



Sign of the Times

William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasms*

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IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN understood – not least by studio accountants – that if a film can be made, it can be remade too. But there are reasons other than financial ones for retreading old paths. Remakes can satisfy an obsessive need to copy while also transform, as in the fetishistically close yet crucially modified revisions of Hitchcock by Gus Van Sant (*Psycho*; 1998) and French artist Pierre Huyghe (*Remake*; 1995). Some remakes ask the question of whether something that seemed uniquely possible at a particular moment, under particular conditions, could conceivably happen again: hence *The Five Obstructions* (2003), in which Lars Von Trier challenged Danish veteran Jørgen Leth to remake a 1967 short under artificial constraints.

The latter rationale seems to underlie William Greaves's decision in 2003 to follow up his *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968) with something that's partly remake, partly sequel. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 ½* (the title echoes Federico Fellini's *8 ½* (1963), the definitive film about the impossibility of filming) is fired by a need to settle unfinished business, but also to revisit an original scene, to ponder a sense of 'it happened here'. Over several days in 1968, New York filmmaker Greaves shot a feature that might fairly be described as a film about its own 'making-of' documentary. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* follows the shooting of a single scene in which a married couple, Alice and Freddie,

bicker in Central Park: she complains that he's gay and unfaithful, he retorts that she's 'cutting his balls'. The scene is not, apparently, part of a larger drama: Greaves simply shoots it over and over, with different pairs of actors. The action is intercut with footage of the shooting process, the two often shown simultaneously in double or triple split-screen images. In addition, we see Greaves's crew gathering behind his back to argue about the film and why they feel it's going wrong.

At one point, Greaves tells a crowd of onlookers, 'It's a picture that's coming out some time next year.' So he thought: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* was not originally released, and only saw the light of day when shown in 1991 at the Brooklyn Museum. Instantly hailed as a lost classic of US underground cinema, it went to Sundance the following year, where actor-director Steve Buscemi offered to help Greaves make the sequel confidently announced at the end of *Take One*. With further help from Steven Soderbergh, Greaves at last delivered *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 ½*. The new film combines footage from the 'Take 2' he planned and shot in 1968 with actors Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker, with new DV material featuring the same actors today, shot by several members of the original crew.

Featured recently in this year's London Film Festival, Greaves's diptych adds up to far more than



Above left
William Greaves and
actor Don Fellows
rehearsing on the set of
*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm:
Take One*, 1968

PHOTO: SYEUS MOTTEL
COURTESY WILLIAM GREAVES
PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Right
Patricia Ree Gilbert
and Don Fellows in
*Symbiopsychotaxiplasm:
Take One*, 1968

PHOTO: SYEUS MOTTEL
COURTESY WILLIAM GREAVES
PRODUCTIONS, INC.

the sum of two parts. Together, the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasms* offer a complex, time-seasoned contemplation of memory, repetition, aging, and changes in New York culture and in attitudes to cinema (in 1968, Greaves's filming drew fascinated crowds; today, no one looks twice at a DV shoot in the Park). The films represent a gloriously defiant quixotism: as Greaves proudly states, he's made a sequel to a film that was never released in the first place.

Even without its sequel, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* stands up as a fascinating venture in itself. Very much a period piece, it overlaps with other experimental impulses of the time. The marital argument resembles the hothouse intimism of John Cassavetes's films, while Greaves's term 'screen tests' explicitly evokes comparison with Warhol's thumbnail sketches of people coming to life, or failing to, before the camera. For Greaves, himself an Actors' Studio alumnus, the project appears to address performance, above all, but in a larger sense, the entire shoot is a performance, indeed a quintessential 1960s Happening: open-air theatre (which the Park is famous for), only with cameras present. Greaves is not so much making a film, as *performing* filmmaking: *Take One* gives us the independent film shoot, with all its attendant bustle, as a New York hipster parody of the 'real' film-making done by West Coast professionals.

The very repetitiveness of the Freddie-and-Alice scenes makes them more

compelling than they might otherwise be: one technician complains of Greaves's harsh dialogue, 'It's not Edward Albee'. What is fascinating, however, is the parade of different actors – some good, some bad, some not nearly as good as they think (one agonizes self-importantly about whether to play Freddie as 'a closet fag'). The real world constantly intrudes: not only do we see the cameras and their multiple angles on the action, we also get the changing weather, a policeman checking the shoot's authorization, a flamboyantly bohemian homeless man who hijacks the cameras' attention in the film's last few minutes.

What gives *Take One* its truly distinctive edge is the heated, but entirely lucid, crew discussion. Disgruntled, apparently losing confidence in Greaves's capabilities, the crew members secretly film themselves criticizing the project. Sound recordist Jonathan Gordon – a brash, stormily handsome longhair, who registers as a *de facto* ringleader – muses, 'Perhaps it would be better to talk about how interesting the non-direction is'. In footage of the same discussions included in *Take 2 1/2*, one participant argues that such a seizure of power by a film crew has never happened before – 'This is the way life really works, without precedent' – and the 1968 footage indeed embodies that decade's belief that new possibilities, both social and artistic, were being realised for the first time in history. It's all the more poignant, then, when some of the same crew try to make the discus-



sions happen again in 2003 with younger colleagues, only to find the talk lacks the old urgency.

