

The Country in the City

On a map or from the air, nothing defines New York City more clearly than the rectilinearity of Central Park at the heart of the curvilinear island of Manhattan. And nothing encodes the paradox of the thinking that created Frederick Law Olmsted's first great park—and simultaneously distinguishes it from many of the parks inspired by Central Park—than the virtually perfect geometry of its outline. The park simultaneously confirms the grid structure of the streets of Manhattan and dramatically interrupts this structure: streets that run vertically uptown and downtown or horizontally across town must, when they reach the horizontal and vertical boundaries of the park, leave their verticality and horizontality behind to traverse the park before rejoining the grid of streets and avenues at the far boundaries of the park's expanse. If the Cartesian clarity of

midtown Manhattan has come to represent the efficiency of American capitalism that was making the United States a major industrial power during the years when the Greensward Plan (fig. 54) was designed and Central Park constructed, the park represented (and continues to represent) a countersensibility: as Olmsted and Calvert Vaux predicted,

The time will come when New York will be built up, when all the grading and filling will be done, and when the picturesquely-varied, rocky formations of the Island will have been converted into foundations for rows of monotonous straight streets, and piles of erect, angular buildings. There will be no suggestion left of its present varied surface, with the single exception of the few acres contained in the Park. Then the priceless value of the present picturesque outlines of the ground will be more distinctly perceived, and its adaptability for its purpose more fully recognized.¹

Of course, this countersensibility has as its ultimate benefit the refreshment of those who use the park and, at least implicitly, their return to their workaday worlds in better frames of mind for productive labor and effective citizenship in a capitalist republic. Indeed, the very complexity of the Olmsted-Vaux design for Central Park was itself a product of the interest in efficiency that is encoded in the graphlike design of the surrounding city: the articulation of the park's considerable acreage in a wide variety of mini-terrains, each with particular kinds of experiences to offer, was a way of ensuring not only the maximum options for individuals interested in using the park, but the longevity of its ability to function as a relief from the commercial energies of the city. Over time, any individual could use the park in many different ways—and, in effect, have many different reenergizing experiences.

For those of us who grew up during the second half of the twentieth century (or, at least, for me), the overall shape of the park is also suggestive of the

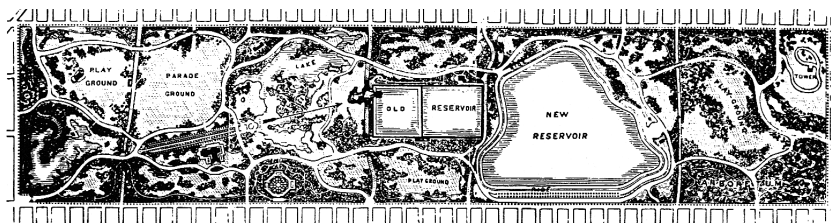


Figure 54. Map of the Greensward Plan submitted by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.

cinematic image, especially of the various wide-screen images that became so popular as television began to threaten the economic viability of the motion picture industry (fig. 55). Obviously, the length-to-width ratio of the park (approximately 5 to 1) is of a different order from even the widest of wide-screen cinema aspect ratios (Cinerama's ratio is 2.77 to 1; Cinema Scope, 2.55 to 1), but this discrepancy seems less an issue if we remember that the panoramic views offered by wide-screen cinema are contemporary versions of the full-fledged panoramas that were so popular in this country and in Europe during the years preceding the development of Central Park and during the period when the park was under construction (Paul Philippoteaux's 1884 panorama of Pickett's Charge in Gettysburg, for example, is 356 feet in circumference and 26 feet high). And it is also less an issue once we remember that Central Park and modern cinema have a good bit more in common than the graphic rectangularity of their visible shape, most obviously a commitment to a fundamentally narrative form of visual experience that is meant to provide at least the momentary illusion of "escape" from the demands of the workplace. In Olmsted's view, according to Bruce Kelly, the park was consciously designed so as to provide a sequential experience in which the viewer's eye would be gently led by the continual discovery of new vistas.² If the Ramble—the series of woodsy paths laid out between Belvedere Castle to the north and Bethesda Fountain and the Lake to the south—was the first sequentially designed section of Central Park to be constructed and, as a result, of particular importance in Olmsted's thinking, the entirety of the park, in one sense or another, reflects this commitment to sequential visual experience.

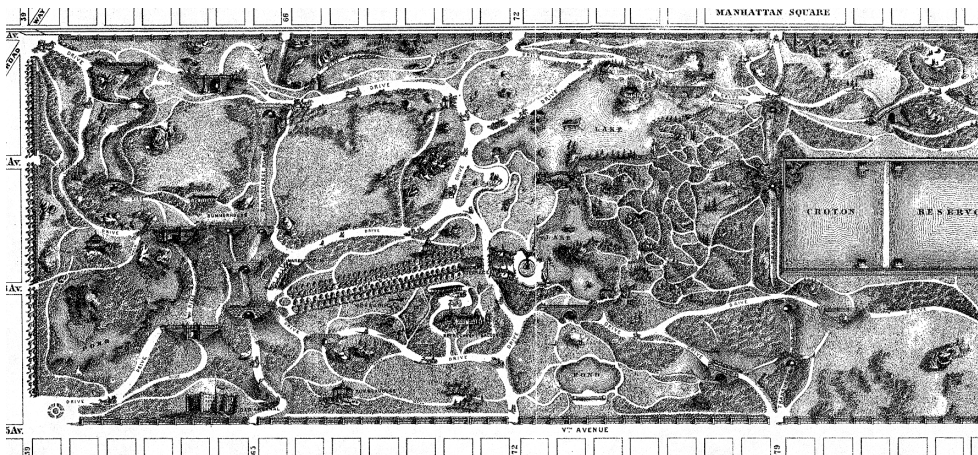
Central Park is more than a remarkable intervention in the geography of Manhattan, however. Both in theory and in practice the development of the park has reflected the complex realities of social class and ethnicity. Certainly, class and race played a crucial role in Olmsted's life and his design for the park. Olmsted's brilliance was, first, to recognize that the benefits of gorgeously designed landscape should *not* be confined to the wealthy, as it tended to be in England (and in his father's generation); *and then*, to have the ability and perseverance to convince people in power—many of them with little interest in parks or democracy—that such spaces should become a reality. After all, the richest class didn't need public parks; they could enjoy their financial superiority on their own estates. Olmsted *was* from a wealthy back-

