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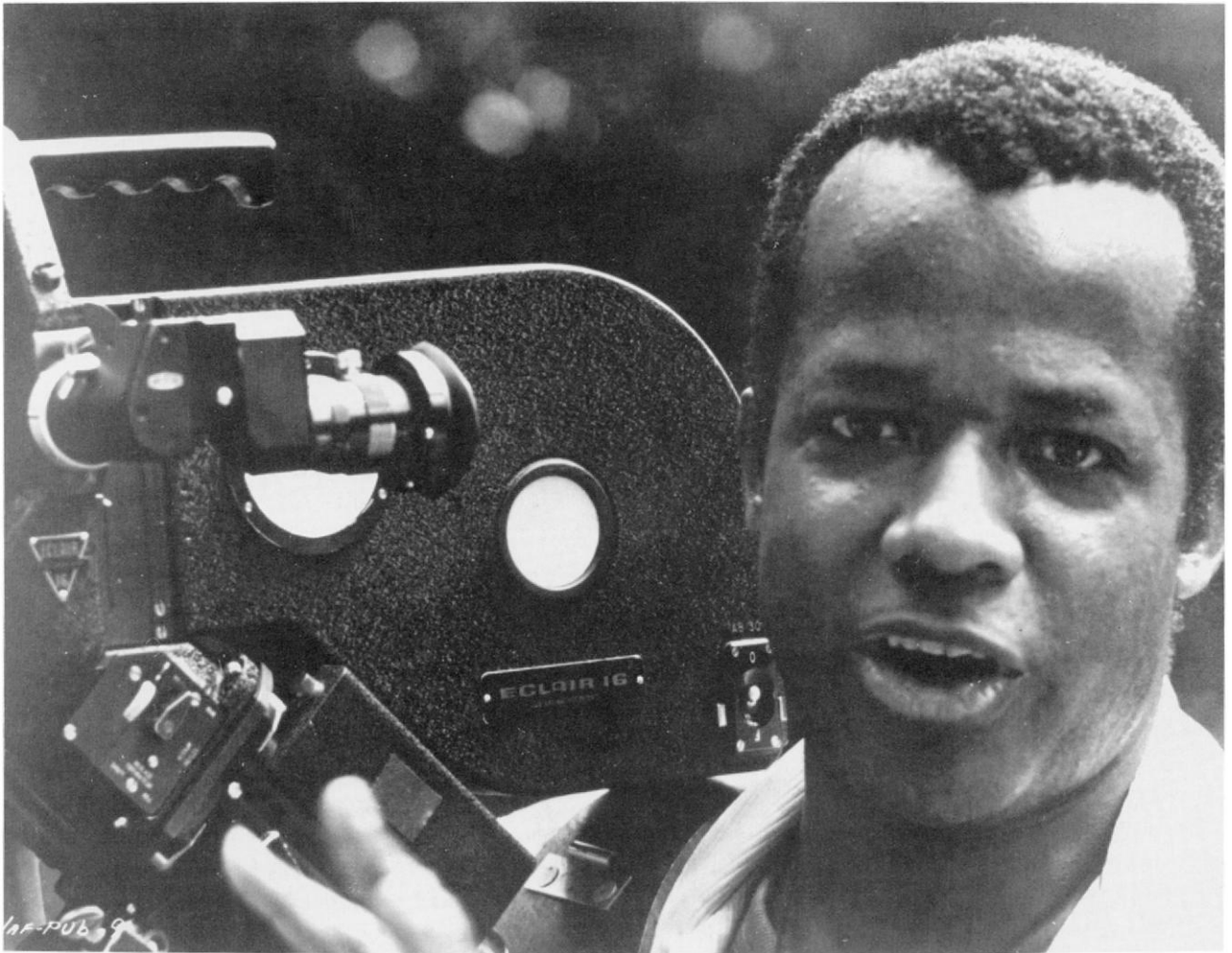
William Greaves, Documentary Film-making, and the African-American Experience

The reputations of many documentary film-makers rest on their production of one or two ground-breaking pictures. But there are some, such as William Greaves, whose real achievements only become apparent when we look at the full accumulation of their work. In Greaves's case this was made possible by a recent retrospective of his films at the Brooklyn Museum. It included a screening of his never-released, unconventional, *cinéma-vérité*-ish feature film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968/1971), which is now being screened at festivals, art houses, and museums. Moreover, Greaves is still making innovative, rigorous films—as demonstrated by his documentary *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989), a historical biography of the black feminist civil rights leader Ida Wells that recently aired on PBS's "The American Experience" and that has won numerous prizes on the festival circuit.

Black independent film-maker Bill 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. During the nineteen-fifties and early nineteen-sixties Greaves endured a protracted struggle to establish himself as a documentary film-maker of artistic integrity. By the mid-nineteen-sixties he finally began to produce films on subjects of par-

ticular importance to African Americans. In 1968, while continuing to further develop his own still limited film-making opportunities, Greaves began to assist a new generation of young black documentarians through the initial stages of their professional careers—film-makers such as Kent Garrett, Madeline Anderson, and St. Clair Bourne. Greaves was not only a harbinger of a new era of multicultural film-making but a pivotal figure in the history of African-American cinema.

