

“This Film Is a Rebellion!”: Filmmaker, Actor, *Black Journal* Producer, and Political Activist William Greaves (1926–2014)

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“Films from a black perspective are films that are more in the order of weapons in the struggle for freedom, for equality, for liberation and self-expression, and for all those human rights, if you will. They tend to agitate in the tradition of Frederick Douglass.”

—WILLIAM GREAVES¹

“I am Furious Black,” wrote Harlem-born actor, filmmaker, and activist William Greaves (1926–2014) in a *New York Times* op-ed that ran in the summer of 1970.² For Greaves (fig. 1), this frustration stemmed not from the racist stereotype of the “angry black man,” but as the only reasonable response to an irrational, “sick” society. Echoing Marxist philosopher and “father of the New Left” Herbert Marcuse, Greaves explained, “America is caught in the grip of myriad neurotic and psychotic trends. Call these trends racism, sexism, chauvinism, militarism, sadism, what you will. The fact remains that it is virtually impossible to develop the necessary number of psychiatrists, psychologists, analysts, therapists and the like to cope with America’s emotionally disturbed population.” Vietnam, environmental degradation, and a nation’s history defined by racism created this tragic situation and carried the seeds of total destruction, according to Greaves. The solution: television. Greaves proposed that socially conscious programming produced through black control of “the most powerful medium of communication ever devised by man” could halt this devolution. Television, in the right hands, would provide the means for a Marxian reversal of power and a reeducation of the ruling class (defined first and foremost by race), potentially bringing the country to mental healthfulness. Greaves writes, “For the Black producer, television will be just another word for jazz. And jazz for the Afro-American has been a means of liberating the human spirit.”³

Greaves’s 1970 op-ed offered a compelling alternative vision to Gil Scott-Heron’s spoken-word recording “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,”

Noelle Griffis, “‘This Film Is a Rebellion!’: Filmmaker, Actor, *Black Journal* Producer, and Political Activist William Greaves (1926–2014).” *Black Camera, An International Film Journal*, Vol. 6 no. 2 (Spring 2015), 7–16.



Figure 1: William Greaves with his Emmy, awarded for the 1969 season of *Black Journal*. Courtesy of the Black Film Center/Archive, with permission from Louise Greaves.

which made its first appearance that same year.⁴ While Scott-Heron riffed on the superficiality and racial bias of commercial television (“The revolution will not be right back after a message/About a white tornado, white lightning, or white people”), Greaves imagined television as the very site of revolution. Of course, he included a caveat that any real change through television would require the impossible: “an inversion of the education to entertainment ratio.”⁵ Yet rather than pure idealism, Greaves’s proposal for a black-led media society actually served as a creative way to deliver a biting critique of the failures of a white supremacist society. Still, Greaves’s utopic vision of black media control seemed slightly less impossible at the time of his writing than it would have just a few short years before, and Greaves was already at the forefront of a new movement. In 1968, Greaves became the co-host of *Black Journal*, the first nationally televised news program geared exclusively toward the issues of Black America. Produced by National Education Television (NET, the forerunner of PBS), *Black Journal* reached the widest audience of any black-oriented nonfiction program. It was, in addition, one of several African American programs created in the wake of the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination and the publication of the Johnson administration’s National Advisory Report on Civil Disorders (the “Kerner Commission Report”) in 1968, which faulted the solely white perspective of the mainstream media for contributing to the growing “separate and unequal” racial divide in the United States.

Although most of *Black Journal's* production team was African American, a white producer, Alvin Perlmutter, remained in charge until the crew, which included filmmakers St. Clair Bourne and Madeline Anderson, staged a walk-out to demand black control at the top-level.⁶ Otherwise, they claimed, the show was falsely promoting itself as "by, for, and of the black community." Greaves emerged as the top candidate for Perlmutter's replacement due to his extensive experience in nonfiction filmmaking for publically funded institutions ranging from the National Film Board of Canada to the United Nations. The protest by the *Black Journal* staff was successful and Greaves became the show's executive producer from 1968 to 1970. *Black Journal*, for which he earned an Emmy, first brought this impressive, politically engaged personality to a national audience (fig. 2).