ground; nevertheless, his passion was not simply landscape design but democratic access to it. Olmsted made this quite clear during the early planning of Central Park:

The primary purpose of the Park is to provide the best practical means of healthful recreation for the inhabitants of the city, of all classes. . . .

No kind of sport can be permitted which would be inconsistent with the general method of amusement, and no species of exercise which must be enjoyed only by a single class in the community to the diminution of the enjoyment of others. Sports, games and parades, in which comparatively few can take part, will only be admissible in cases where they may be supposed to contribute indirectly to the pleasure of the majority of those visiting the Park. The Park is intended to furnish healthful recreation for the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the vicious and the virtuous, so far as each can partake therein without infringing on the rights of others, and not further.³

Ethnicity was equally important in Olmsted's thinking. Like Central Park, which is divided into two distinct sections—a smaller, more sylvan northern section and a larger, more heterodox section below the reservoir—Olmsted's career in the 1850s and 1860s had two different phases. During the 1850s, Olmsted was a travel writer whose books about the pre-Civil War South—*A Journey through the Seaboard Slave States* (1856), *A Journey through Texas* (1857), *A Journey through the Back Country* (1860), and *The Cotton Kingdom* (a conden-



sation of the previous three books, published in 1861)—remain important descriptions and indictments of slavery. During the same years that his final contributions as travel writer were written and published, Olmsted’s interest in public parks was coming to fruition in his collaboration with Vaux on the Greensward Plan for Central Park (submitted in 1858). Though these two interests—slavery and public parks—may seem distinct, they are related.

Olmsted concluded that one of the major disadvantages of slavery, above and beyond its indefensible inhumanity, was its impact on land: in those areas of the South where human beings were enslaved, there was also less respect for natural resources than he had observed in free states; those crops that “required” slave labor also did the most damage to the soil. If one considers the obverse of this conclusion, Olmsted’s commitment to well-designed, public lands is no surprise: a society that values human beings, regardless of their origin or class, might be expected to devote not just land but beautiful, enjoyable, accessible land to the public good. Of course, Olmsted and Vaux designed Central Park, not only in light of the problematic urban realities of their own era, but because they could see that urbanization was the trend, and effort was needed immediately to avoid future problems.

On the other hand, whatever the theory behind the Greensward Plan, the actual building of the park was problematic with regard to both class and ethnicity. In *The Park and the People*, Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig are

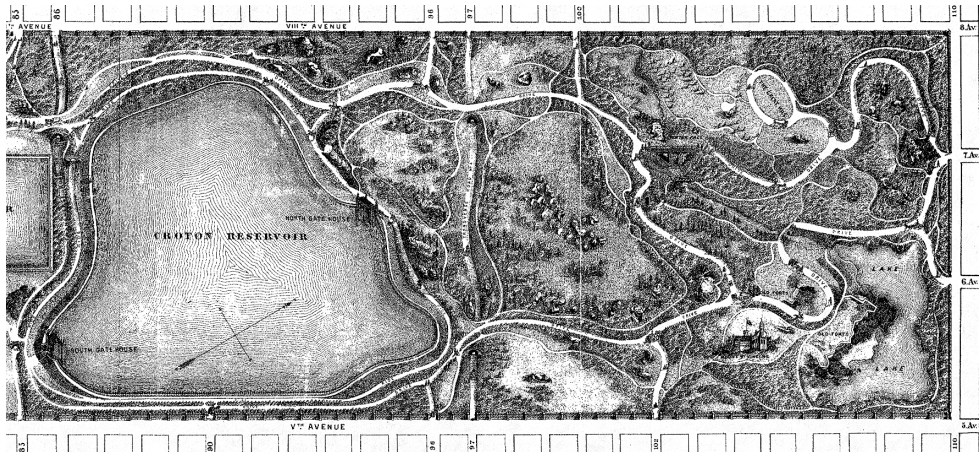


Figure 55. Map of Central Park as it was actually built by Olmsted and Vaux.

at pains to balance several generations of Olmsted worship with a detailed history of Central Park as a social space. As the authors make clear, in making the Greensward Plan a reality, the park builders trampled the interests of many of those who made their homes on the land bounded by what is now 59th Street and 110th Street, Fifth Avenue and Central Park West. Ninety percent of these sixteen hundred people were immigrants (primarily Irish and German) and African Americans, many of whom resided in what was called Seneca Village, one of the most economically successful largely African-American communities in New York state (in 1855 African Americans living in Seneca Village had a rate of home ownership five times greater than New Yorkers in general and thirty-nine times greater than other African-American New Yorkers). Whatever interests in beauty and healthy living for the less privileged classes underlay the Olmsted-Vaux design and whatever the aesthetic distinctions of this design and of the finished park, the sociopolitical history that made the building of Central Park possible was *also* one more instance of the racism and religious intolerance (churches displaced by the park included two African-American Methodist churches—AME Zion and African Union—one racially integrated Episcopal church, and Mount St. Vincent Convent, established by the Sisters of Charity in 1847) so evident in American society then and now.⁴