Greaves, in addition to being an important historical force, has produced an impressive and surprisingly diverse body of work, both in approach and subject matter. This testifies, on one hand, to his inventiveness and broad range of interests and, on the other, to the numerous practical exigencies he has faced over several decades. Greaves has received much recognition for his work as executive producer and co-host of public television's "Black Journal," an Emmy-winning public-affairs series, and for his direction of such ground-breaking films as the historical documentary *From These Roots* (1974), which looks at Harlem during its cultural renaissance in the twenties and early thirties. However, the broader course of Greaves's career and the substantial contribution he has made to African-American film production—from acting in black-cast films during the nineteen-forties to serving as executive producer on



William Greaves during shooting of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*

Richard Pryor's 1981 hit, *Bustin' Loose*—are only now starting to receive adequate attention.

Even aside from the scores of films and television programs that Greaves has produced, directed, edited, photographed, written, 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. He was born and raised in Harlem and educated at Stuyvesant High School. While enrolled as an engineering student at City College of New York during the early forties, Greaves used his skills as a social dancer to become a performer in African dance troupes. From there he moved into acting at the American Negro Theater and was soon working in radio, television, and film. Among the films he was

featured in (and sometimes sang in) at this time were the whodunit *Miracle in Harlem* (1947), one of the most technically polished of black-cast films, and the Louis de Rochemont-produced *Lost Boundaries* (1948), a highly popular film based on a true story about a black doctor who set up a practice in a New England town while “passing” for white.¹ The doctor and his family are played by white actors (in keeping with Hollywood conventions of the day), while Greaves portrays a debonair black college student who is completely comfortable with his African-American identity as he interacts with his white counterparts. It was an image seldom if ever seen in American films prior to that date. Greaves's role here clearly prefigured many of those played by Sidney Poitier in the next decade, and one is apt to wonder whether Greaves

would have become one of the crossover stars of the fifties had he remained in screen acting.²

Greaves on *Lost Boundaries*:

*You have to decide when you make a movie—and it's a tough decision—how authentic, how pure, how faithful you must be to reality while at the same time making this product so that people will go to see it. This is an extremely tricky, difficult challenge for a filmmaker. And in the climate of an extremely racist society, this was a marketing problem. Now *Lost Boundaries* turned out to be a massive hit. It ran for six months on Broadway, which was practically unheard of. It played at the Astor Theater and won awards and one thing or another. Mel Ferrer, the star, did a very fine piece of work. It was a very moving film. You say, Jesus, why didn't they have some light-skinned blacks in those roles? You can ask that question very aggressively today, but at the time you had to take into account the very cold temperature of the country.*³

Greaves himself moved easily between the white and black worlds. After acting in such ANT productions as Owen Dodson's *Garden of Time* and *Henri Christophe*, he appeared in the musical *Finian's Rainbow*, which began a two-year run on Broadway in January, 1947. As the show came to a close, Greaves joined the Actors Studio, becoming a member alongside Marlon Brando, Shelley Winters, Eli Wallach, and others. Despite this illustrious affiliation, Greaves was increasingly frustrated with the demeaning roles available to him (and blacks more generally) in theater and film. A decisive moment came in 1950, when he was slated to appear in the Broadway revival of Ben Hecht and Charles McArthur's *Twentieth Century*, starring Gloria Swanson and José Ferrer (who also directed and produced).⁴ Upon reporting to the theater, Greaves discovered that he was to play a stereotypical bumbling porter and quit on the spot.

Greaves on *Twentieth Century*:

All I knew was that I had built up a little reputation and my agent said "You have a part." So I reported to the theater. And then I saw this goddamn dialogue which they put in my hand and Ferrer said, "You're going to

be this Uncle Tom type." I just walked out. Whenever that kind of role came up I would never play it, because it was just too demeaning. Actually that was the final straw. That was the thing that made me realize I have to get on the other side of the camera because they were messing with the image of black people with impunity.

Deciding he had to move into film production, Greaves enrolled in film-making courses at City College. With the exception of de Rochemont, who allowed him into the studio as an apprentice, no one seemed prepared to provide him the needed opportunities to achieve his goals. Like Melvin Van Peebles and many other African-American artists during the fifties, Greaves finally had to leave the country to practice his craft. In 1952, fed up with McCarthyism and the exclusionary practices of motion picture unions, Greaves moved to Canada.

Greaves on his move to Canada:

It became obvious to me that either I would stay in America and allow myself to be made a fool of, or become a very neurotic person, or be destroyed. Or leave. So I left, which was fortunate because I had a very good opportunity in Canada. The Canadians were much more liberal than Americans. Race didn't have that much meaning to them. And I was fortunate to be taken onto the production staff of the National Film Board of Canada, set up by John Grierson.

I had been reading Grierson on documentary and was very taken by his discussion of the social uses of film. He proposed ways in which film could be a social force, an educational tool, and this interested me.

Greaves worked his way up over the next six years at the National Film Board through various editing jobs to directorial work. His tenure there culminated with his directing and editing of *Emergency Ward* (1958), a production for the Canadian government that documents the events of a typical Sunday night at a Montreal hospital emergency room.