Devorah Heitner's recent book, *Black Power TV*, argues that national programs including *Black Journal* and *Soul!* (WNET), as well as local programs such as *Inside Bedford-Stuyvesant* and *Say Brother*, helped to shape "imagined communities" through television's sense of shared time and space, creating "Black public squares" on the air.⁷ William Greaves likened *Black Journal* to the communal space of the black barbershop:

We were aware that we had to develop programming that communicated to the black community, and one of the paradigms or one of the devices that I used in developing the monthly programs was the black barbershop, you know, the kinds of things that are routinely discussed in a black barbershop. I used to filter these concepts through a black barbershop in my own head.⁸

Giving voice to African American issues on television provided a first step toward a more democratic participation for black citizens. At the same time, these public outlets were often limited by poor funding and undesirable time slots. As Heitner contends, "On one hand, television seemed to offer a perfect, nonviolent outlet for Black discontent, and even provided a way to contain Black audiences by keeping them at home. But coupled with the attraction local officials and station managers had toward giving Blacks a place to let off steam without rioting, television producers and executives were also fiercely protective of the public influence that television wielded."⁹ Greaves, surely aware of this dynamic, had tapped into the fears shared by some white Americans and media producers with his proposition for a televisual New Black Order in the *New York Times*.

Despite its challenges, television's potential must have been appealing to a man who had spent nearly thirty years running up against, and seeking to evade, the racism of the commercial film industry. As Charles Musser and Adam Knee note, "Even aside from the scores of films and television programs that Greaves has produced, directed, edited, photographed, written,



Figure 2: *Black Journal* crew shooting in Harlem. Courtesy of the Black Film Center/Archive, with permission from Louise Greaves.

and/or appeared in, his career itself deserves attention for the way it traces many aspects of African American involvement in (and exclusion from) motion picture, television, and related industries.”¹⁰ Greaves found success early as an actor and dancer, working with the American Negro Theater. During the same period, he spent time at the Actors Studio, studying Method Acting alongside future film stars such as Marlon Brando and

Shelley Winters.¹¹ Greaves appeared in some of the last black-cast feature films of the “race film” era, such as *Miracle in Harlem* (1948), in addition to a Louis de Rochemont production about a black family passing as white, *Lost Boundaries* (1949). Although he found early success in Hollywood and on Broadway, Greaves became increasingly frustrated with the stereotypical “Tom” roles available to African Americans. Not seeing much hope for better representation in 1950s theater and film, he gave up acting altogether and took up filmmaking. He started taking classes at City College under the tutelage of Hans Richter, but ultimately saw no place for himself in the American film industry, which he had described as “like apartheid at that time.”¹²

Through the work and writings of documentarian John Grierson, however, Greaves found an alternative purpose for filmmaking. Rather than making commercial films for entertainment, Greaves sought to use the camera as a tool for social change. He moved to Canada without any set job or funding, just a determination to apprentice at the institution Grierson founded, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). After proving his commitment with small, menial tasks, over the course of eight years Greaves became assistant editor and sound editor, rising eventually to chief editor, writer, and director. In 1963, Shirley Clarke saw NFB documentary *Emergency Ward*, produced and directed by Greaves, and recommended him to George Stevens Jr., head of United States Information Agency (USIA), who was organizing the agency’s Film and Television division. Stevens was excited by the idea of an African American filmmaker and Greaves took the position, which allowed him to turn his camera increasingly toward the issues, culture, and politics relevant to Black America right as the civil rights movement was gaining momentum.¹³



Figure 3: Greaves with cast and crew on the set of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Courtesy of the Black Film Center/Archive, with permission from Louise Greaves.

Greaves shot several films for the USIA film division, including a documentary of Dakar, Senegal's First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966, which featured performances by Duke Ellington, Katherine Dunham, and Langston Hughes, whose poetry frames the film. The resulting film, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*, allowed Greaves to explore the artistic connections between Africans and African Americans.¹⁴ *First World Festival* became the first of Greaves's documentaries to explore race relations, followed in 1968 by *Still a Brother: Inside the Black Middle Class*. Narrated by Ossie Davis, the television documentary explored class relations among African Americans in cities across the United States. That same year, while also taking the reins at *Black Journal*, Greaves began a far more uncon-

ventional and ambitious project, which he titled *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*. An anonymous donor gave Greaves funding, allowing him to experiment freely without the constraints or responsibilities attached to public funding.