Almost exactly a century after the construction of Central Park, anti-Vietnam War demonstrators gathered in Central Park Mall for a rally that was followed by a march down Fifth Avenue. This March 26, 1966, event was only the second oppositional political event ever held in the park (the first was a 1914 women's suffrage meeting); and it was to be the first of many such gatherings that characterized the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, the same period saw a flowering of oppositional cinematic activity, including the completion of the two most distinctive films to have used Central Park as a primary location: Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (shot from 1964 to 1968 and completed in 1969) and William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (shot in 1968, completed in the earliest version in 1972, and revised in 1995). That Mekas is a Lithuanian immigrant (he escaped his native land as Nazi Germany invaded and spent several years in a prison camp in Germany before emigrating to the United States in 1949) and Greaves is an African-American native of Manhattan makes the fact of these two films a poignant historical note, especially as both film artists use the making of these films as demonstrations of

political viewpoints critical of an “upper-class” Hollywood film industry that has been, for most of its history, as oblivious to the interests of immigrant groups and African America as were those who wiped out Seneca Village to make way for what Vaux called the “big art work of the Republic.”⁵

Walden

Jonas Mekas began his career as a filmmaker almost immediately on his arrival in the United States—Mekas’s *Lost Lost Lost* (1976) begins with the intertitle “A WEEK AFTER WE LANDED IN AMERICA (BROOKLYN) WE BORROWED MONEY & BOUGHT OUR FIRST BOLEX”—almost as if his arrival in America necessitated a transformation, if not of his artistic consciousness, at least of the means with which he would express it. By the time he left Lithuania, Mekas had established himself as a significant poet with a defiantly personal sensibility, deeply hostile to the interests of major conglomerate nation-states like Nazi Germany and Communist Russia.⁶ Once he and his brother Adolfas had purchased their Bolex, Mekas transformed the diaristic tendency of his written verse into a diaristic cinema with few predecessors either in this country or abroad. From late 1949 on, Mekas chronicled first the New York City community of Lithuanians-in-exile and his own personal explorations of the city, and subsequently the development of what was to become the New York art scene of the 1960s and, for Mekas himself, a new, artistic “homeland.” By the early 1960s he was completing films, though it was not until 1969 that his first major diary film—known at first as *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (also known as *Walden*) and more recently simply as *Walden*—was finished.

Mekas’s *Walden* is a 177-minute film divided into four sections (six in the video version) of approximately equal length. Each section includes two types of visuals—Mekas’s generally hand-held chronicling of the events he sees and the frequent intertitles (visual texts intercut with a film’s other imagery) that introduce imagery we’re about to see or identify imagery we’ve just seen—and three types of sound—environmental sounds taped by Mekas (most frequently, the sound of subways), narration by Mekas, and music. The particular quality of these various sources of information and to a certain extent their organization are implied by the film’s opening intertitle, which precedes even the title of the film: “DEDICATED TO LUMIERE.” For Mekas, and for some other

filmmakers emerging from the New York underground during the 1960s, the Lumière Brothers' earliest films were an inspiration. The inspiration they provided was less a function of their original, commercial concerns (the Lumières were camera manufacturers and their one-shot films were a function of their interest in marketing the Cinématographe and their Cinématographe presentations) than of what was for a time a widespread idealization of the comparative simplicity and directness of the earliest films. For 1960s filmmakers interested in providing a critique of commercial culture and commercial media—and especially of the visual and auditory overload increasingly characteristic of television and of a film industry desperately trying to compete with the new mass medium—the Lumières' single-shot, extended views of what seemed to be the everyday realities of 1895–96 offered a useful alternative, just as Thoreau's decision to live at Walden Pond half a century earlier was an alternative to what he saw as the fast-paced life of Concord and Boston.⁷

Another part of Mekas's defiance of contemporary film standards is his consistent use of intertitles to introduce and interpret the events and experiences he chronicles. Intertitles had been an essential dimension of Hollywood films until the advent of sound-on-film, at which point they quickly became at most a visual vestige of a bygone era. In other words, like the informality of Mekas's hand-held imagery, his frequent intertitles (themselves presented in a typewriter typeface that provides a handcrafted feel) declare his alliance with the cinematic past, with his own past as a poet, and with the literary past represented by Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, which Mekas read in German translation in the mid-1940s while living in a German prisoner-of-war camp and, again, in English in 1961.⁸

While Thoreau's *Walden* provides the title for Mekas's film and the film's central metaphor (the intertitle "Walden" is juxtaposed with images of Central Park lakes three times; see plate 14 and fig. 56), Mekas's relationship to Thoreau, as evidenced in the film, is complex and even paradoxical. One obvious similarity between the two *Waldens* is evident in the particular ways in which the authors draw attention to their authorship. Thoreau's narrative of his personal experiences at Walden Pond is from the outset defiantly personal. Of course, Thoreau not only writes in the first person, his narrative is about his largely solitary life in the woods, a life so solitary—at least as it is depicted in *Walden*—that while he is "naturally no hermit," most of those with whom he communes on a regular basis during his two years at Walden Pond are



Figure 56. The first image of Central Park in Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (1968). Courtesy Anthology Film Archives.