Stylistically, *Emergency Ward* falls somewhere between the "Free Cinema" of Lindsay Anderson's *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957), with its carefully prepared set-ups and tripod-dependent

shooting style, and the *cinéma-vérité* style of *Lonely Boy* (1961), by Roman Kroitor and Wolf Koenig. (Not uncoincidentally, Koenig served as Greaves's cameraman on the film.) *Emergency Ward* was shot over the course of many nights and exposes us to the range of people admitted to the hospital: accident victims, people with imagined illness, people abandoned by their families, and others who are just plain lonely. Grierson's influence on Greaves is evident in this film: Greaves humanizes his subjects and reassures the viewer that the emergency ward at this institution is run as responsibly and as well as the post office in *Night Mail*. The doctors know their jobs and care; orderlies and nurses are ennobled. At the same time, this film might be seen as a forerunner of Frederick Wiseman's *Hospital* (1968), for instance in its visual sensitivity to character quirks, although it ultimately lacks Wiseman's aggressiveness and sense of style. While Greaves found the subject matter fascinating, it offered little for him to grab hold of, given his reasons for moving behind the camera. In the all-white world of a Montreal hospital, black racial identity was not a pressing issue. Greaves learned his craft and escaped the humiliations of American racism in Canada, but it was not a place where he could readily develop the kind of distinctive voice he had displayed as an actor.

Greaves was perfectly positioned to participate in the *cinéma vérité* revolution of the early sixties—until new senior management at the Film Board decided to place him in charge of its unit making science films. Sensing a dead end, Greaves left to create and direct with a Canadian acting troupe. In 1960, he joined the International Civil Aviation Organization (I.C.A.O.), an agency of the United Nations, as a public information officer. This, in turn, led to his making a one-hour television documentary about a round-the-world flight of a major airliner (*Cleared for Takeoff*, 1963; featuring Alistair Cooke). The U.N. job eventually required Greaves to move back to New York.

Greaves was by this time eager to return to the United States, as race relations were rapidly changing: the Civil Rights movement was gaining momentum and Kennedy's New Frontier was seeking to respond to its demands. New York filmmaker Shirley Clarke had seen *Emergency Ward* and was impressed. She told George Stevens, Jr., who was head of the United States Information

Agency's film division, about Greaves, and Stevens, looking for a black director, soon contracted with him to do a documentary on dissent in America. The topic quickly proved too controversial for the agency, especially when it learned that Greaves planned to include people like professed atheist Madalyn E. Murray, the "no prayers in the school" leader, in the film. U.S.I.A. subsequently decided to change the film's focus to freedom of expression. Essentially, the resulting *Wealth of a Nation* (1964) maintains that America is great in part because its citizens are allowed "to do their own thing." In this context, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I have a dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial takes on unexpected meaning, suggesting a purely personal vision rather than the expression of a larger political movement. Featuring footage of various artists and visionary architects at work, the film relies on a heavy narration to assert the potential social usefulness of individual creative expression. It ultimately becomes an essayistic paean to American myths.

Wealth of a Nation, nevertheless, established Greaves as an independent producer and with his next U.S.I.A. production he finally won the opportunity to focus on black culture from behind the camera. The African-American film-maker was originally dispatched to Dakar, Senegal, to shoot a historic gathering of black artists and intellectuals from throughout the African diaspora. The U.S.I.A. wanted a five-minute news clip. Upon arriving, however, Greaves immediately realized the value of a longer piece. After he, his cameraman, and driver shot as much footage as possible, largely without synchronous sound, Greaves utilized those editing skills acquired at the N.F.B. to put together an effective and comprehensive record of the event. This record, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966), features performances by dancers from throughout the black world and appearances by Duke Ellington, Katherine Dunham, Langston Hughes (whose poetry frames the film), and many others. Greaves's juxtapositions explore and affirm the links between African and African-American culture. It was Africans, however, rather than African Americans, who were given the opportunity to appreciate these links: while *First World Festival* proved the most popular U.S.I.A. film in Africa for the following decade, U.S.I.A. films were prohibited at the time

(and until recently) from distribution in the United States.⁵ Although such links could have been radicalizing for African Americans, this affirmation was more likely to serve a conservative agenda when presented to Africans—in suggesting greater identity with the United States and, by implication, with its Vietnam-era policies. If the film is considered in terms of the politics of production, however, it represents an important achievement.

Greaves on *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*:

You have to realize that the reason why I went into motion pictures was to make films like The First World Festival of Negro Arts. It was the first opportunity I had to make films that expressed a black perspective on reality. Until then I had not had access to financing which would permit that.

The First World Festival of Negro Arts was quickly followed by another breakthrough film for Greaves, *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class*, a 90-minute television documentary made in collaboration with William Branch for National Educational Television (NET). By the summer of 1967, the nation's inner cities were in turmoil. Television news featured rioting blacks, creating a perception among many whites that African Americans were burning down the country. As envisioned by NET, *Still a Brother* was to focus on a group of "good negroes" as a way to challenge negative stereotypes held by whites and to encourage poorer blacks to see that the system was working and creating new economic opportunities. *Still a Brother*, completed in 1967, proved more controversial than NET had expected—ultimately focusing as it does on the rise of contemporary black-pride movements. Although the film's interviews with a number of successful blacks at times suggest a preoccupation with material gains—most pointedly in the opening interview, where a man describes his version of the American dream as owning a yacht and wearing a Brooks Brothers suit—they also bespeak the extreme barriers to achieving such gains, and their great fragility once achieved. Many interviewees agree that the loss of a well-paying job often means instant loss of middle-class status to African Americans. In its

emphasis on the concerns of an emerging African-American middle class, the project was an especially personal one for Greaves.

