

by a very strongly rhythmic soundtrack of rock 'n' roll or rap, or what have you, has entered the commercial cinema: Oliver Stone is an example, both in *JFK* [1992] and *Natural Born Killers* [1995], as are current movie previews—we used to call them “trailers.” Much of it is mind-numbing. On the other hand, there are some people who are doing very interesting things in music videos. You can't throw the baby out with the bathwater and say all music videos are commercial and not to be taken seriously as art. What do you do with Zbigniew Rybczynski? And there are many others. *All* of these things should be part of the mix of the programming of this ideal exhibition showcase we're talking about here.

You once raised the question of whether the field would have been better off had Jonas and I been able to work together.

*MacDonald*: Yes. What do you think?

*Vogel*: Generally speaking, the split was not helpful to the cause of the American avant-garde. Jonas might disagree, but in my view, had it been possible for us to work together in those days, it would have been to the advantage of the field. But, of course, it's easier to see this looking back.

*MacDonald*: I think we need to learn from the other visual arts. For me, it's a question of where the dialectic takes place. At the major modern art museums, we can see the history of very diverse approaches that were established originally in opposition to each other; and the public, which is considerable for any major show, often goes to the museum to experience the interplay of these various approaches. In the history of avant-garde film, the situation is very different. One could argue that the New American Cinema model of exhibition and distribution was a healthy response to what Cinema 16 had done. The problem is that these two approaches were set up as mutually exclusive. The Collective for Living Cinema was established in opposition to Anthology Film Archives [the archive and exhibition space developed by Jonas Mekas and others], rather than as a collaboration *within* a growing, larger institutional framework. Each new institution has been built on the ashes of the previous institution—and so at the end, all we have is a lot of ashes.

*Vogel*: I understand what you mean, but I must tell you that no matter what the present situation is, despite the social factors that are operating against us and the narrowness of the existing showcases, I have a very optimistic attitude. In my opinion, the avant-garde will never die; it *cannot* die. There will always be people who want to go against whatever the current orthodoxies are, who want to strike out in new directions and find new ways of expression. When people ask me how I can be optimistic now about the possibilities for progressive politics or for subversive art, I have a saying: “I have more confidence in my enemies than I have in my friends.” I'm convinced that my enemies will continue to do the most outrageously repressive things and therefore will again, inevitably, evoke a revolt on the part of those who are being kept out or kept down artificially and by force. The power of the artistic impulse that creates what we call the avant-garde *cannot* be overcome; it will always rise again.

"A Critical Cinema 3"  
Scott MacDonald  
U. Cal. Press 1998

In general, the filmmakers who produce critiques of conventional cinema and television have tended to define themselves in one of two ways: either as *artists*—painters, photographers, dancers who happen to have turned to cinema as a way of formally extending their other art activities, sometimes in the hope of attracting a more popular following to their work—or as *avant-garde filmmakers*, that is, “specialists” in the production of critical forms of film art. But these definitions certainly do not account for all the major contributions to the ongoing discourse of critical cinema. A case in point is William Greaves, whose long, diverse, prolific career has included songwriting, dancing, acting on the Broadway stage and in commercial films (Greaves shared the Actors' Studio's first Dusa Award with Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, Sally Field, Jane Fonda, Dustin Hoffman, and Rod Steiger), teaching acting (at the Actors' Studio); producing, directing and co-hosting a television show (National Educational Television's *Black Journal*; co-host was Lou House); producing, writing, directing, and distributing dozens of documentary films on a wide range of topics (including many on African-American history), and, in a single instance, conceiving, writing, and directing one of the landmark “underground film” projects of the 1960s: the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project, which was shot in 1968. Greaves envisioned a series of films as the result of the project, but only one film was completed, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, and that not until 1971.

The *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project was Greaves's attempt to explore the filmmaking process and, in particular, to put the usual film production hierarchy into crisis. Greaves wrote a single scene—a candid argument between a man and a woman about their relationship: she complains about the abortions he's pressured her into and claims he's a homosexual; he denies and tempo-

rizes—and asked several pairs of actors to perform the scene in a variety of ways. The crew were given directions to film not only the scene, but themselves filming the scene, and even the activities in their surround in Central Park, where the shooting took place. Unbeknownst to his collaborators, Greaves was consciously acting the role of an incompetent film director, in an attempt to discover how far he could push the cast and crew before they rebelled against him. As the experiment turned out, little overt rebellion took place, but the finished film documents the public process of the shoot, as well as a secret meeting held by the crew (and filmed by them) to discuss the “disaster” of the production. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (the other films were to be entitled *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two*, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Three*, etc.) deconstructs the process of creative collaboration in general, and the cinéma vérité approach to documentary in particular. Few films do as good a job at capturing the mood of the sixties as *Take One*.

In the following interview, I talk with Greaves about his overall career as a means of providing a context for our in-depth discussion of the Symbiopsychotaxiplasm project. The extent and productivity of Greaves’s career could, of course, sustain a much more extensive interview, but for the purposes of this volume, it seems sensible to focus on the most extravagantly “critical” film of Greaves’s career and on related experiments. Our discussion of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* originated at the 1991 Robert Flaherty Seminar (programmed by Coco Fusco and Steve Gallagher), where Greaves, the final filmmaker guest, was questioned following a screening of *Take One* (I have incorporated many of the participants’ questions, along with the self-identifications they provided). In the years since the Flaherty Seminar, I have supplemented that original discussion with a series of one-on-one conversations with Greaves.

In 1994 Greaves revised *Take One*, adding four minutes of material not included in the version discussed here, in order to provide contemporary viewers with a clearer sense of the original project.

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*MacDonald:* I’d be grateful for some general background about your career.

*Greaves:* I became interested in art very early in life. I used to paint as a kid. In fact, I won a scholarship as one of the five best child artists in New York State, a scholarship to the Little Red Schoolhouse in Greenwich Village. I used to go there every Saturday morning and paint. My art was very impressionistic and free-form, but I was still conservative at that time about modern art. I thought Picasso was a disaster. Today I can look at a Picasso and see it’s about fracturing reality, like modern jazz.