“brute neighbors.” Indeed in the second paragraph of “Economy” Thoreau confronts the issue of his use of the first person:

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been a distant land to me.⁹

Mekas's film is as fully first person as Thoreau's written narrative, a choice that for Mekas was at least as defiant of contemporary standards and expectations as was Thoreau's use of *I*. The first visual image in Mekas's *Walden* is the filmmaker waking up, and from the beginning Mekas's visual imagery is framed as a first-person activity. In the opening minute of the film we see Mekas playing the accordion and read the intertitle, “I CUT MY HAIR, TO RAISE

MONEY. HAVING TEAS WITH RICH LADIES [fig. 57]" (followed by images of Mekas having his hair cut). Mekas's first-person approach was so unusual for a film in 1969 that he printed a broadside guide to *Walden*, with this introduction:

This film being what it is, i.e. a series of personal notes on events, people (friends) and Nature (Seasons)—the Author won't mind (he is almost encouraging it) if the Viewer will choose to watch only certain parts of the *work (film)*, according to the time available to him, according to his preferences, or any other good reason. To assist the Viewer in this matter, particularly in cases of repeated viewings (forgive the Author this presumption), the following Contents, a list of scenes and their time tables, reel by reel, have been prepared.

A note in the beginning says, that this is the First Draft of the Diaries. Why should the Author permit then, one may ask, the unpolished or half-polished edition to come out? His answer is, he thought that despite the roughness of sound and some parts of the images, there is still enough in them—he felt—to make them of some interest to some of his friends and a few strangers. In order to go to the next stage of polishing, he felt, he had to look at the footage as it is, many many more times, and gain more perspective to it—that's why this edition. There is another reason. A few months ago, suddenly he saw his room filling up with smoke—he couldn't even see the film cans—and only a very lucky coincidence stopped the fire next door which would have consumed five years of his work. So he gave himself word to bring out as soon as he can this First Draft version, and there he stands, and hopes that some of you will find some enjoyment in what you'll see.¹⁰

This "First Draft version" was never substantially revised.

Mekas's determination to make and release what would come to be known as a "diary film" not only defied the Hollywood tradition of suppressing directorial identity and the process of producing the film we're seeing (Mekas was not alone in this particular defiance; even as he was shooting the footage that would later become *Walden*, Fellini's *8½* [1963] was a hit on the art house circuit), but his decision to make a longer-than-feature-length film as a solo enterprise defied the even more fundamental corporate tradition of American cinema (and of popular European cinema as well). Further, his assumption that individual viewers should decide how much of the film they should experience during any one time period ignores the tradition that films are consumed in their entirety in a public forum controlled by distributors and exhibitors, in favor of the kind of access readers have to literary texts.¹¹

If *Walden* is characterized by Mekas's consistent defiance of film industry

I cut my hair,
to raise money.
Having teas
with rich
ladies.

Figure 57. An early text from Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (1968). Courtesy Anthology Film Archives.

traditions and the audience expectations these traditions have created, he is quite explicit in seeing an alliance between his “film diary” and another popular film tradition: home movies. Early in *Walden*, Mekas sings (while accompanying himself on what looks to be a child’s accordion),

I live—therefore I make films.
I make films—therefore I live.

Light. Movement.

I make home movies—therefore I live.
I live — therefore I make home movies.

While Mekas does focus on weddings, on children, on vacation trips—the stuff of most home-movie and video making—the alliance he proposes is at best rather disingenuous.¹² Most home movies have a very limited audience—the family itself and a few friends—but *Walden’s* focus on those who were important in the New York art scene of the 1960s, and, to a degree, *their* family life gives this project a much larger potential audience. Further, while

home-movie makers in the 1950s and 1960s tended to emulate Hollywood standards for making “good shots” and “good movies,”¹³ Mekas’s style in *Walden* is aggressively “personal”: he refuses to hold the camera still, preferring an openly gestural style, and he often single-frames in a wildly erratic manner as he films—an approach that for audiences accustomed to more stable imagery is difficult to watch. Mekas defies the production standards for commercial cinema *and* the home-movie tradition of suppressing personal style in order to honor the nuclear family. In this, Mekas again goes further than Thoreau in his defiance of convention: if the writing in Thoreau’s *Walden* is more openly self-involved than was usual at the time, it is not grammatically rebellious: readers need not learn to read in a new way.

Of course, it is the centrality of the idea of nature in the literary and the cinematic versions of *Walden*—not each work’s emphasis of its author’s defiantly personal stance—that accounts for Mekas’s decision to use Thoreau’s work as the central, guiding metaphor of his film. And it is the idea of nature that suggests the most fundamental distinction between the visions of the two works. That Thoreau’s *Walden* was part of a particular American cultural moment when writers and painters were realizing the degree to which industrialization was threatening America’s distinctive access to “wilderness” and to the connection with God available through the Book of Nature made it of particular relevance for Mekas whose personal history had threatened a comparable loss.

Mekas had spent most of his life in rural Lithuania, but after the arrival of the Nazis had forced him to flee his homeland and once the partition of Europe at the end of the war had put Lithuania into Communist hands, Mekas found himself exiled both from Lithuania and from the immersion in nature he had experienced there as a child and an adolescent. Not surprisingly, this loss of access to homeland created a considerable nostalgia that is often a central issue in Mekas’s diary films: *Lost Lost Lost*, for example, chronicles Mekas’s gradual personal evolution from Lithuanian-in-exile to American artist; and *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* documents the filmmaker’s return to his mother and his motherland for the first time in twenty-seven years. *Walden* is the earliest of Mekas’s completed diaries to express this nostalgia. About three minutes into the film, we see Mekas in bed, apparently unable to sleep, followed by the intertitle “I THOUGHT OF HOME.” The suggestion is that the pain of his exile has kept him awake, or is

a bad dream he has just awakened from. The intertitle is immediately followed by an image of the Lake in Central Park, which is in turn followed first by the intertitle "WALDEN" and then by a series of sequences filmed in Central Park.