Still a Brother looks at the danger of passive wholesale acceptance of white middle-class values by blacks—a phenomenon which Greaves has referred to as mental enslavement. The film's main contention, however, is that in the turbulent sixties, economically successful blacks were undergoing a mental revolution. Again and again, those interviewed reveal a growing understanding that the oppression of lower-income African Americans is their oppression as well. The perspective of the film, which supports black pride while stopping far short of advocating separatist politics, is one that continues to emerge in Greaves's work. It is better described as liberal than radical, but it is always questioning of liberal assumptions and sympathetic to radical goals.

Greaves on *Still a Brother*:

We had difficulties once Still a Brother was finished because NET had not expected that kind of film. They had expected an Ebony magazine kind of film, but we brought them this documentary that talked about mental revolution and showed increasing militancy in the black experience. People are talking about black is beautiful, the African heritage, militancy, and championing Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael. So when NET executives saw the film they sort of blinked because they didn't know whether or not they really wanted to put it into the system. They weren't clear whether or not it would be acceptable. There was a great deal of anxiety because these executives were looking at their mortgages and didn't know whether they would be tossed out of their jobs. They didn't tell me that, but it was obvious that they were really under pressure. But I must say that they rose to the occasion, which speaks well of them, and of course the film eventually received an Emmy nomination and a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival.

Still a Brother was finally shown by NET on 29 April, 1968, less than three weeks after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. The newest round of riots, sparked by King's assassination,

reemphasized the urgency of the Kerner Report and its call for increased media coverage by minorities in the face of a growing separation between blacks and whites. Meanwhile, NET began to develop a national monthly magazine format “by, for and about” black Americans. Called “Black Journal,” it had a predominantly black staff that included Lou Potter as “Editor,” Sheila Smith as researcher, Madeline Anderson as film editor, and Charles Hobson, Kent Garrett, St. Clair Bourne, and Horace Jenkins as associate or full producers. From the many who auditioned to fill the roles of co-hosts, Lou House (who later changed his name to Walli Sadiq) and Bill Greaves were selected. Alvin H. Perlmutter, who is currently known for producing various Bill Moyers specials and “Adam Smith’s Money World,” was at the top of the pyramid, acting as executive producer.

The series debuted in June and was broadcast during prime time by many public television stations (Wednesdays at 9 PM in New York City). The first program displayed remarkable promise. It begins with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, widow, Coretta Scott King, giving a commencement speech at Harvard, and concludes with a brief, reasonably sympathetic portrait of the Black Panthers. Not only is the spectrum of black political opinion surveyed, but there is an historical segment on the black press. Even the portrait of the only black jockey in the United States is given an historical context, reminding viewers that jockeys of African descent had once been common in horse racing.

After the third program had been aired, certain contradictions within the production of “Black Journal” had crystallized. Although the series was being sold as “by, for and of the black community,” the white Perlmutter was firmly in charge, and the programming was often dominated by white-produced segments. In mid-August, there was a palace revolt. Eleven of the 12 black staff members resigned in protest. NET was ready to rescind the “by, for and of” claims as deceptive. The staff members, in contrast, demanded a black executive producer—suggesting Lou Potter. NET maintained that Potter lacked adequate experience. The staff then suggested the two producers of *Still a Brother*, William Greaves and William Branch. Both were, NET claimed, unavailable.⁶ Greaves, in fact, was vacationing on Cape Cod, and a quick phone call ascertained that he would take the posi-

tion while retaining his role as co-host. Perlmutter became a consultant to the series, and black representation on the staff was increased.

Program No. 5 for “Black Journal” (October 1968) shows the series in full stride. In some respects, the format and aspirations of the series have changed little. Most obviously, Greaves now wears a dashiki instead of a sports coat and turtle-neck, and Lou House begins and ends the program with greetings to “brothers and sisters” and a few words of Swahili. More substantively, the staff investigates controversial issues, such as the crisis surrounding the Community School Board in Oceanhill-Brownsville, in a polished and insightful manner. The producers emphasize those ways in which community control can provide better schooling that will result, for example, in dramatically improved reading scores. Black members of the school board make the case for community control, while the efforts of the United Federation of Teachers and its president, Albert Shanker, to subvert such an administrative structure are convincingly documented.

While offering a multiplicity of voices from within the African-American community, “Black Journal” presents forthright editorial comments without feeling the need to give “equal time” to extremely conservative blacks or to white spokespeople. In Program No. 5’s short panel discussion, Professor Charles Hamilton, co-author with Stokely Carmichael of *Black Power*, simply states that there can be no peace in the nation until the United States gets out of Vietnam; ending the war is thus a key priority for African Americans. The program condemns the expulsion of protesting “black power” medal winners from the American Olympic team as excessive and insensitive to past racial injustices. It then documents the long-standing devaluation of African-American history and scholarship by profiling Professor William Leo Hansberry, a prominent scholar who was once denied a Ph.D. by Harvard University because no one at that institution was qualified to supervise his dissertation on African-American history.