I was always surprised that people thought I had talent. Do you know the

jazz musician Bill Dixon? Well, he and I grew up together, and Bill was an artist, too. He could mimic artwork of any kind. He could reproduce a Rubens, a Turner, to the letter. And he would draw cartoons and other kinds of images he saw in magazines. I couldn’t do that. All I could do was paint as I felt. Bill went on to become a fantastic musician in the tradition of Pharoah Sanders and Cecil Taylor. He broke entirely out of the conventional idea of reproducing reality in a traditional way. Bill Dixon’s music is *wild*. He did a marvelous score for my film *Wealth of a Nation* [1964], which is about individual freedom of expression.

My career on stage began with dancing. I started out as an African and modern dancer with Pearl Primus. I danced with her at Carnegie Hall, Town Hall, and the Roxy Theater. And then I got into acting. And while I was doing theater, I was writing popular songs. Eartha Kitt, Arthur Prysock, and others recorded my songs [Kitt recorded “African Lullaby,” as did Percy Faith; Prysock recorded “Baby, You Had Better Change Your Ways,” as did Al Hibler and Donna Hightower]. Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, I wrote a lot of songs, maybe as many as a hundred.

When I first started acting, I was a “natural”: the first play I did, *Garden of Time*, got rave reviews from the New York critics. They said I was so natural I would “out-cotton Joseph Cotton!” Hell, I was admiring the other actors in the production and here I walked off with all the reviews! I remember thinking, “I wasn’t even acting—wait ‘til they see me really act!” I was just responding to anybody who talked to me on the stage. Of course, when I actually started acting, I was horrible! I got some pans in my next production, and then I settled down and worked at appreciating simplicity in acting and eventually found myself getting hired. I was not only acting on the stage, but in film, in radio, and in early television.

Fritz Pollard, who had been a football star years before with Paul Robeson, had a place called Suntan Studios, and I was one of the actors he was always casting in his films. And also, the Army Signal Corps was doing films on Long Island. I acted in some of those, and I played the lead in a documentary called *We Hold These Truths*, though I never got a copy of it. I’ve always wondered what happened to that film. During those years I remained very active in theater. I was in *Lost in the Stars*, *Finian’s Rainbow* and in an all-black production of *John Loves Mary* at the Music Box Theater (Tom Ewell, William Prince and Nina Foch were in the white production; I had the William Prince role and Ruby Dee, the Nina Foch role). And I did summer stock. I was probably the most active young black actor in New York between 1945 and 1952. I didn’t have great roles for the most part, but I was all over the place. Looking back on it, I’m amazed.

*MacDonald:* There is so little information about the underground black cinema. You had your first film roles as part of the underground.

*Greaves:* I have the honor of being featured in the last two black-cast films



William Greaves (in middle, lying on bed) in Powell Lindsay and William B. Alexander's *Souls of Sin* (1949).

of that era, *Souls of Sin* [1949] and *Miracle in Harlem* [1948]. It's a curious experience to have been present at the tail end of that history. I feel like a relay racer, taking the baton from William Alexander and the others. I did two films with William, *The Fight Never Ends* [1948], with Joe Louis, and *Souls of Sin*. He was a role model in a way, not the only one, but certainly one. I saw him function in what was an entirely fascist state. It was a horrendous period.

*MacDonald:* Even on the most mundane level! In my junior high school, there were regulations about how far from the floor girls' skirts could be. And of course, no one was allowed to wear jeans.

*Greaves:* You know, Brando and I were at the Actors' Studio together, and he always used to wear jeans. At that time, everybody used to think, me included, that if we didn't wear suits and ties, God would strike us dead. Everyone knew that if you went on a casting call, you showed up with a shirt and tie and a suit—cleaned and pressed—and you were deferential to the producer or the director or the casting agent. You grinned from ear to ear and did all the things that Uncle Toms do, whether you were black or white. And here comes Brando, sauntering into the producer's office in his jeans, and if he didn't like the producer, he wouldn't shake his hand. He had this marvelous instinctual radar. It decoded phonies. He wanted to be himself, and he worked hard at it. He realized the polluting effect that American society had on consciousness, so he was very defensive of himself, which everyone decided was him being an ass-

hole—not realizing that the man was in a very nurturing state with respect to his talent and his consciousness. All this was part of this fascism: the hemline, the demands of authority in the theater business . . . and yet it came to pass that Brando became the preeminent actor of that era.

*MacDonald:* What was it like working on the black-cast films?

*Greaves:* *The Fight Never Ends* was my first real film role. Joseph Lerner was the director and William Alexander the producer. We got along very well. Lerner was a good director, I thought, and a savvy guy. He was smart enough to just keep me relaxed. I found that in those days the film directors gave me my own head. They must have felt there was no sense trying to push me out of joint.

*MacDonald:* *Souls of Sin* seems barely directed. The acting isn't bad, but cinematically it doesn't work at all.

*Greaves:* Well, Powell Lindsay was a stage director; he didn't have a sense of the cinematic the way Jack Kemp did [Kemp directed *Miracle in Harlem*].

*MacDonald:* How do you understand the demise of the all-black cinema? There had been some production, even through the thirties, when nobody had two pennies to rub together. And then at the end of the forties, when you would think there might be a market, it disappeared.

*Greaves:* It collapsed for several reasons. American apartheid, as it had been practiced, was collapsing. The black film industry was a creature of that apartheid system. Black people did not want to be discriminated against in the white theaters downtown any longer. They hadn't been able to get into some of the theaters, and when they did get into them, they had had to sit in the balcony. Very dehumanizing. So they went to the black independent films. But change was happening. All the post-World War II rhetoric about Democracy and the New World and the United Nations and so on was having some impact on white America, which was relaxing some of its neurotic need to oppress black people. The horrors of Nazism, Hitler, the Holocaust—what a racist propensity on the part of a large population can lead to—was having an effect on the American psyche.