Thoreau's decision to leave Concord and live at Walden Pond for two-plus years in the hope that the privacy and serenity offered there would allow him to plumb the depths of his soul was an attempt to defend his psychic health from what he saw as the increasingly pervasive tendency in modern man to have "no time [in his life] to be anything but a machine,"¹⁴ a human machine at the mercy of the larger machine of industrialization. As is suggested in Mekas's introduction of Central Park-as-Walden (and as is consistently confirmed during the remainder of the film), for Mekas, the "natural" environment of the park is a way of making contact with his rural origins and the source of his identity, both of which he has been separated from by the industrial machines of modern Germany, the Soviet Union, and the other major nation-states whose decisions have determined Lithuania's modern history.

While both men see nature as a refuge from the machine of industrialized society, the century that separates them causes their depictions of nature to seem at first like inversions of each other. In 1845 Thoreau needed to go no farther than a couple of miles outside of Concord to achieve the feeling of solitude, and had he wished to be even more fully isolated, he need only have traveled a few miles farther. The location of Central Park on what was then the outskirts of New York City was a result of a combination of economic practicality (the less densely inhabited land was less expensive for the city to acquire) and of the same urge that took Thoreau to Walden Pond: the desire to leave the city behind, in order to access what the city could not offer. But judging from the imaging of the park in photography and cinema, the modern eye is less astonished by nature itself than by the spectacle of nature walled in by skyscrapers in virtually all directions, and by the "seam" between park and city. For Mekas, the beauty of Central Park was no longer a function of its being outside the city. Indeed, the park's location so dramatically inside the city provided Mekas with his *Walden's* most essential insight into nature:

In general I would say that I feel there will always be Walden for those who really want it. Each of us lives on a small island, in a very small circle of reality, which is our own reality. I made up a joke about a Zen monk standing in Times Square

with people asking, “So what do you think about New York—the noise, the traffic?” The monk says, “What noise? What traffic?” You *can* cut it all out. No, it’s not that we can have all this today, but tomorrow it will be gone. It *is* threatened, but in the end it’s up to us to keep those little bits of paradise alive and defend them and see that they survive and grow.¹⁵

The motif of Mekas’s use of the various Central Park lakes in conjunction with his intertitle “WALDEN” is essentially a paradox: on the one hand, Mekas recognizes that his filming of the lakes and the crowds of walkers, ice skaters, and rowers who frequent them is virtually the opposite of the Thoreau of *Walden*, alone, gazing deep into the unruffled waters of Walden Pond at the dazzling pickerel and his soul. Indeed, on this level, Mekas’s references to Walden might seem a form of humorous irony. On the other hand, however, this seeming irony unites the author and the filmmaker as fully as it distinguishes them.

While in the popular imagination, Walden Pond’s isolation and Thoreau’s solitude there seem at the heart of *Walden*, in fact, Thoreau was not a chronicler of “wilderness”: even the pond’s isolation was compromised, though not in a way he resents, by the train tracks that run past it across from his cabin. In fact, one of the most elaborate descriptions in *Walden*—a description located strategically in “Spring,” the penultimate chapter of Thoreau’s chronicle—focuses on the thawing of sand and clay on the sides of a deep cut “on the railroad through which [he] passed on [his] way to the village, a phenomenon not very common on so large a scale, though the number of freshly exposed banks of the right material must have been greatly multiplied since railroads were invented.” For Thoreau, what happens on this hillside “illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf.”¹⁶ That is, the essence of creativity and the hand of the Divine are as fully evident in those spaces where we feel nature and technology intersecting as in an “untouched wilderness.” Mekas’s *Walden* expands on Thoreau’s insight by recording the myriad such spaces offered by Central Park and the New York City environment in general and by chronicling the many creators he meets who, like himself, do honor to the divine creativity in all of us. Mekas’s camera is a twentieth-century version of Thoreau’s house by the pond, and the legendary frugality of Thoreau’s budget in “Economy” finds its modern echo in Mekas’s low-budget, high-art “home movies.”

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One

Central Park allows Mekas to pursue his solitary way within a “natural” environment. He is the quintessential “American” individualist. Indeed, even when he is with someone—as when he films Stan Brakhage crossing the park—Mekas remains a detached observer.¹⁷ On the other hand, for William Greaves, who was an actor (dancer, songwriter) on Broadway and in commercial movies before he became a director, filmmaking is a fundamentally social activity, and he chose Central Park as the location for what became *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* not only because it is a social space but also because of the kind of social space it is. While Mekas wanders through the park, recording what interests or touches him, Greaves uses the park as a background and a resource for a cinematic engagement of the ways in which creative individuals relate to one another when they find themselves outside the institutional structures within which their creativity is usually exploited. Indeed, for Greaves himself, the opportunity to participate in the project that generated *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* came as an interruption of a busy career of producing sponsored documentary projects for such institutions as the United Nations and the U.S. Intelligence Agency.