“Black Journal” clearly deserved the Emmy it received in 1969. In a manner unique to magazine-format programming, the events of the present are situated in the context of unfolding African-American history, giving them deeper meaning and resonance.⁷ Black identity is power-

fully constructed. “Black Journal” consistently shows representatives of the African-American community to be reasonable, articulate, and authoritative. These spokespeople are often in the position of judging the antisocial behavior of hysterical, unreasonable whites such as Albert Shanker, Presidential candidate George Wallace, or the Oakland police chief who condemns the Black Panthers in vitriolic terms. Traditional codings of authority by race are inverted; the nature of mainstream television representations stands exposed. As the experienced Greaves told his young staff, never again were they likely to find a production situation that was so protective of their views and offered them so much freedom.

Greaves on “Black Journal”:

Periodically there was a little anxiety at NET, for instance when we decided to do a show on the Black Muslims, or Paul Robeson, or Malcolm X; but quite interestingly we had a

great deal of freedom on that show. That is to say I was not bugged by the management of NET for several good reasons. First, they were basically people of good will. But more importantly, perhaps, was the fact that we had developed a lot of political clout. I had purposely cultivated the black press, so they were very much behind us; I cultivated the people in the Congressional Black Caucus. And, of course, there were all these riots and demonstrations going on, so they knew if they in a sense touched us, they might get burned. I’m overdramatizing this, but the situation in the sixties was so volatile and tense that it would have made no sense whatsoever for them to have this heavy hand on a show that had been put together specifically for the purposes of expressing the concerns of the black community. That was the point made by the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorder and the Carnegie Endowment. They would have been violating the mandate of the show.

Executive producer William Greaves with “Black Journal” producers and crew filming in Harlem.



While serving as executive producer on “Black Journal,” Greaves continued to operate his own production company, William Greaves Productions, which he had set up in 1964. In 1967 he applied his long-standing interest in acting and dramatic processes to a highly innovative feature film, eventually titled *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. Still awaiting commercial release, this picture eludes traditional generic categories, being an often humorous *cinéma-vérité*-style documentary about the filming of a screen test for a larger dramatic work—and ultimately about its own making as well. In its freewheeling camera style, its playful editing and jump cutting, its use of direct camera address and improvisation, its self-aware, tongue-in-cheek humor, and its foregrounding of the film-making process and the medium’s materiality, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* shows affinities with the contemporaneous French New Wave, avant-garde American cinema, and *cinéma-vérité* documentary. In many respects, Greaves’s work predates the wave of American features that were to make use of such techniques over the next few years, from Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969), which mixes documentary and fiction about events coinciding with the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention, to Rick King’s *Off the Wall* (1976), in which a counterculture youth steals a camera from the documentary crew that is filming his life and begins to make his own record of life on the lam.