And don't forget, Jews were major players in Hollywood. The Jewish community had come out of this horrific experience and had, at that particular time, a much greater sensitivity to humanity, and a strong empathy with oppressed people. Recently, much of the Jewish community has become increasingly conservative. But at that time, I remember distinctly that most of the progressive white people I knew were Jewish. Sure, there were conservative Jews, but there was this progressive group in Hollywood, and they had an impact. I'm thinking of Dalton Trumbo and the people who were active in writing *Back to Bataan* [1945], *Gentleman's Agreement* [1947], and *Pinky* [1949], and in bringing Sidney Poitier to the fore. As a matter of fact, both Sidney and I were up for the role in *No Way Out* [1950]. I didn't get it because I had done *Lost Boundaries* [1949]: Zanuck didn't want to use anybody from one of Louis de Rochemont's films [de Rochemont produced *Lost Bound-*

aries; Alfred L. Werker directed it]; he was feuding with de Rochemont at the time.

Anyway, to get back to the original question, these new Hollywood films began to attract black audiences, and the segregation began to break down. Brown versus the Board of Education was decided in 1954. There was an attenuation, or a dilution—whatever you want to call it—of racism. Finally, black people could go to any theater they wanted, and they were looking at lots of films not made by blacks. There were a few black-cast films made, but the bulk of the films we were looking at were white films coming out of Hollywood.

*MacDonald:* At the point when you were in *Souls of Sin* and *Miracle in Harlem* were you conscious of a history of that kind of work? The last ten years or so have seen the reconstruction of the history of African-American underground filmmaking since Oscar Micheaux.

*Greaves:* No, I didn't know that history. I was a young actor gratifying my ego, seeing myself on the screen. I didn't think of the historical. I'd started studying acting when I was thirteen or fourteen, but it wasn't until I was eighteen or nineteen that I started becoming aware of the processes of history. And I didn't think about *film* history, just history in the larger sense. So I was part of it, but didn't even know about it!

I used to see Micheaux walking around with film under his arm. I lived right across the street from where he had his office: I lived at 203 West 135th Street and 7th Avenue in Harlem, and he had his office at 200 or 202 West 135th Street.

I was only about ten years old, but I do remember two bars—The Big Apple (as a matter of fact I wonder if that's where the term "the Big Apple" came from), on the corner of 135th Street and 7th Avenue; and I think the Bird Cage—where they showed films on a screen. We used to peek in and see it was a black film and say, "Let's go see that." We didn't know where it came from. We assumed it came from Hollywood.

Did I tell you that I studied film production at City College with Hans Richter?

*MacDonald:* No!

*Greaves:* And Lewis Jacobs was one of my teachers. Jack Knapp was there. I think Leo Seltzer was there, a whole crew of people. Richter was the head of the department. I also studied at a place called the New Institute for Film and Television, in Brooklyn. I'd go to one place during the day and the other at night. I was still a kid.

*MacDonald:* *Lost Boundaries* was one of a half a dozen Hollywood films of the late forties and early fifties that broke through in terms of dealing with race. Did the cast and crew feel as if they were involved in a breakthrough production?

*Greaves:* Oh, very much so! We felt we were involved in something very important. Hollywood was doing all these horrible Uncle Tom things—Mantan Moreland and the rest. This film was different: there were classy black people in it . . .

*MacDonald:* And a lot of variety, too: there are wealthy blacks, working-class blacks, black doctors, black cops . . .

You shot on location for *Lost Boundaries*?

*Greaves:* Yes, in Keene and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

*MacDonald:* Both *Lost Boundaries* and *Intruder in the Dust* [1949, directed by Clarence Brown] were shot on location about events which took place locally. And in the case of *Lost Boundaries*, the events had actually occurred. What was the public surround of the shooting?

*Greaves:* Keene was very New England, WASPy, but I didn't find the people inhospitable at all. They were cool, as New England types often are, but I don't remember feeling any racial pressures. Of course, you have to understand that by then I was an actor and so full of myself that I didn't have time for racism. I didn't like it when it revealed itself and could be very angry, but I had no problems in Keene.

A few years ago, we had a big reunion in Keene. Larry Benequist, head of the film department at Keene State University, thought it would be a good idea to bring the cast and crew, and the townspeople who had been involved, together for a fortieth reunion. It was a very emotional coming together, a wonderful evening.

*MacDonald:* I assume you met the actual family who had passed for white?

*Greaves:* Oh yes.

*MacDonald:* There's a photograph of the Johnston family in Donald Bogle's *Blacks in American Film and Television* [(New York: Fireside, 1989), 139] . . .

*Greaves:* The actual family was not that white!

*MacDonald:* It seems remarkable now that they *could* pass.

*Greaves:* According to some of the townspeople, the family had deluded themselves into thinking they had passed. To some people they may have, but not to others. It was just that some of the white people didn't think it was important enough to make a fuss about. They just took the guy the way he was. But Johnston himself was apparently very uptight about the whole thing. Of course, the kids would think of themselves as white because up there in Keene they didn't have anything to do with black kids.

In going to de Rochemont's place during the *Lost Boundaries* period, I began to chat with Lou Applebaum, the composer for *Lost Boundaries* and the principal composer for the National Film Board of Canada. Lou was delighted that I was interested in the NFB. Louis de Rochemont had allowed me to be an apprentice on *Lost Boundaries*, to observe in his editing rooms, and so on; but even he didn't have any black people working there, and there were no black people with the necessary skills for the work anyway. Even Bill Alexander hired white cameramen and technicians. The unions were entirely racist. The McCarthy thing was happening here, and I was having some trouble getting work, not because I was a member of this or that, but because the whole climate of the industry had begun to change: they wanted to screen out *en masse* a whole group of people. America was locked up.

*MacDonald:* Had you actually tried to go into production here?

*Greaves:* Sure. But in 1951–52, in America, it was absolutely unthinkable. It was laughable. Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte and all those guys used to tell me, “You’re crazy, They’ll never give you an opportunity to direct!”

*MacDonald:* How did you know Canada would be different? How did you get to the National Film Board?