Greaves made a name for himself in the 1940s on Broadway, where he was among the most sought after African-American actors of the period. His stage roles led to his appearing in several of the last Black Underground films of the 1940s—Herald Pictures’ *Miracle in Harlem* (1948), Powell Lindsay’s *Souls of Sin* (1949)—and to a small but crucial role in one of the major Hollywood “problem pictures” of the time: *Lost Boundaries* (1949), produced by Louis de Rochemont and directed by Alfred L. Werker. By the 1950s he had become interested in filmmaking, and in particular, in documentary. Seeing no way to develop a career as a documentarian in the United States, Greaves found his way to the National Film Board of Canada where he worked on dozens of Canadian productions, returning to the United States in 1963 a capable filmmaker. Since the 1960s Greaves has produced and directed dozens of films for others and for his own production company. A good many of these films chronicle aspects of African-American history, an ongoing interest that also found an outlet in the television series *Black Journal*, which Greaves produced, directed, and cohosted. By the time a well-heeled former acting student agreed to provide “angel” financing for a fully experimental film project of

Greaves's own devising, Greaves had a range of accomplishments and skills to call on, and he combined them in one of the most bizarre film productions of the 1960s—and a remarkable document of the attitudes of that era.

Greaves wrote a brief script for an argument between a man and a woman reminiscent of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: the woman complains bitterly about the abortions her partner has pressured her into having and charges him with being a homosexual; the man denies he is gay, claiming the time just isn't right for them to have children (see fig. 58). The script for this argument was used as a screen test for five pairs of actors who were asked to perform the scene in a variety of ways. Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert, the leads in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, played the scene as conventional melodrama; another pair performed it as a musical; still another, as a psychodrama. In addition to filming the various versions of the argument, the crew was directed to film themselves filming the actors: that is, Greaves conceived the various performances of the scene as a catalyst for the interaction of crew, performers, and director that was the real focus of the project. And, finally, Greaves also directed the crew to film their Central Park surround, whenever the activities of those observing the shoot seemed particularly interesting or energetic.¹⁸



Figure 58. The arguing couple in William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (shot in 1968, finished in 1972). Courtesy William Greaves.

Originally, Greaves's plan was to use the considerable footage recorded of the performances, the production process, and its Central Park environment for a series of five films: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One, Take Two, Take Three, Take Four, Take Five*, each of which would center on one of the five pairs of performers. But the decision to run several cameras at once—necessary since the process of a cameraperson filming the performance could only be filmed by another camera—quickly used up Greaves's financial resources. The result was that sufficient material for all the projected "takes" was recorded, but only *Take One* was finished—and not for several years.

The intellectual sources for the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project were several. Perhaps the most crucial of these is the source of the film's title, which is a take-off on "symbiotaxiplasm," the philosopher–social scientist Arthur Bentley's term (in his *An Inquiry into Inquiries*) for any particular social organism within which human beings interact with each other.¹⁹ Greaves added "psycho" to Bentley's term, "to focus more acutely on the role that psychology and creativity play when a group of people come together and function as a creative entity charged with the responsibility of making a film."²⁰ Bentley's exploration of the various approaches to investigation in the social sciences is analogous to Greaves's project both on the level of the actors performing the screen test (which is always an inquiry into the abilities of the actors who perform it) and on the level of the crew recording the action of screen test and surround. Indeed, Greaves planned from the beginning to reveal his own personal vulnerability in the hope of energizing a multilayered inquiry into the cinematic process. For a crew accustomed to professional directorial decisiveness, this "vulnerability" appeared to be confusion, even incompetence—and it provoked rebellion. At one point, Gilbert becomes furious that she can't perform the scene the way she thinks Greaves wants her to and storms off, with Greaves following. Instead of recording their subsequent discussion, the crew, alienated from Greaves's process, remains behind. They also demonstrate their alienation by meeting together without Greaves's knowledge to discuss what seems to many of them the fiasco of the production. They filmed their discussion and gave the material to Greaves at the end of the production.²¹

In the end, Greaves was able to edit *Take One* so that viewers can sense the developing frustration of this particular social organism—but also to reveal his fascination with two scientific principles, the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty,

I began to think of the movie camera as an analog to the microscope. The reality to be observed is the human soul, the mind, the psyche. Of course, as the camera investigates that part of the cosmos, the individual soul or psyche being observed recoils from the intrusion. On-camera behavior becomes structured in a way other than it would have been had it been unperceived.

and the second law of thermodynamics,

In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, the cameras trace the flow of energy in the social system I had devised. If the cameras focused on one person and the energy level of spontaneous reality began to decline as a result of their being under observation, that energy would shift and show up somewhere else—behind the cameras or among the bystanders, for example.²²

Greaves's decision to use Central Park as the (only) location for his project has both general and particular relevance to the issues raised by the film. Most obviously, Greaves, like Mekas, 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. This understanding of the park is relevant on all three levels of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. For Alice and Freddy, the arguing couple, the expanses of Central Park provide both the psychic space and the comparative privacy to express their frustrations. The level of Alice's frustration and Freddy's surprise at her confronting him suggest that they have lived together, while repressing their problems, for some time; and this walk in the park is a result of Alice's desire to leave the puzzling “wonderland” of repression and let some fresh air into her life.

The park is equally relevant for the production process Greaves instigated. While the filming was done by men and women who had had considerable experience working on more conventional films, the very point of Greaves's method was to force both actors and crew into unfamiliar ways of working, in the hope of freeing them to be more openly creative than conventional film production allowed. The comparatively open spaces of Central Park are analogous to the creative space Greaves offered cast and crew, though ironically—like Freddy, who claims over and over not to know what Alice is talking about—they have come to be so at ease with their more usual (controlled, repressed) ways of working that they cannot make sense of what Greaves is doing. And even on the level of the park surround, those visiting the park who

come across the production are rewarded with the spectacle of creative activity within a space originally created, at least in part, for their aesthetic pleasure.