Shot in Central Park during the summer of 1968, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* follows five different sets of actors under Greaves's direction to play out a seemingly banal psychodrama countless times, drawn from the Actors Studio's Method technique (fig. 3). Greaves then proceeds to push both his cast and crew to their limits with his unrelenting, ever-present camera. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* appears as an outlier of Greaves's career—an experimental feature that intentionally evades categorization as fiction or nonfiction. Instead, the film interrogates the central ideas of documentary and cinematic "truth" by exposing the manipulations of a filmmaker and the imbalance of power between the wielder of the camera and his subjects. Greaves has stated that he was fascinated by the idea of applying the Heisenberg Principle of uncertainty to the camera.¹⁵ In doing so, Greaves upends the "fly on the wall" rhetoric of Direct Cinema practitioners such as Albert and David Maysles and D.A. Pennebaker, though he finds

some allegiance with the “camera as catalyst” practices of ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch.¹⁶

Greaves places himself at the center of the film, playing a rather inept but demanding filmmaker, giving direction to an increasingly frustrated cast and crew. He either knowingly or unwittingly instigates a mini-revolt by his crew, which the crew records, and Greaves includes as the centerpiece of his film. Thus, Greaves presents his filmmaking experiment as an allegory of “establishment” society, whereby the auteur functions as “The Man” and eventually the people are driven to take a stand.¹⁷ There remains one crucial element that complicates this equation: “The Man,” in 1968, was always implicitly white.

Although race remained a central theme throughout Greaves’s body of work, he never calls attention to his own racial identity in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Akiva Gottlieb describes this as a “conspicuous absence” in his essay on the film:

By refusing to call attention to his blackness, and to his extradiegetic status as a furious radical, he strips away a layer of easily interpretable, easily dismissible meaning, both for his collaborators and his audience. He refuses to let the film become one man’s perfectly appropriate gesture of social protest. Instead, Greaves wants the film’s revolutionary energy to manifest itself formally. As the production notes plainly state: “This film is a rebellion!”¹⁸

Through film, television, and print, Greaves took on these multiple identities—the capable host and man in charge at *Black Journal*, the industrious documentarian, the seemingly unqualified authority figure in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, and the justifiably “angry black man” who writes op-ed pieces for the *New York Times*. In doing so, he elides the traps that seek to categorize black individuals into easily recognizable, reductive types.

Rediscovering Greaves

Despite his long and illustrious career in television and documentary, Greaves’s body of work never really came into focus for film scholars until the Brooklyn Museum organized a retrospective in 1991, which included the public premiere of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Initially conceived as five separate films, each a different “Take,” Greaves ran out of funding after the first part failed to find distribution upon completion.¹⁹ Following its long-delayed premiere, the film travelled to the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar and to Sundance during its festival run.²⁰ Film historian Scott MacDonald has noted that the commonly held perception of the 1960s American avant-garde as an exclusively white phenomenon fundamentally changed with the

emergence of Greaves's film.²¹ Similarly, film scholar Robert Stam professed in the 1992 edition of *Reflexivity in Film and Literature* that he lamented not having been aware of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* when he wrote the book in the 1980s, since the film "virtually calls for a rewriting of the history of filmic reflexivity."²²

Knee and Musser propose that the discovery of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* should lead scholars to his larger body of work and toward a much deeper assessment of his contribution to the development of documentary practices through his always inventive and often ground-breaking films, including *Ali*, *The Fighter* (1971), Greaves's nationally distributed "docutainment" feature that followed Muhammad Ali on his failed effort to recapture the heavyweight crown (fig. 4); *Nationtime*, *Gary* (1972), which chronicled the first National Black Political Convention in 1972, and featured prominent political leaders such as Jesse Jackson, Amiri Baraka, and Coretta Scott King; the historical homage to the Harlem Renaissance, *From these Roots* (1974), which employed archival photographs displayed in the style later attributed to Ken Burns; and the critically acclaimed PBS primetime biography of the Nobel Peace Prize winner, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (2001). Musser and Knee assert, "Greaves has played a significant if not always fully appreciated role in the creation of a new post-1968 era in U.S. documentary cinema—one that is characterized by greater cultural diversity among those making films."²³ MacDonald, also noting that *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* added to an already accomplished career, chided film historians for having failed to make Greaves name "a household word" before 1991.²⁴

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One also leads one to speculate on the cinematic practices that may have intrigued Greaves, yet remained financially unfeasible. In 1984, the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in Oakland, California, organized an independent filmmaking workshop open to black filmmakers who had completed at least one project. John Williams covered the event for *The Independent*, highlighting discussions with featured guests Topper Carew, Gordon Parks, Sr., and Greaves.²⁵ When a workshop participant asked how he funded his projects, Greaves described his "adoption of the documentary-public affairs format as a survival strategy." He then recalled a conversation that he had with a young Stanley Kubrick when they both studied with Richter. Kubrick asked Greaves why he didn't seem interested in making commercial features, to which he replied that he was simply more interested in documentary. Yet Greaves told the workshop attendees that this was not the whole truth: "The simple fact was that Kubrick was white and I was black. The motion picture field is one of the most fiercely competitive enterprises. The talented Kubrick could take a gamble and hope to succeed. I couldn't."²⁶



Figure 4: Muhammad Ali in Greaves's *Ali, The Fighter* (1971).