*Greaves:* I got to Canada partly as a result of reading *Grierson on Documentary* [London: William Collins, 1946; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947]. I thought it was a sensational book, exactly what I needed to give me guidance as to how I might approach this whole business of film. I wasn’t interested in just making movies, I was interested in social issues and corrective social action. I was particularly interested in the denigration of black people on the screen, and I realized I could make films that would counter some of this adverse propaganda. I heard about the National Film Board in Grierson’s book: he had set up the Film Board.

I applied for a grant from the John Hay Whiting Foundation to go to the NFB. I had recommendations from Elia Kazan, who was my teacher at the Actors’ Studio; Rouben Mamoulian, who had directed me in *Lost in the Stars*, and Louis de Rochemont—and the bastards turned me down! They could give money to black dancers and singers, but apparently couldn’t conceive of a black in control of films. I thought, “Fuck you!” and went to Canada on my own. For a while I lived on nothing but water and sugar cubes, but it was the smartest thing I ever did. Lou Appelbaum helped me get taken on as an apprentice, and after three months Guy Glover wrote a letter on my behalf, and I was taken on formally, with a salary.

I came back from Canada in 1960, because I thought the climate was changing, that the country was becoming more civilized. I had worked on seventy or eighty films and was a full-blown filmmaker. I figured I would get into the industry at some point, but then I had the wonderful opportunity to direct at the United Nations. And then, when I was ready to stay at the United Nations, I got the opportunity to make films for the US government. I did films for the USIA [US Information Agency] during the whole Kennedy period. George Stevens, Jr. was the head of the film department. Willard Van Dyke, James Blue, and a lot of other good filmmakers were making films for the USIA. Apparently George Stevens, Jr. had said to Shirley Clarke, “Gee, it would be great if a black filmmaker could do some of these films we’re doing,” and she mentioned me. They asked me to send them *Emergency Ward* [1958], which they flipped over, and that’s when I started doing films for the USIA. I did four altogether, and out of that came the other film production work.

The path I took, and there may be others (I guess there’s crime and prostitution!), was to develop a multiple front, to develop three or four projects I’m interested in, and keep myself available for other kinds of production work that might interest me. I’ve always tended to turn down commercials or industrials,

but education interests me. I’ve done a lot of educational films for the US government. I’ve done films for the American Cancer Society, Exxon (a film having to do with minority businesses)—all with interesting subject matter. These sources have provided enough money to put my children through school and to have something resembling a decent life, although at times it’s been very stressful, financially. When you commit yourself to independent filmmaking, no matter what level you’re at, you’ve taken a vow of poverty. You keep putting your money into your films because you need to enhance the quality of what you’re doing. That’s why you *are* independent, because you want to do something that’s very pristine, something that’s precisely the way *you* want it to be. But it’s quite a burden.

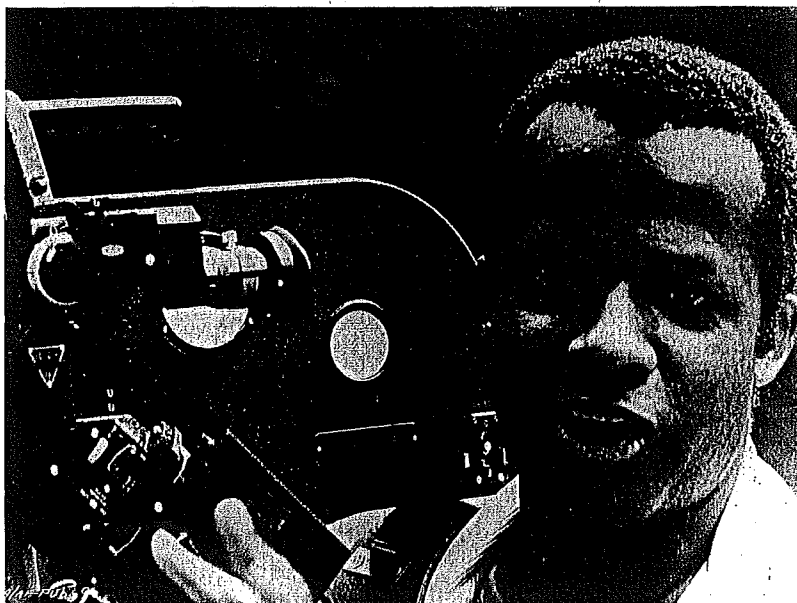
On the plus side, that kind of reinvestment does result in a qualitative improvement of your product, which then makes it much more viable and attractive. *From These Roots* [1974] is considered a high-quality film. It won twenty-two awards. Recently, when people contacted Bill Sloan about the history of American documentary for a show in Paris, he mentioned *From These Roots* to them. But *From These Roots* practically bankrupted us, in terms of the energy and the time we put into making what we felt would be an interesting cinematic experience.

*MacDonald:* Which leads to an obvious question: how were you able to finance *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, a feature-length film experiment?

*Greaves:* I’d been a member of the Actors’ Studio since 1949, and knew the Stanislavsky system—the Method, Strasberg, that whole approach to theater and acting. I began teaching actors in Canada, and one of my actors there was extremely adroit at business ventures and became very successful. He wanted me to make a feature and said, “Anything you want to make, just tell me.” I began to realize I could put a feature together using some of the actors at the school, and so I went ahead.

*Jackie Tshaka* (coordinator, National Black Programming Consortium): Where has *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* been shown?

*Greaves:* We showed it at the Brooklyn Museum retrospective [April 1991]; we also showed it at the Federal Theater and in Paris at a retrospective of black American film. We’ve had only a few public showings to date [August 1991]. The film was never released. We shot it in 1968 and then had difficulty getting anybody to finish it. We finally got the money for a blow-up in 1971, but then we had the problem of trying to get it launched. I thought I could get it into the Cannes Film Festival, and I flew over to France. The problem was that Louis Marcorelles, the influential critic, went to a pre-screening of the film and the projectionist got the reels all fouled up. *Take One* is already chaotic. It’s so fragile that if you mix it up even a little, you lose the film. Marcorelles and I had dinner after the screening, and he said, “I couldn’t understand what the film was about!” I was surprised at his reaction, and then later, too late, I discovered that his projectionist had screened the reels out of order.



