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On the cover:

William Greaves, with crew
in Central Park, 1968.



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BEYOND THE MIND'S EYE



Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One

Film History Revised

By Adam Knee

William Greaves's unique, improvisational documentary/fiction hybrid *SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE*, although originally shot in 1968, has only in the last year and a half begun to receive the attention it deserves. This provocative and entertaining feature film, about the marital problems of a fictional couple and the (possibly real) problems of the people filming them, not only raises interesting questions about the relationship between a film and reality, it provides a new perspective on a number of under-examined facets of film history as well. *TAKE ONE*'s "rediscovery", in the wake of its screening as part of a retrospective of William Greaves's work at the Brooklyn Museum, has indeed been described by one critic as "perhaps the most notable event in American independent film during 1991".¹ While the film still does not have a theatrical distributor, it has been screened at close to a dozen film festivals internationally as well as several museums and independent film centers.

The resurfacing of *SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE*, at the start of the nineties is in and of itself pertinent in historical and critical terms. The film had a number of other showings during its heretofore hidden existence, but only now — in a context where critics, academics and programmers are becoming far more aware of independent production history generally and black independent production in particular — has the film been able to generate such sustained interest.

In New York's Central Park in the summer of 1968, Greaves shot 16mm film footage for what was originally planned as a series of five feature films entitled *SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE* through *SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE FIVE*. Each film was to feature a different pair of actors improvising on the same basic scenario of marital discord. As it turned out, however, post production funds were scarce and only one feature was completed. (The footage for the other four films is, in fact, still extant.) Most of the editing on *TAKE ONE* was completed over the next two years, with a 35mm blow-up and split screen optical effects handled in 1971. At this point, the film was screened for potential distributors, but they were not prepared for its experimental and innovative nature. There were no takers and the film was shelved.



TAKE ONE was initially given a reprieve from oblivion in 1980 by Katherine Ruell, Katherine Arnaud, and Pearl Bowser, who programmed it for a retrospective of works by black American filmmakers in Paris. Later that year, the film played in New York with other works from the Paris retrospective at Joseph Papp's Public Theater. *TAKE ONE* again did not garner much attention from that screening — at a time when relatively few were paying much mind to African-American independent filmmaking. Bowser, a historian and programmer who was responsible for saving quite a number of black independent films, introduced the Brooklyn Museum's Coordinator of Film and Video Programs, Dara Meyers-Kingsley, to William Greaves and his work in 1988. Bowser and Meyers-Kingsley were at the time co-curating the show for the Museum entitled "Black American Cinema: Images of a Culture", which included two of Greaves's documentaries. Meyers-Kingsley was impressed with the filmmaker and with the range of his experiences and his work in film — so much so that she decided to devote a retrospective to his films to coincide with the opening of a major new auditorium at the Brooklyn Museum.

In researching the retrospective, Meyers-Kingsley was intrigued by the description of *SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE* offered in Greaves's filmography and asked him to take the only print out of storage. She was astounded by what she saw and felt she had a real historical find: a sprightly, experimental quasi-documentary feature fully versed in (and in some ways prefiguring) many of the formal innovations and thematic concerns of various 1960's American and European New Wave filmmaking movements. As J. Hoberman later described it, "it's a movie that enters American history so decisively it seems like it's always been there".²

Meyers-Kingsley decided to open the April to May, 1991 retrospective with *TAKE ONE* and to include the film in press screenings. Owing in part, no doubt, to a new and very strong interest in African-American independent filmmaking in the popular press and the trade press and in various sectors of the filmmaking community, the film quickly started to gain a good deal of deserved attention. (Ironically, this new attention is certainly also due in part to the fact that the film's innovations are now hardly as surprising and

unfamiliar to viewers as when it was first screened.) **TAKE ONE** has been the subject of a number of feature articles and reviews and receives a special mention in the new preface to the reissue of Robert Stam's book on reflexivity in film and literature: "[The] film virtually calls for a rewriting of the history of filmic reflexivity."³ **TAKE ONE** has also generated consistently strong interest in the venues where it has been shown, among them the film market of the Independent FeatureProject, the Sundance Film Festival, and the Flaherty Film Seminar. This vulnerable fragment of film history still exists in only a single 35mm print — but negotiations are now underway for a long-delayed **SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE TWO**.

SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE's rich and multi-leveled reflexivity (or self-referentiality) is indeed one of the film's most surprising and salient characteristics. The film is in one sense an extended document on its own processes of production, as well as a meditation on its own function and status as an artistic text. This self-reflective bent is evident from even before the start of the credits. The film opens in Central Park on a heated, curse-filled argument a couple is having about various intimate difficulties and then cuts to a nonplussed octogenarian and a shirtless young man evidently looking on; the camera then reveals that the two were watching Greaves and his crew film this personal drama. As this "scene" progresses, we start to notice an annoying hum on the soundtrack; it turns out that the crew within the film can hear the noise on their recording equipment as well. After Greaves comments that "it's terrible," the hum is mixed in with the music for the entire credit sequence.

These self-referential twists, at once humorous and distancing, establish the pattern for the film that is to follow. Each time the scripted drama-within-the-film is taken up again, we are reminded of its artifice through such things as unconventional editing, unmotivated zooms, equipment failures, and (apparently real) performer frustration and fatigue. Indeed, **TAKE ONE** is as radically deconstructive by nature as any French New Wave or American independent film of the 1960's. The constructedness of acting is underscored in numerous sequences of Greaves giving direction to the actors, as well as in footage which catches the "real" people behind the performers. Hollywood editing and shooting techniques are denaturalized through split screen effects which enable us to see all of the camera's coverage of a given scene at once, as well as through the numerous discussions of filming which became part of the "plot" of the film itself. Even processes of sound recording and mixing become foregrounded when we hear technicians adjusting their equipment or when sideline commentaries from the crew are more audible than actor's dialogue.

TAKE ONE profoundly questions conventional cinematic structure in a number of ways, not the least of which are its repetition *ad nauseum* of its main scripted dramatic scene and the (at first) evidently haphazard inclusion of

various events which transpire during the filming in Central Park. In fact, even the members of Greaves's crew start to become concerned about the apparent lack of structure — so much so that they appropriate the equipment themselves to debate whether their director is taking contemporary notions of open-ended, free-form art a bit too far. The surprising inclusion of the material filmed by this insurgent crew is most provocative for the issues it raises — about filmic form, about different registers of cinematic "reality", and about authorial control.

Among the questions suggested by this revolt within the film: What are the viable parameters of feature film structure? How much conscious organization must an artistic text have beforehand? Is this "revolt" real, or is it scripted and directed by Greaves as well? For that matter, how can the viewer tell which are "real" events, and how can the crew tell when Greaves is being his true self? (Some of the crew make the reasonable speculation that the whole improvisational filmmaking process is Greaves's own means of seeking out his true self.) From the viewer's perspective, another dimension of the situation is that even if the scene was indeed shot without the director's initial authorization, it was his eventual choice to include the material.

The figure of Greaves presented to us in the film does give some clear indications of the goals behind his improvisational *modus operandi*, a number of them offered after the crew's uprising. Greaves is interested in focusing on creative process, in bringing together a rather basic dramatic premise along with the formative energies of himself, his cast and his crew in a living, interactive environment. The director's goal thus becomes to guide and to record — and then in post-production to more sharply focus — this dynamic interactivity. (The approach makes for an interesting comparison with independent filmmaker and theorist Maya Deren's notion of the "controlled accident", of allowing events to evolve naturally and spontaneously while keeping them focused and directed.)

William Greaves does succeed in these broad goals remarkably well — a fact strongly evidenced by the film's overall coherence, its thematic consistency, and its deep resonance with the artistic, social, and political concerns of its time and place of production. As haphazard as some of the filmed material initially may appear, it all ends up fitting quite well into the overall design of the text. A seemingly random off-angled shot of the film's actress reflected in a make-up mirror on the grass in fact subtly telegraphs her own strong self-involvement and insecurity, both of which become clear as the film progresses. Similarly, shots of amorous couples and young children of various races which accompany the credits, seemingly just to establish the park setting, are in retrospect germane to **TAKE ONE**'s constantly reemerging themes of the creation of children, the paralleled creation of artistic text, and the growing contemporary awareness of the dynamics of racial diversity.