The analogy of Greaves's film and Central Park goes deeper than the general idea that, as a created, artistic space, the park is an appropriate environment for creative activity. For one thing, the economic background of the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project recalls the economic history of the park. The economic realities of commercial film production would never have allowed Greaves to conceive a feature-length experimental film—much less a set of five features.²³ Greaves's experiment was only possible because of the trickle-down effect of Greaves's "angel's" business success, combined with a respect for the creative process in general and Greaves as a creative person.²⁴ Further, just as Central Park, during its earliest years, was used primarily, or at least most visibly, by the rich,²⁵ *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* was not only funded by independent wealth and shaped by the support of Greaves's patron (whose generosity made possible the extensive shooting and the shooting of the shooting), it was and has been available only to those with considerable cultural resources: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* has been seen primarily at film festivals, in colleges and universities, and in art museums, by people with sufficient leisure to pursue an interest in experimental cinema—that is, by people who are a modern version of "the carriage trade."²⁶ To put this another way, just as Central Park provides only the illusion of escape from the realities of New York City—"illusion" because it is surrounded by and, in the long run, serves the capitalist energies of businesses and businesspeople—*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is a brief cinematic "fling" made possible by a business success, which was followed by Greaves's quick return to a more conventionally productive filmic life in the city surrounding the park.²⁷

Having said all this, however, I must make a substantial qualification. Even if one were to decide that Central Park was a result of nothing more noble than a combination of the financial interests of those who stood to gain from its construction and the self-serving, class-inspired, paternalistic romantic egos of Olmsted and Vaux,²⁸ in the long term the democratic idealism that Olmsted and Vaux claimed as the basis of the Greensward Plan has, in fact, become a reality: Central Park is used by a huge, diverse population in a very wide variety of ways, only a few of which can be said to be the property of the rich. This contemporary democracy of the park is clearly demonstrated by *Take*

One. The only “character” in the film who might be said to represent the rich is a woman who rides past the production on horseback early in the film.²⁹ And if the characters in the film’s melodramatic story and those men and women doing the filming are middle-class professionals, the people who are watching the production appear more broadly representative economically.

In general, Greaves is at pains to assure a broad representation of park-goers. In the opening credits, for example, the names of those who worked on *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* are superimposed over a montage of people using the park. This montage, which is so fully reminiscent of Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man* (1955) as to be virtually an homage, presents hundreds of people, seemingly of many heritages and a wide variety of economic circumstances, as representatives of the cycle of life: there are parents and babies, parents with older children, adolescent and young adults playing soccer, lovers . . .

Further, in the body of the film, Greaves and his crew interface with a number of bystanders, most notably a middle-aged, alcoholic, homeless man who “sleeps in the bushes.” Though this homeless man represents the most economically disenfranchised class of New York City residents, the film gives him a substantial voice—indeed, he has the film’s last words—and reveals him as an (at least accidentally) astute commentator on the production. His entrance into the film is announced on the sound track as we hear him say, “What is this thing? What is this thing? . . . Oh, it’s a *movie*—so who’s moving whom?” If this man (and others like him: he explains that there are “many sleeping in the bushes”) has been excluded from or has dropped out of the economically productive sector of society, and is, as he explains, unrepresented politically, he has found at least a temporary refuge in the park, just as Greaves’s film has provided the man with a momentary escape from his social invisibility by offering him at least one brief moment of democratic “representation.”

A final dimension of the analogy between Central Park and *Take One* involves the issue of race. As mentioned earlier, at the outset the Central Park project displaced the particularly successful African-American community at Seneca Village. Whether or not this was part of a conscious plan, the comparative sacrifice of African Americans in the interest of goals devised by European Americans seems of a piece with the history of American racial politics (a history also evoked by the fact that this community was named *Seneca Village*). Regardless of the racial attitudes of those who planned and developed

Central Park, however, the forces of history have encouraged the racial integration some nineteenth-century New Yorkers might have avoided. By the 1920s African-American migration from the South had transformed Harlem, which lies directly north of the park, into one of the largest and most visible African-American communities in the nation. And by the 1960s the northern migration of Hispanics had further transformed sectors of this community into “Spanish Harlem.” These transformations of Central Park’s surround have transformed the nature of the community using the park for recreation, and this transformation is visible in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. For example, a group of adolescents observing the filming with whom Greaves and the crew interact early in the film are primarily African American and Hispanic.

The integration evident within the park is also visible on the production level of the film, not only in the fact that Greaves himself is African American, but also in his mixed-race crew and cast. Two crew members (Clive Davidson and Phil Parker) are black, and one of the five pairs of actors who dramatize the argument is a mixed-race couple: the 1972 version of *Take One* ends with final credits superimposed over shots of an African-American woman (Audrey Heningham) and her European-American partner (Shannon Baker); the 1995 revision ends the same way, but shots of this mixed-race pair also introduce the film. There seems little ethnic friction between cast and crew. Indeed, Greaves claims, “The people who worked on *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* were Age-of-Aquarius-type people who were in many respects shorn of the racist encumbrances that many White Americans are burdened with”³⁰—though when Don Fellows jokingly says to Greaves, “You wanted to say a few words for George Wallace,” Patricia Ree Gilbert’s laughter seems forced and embarrassed, revealing perhaps that for the cast and crew race was not entirely invisible.