William Greaves in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968).

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

*Bill Sloan* (chief, Circulating Film and Video Program, Museum of Modern Art): I saw *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* when it was still in a rough cut back in the sixties, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing! What did you have in mind at the time?

*Greaves*: I had a whole range of concerns. The term "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm" is a take-off on "symbiotaxiplasm," a concept developed by philosopher/social-scientist Arthur Bentley in his book *An Inquiry into Inquiries* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1954] as part of his study of the processes of social-scientific inquiry. Bentley explored how various social scientists went about the business of approaching "civilization" and "society." The term "symbiotaxiplasm" referred to all those events that transpire in any given environment on which a human being impacts in any way. Of course, the most elaborate symbiotaxiplasm would be a city like New York. I had the audacity to add "psycho" into the middle of Bentley's term. I felt the longer term more appropriate to my idea, which was to explore the psychology of a group of creative people who would function as an entity in the process of making a film.

I called it *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* because the plan was to make

five Symbiopsychotaxiplasms. But we couldn't even get the first one off the ground, and never developed the others.

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

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

*MacDonald*: Did you write the basic scene?

*Greaves*: Yes.

Of course, the actors will suddenly take hold and sometimes have a moment of truth, which takes what is purportedly bad writing and moves it to another level. The nature of acting is that you can put Shakespeare into the mouth of a horrible actor, and it's just a disaster, but with a superb actor, Shakespeare takes off. And you can take very neutral dialogue and by varying the basic circumstances of the dialogue entirely change its impact. For example: "Hello. How are you? What's new? Nothing too much. Have you seen so and so? No, I haven't" means almost nothing. But if one person is a killer and the person he's talking to is a potential victim, the same dialogue is entirely different. Suddenly, the person coming away from it says, "Gee, that was well written." It's in the configuration of motivations and basic circumstances that the full reality of the scene emerges.

Anyway, in the film you find yourself moving back and forth among all those kinds of realizations. One minute the thing is lousy, the next minute it's interesting.

*MacDonald*: And the different levels are often mutually referential. What the man and woman are saying to each other within their story can be interpreted as reflecting our feelings about the film, but even the struggle they're having getting along is analogous to our struggle as audience with what's on the screen.

*Greaves*: Also, for a variety of reasons I felt it was necessary to factor into the equation of the film the whole issue of sexuality. I was certainly mindful of the fact that sex/love makes the world go round, and it makes Hollywood go round. It's the easiest way to capture the attention of the average American audience. Failure to address the issue of sexuality has dire implications in terms of the marketplace. During the opening credits we see the maturation of the



child in a series of *Family of Man*-type images. And then at the end of that sequence, you're focused on the behind of the black girl with the bike; the cycle is starting all over again. And then, the film focuses in on this couple in a relationship opposite to what has been projected as the normal cosmic cycle: two people getting together and procreating. This relationship threatens that possibility.

Also, in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* the sexual issue has more than one level of meaning. It has to do with birth and life versus nonbirth and nonlife, the abortion issue. And in 1966 the abortion issue was (for me) a metaphor for the Vietnam War, where many babies were killed. I also felt that the discussion of sex—especially homosexuality, which was considered unorthodox or unconventional sex at that time—would be controversial and would elicit audience interest and attention. Using sex as the focal point of the scene, I could then orbit the rest of my concerns around it.

*MacDonald*: Nowadays, abortion is rarely dealt with so directly in films. I don't remember ever seeing characters debate the issue in a film, either in recent years or in the sixties.

*Greaves*: Abortion was an issue moving up on the wheel of time. It's interesting that in my film *she* wants a child, *he* does not, whereas in *Roe versus Wade*, it's more an issue of a woman having the right to say she doesn't want this life. What I like about the scene today is that it prevents the film from seeming like advocacy for a particular issue. It creates an interesting tension.

*MacDonald*: At one point, I thought you were indirectly using homosexuality and abortion as metaphors for the idea that this particular film is not what Hollywood would consider a creation: in other words, that the industry would consider *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* an "abortion," a "perversion."

*Greaves*: For me, the homosexuality was more involved with the simple fact that people change, people become homosexual, and people become heterosexual. People have the right to go in whatever direction they want.

*MacDonald*: So it fits with this film as a production process, as an open system?

*Greaves*: Sure.

*MacDonald*: About the choice of Central Park as the location. I assume that on one level, it was just the practical availability of having a space in New York that you could control in certain ways. But it also strikes me that there's an Edenesque quality to the landscape you use . . .

*Greaves*: Oh, absolutely! I mean we *could* have shot the scene inside an apartment. Central Park was an absolutely pregnant Eden. The park was appropriate for the traditional Family-of-Man cycle, and it had opportunities for uncontrollable events taking place, like the policeman coming in and asking, "What are you doing?" And in the wider social environment of Central Park, there were so many opportunities for an interaction between our creative nucleus, the cast and the crew, and the public surround.

*MacDonald*: If we think of the layout of New York City, Manhattan is geometrically arranged for efficiently doing business (at least in theory). It's all about doing things in rigorously structured ways to make money. Central Park is one of the few public places in the city that creates a sense that you can escape (even if that escape is an illusion). It's interesting that this film, which rebels against all the standard assumptions of the movie business, ends up being made in this space. It takes part in the whole tradition of the park as a form of therapy.

*Greaves*: Absolutely.

*MacDonald*: Did you shoot material for all five *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* "takes" and just edit one?

*Greaves*: Yes.

*MacDonald*: The original plan was to have each *Take* center on a different couple?

*Greaves*: *Take One* was going to be an omnibus version, a kaleidoscope of the couples. And then *Take Two, Three, Four, and Five* would have been focused on individual couples. We decided to abandon the omnibus version during the original editing; it looked like it was going to be too much.

*MacDonald*: Did you decide to start with the Don Fellows/Pat Gilbert "take" because their performances were the strongest?