The central issue of the films is power, but in the context of hippie-era activism, with the debate fired by a ludic 'what-if?' spirit, rather than the more earnestly analytical *marxisant* stance that might have marked similar manifestations in Europe (around the same time, Jean-Luc Godard tried to involve British technicians in similar debates, but found them too eager to clock off after work). Still, you can't help wondering about the real degree of Greaves's control: during the 1968 discussions, production manager Robert Rosen muses, 'For all anyone knows, William Greaves is standing outside the door directing us... No one knows whether this is real.'

Whether the discussions are real – as they appear to be – or, as they used to say back then, a 'put-on', the fact remains that Greaves incorporated the unrest into *Take One*, allowing it to cast a critical light on his competence. He compares this 'palace revolt', as he calls it, to contemporary American dissent: 'I represent the establishment'. Yet the display of Vietnam-era dissidence gets a distinctive and uncomfortable twist from the fact that this supposed embodiment of the establishment is an African-American director watching his authority undermined by a predominantly white crew.

In *Take 2 1/2*, Greaves at last explains his cumbersome title: derived from the social sciences term 'symbiotaxiplasm', which he defines as 'events that impinge on human environment and behaviour' (here, in other words, the whole damn

Below
William Greaves and Steve Buscemi on location of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2* in Central Park, 2003

PHOTO: SUSAN STAVA, COURTESY PREMIER PR AND WILLIAM GREAVES PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Right
Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker on location of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2* in Central Park, 2003

PHOTO: SUSAN STAVA, COURTESY PREMIER PR AND WILLIAM GREAVES PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Facing page from top
Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker on location of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* in Central Park, 1968

PHOTO: ROLAND MITCHELL, COURTESY PREMIER PR AND WILLIAM GREAVES PRODUCTIONS, INC.

Crew debating Greaves' method on the set of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, 1968

PHOTO: ROLAND MITCHELL





circus surrounding a film shoot). The first part of *Take 2 1/2* shows footage, shot in 1968, of Henningham and Baker, a young black woman and a middle-aged white man, whose pairing introduces a racial dynamic absent in the earlier duos. We also get a stronger sense of the out-and-out oddity of Greaves's tactics. At one point in the 1968 shoot, 'psychodramatist' Marcia Karp engages the actors in role play; one utterly bizarre sequence shows Baker wrestling on the lawn with a mini-skirted Karp, playing Freddie's 'strong self'.

After an interlude showing Greaves and colleagues today, presenting *Take One* to an appreciative audience, he's then back in Central Park taking up where he left off. In the new scenes, Freddie and Alice are reunited: he's ill from HIV/AIDS and wants her to take on a young African-American protégée of his. The actors have aged imposingly: the intense Afro'd beauty Henningham is now a regally arty matron with a European accent, Baker a gentle Max von Sydow type. But they're as inflammable as they ever were: when Karp returns for further dramatic goading, Baker (in or out of character, it's hard to tell) ends up raging, 'Shut the fuck up!', causing Henningham to storm off. 'I think we'd better go back to the script,' concludes Baker, 'it's getting too physical'.

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While much of the old intensity remains, we can't help being aware of what's been lost, not least visually: the vivid candy pastels of the 1968 16mm footage are replaced by a glassier, more literal DV image. Freddie and Alice are no longer creatures of an urgent present but stately survivors of a distant lost era. Indeed the fading of a certain trailblazing spirit is represented, intentionally or not, by Greaves's choice of music. *Take One* uses excerpts from Miles Davis's then spanking-new *In A Silent Way*: a perfect analogy for Greaves's work, for Davis's LP was a prime example of improvisation studio-edited into finished shape. In *Take 2 1/2*, we have to settle for blandly bucolic takes on standards such as 'Autumn Leaves'.

Greaves too has changed – the charismatic, affably theatrical provocateur of the first film replaced by a benign, frail figure, a little lost under his baseball cap. Interestingly, when it comes to making declarations about the two films, the old firebrand Jonathan Gordon – now a Falstaffian ringer for late Brando – is still intent on having the last word, effectively playing the director role. This, indeed, is a central question of both films: who has the right to direct a film, or to 'play' the director? In 2003, Greaves comments, 'Everyone wants to be a director', and ascribes that all-American impulse to George W. Bush: 'I think he wants to direct humanity'. As a political closing gesture, Greaves has *Take 2 1/2* end with the appearance of Freddie's black adopted daughter Jamilla, suggesting a baton passed on to another generation, and perhaps the prospect of another generation's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 3*.

Greaves's *Take One* is a message in a bottle that finally hit the shore against all odds, and his sequel parlays disaster into victory, making a trophy of pride from an experience that many filmmakers would no doubt rather forget. You can't help loving Greaves's self-effacing wryness: in *Take 2 1/2*, when his impatient cinematographer still has to explain a technicality to him after all these years, he chuckles, 'Trust me folks, I know how to make a movie'. As a return to the 60s spirit, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2* certainly beats a Crosby, Stills & Nash reunion. ●