The questioning of social form and social prejudice and the challenging of conventional perspectives on race, gender, sexuality, and power which the 1960's are remembered for are indeed very central to **SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE**. Greaves sets up his own attack on the industry prejudices which had hindered his film career in using a racially mixed film crew of both men and women — and then including substantial footage of the interactions of these crew members in the final film. Issues of sex and sexuality are the focus of both the performed drama-within-the-film and a number of the debates the crew engages in; even if some of us may find some of the 1960's terms of this debate inappropriate today, the ardency and seriousness of purpose with which these issues are approached is indeed quite refreshing. It is clearly this same commitment to challenging the status quo which prompts the crew to revolt — a revolt the political implications of which, in 1968, are by no means lost on Greaves, who had himself long fought to likewise gain control of the production apparatus to communicate his own views.

The film career of **SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE's** director is itself only now receiving closer study.⁴ William Greaves's first involvement with film was as an actor in black-cast films of the late 1940s. His interest in moving behind the camera arose in part out of a dismay over the demeaning roles available to him and other African-American actors in film and theater at that time. Similar racial discrimination and lack of opportunity in film production ultimately prompted Greaves, in 1952, to move to Canada to learn his craft with the National Film Board. He eventually returned to New York, in the early sixties, where he formed his own production company and produced and directed a number of films for the United Nations and the United States Information Agency.

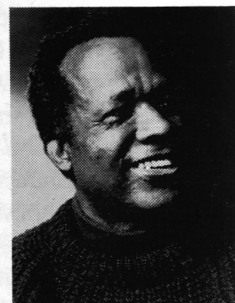
In 1967, Greaves made the documentary **STILL A BROTHER: INSIDE THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS** in collaboration with William Branch for National Educational Television (NET); this ground-breaking film focused on various difficulties which faced African-Americans achieving middle-class status at that time. The next year, Greaves worked for NET again, as co-host and then executive producer of "Black Journal", an Emmy-winning public affairs show concerned with presenting black perspectives on a variety of political, cultural, and historical issues at local, national and global levels; "Black Journal" also helped provide training and guidance for a group of young African-American documentarians who were getting some of their first production experience on the show.⁵

Greaves left "Black Journal" in 1970 to concentrate on producing and directing films through his own company. Since that time, he has made dozens of films for a variety of industry and government sponsors, as well as for public television and with other kinds of independent financial backing. Among the most notable of these varied and wide-ranging films are: **ALL THE FIGHTER** (1971), a feature-length cinema verite-style documentary on Muhammad Ali containing extensive original footage of an historic boxing

match with Joe Frazier; **FROM THESE ROOTS** (1974), an influential study of the Harlem Renaissance which skillfully uses the limited photographic material available on that era; **BUSTIN' LOOSE** (1981) (with Greaves as executive producer), a rare (and financially successful) Hollywood use of black leading players (Richard Pryor and Cicely Tyson) in a family-oriented comic drama; and **IDA B. WELLS: A PASSION FOR JUSTICE** (1989), a highly effective, award-winning portrait of an unjustly ignored black civil rights leader at the turn of the century, which has been as popular on the festival circuit as **SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE**. Despite a lengthy career and an impressive filmography, Greaves, like many other independent documentarians and like many other black filmmakers, must still struggle to raise funding for his projects and to distribute them, a struggle in which the success of **TAKE ONE** and **IDA B. WELLS** fortunately seems to be assisting. Greaves has recently been awarded a Ford Foundation grant for the first phase of a television mini-series on the life of renowned U.N. Undersecretary General and Nobel Prize Laureate Ralph Bunche. ☆

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William Greaves, pictured at right in a current photo, will be the featured speaker on opening night at the 35th American Film & Video Festival & Conference.



Acknowledgement is made for the assistance of Pearl Bowser, Dara Meyers-Kingsley and William Greaves in the preparation of this article. Most of the films discussed are available for rental from William Greaves Productions, 230 West 55th Street #26D, New York, NY 10019.

End Notes

1. Scott MacDonald, "Sunday in the Park With Bill", *The Independent* 15 (May 1992), pp. 24-29. MacDonald's article includes a lengthy interview with Greaves on **SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE**.
2. J. Hoberman, "It's Deja Vu All Over Again", *Premiere*, July 1992, pp. 31, 33.
3. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 reissue), p. xviii.
4. For a more detailed career overview, see Charles Musser and Adam Knee, "William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking and the African American Experience", *Film Quarterly* (Spring, 1992) pp. 13-25.
5. For more on "Black Journal" and Greaves's involvement with it, see also *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1990), pp. 304-07.