*Greaves*: No. Originally, we were going to start with the interracial couple you see at the very end of *Take One*. But it didn't matter where we started; we were going to make all five of these anyway, so we decided to go with what was available financially and get started. It was a pragmatic decision, but I felt comfortable with Pat and Don who had done fascinating work.

*MacDonald*: If you had the money now, would you finish the other four "takes"?

*Greaves*: Oh yes, I'd love to. We've got great stuff, including, by the way, some wonderful material with Susan Anspach. Susan and the young fellow who played opposite her sang some of their lines. In fact, each pair dealt with the scenario in a different way. The interracial couple made it a psychodrama. We drew on the works of J. L. Moreno, a student of Freud, who conceived psychodrama as a psychotherapeutic tool, a way of accessing and objectifying the subconscious, and brought it to this country. We had a psychodramatist, someone who had been trained by Moreno, come onto the set and work with the actors.

*MacDonald*: So there's the psychodrama; there's the version with elements of a musical . . .

*Greaves*: And then there are two other straight-ahead efforts by actors not as experienced as Pat and Don were.

*MacDonald*: Is there much more material of the crew meeting among themselves and responding to the project?

*Greaves*: Oh yes, but not as much as I originally thought I would get. I had thought the crew would challenge me *on camera*, and that that conflict would be central to the drama of the film. My thinking was that if I made the crew

sufficiently angry by certain types of redundancies and repetitions, they would begin saying, "What the hell's going on? Why are you doing this? What's this all about?" They'd rebel. But they didn't do that, and it was a source of grief, frustration, and depression for me during the course of the shooting.

Similarly, I thought that the actors would periodically have trouble with their lines or with me and that we'd get into these debates over the relative merits of this passage of dialogue or that, of this particular psychological adjustment versus that motivation—that kind of thing. But the actors and the crew were so professional that they couldn't cross that boundary; they were too accustomed to situations where the director is god.

*MacDonald:* There's a difference though, in that the crew sneaks away to have their own discussion about you and then presents you with the results, while the actors seem to assume that if something is going wrong it's because *they're* not good enough.

*Greaves:* Well, actors tend to be like that.

*MacDonald:* I assume it's also because they knew you and your reputation as a teacher of actors.

*Greaves:* That may have had something to do with it, but typically actors are such an oppressed community, such a desperate community. They have so few opportunities to work that the last thing an actor wants to do is get a reputation for confronting directors.

So I didn't get what I wanted, except for that moment at the end where I say, "Cut!" and Pat says, "This is not working out," and I say, "Yes, it is," and she yells, "It's *not* and you *know* it!" I thought, "Oh boy, here she comes," because Pat was an intelligent, talented, sensitive actress with a volatile personality. She had radar about when something was truthful and when it wasn't. I figured that once she decided to confront me, she'd pull out all the stops. And I assumed that the crew would catch the whole thing. Well, by that time the crew were so pissed off with me that they'd become sloppy in their camera reloading and, wouldn't you know, just at that moment they didn't have any film in the fucking camera! So when I walked across the bridge after Pat, they didn't follow. And then once they were loaded, they felt it was too private a moment to interrupt. They fell back into the conventions.

*MacDonald:* Was this Pat Gilbert's first film? Don Fellows mentions acting in advertisements.

*Greaves:* I think it was her first film.

*MacDonald:* Because there's that added dimension of thinking you may be screwing up because the process of doing takes over and over wastes film. Fellows talks about that.

*Greaves:* Well, he was not accustomed to *cinéma vérité* as a methodology for filming. When you do a commercial, you sit down, you've got a slate, you've got a scene number, you've got a script clerk. Everything is all set up. Of course, *cinéma vérité* doesn't adhere to that and even in the moments when

we were filming in a more or less structured and conventional way, Don was surprised that we would do so many takes and that we would do improvisations. Up to that point there really weren't many incidences of improvisation being done in feature films. Cassavetes, but not much else.

*Lazar Stojanovic* (Yugoslavian filmmaker): In 1970 a Yugoslavian writer came back from the United States and told me about Bill Greaves and this film. He knew that I was very interested in what I call self-analytical movies, movies that consider the medium. I couldn't really get a clear picture of Bill's film—only that it was related to some of Godard's work. Now that I have finally seen *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, I think it's a milestone in the history of the sixties.

*Michelle Materre* (then, associate director, *Women Make Movies*; subsequently, executive director of International Film Seminars): You must have had your ego in a great place to be able to allow the crew to think about you the way they did.

*Greaves:* It was a calculated risk. In general, my livelihood turns on people's perceiving me as a director, and yet, for this particular film to work, a flawed, vulnerable persona was essential. I must say I feel very good about my relationship with the crew. Even when they spoke about me at their meeting, they didn't speak in anger. They were six characters in search of an author.

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

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

*MacDonald:* Certain ways of critiquing conventional film happen in many places simultaneously. In the sixties there were a number of different attempts to critique *cinéma vérité*: Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* [1961], Jonas Mekas's *The Brig* [1964], and Peter Watkins's *The War Game* [1965] and *Punishment Park* [1971] are distinguished instances. The one that strikes me as closest to this film is Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* [1967], which itself was inspired in part by the work of Andrew Noren. I'm curious as to whether you had any contact with McBride or Noren, or if they had contact with your work.

*Greaves:* I've heard of *David Holzman's Diary*, but I've not seen it. I've been involved in *making* films, and, you know, you stay in an editing room until you're exhausted, then you go home and collapse, and get up and do it again. There was a period in my life when I used to go to the theater a great deal, and to the movies. But that stopped after I left Canada in 1960.

*Richard Herskowitz* (then, director, Cornell Cinema; currently, director, Virginia Festival of American Film): Did you think of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* as a satire of *cinéma vérité* in particular?

*Greaves:* At the National Film Board of Canada, I was in the unit that pio-



neered cinéma vérité on the North American continent. Terry Filgate (the English cameraman in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*) and I were together at the National Film Board at what was called Unit B. We worked on *Lonely Boy* [1961, directed by Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor]. The process of learning to do that kind of shooting made me very attuned to the spontaneous capturing of reality and certainly laid the groundwork for this film.