More suggestive than the fact of Greaves’s decision to use a mixed-race cast and crew is the way in which Greaves conceptualized his role as director vis-à-vis race:

[C]learly 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 politic. Plus the more specific struggles: the Civil Rights marches[,] . . . the whole Vietnam War problem and the growing dissent over it. There was the emerging Feminist movement. . . .

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 questions were, 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 metaphor of the politics of the time.³¹

If in the mid-nineteenth century even the most successful of African-American communities could not slow the development of the park, by 1968 an African-American director could not only take charge of a mixed-race production, but he could also see himself as a representative of “the Establishment.” No one could argue that racism had disappeared by the mid-1960s, even in Central Park; but by 1968 Greaves himself had lived through substantial changes insofar as his own access to the means of film production was concerned.

That Greaves functions as the Establishment in *Take One*, however, will not blind anyone familiar with American film history to the fact that Greaves’s access to directorial control in this instance is anything but representative of the era. (See fig. 59.) Indeed, one could argue that in the 1950s and 1960s opportunities for African Americans to direct commercial film were at a nadir: the increasing inclusion of black performers in some Hollywood films had cost the Black Underground cinema its audience, and it was not until the 1980s that some African Americans began to have anything like a regular opportunity to direct. At most, Greaves enacts a metaphor for the Establishment: he *is* in charge of this particular production, but the project itself is as distant from the established, white-dominated business of cinema as Central Park is from Hollywood.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: *Take One* is rich with paradox. For one thing, it was precisely Greaves’s distance from the commercial mainstream that allowed him the opportunity to experiment with the film process and form and provided him with a mind-set that saw improvisation—on location and later in the editing room—as a logical creative option (an option located within the larger history of African-American creativity by Greaves’s use of Miles Davis’s “In a Silent Way” to accompany the credits and as a motif during the rest of the film). Further, even if Greaves’s sense of himself as the Establishment is, in a larger sense, ironic, considering the general lack of opportunity for

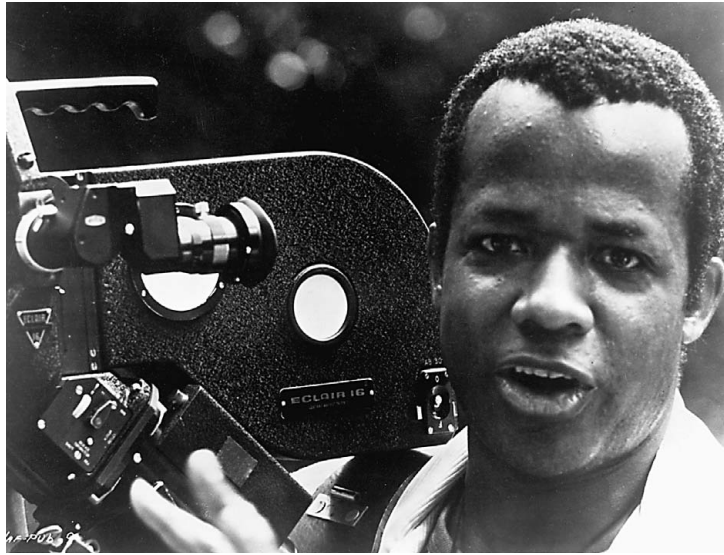


Figure 59. William Greaves shooting what became *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* in 1968. Courtesy William Greaves.

African Americans to direct, nevertheless, the visual motif of Greaves and his cast and crew moving through Central Park provides us with at least an image of film history moving in the direction of equal opportunity. In this context we can see a poignancy in the fact that one of the few identifiable locations in the park, other than the bridge at the northwest corner of the Lake, is a monument located just to the west of the Sheep Meadow and to the north of Tavern on the Green, erected in honor of fifty-eight men of the New York National Guard's Seventh Regiment who were lost during the Civil War. The monument, which is one of several locations where Alice and Freddy argue, is a reminder (a conscious one, according to Greaves) of the centuries-long road toward societal freedom and equal access African Americans had had to travel before even the *metaphor* of cinematic power provided by *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* would be possible.

From our perspective at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to imagine New York City without Central Park. Even if we see the park as merely a space in the service of capitalist goals, that it continues to exist in a section of the city where land values are as high as anywhere in the world is a

testament to the fact that the idea of nature has remained a crucial component of the American psyche, so crucial that anyone interested in transforming the park must confront considerable resistance on the part of New Yorkers from a variety of classes. Central Park remains not only another instance of capitalist development, but a space that a good many of us continue to find startlingly beautiful and an aid to both physical and spiritual health. Similarly, even if we see all forms of “experimental” or “personal” cinema as trickle-down results of the moneyed commercial film industry, the cinematic alternatives demonstrated by Mekas’s *Walden* and Greaves’s *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* reveal that as long as the industry remains powerful, those willing to offer creative alternatives to it will not only continue to work, they will evolve in stature. While Mekas may have assumed that *Walden* would be of interest only “to some of his friends and a few strangers” and even if *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* represents a momentary interruption of a more conventional documentary career, these two films have become increasingly interesting as time has passed—at least for that substantial group of us who remain fascinated by the full spectrum of film history. Indeed, it is difficult to think of two commercial films of the 1960s that look more impressive today than these alternative films do. Whatever the nature of their limitations, Central Park and the films by Mekas and Greaves for which the park has served as explicit location and implicit inspiration offer a set of visionary experiences that continue to enrich our sense of the past and the present.³²