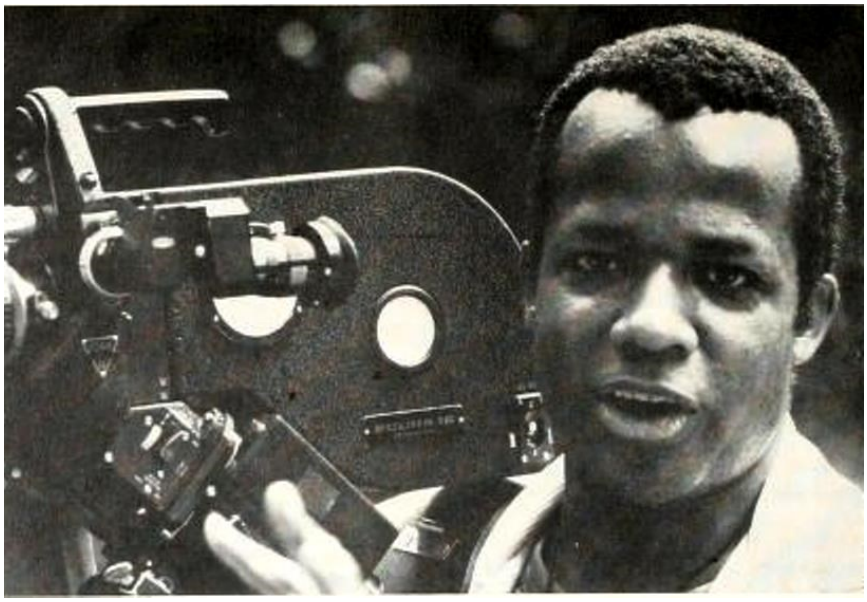
Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One

By Maria San Filippo



The June 1970 edition of Business Screen Magazine *included an article about William Greaves titled "A Concerned Filmmaker" which featured this photo. Courtesy* [Media History Digital Library](#).

In 1968, Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker William Greaves wrote, directed, produced, edited, and starred in his first feature, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One." Shot on-location in New York's Central Park, cast with Actor's Studio students and with a Miles Davis score, "Symbio…" depicts a film crew's uprising against its authoritarian director (Greaves playing himself) as captured by a documentary crew. This genre-defying, mind-bending work constructs several levels of cinematic reality, prompting the question of "How much is real?" and leading the way for mockumentaries and found footage films like "This is Spinal Tap" and "The Blair Witch Project." Producer of 200-plus projects including the landmark "Black Journal" public television series and recipient of the International Documentary Association's Career Achievement Award in 2004, Greaves' name has long been synonymous with maverick independent media-making and a commitment to documenting the African-American experience. Though Greaves is undoubtedly the film's visionary auteur – notable for an African-American filmmaker in the 1960s – "Symbio…" is truly a film made collectively by a multi-racial crew, whose on-set rebellion becomes the film's drama and its platform for sociopolitical critique and revolutionary philosophy.

The cast and crew of "Symbio..." received only a scanty premise of the film-within-a-film's unscripted narrative: a director shoots screen tests with several pairs of actors for a low-budget feature. Greaves has his auditioning performers read deliberately clichéd dialogue between bickering married suburbanites, with the actors' (Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert) increasingly testy relationship becoming the catalyst that induces their performed argument to gradually seem more "real." Intentionally vague and open-ended, this scenario was intended as an initial segment ("take one") of a multi-part project described by Greaves as a "feature-length we-don't-know-what." Greaves' covert agenda was to so antagonize the crew with his chaotic production and purposely inept direction that they would be driven to rebel. And so they did: the two "palace revolt" sequences, in which Greaves' crew secretly meets and films themselves discussing their dissatisfaction, are the most complex moments of reflexivity in the film. These sessions, in which Greaves' crew functions as combination Greek chorus/rebel faction, call attention to the manipulations of cinema by most pressingly posing the question of how much of what we're watching is real. Although Greaves maintains that he was unaware of the crew's machinations until production's end, even this reality is essentially unknowable.

The film's title modifies social philosopher Arthur Bentley's term "symbiotaxiplasm," referring to all the elements and events that transpire in any given environment, which affect and are affected by human beings; by inserting "psycho," Greaves emphasizes the role of human psychology and creativity. Acknowledging the inevitability of artifice even within cinéma vérité, Greaves nevertheless strives for authenticity by urging improvisation and by keeping the camera focused on his actors even when not "performing" in the hope of capturing spontaneous emotion. An exceptional instance of the film's living theater features five minutes of poignantly nihilistic stream of consciousness from a homeless alcoholic who wandered onto set. Also captured through footage of gawking bystanders is the power of the filmmaking process to transfix viewers, especially before the proliferation of amateur filmmaking and mobile cameras.

The opening sequence of "Symbio…," a tour-de-force of editing and sound design that pays homage

to Bertoldt Brecht, Dziga Vertov, the "In a Silent Way" sessions, and Strawberry Fields, quickly establishes itself to be unlike any film made before or since. Pulling back the curtain to show the spectator what goes on behind the camera was Greaves' intent – though not as a romanticist paean to filmmaking or as entertainment industry satire. In breaking the fourth wall so completely, Greaves' conducts a radical experiment in reflexivity infinitely more entertaining than the Godardian proclamation that the only completely honest film would show a camera filming itself in the mirror would seem.

The crux of the dramatic tension in "Symbio…" stems from the struggle to save its strategy of improvisatory abstraction from collapsing into unintelligibility, combined with an idealistic attempt at collective filmmaking that is nevertheless susceptible to an infectious auteur-as-God complex. As one crewmember muses, "A director's film is his mind photographing the world…if you say you're going to show him what's in his mind or what ought to be in his mind, you're taking away the director's film from the director." That this declaration is voiced over accompanying footage of Greaves wandering dejectedly, tortured genius-like, along the set's periphery and is followed by another crew member responding, "The thing is, we wonder if the director *knows* what's in his own mind" lends the point comic buoyancy. As Greaves himself warns his crew *and* spectators, in direct address to the camera during his first appearance on-screen, "Don't take me seriously."

Yet ultimately, "Symbio…" seems to reinforce the power of the director, s/he who corrals the multitude of available images into a pared-down, personal vision of reality. Even the palace revolt sequences, supposedly filmed without his knowledge, were selected by Greaves for inclusion in the finished product. Films are a collaborative effort, "Symbio…" seems to say, but they arise and are borne along by the director's singular vision. Yet the crew's rebellion stands as a call for resistance against authoritarianism – that of the rigid hierarchy of film productions (which elevate the director to revered, godlike status); of the bourgeois ideology imposed by conventional commercial cinema; and of the world at large.

What seemed like bleak prospects for such an unorthodox, difficult-to-categorize film deterred Greaves from seeking a distribution deal after completing production, and "Symbio…" was largely forgotten until a Brooklyn Museum retrospective of Greaves' work in 1991 forged its rediscovery. Screened at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, "Symbio…" caught the eye of actor-director Steve Buscemi, who pledged his support to the film and championed the production of a 2005 sequel, "Take 2 ½," in which he co-stars. Screening internationally and released on DVD by the venerable Criterion Collection, "Symbio…" proves utterly up-to-date in its postmodern irony and multilayered manipulation of mediated reality, while serving as a vivid time capsule of its heady historical era and a memorable document of this creatively prosperous period of American independent filmmaking.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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