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

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

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

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

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

*Patricia Zimmermann* (professor of film, Ithaca College): In documentary and in certain narrative forms, there's a long history of self-reflexive filmmaking as a political intervention to disengage the traditional power of the director. It's evident at least as early as Dziga Vertov. In the sixties, self-reflexivity became an international movement: Godard, Dusan Makavejev, Lazar Stojanovic, many American and European avant-garde filmmakers, you. . . . In all these instances, self-reflexivity functioned as a way of disengaging from certain authoritarian power relations to make way for more utopian ways of working in

the world. The scene where you're sitting with your multiracial, mixed-gender crew seems to encapsulate this. And you're an African-American director. Could you situate your method within the politics of the time?

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

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

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

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

*John Columbus* (director, Black Maria Film Festival): Did you expect a counterculture audience for the film? Or did you hope for distribution through commercial theaters?

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



The arguing couple (Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert) in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*.

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

*Steve Gallagher* (programmer): What was the reaction of the cast and the crew when they saw the film?

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

*Jack Churchill* (videomaker, musician): Did you always know what you were doing while you were shooting?

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

The interesting thing to me is that if you take a filmmaker, or any artist or writer, and throw them into any milieu, any situation, they will probably land feet first, if they've had enough experience. If you sit a pianist at a piano, even though that person has no music in front of him, even though he may not even decide to play any particular piece, he can still improvise. I used Miles Davis music [from *In a Silent Way*] in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* as a metaphor for the film, which is a form of audiovisual jazz. It was improvisational within a certain structure.

*MacDonald*: One of the things I noticed when I looked really carefully at *Take One* is that while it has this feeling of informality and spontaneity, it's very rigorously composed.

*Greaves*: Well, the finished film did not develop overnight. There was a lot of agony in the editing room—a *lot*. I had sixty or seventy hours of film. I can't tell you how many editors I burnt out. The film had to be chaos, but chaos of a very special character: *intelligible* chaos. It had to hold your attention, even though it was supposed to be a lousy film.

*MacDonald*: From the opening minutes it's evident that the film is precise in what it does. During the preface, we no sooner start to get engaged in this argument about abortion, than you flip us out of it by switching to a split-screen image of two different angles on the two characters. And the minute we're starting to become accustomed to the split-screen, you flip us out of that and into candid shots of bystanders observing the shoot. The switch from one level to another in the preface sets up the overall rhythm of the film.

And the following credit sequence confirms the film's precision. Often credits are little more than throwaways, but as you've said, you move through a whole cycle of life, while this sound that was identified as an error during the final moments of the preface gets louder and louder so that we know that even if it *was* an error then, it sure as hell is conscious now. The film is loaded.

*Greaves*: It *is* loaded, and that took a lot of time. It flows very easily now, but obviously there was a time when nothing flowed. In a way it comes out of my own background as a filmmaker. I began as an editor; I edited maybe sixty or seventy films as a sound editor, as a picture editor, and as chief editor. I was counseled at the Film Board by some marvelous people that the editing room was the best possible place to get a good grounding in filmmaking. And for that I will always be grateful. Some people were trying to get me to become a director very early in the game.

*MacDonald*: One last question about the film's subtlety. The first time we see you in the film, you're listening to the sound and saying, "This is terrible, this is terrible," but you don't look like you feel it's terrible; you look amused.

It's a kind of foreshadowing, as is your statement a moment later, "Don't take me seriously."

*Greaves:* I was very happy with the fact that there was error and confusion. If you notice me with Victor, the homeless guy at the end, I have the same kind of private smile. That emotion comes out of the fact that the thing was going my way: there was confusion, and conflict, and an unpremeditated development that was important for the life and success of the film. That's on one level.

Now on the second level, there's a paradox. I wanted to harness the paradox of doing failure, of *using* failure and error and confusion and chaos and unhappiness and conflict! The film is a tour de force. You are drawn inexorably through this cosmic flux. At the end you say, "Wait a minute, what was *that* about, and why was I so transfixed by it?" Well, life is like that, life keeps you totally absorbed from moment to moment and yet oftentimes you can't tell what it's about. I like that paradox. My filmmaking always goes for paradoxes, ironies, contradictions.

You know, it's like Zen: here we are on this earth, this ball, suspended out in space; we're all tied in with the gravitational forces of the sun and yet we're speeding and trying to go off in another direction. Cosmically, we're caught in this equilibrium of paradoxical forces.

*John Columbus:* Today some people might be a little troubled by the way you handle the homeless man who walks into the shoot near the end. Did you have mixed feelings then or do you now about that scene?

*Greaves:* We were confronted with that individual, and we said, "Do we want to let this survive as a sequence or not?" I made a determination at the time that we were going to go with it, because though he was intrusive, this was reality—and reality was what the film was all about. I decided to stay open to it, and I'm so glad I did. As you saw, I did take the precaution of getting the guy to sign a release.

There's a mystical element to this film. We certainly recognized that he was drunk and homeless, but in his confrontational nature, he articulated what I was trying to get at in the film. Over the years, Victor has been in different sections of the film, but he works best at the very end: you can't go beyond *that* level of truth. Even though we were all being very spontaneous up to a point (I was probably the least spontaneous of anyone), he was even *more* spontaneous. And that's the nature of film truth: the closer you come to it, the less permissive it is of artificiality following it.

*MacDonald:* How many versions of the film are there? I understand it's changed over the years.

*Greaves:* We went through many permutations of the material until we arrived at what we have. After he saw the film tonight, Steve Gallagher asked me if I'd cut something out of the film since he saw it a short time ago. The answer was yes. Over the years, every time I've looked at the film, I've thought, "Shit," and I fiddle with this and that.

*MacDonald:* I understand that you've been considering a *Take One and a Half* and a *Take Two*. What do you have in mind?