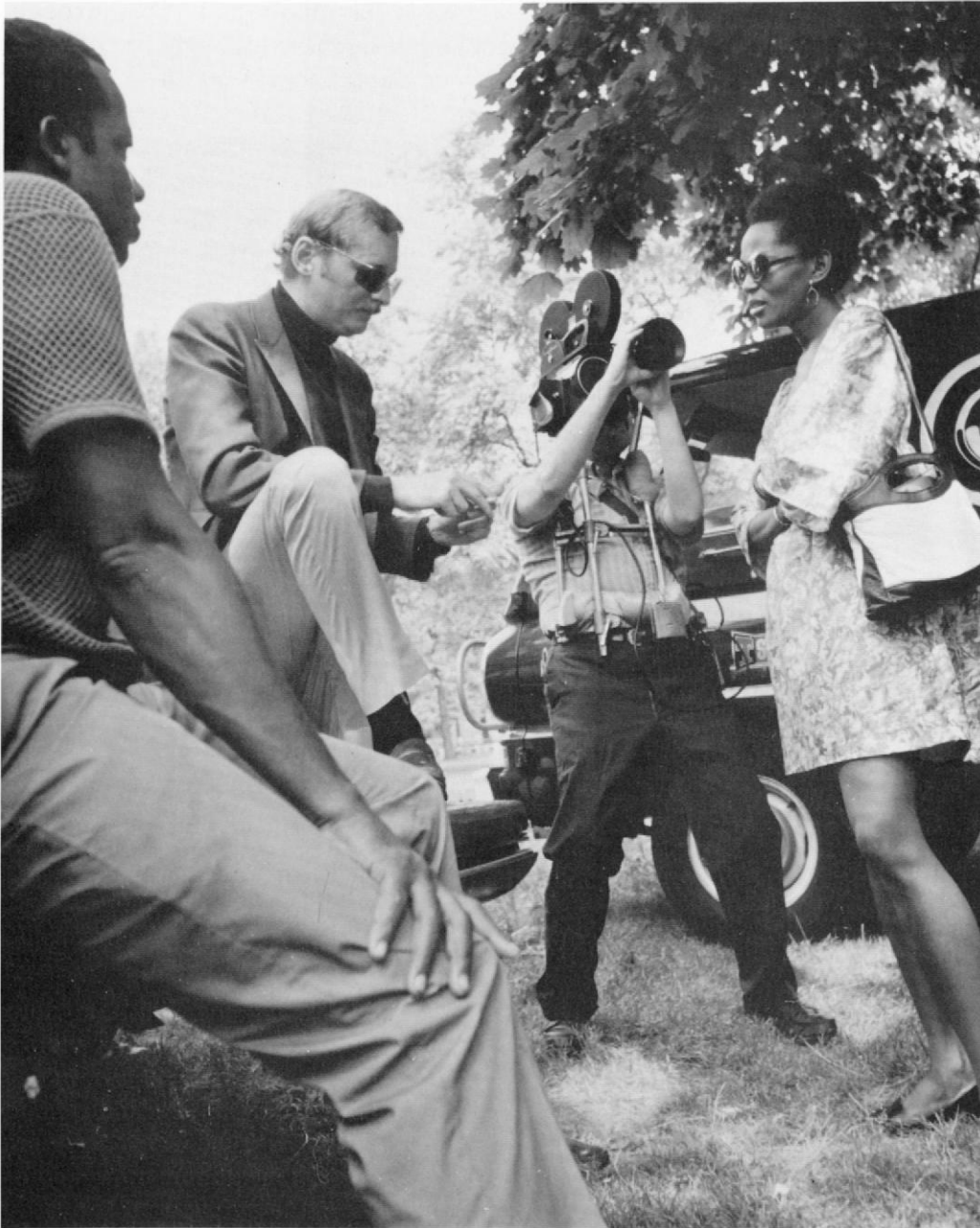
One of the most distinctive aspects of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is its emphasis on both film-making and acting as creative, improvisational processes. The actors do not merely play out the drama-within-the-film in New York’s Central Park, they are actively involved in shaping it; the director attempts to put the rehearsing performers into a framework of tension and confrontation with each other and with himself—and then records the results. These planned dramatic conflicts sometimes spill out beyond the realm of fictional drama into actual tantrums and frustrations. The affinity between this approach and psychodrama therapy, in which patients act out their anxieties and conflicts, is hardly coincidental. Greaves has had a long-standing interest in psychodrama, seeing it as closely allied with the techniques of method acting.⁸ He focused on psychodrama sessions in two later documentaries—*In the Company of Men* (1969) and *The Deep North* (1988).

As Greaves has explained his approach, “Everything that happens in the *Take One* environment interrelates and affects the psychology of the people and indeed of the creative process itself.” Greaves’s shooting methods—the simultaneous use of numerous cameras to cover both the drama and the filming context—are designed to best capture this total interactive “environment.” Wary of Greaves’s approach, the production crew film their own meeting, a kind of mini-“revolt,” over the shape (or lack of one) that the film appears to be taking. Within the film’s frustrated diegesis, Greaves plays the role of a rather inept director trying to make a film tentatively entitled *Over the Cliff*. Yet through his own audacity and directorial vision, Greaves the film-maker comically upends the demeaning stereotypes of black ineptitude that haunt American cinema. The racially mixed film crew of men and women (a makeup that was then quite unusual in film-making) is itself refreshingly open and committed in its ardent questioning of creative processes, conventional aesthetic forms, and, ultimately, attitudes toward sexuality (albeit in some terms that today one may easily find off-putting). It is a film that continued Greaves’s interest in issues beyond the immediate ones of African-American politics and identity—and yet the film’s failure to win critical affirmation and a commercial release discouraged him from pursuing further work along these lines.

Greaves on *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*:

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm is neither a documentary nor a traditional feature. At least I don't feel that it is. It is more of a happening. Instead of being a form of conventional art it is a piece of abstract art. Abstract in the sense that it does not obey the language of convention. It obeys the mind, the heart, the intuition, the subconscious. These are the determinants, rather than the Aristotelian approach to drama—the traditional dramatic form of Sophocles or Ibsen or whomever. You're going for—let's call it divine action, another level of insight into the human condition, using cinema.

The fact is that we could take this event—this scene, this screen test—and throw it into a community of actors and cinema technicians and no matter how it fell, it would be a film.



Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One's director, cast, and crew on location in Central Park

Before we knew it, we were dealing with some of the basic points of drama, which is conflict and development, progression, a rising conflict into some kind of crisis, climax and some resolution. It may not happen as we would like it, but some variant of that theme will occur. The problem for the film-maker is to find what the variant is and how to put it together in the editing room with the materials you have.