Figure 5: William Greaves. Courtesy of the Black Film Center/Archive, with permission from Louise Greaves.

When the walls came up, however, Greaves either fought through them or walked in another direction, refusing to compromise integrity for fame. Determined to maintain independence in his filmmaking practices and control over his catalog, he founded William Greaves Productions with his wife, Louise, in 1964 to self-

produce and distribute his films (fig. 5). Greaves remained prolific until the end of his life this past August, leaving behind an impressive body of work and an extensive archive of documents. Most of this material has been donated by the Greaves family to the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, located in Greaves's beloved Harlem. William Greaves Productions (wiliamgreaves.com) continues to serve as the primary rental source for his filmography. Much work remains to be done on the aesthetic and political concerns that motivated the rich life and multifaceted career of Bill Greaves.

Notes

1. Phyllis Klotman and Janet Cutler, interview with William Greaves, September 12, 1991, Black Film Center/Archives Interview Collection.

2. William Greaves, "100 Madison Avenues Will Be of No Help," *New York Times*, August 9, 1970, 81.

3. Ibid.
4. Scott-Heron's debut album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, featured the first recording of the piece set to a conga beat. The 1971 re-recording with a full band for his second release with Flying Dutchman/ RCA, *Pieces of Man*, is the more popular version.
5. Greaves, "100 Madison Avenues Will Be of No Help."
6. Klotman and Cutler interview with William Greaves.
7. Devorah Heitner, *Black Power TV* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013): 11.
8. Klotman and Cutler interview with William Greaves.
9. Heitner, *Black Power TV*, 15.
10. Adam Knee and Charles Musser, "William Greaves, Documentary Film-Making, and the African-American Experience," *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 14.
11. Ibid., 15.
12. Klotman and Cutler interview with William Greaves.
13. James V. Hatch, "William Greaves: Filmmaker," *Artist and Influence* 9 (May 21, 1989): 65.
14. According to Knee and Musser, the film became the most successful USIA film in Africa for the following decade, but USIA films were prohibited from distribution in the United States at the time. ("William Greaves, Documentary Film-Making, and the African-American Experience," 16-17).
15. In very generalized terms, the Heisenberg principle describes the limits of defining the properties of particles of physical matter because the tools of observation always transform their objective reality.
16. Here I am using "Direct Cinema" to refer to the American school of documentary filmmaking associated with Robert Drew, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and David and Albert Maysles, who promoted their use of newly developed sync-sound recording technologies as offering a "fly on the wall" perspective into social realities. In France, Jean Rouch and Edward Morin experimented with similar technologies in their film *Chronique d'un été* (1960), but described their filmmaking practices as instigating, rather than objectively recording, social interactions. The latter became associated with the term "cinéma vérité," although the term "vérité" soon became a loose designation for the explosion of films that featured a loose, hand-held, improvisatory style. The concept of "cinematic truth" in relation to recording technology became a matter of intense debate and a favorite subject of filmmakers like Greaves.
17. MacDonald elaborates on Greaves as "the Establishment" in his essay "The Country in the City: Central Park in Jonas Mekas's 'Walden' and William Greaves's 'Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One,'" *Journal of American Studies* 31, no. 3, (December 1997): 337-60.
18. Akiva Gotlieb, "'Just Another Word for Jazz:' The Signifying Auteur in William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*," *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 164-83.
19. The film gained cult status during this festival run. Steve Buscemi and Steven Soderberg helped garner publicity and funding for a theatrical run, and eventually, for a second part, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 ½* (2005). After this second part was released, Greaves's earlier project, up until then titled *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, was retroactively renamed *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*.
20. Scott MacDonald, *Screen Writings: Scripts and Texts by Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 32. MacDonald's invaluable resource includes Greaves's notes for the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project and an excerpt from the script for *Take One*.

21. "Discovering William Greaves," DVD bonus documentary on *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (Criterion Collection, 2006).
22. Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean Luc-Godard*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, rev. ed.): xvii.
23. Knee and Musser, "William Greaves, Documentary Film-Making, and the African-American Experience," 13.
24. Scott MacDonald, "Sunday in the Park with Bill: William Greaves' Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One," *The Independent* 15, no. 4 (May 1992): 24.
25. John Williams, "Black Filmmaking in the 1990s: A Pioneering Event," *The Independent* 11, no. 10 (December 1988): 16–19.
26. *Ibid.*, 18.