*Greaves:* Well, *Take One and a Half* will be what it sounds like: a halfway point between *Take One* and *Take Two*. Actually, I decided to do a *Take One and a Half* because we were caught in a logjam at a festival in Austria. They were supposed to send *Take One* to France for another event, and they didn't do it, so we had to scrounge around and pull together all the answer prints of *Take One* and assemble a film. In the process of making this emergency film for the Amiens Festival, we used a few things we liked that weren't in the original *Take One*, so you can call that version *Take One and an Eighth*. It's the same as *Take One*, with a few additions [This is the new version of *Take One* mentioned in the introduction to this interview]. But *Take One and a Half* will use sequences of couples who were left out of *Take One*. We'll use the interracial couple you see and Susan Anspach and her partner. I'm not quite sure how we'll weave their story lines into the larger situation, though I did sketch out one outline we might follow. *Take One and a Half* will probably be about ninety minutes, as opposed to the seventy minutes of *Take One*.

*MacDonald:* And *Take Two*?

*Greaves:* It occurred to me, when I was in Germany recently, that since the actress [Audrey Heningham] in *Take Two* has lived in Germany for almost twenty years and since the people at the Munich Film Festival like *Take One* so much, it might be interesting to have a look at some of the concerns in *Take One* within the context of that lapse of time. The actor who plays her partner in the original shooting [Frank (now Shannon) Baker] is still in New York at the Actors' Studio, and his craft has developed. So they would interact on several different levels: on the level of the basic screen test (the argument between them), *and* on a psychodramatic level (they did have a relationship with each other in real life); *and* on a third level, in terms of their here-and-now professional and personal realities and whatever has happened to them in the interim. I'd like to bring the actress's German reality into the film—especially the Munich beer halls. I love the energy there, which is kind of ironic because Dachau is only a few miles away. It's hard to conceive of those horrors. For me, it only underscores that, as an old professor of mine used to say, "Genius and gentility, stupidity and savagery are not the private preserve of any one group or race of people."

We would have *Take Two* unfolding in Central Park in the original footage, and then there'd be this abrupt cut into this new recent material. Or we could start off in Germany and intercut between present and past. Those are some of the thoughts I've been playing around with. How much of that I will be able to get to, I don't know.

*MacDonald:* Which of your other films do you see as particularly experimental?

*Greaves:* The film I did in Africa called *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* [1966] is experimental in the sense that it uses poetry in conjunction with *cinéma vérité* in an unusual formulation.

*From These Roots* is all still photographs. To make a documentary that was dramatic in its impact with only still photographs and sound was experimental then. Today you have Ken Burns's *The Civil War* [1990] and so on. *Ida B. Wells, A Passion for Justice* [1989], which also came out before *The Civil War*, combined sound effects, still photographs, and interviews overlaid with graphics. I think that film was innovative.

And *Ali, the Fighter* was experimental in the sense that it was shot *cinéma vérité*, but has a progressive, dramatic story line. Certainly the chronology of the event itself was helpful—the events leading up to and including the fight between Ali and Joe Frazier. But apart from that, there was character delineation and a development of dramatic themes. Up to that point in American filmmaking I don't know if there were any films that used *cinéma vérité* in such a dramatic way. I could be wrong, of course; I'm looking at this through my own tunnel vision.

You know, *Ali, the Fighter* became the basis for *Rocky* [1976]. If you analyze *Rocky*, you'll know that Rocky is a white Joe Frazier. Joe Frazier was in my apartment about four months ago, and he said, "Goddammit, they ripped me off." They used his public persona as the basis for Rocky and Muhammad Ali as the basis for Apollo Creed. They even purchased sequences from our film to use as crowd reactions during the fight. The *Raging Bull* [1980] people also studied our film. There are echoes of our way of shooting in both films. *Ali, the Fighter* was an experiment that went on to become conventional.

*MacDonald*: Your work on the *Take One* project is ongoing, but you're now [autumn 1995] shooting a film about Ralph Bunche. Is the Bunche project the biggest thing you've done?

*Greaves*: Well, yes and no. I was executive producer of *Bustin' Loose* [1981], a twelve or thirteen million dollar production. But an executive producer is a glorified baby-sitter. You just hover while this thing is being done, trying to keep harmony on the set and to stay within the budget. In terms of real hands-on direction, the Bunche project is the most expensive I've done.

I was thinking recently about the American ethos, and about Hollywood setting up the guidelines for our expectations and responses. As you've said, we see hundreds of hours of film, TV, and so on, and *then we may* see an avant-garde film. There's a related development in Europe. At least a couple generations of Europeans were largely raised on their own films, films from their cultures, in *their* aesthetics, films about what concerns them. Then here comes the American film invasion, wiping their screen culture—and as a result, their actual culture—off the map. I've been to France, Italy, Spain, and Sweden recently, and Europeans look less and less like Europeans to me and more and more like Americans. And European films are mimicking American action films. The American motion picture and television industry and print media are the engine that's driving the cultural transformation of the world.

At the Goethe Institute this past Saturday, I saw a German action film with

lots of blood and guns, all these phony film conventions—the stock-in-trade of an American Hollywood product. Europeans figure if they make these films, they'll be able to access the American market. At least some of them think that. Another group makes these films to recapture their own marketplace—not to preserve their spiritual or cultural integrity, but for business reasons. In Germany right now, as I understand it, 12 percent of the market share is controlled by the Germans. Eighty-five percent is controlled by Americans, and about 3 or 4 percent by the French and people from other parts of the world. This breakdown is pervasive throughout Europe.

As a juror at the San Sebastian Film Festival recently, I saw a lot of films from different countries: all were clones of American films and not as good. I mean we do our films very well. That's what we *do*. They're trying to emulate our films in order to recapture their market share, but in the process they lose whatever values and identity they have. I hate to see all these amazing worlds disappear.

Two years ago I was in China and, to my utter amazement, when I'd talk to Chinese filmmakers about the aesthetics of film, about cinema language, they'd talk to me about *Rambo*: "Where do you get the money? How do you make a deal?" Unhappily, the world seems progressively oriented to the bottom line, and the impact on cinema is devastating. It sure plays havoc with *my* truth. When you've got X-hundred thousand dollars of debt to pay off, you have to watch what you say. Unfortunately, I don't know any way around it.