Ultimately Greaves recognized that he had to either become a full-time television executive or retain his independence as a film-maker and devote greater energies to independent production. In 1970 he left "Black Journal." The following year he made the feature-length "docutainment movie" *Ali, the Fighter*, about Muhammad Ali's first, unsuccessful effort to reclaim his heavyweight crown from Joe Frazier. (Ali had been stripped of his crown because of his radical politics and oppo-



Ali, the Fighter:
Joe Frazier (left) and Muhammad Ali do battle at a pre-fight press conference

sition to the Vietnam War.) Greaves deftly interweaves exchanges between fighters and their fans with scenes of press conferences, training sessions, and business discussions—then ends with the fight itself. The film’s behind-the-scenes images often pertain to the economic politics—and more implicitly the racial politics—involved in the promotion of the fight. While *Ali, the Fighter* received national distribution in commercial theaters, Greaves was not so fortunate with *Nationtime: Gary*, his film of the historic first National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. Attended by about 10,000 people, this 1972 gathering included representatives from the full range of African-American culture and politics, from Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) to Jesse Jackson and Coretta Scott King. The film covers the efforts of participants to create a platform acceptable to the numerous constituencies within the black community. Jackson steals the show with a rousing and uncompromising speech calling for black political unity in the face of white-dominated party politics. The subject matter was considered too militant by commercial broadcasters, and the film never aired.

Greaves on *Nationtime: Gary*:

There was a guy who came into my office and said to me, “The Gary convention is going to be the greatest event in the history of black America, and you’ve got to take some cameras there. I can get you some money to make this film, and then after you make it you can sell it to television.” He talked like that. “Money is no object.” To make a long story short, we went down there and ended up paying our own fares because I was interested in the event anyway. We took some raw stock and filmed this event. Our company paid for that film entirely. So it practically bankrupted us (as have several other films). But we put the film together and I got Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte to do the narration. And I thought that with the two of them we wouldn’t have any problem getting it onto the networks. But the networks and local stations wouldn’t touch it. They thought the whole event was too militant and that the film was, as well. Don’t misunderstand me. There were some technical problems with it

that we couldn't afford to fix. But essentially it was a major, major event. How can you say you don't want to show material of the crucifixion because it is out of focus? I'm not saying it was of that magnitude but it was a very important historical moment.

At this same time, Greaves relied for much of his income on films made for the Equal Opportunity Commission (*Voice of La Raza*, 1972), the Civil Service Commission (*On Merit*, 1972), NASA (*Where Dreams Come True*, 1979), and other government agencies; but he also began to produce important historical documentaries, beginning with *From These Roots* (1974), a look at the Harlem Renaissance of the nineteen-twenties. Among other things, the film was a return to Greaves's own roots growing up in Harlem. This pioneering effort treated the major contributors to that Renaissance with much greater sympathy and insight than the then standard book on the subject—Nathan Huggins's *The Harlem Renaissance*. With little stock footage of Harlem and its intellectuals available, Greaves decided to construct a film composed exclusively of photographs. What emerged was a compelling portrait of a community made strong by relative freedom and opportunity. Within the larger context of documentary practice, the film helped to inaugurate a cycle of city neighborhood films that focused on local communities. One of the best known, William Miles's *I Remember Harlem* (1980), owed much to Greaves's earlier effort.

Greaves went on to direct a number of biographical portraits of significant figures in African-American history. Two efforts from the early nineteen-eighties were *Booker T. Washington: The Life and Legacy* (1982) and *Frederick Douglass: An American Life* (1984), both for the National Park Service. *Booker T. Washington* is notable for the way it seeks to understand the historical pragmatics of Washington's accommodationist politics, while also continuing to question them through critical responses from a committed W.E.B. Du Bois and a "reporter" (played by Gil Noble) covering his life. These two half-hour films are basically dramatizations, but they also incorporate the limited number of available archival illustrations. (The paucity of visual documentation on important figures in black history is something with which Greaves and other film-makers must frequently

struggle, as did Jackie Shearer with her recent documentary *The Massachusetts 54th Colored Regiment* [1991].) At times *Booker T. Washington* and *Frederick Douglass* bear the trappings of their educational purpose quite heavily. Yet they, along with the numerous other government-sponsored films on a broad range of topics, enabled Greaves to keep working and producing films on important African-American subjects—no mean achievement during a period in which projects concerned with African-American culture were receiving little national attention or funding.

Greaves's most recent work in the area of biography is the documentary *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, co-produced with his wife, Louise Archambault. A reporter who developed her craft in Memphis, Tennessee, Wells became an important black leader who knew how to use both the black and mainstream press to support the struggle against racism—particularly lynchings—and to fight for women's suffrage. She realized that newspapers could mobilize citizens to boycott either specific businesses or whole towns which failed to acknowledge their patronage with appropriate services and legal due process. Again Greaves encountered a paucity of visual documentation: fewer than 15 photographs of this courageous, militant woman survive, and almost all are formal portraits. Yet the film-maker succeeds in shaping these limited materials into a masterful film. Toni Morrison reads movingly from *Ida Wells's* autobiography, which functions not unlike a protracted interview with Wells herself. In all these biographical documentaries, Greaves explores the possibilities and responsibilities of leadership within the black community. He investigates the parameters within which these individuals operated and the social and economic forces to which they were attuned and which they mobilized. Biography is used as a way of presenting African-American history to both a general audience and, more specifically, the black community.

These historical portraits are balanced by such documentaries as *Black Power in America: Myth or Reality?* (1986), which profiles a group of successful African Americans working in professions not traditionally associated with black leadership. This hour-long program includes Franklin Thomas, head of the Ford Foundation; June Jackson Christmas, psychiatrist; Clifton Wharton,

chancellor of the SUNY system; Charles Hamilton, political scientist; and Richard Hatcher, mayor of Gary, Indiana. Yet just as the critic is ready to suspect that Greaves has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the black elite, a film like *Just Doin' It* (1976), an informal *cinéma-vérité* look at two neighborhood barbershops in Atlanta, defeats any such easy conclusion.⁹

Greaves has constantly struggled against being stereotyped in his work—as an actor and as a filmmaker. His work has always displayed diversity: he has balanced his numerous documentaries with repeated forays back into fiction film-making, such as *Bustin' Loose* (as executive producer, 1981) and the never-released, hurriedly made black exploitation feature *The Marijuana Affair* (1974). Furthermore, Greaves has alternated films on contemporary subjects and issues with historical treatments. Films focusing on African-American concerns are countered by numerous films preoccupied with other issues (i.e., *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*); according to Greaves, roughly half his films have addressed topics other than the black experience. Industrials and government-sponsored films that operate within circumscribed parameters are offset by films in which Greaves took large artistic or financial risks.

In many respects Greaves has adapted what is most positive and progressive in Grierson's writings regarding the possibilities of and need for non-fiction films that can inform and educate the public. His approach has differed from that of many leftist or art-oriented documentarians—Barbara Kopple being one example of the former and Errol Morris an instance of the latter—in that his conception of film-making avoids fetishizing the individual work and instead looks to each work as one instance in a larger struggle. It takes a pragmatic rather than a romantic approach, one that has its roots in the black film-making experience—in the race films of Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams, and William Alexander, which were typically made under remarkable financial constraints. Yet if Greaves's career, like that of Melvin Van Peebles, resonates with this legacy, it has done so within an entirely new social and cultural framework. This framework, characterized by the end of legally sanctioned segregation (though not of racial discrimination) and by the dominance of television, has altered the very terms of black film-making.

Like those leaders that are the subject of some of his films, Greaves has had insight into the changing realities of his time, has persisted, and, often enough, has triumphed.

An examination of the career of William Greaves suggests that we need to rethink our conception and periodization of documentary film practice, which has typically been divided into two eras—the one before the *cinéma-vérité* revolution of 1960 (e.g., *Primary, Chronicle of a Summer*) and the one after. There are other turning points of equal or perhaps even greater importance, not all having to do with technology. The year 1968 can be seen as a watershed, a moment when access to the means of production and distribution began to be more open; not only “Black Journal” but “Inside Bedford Stuyvesant” and “Like It Is” also began to air in that year. These and other initiatives—such as Newsreel, Third World Newsreel, and New Day Films—began to chip away at white male hegemony in documentary film-making. Today, documentarians come from much more diverse backgrounds in terms of race, gender, and publicly acknowledged sexual orientation. Although problems of discrimination and social democracy have not been fully overcome even in this limited area, the manner in which these substantial changes have occurred needs to be better understood. Such historical reconsiderations are particularly urgent at a moment when many ideologues have launched gross polemics against multiculturalism, “political correctness,” and arts funding—seemingly to taint if not obliterate our memory of these achievements.

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[The impetus for this article came from the Brooklyn Museum's retrospective exhibition of William Greaves's work, organized by Dara Meyers-Kingsley, which ran from 13 April to 26 May, 1991. Most of the films discussed in this article are available for rental through William Greaves Productions, 230 West 55th Street, #26D, New York, NY 10019.]

1. Like many black-cast films, *Miracle in Harlem* had a white director (Jack Kemp)—as did *Lost Boundaries* (Alfred L. Werker).
2. In fact, Greaves was seriously considered for the part in *No Way Out* that launched Poitier to stardom. Greaves's association with renegade de Rochemont, however, may have hurt his chances of being selected for the role.
3. This and subsequent quotations come from the authors' interviews with William Greaves in April and May, 1991.
4. Both stars were hot properties, boasting Oscar nominations for that year: Gloria Swanson as Best Actress, for *Sunset Boulevard*. José Ferrer went on to win the Oscar for Best Actor in *Cyrano de Bergerac*.
5. Greaves has recently succeeded in acquiring the distribution rights to this film through his own company.
6. "11 Negro Staff Members Quit N.E.T. 'Black Journal' Program," *New York Times*, 21 August, 1968, p. 91.
7. Because the shows work effectively as unified wholes, the screening of excerpted segments was possibly the only disappointment of the Brooklyn retrospective.
8. Greaves had taught method acting for Lee Strasberg over a 12-year period, and occasionally substituted for Strasberg at the Actors Studio when he was unavailable.
9. Interestingly, Greaves's *Just Doin' It* predates Spike Lee's fictionalized portrait of a neighborhood barbershop, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1982), by six years.

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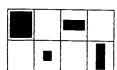
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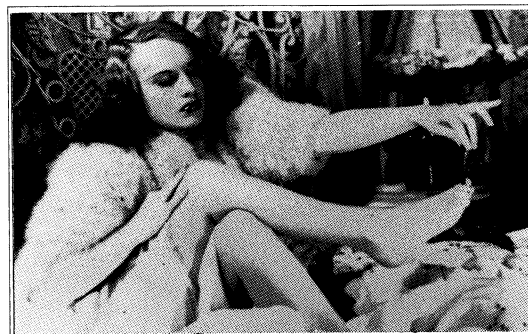
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