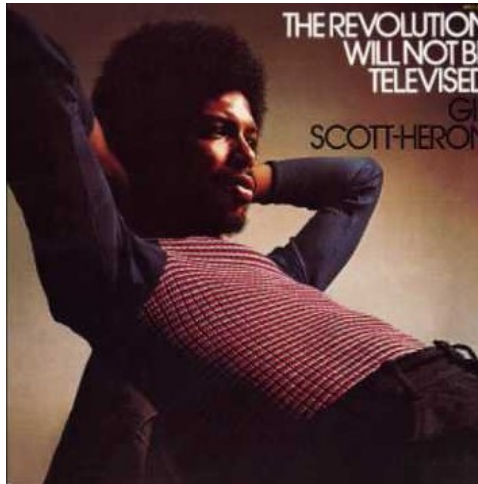


“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”--Gil Scott-Heron (1970)

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Essay by Marcus Baram (guest post)*



Muslims in street protests in Mumbai denouncing India’s new discriminatory laws in November 2019. Protesters braving tear gas in Cairo’s Tahrir Square to condemn the Mubarak regime in January 2011. Occupy Wall Street activists voicing their outrage over income inequality in the United States in September 2011. Anti-nuke protesters marching in Hyde Park, London, in October 1983.

Activists at each of these protests around the world held signs declaring “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” borrowing the title of Gil Scott-Heron’s incendiary 1971 song to showcase their message of righteous anger and political assertiveness. It’s a slogan that has resonated through the decades, inspiring generations of rebels and dissidents--as well as advertising gurus and headline writers who have coopted the phrase for their own less-than-revolutionary purposes.

Back in 1969, 19-year-old college student Gil Scott-Heron could hardly have foreseen the song’s global impact when he first came up with the lyrics while watching baseball games on TV at his dorm room in Lincoln College outside of Philadelphia. It was a heady time on campus, amid the political ferment over Civil Rights and the Vietnam War exploding across the country. And Gil, who was one of three black children to integrate his middle school in Jackson, Tennessee, back in 1961, was right in the in thick of it, organizing protests at Lincoln to demand better health care for students, among other rights.

“The revolution will not be televised” was already a catchphrase shared in black militant circles. And the idea of putting words and music to that sentiment was already on Gil’s mind--a few months earlier, he had invited the Last Poets, a group of poets and musicians, to perform their song, “When the Revolution Comes,” at Lincoln. Inspired by

their example, his mother's acerbic wit, the wordplay style of Langston Hughes, and the commercials that aired in between the Mets and Phillies games, he started writing lyrics that highlighted the disconnect between the consumerism celebrated on TV with the protests happening on the streets of America. He and his pals, including musical partner Brian Jackson, mused about the power of advertising to lull an audience of even the most politically-engaged couch potatoes into passivity.

In the song, Gil recites advertising slogans for some of America's most famous brands--Coca-Cola, Listerine, Hertz, Dove, Exxon--totems of the consumer culture of the 1950s and 1960s which had inculcated themselves into the country's mythology and folklore. And he name-checks popular TV shows and movie stars—"Green Acres," "The Beverly Hillbillies," Natalie Wood, Steve McQueen--the demigods of America's popular culture. His voice dripping with sarcasm, Gil mocks their triviality and insignificance because when the revolution comes, "black people will be in the street looking for a better day," because "there will be no highlights on the 11 o'clock news." He continues:

The revolution will not go better with Coke
The revolution will not fight the germs that cause bad breath
The revolution WILL put you in the driver's seat
The revolution will not be televised
WILL not be televised, WILL NOT BE TELEVISED
The revolution will be no re-run brothers
The revolution will be live

Long before he stepped into a recording studio, Gil already saw the poem as a song, a classic 12-bar blues track. And the next year, when he worked on his first album, "Small Talk at 125th and Lenox," he recorded the lyrics to the poem, accompanied by congas and bongo drums, in front of a small group of friends sitting on folding chairs in a studio in midtown Manhattan. It was later re-recorded with a full band, including his pal Brian Jackson on flute, as the B-side to his 1971 single, "Home Is Where The Hatred Is" for an album produced by Bob Thiele, who had also worked with John Coltrane and poets like Jack Kerouac.

The song and the album were an early example of a creative work going viral, decades before the launch of Twitter and Facebook. It didn't get much airplay on radio, due to its incendiary lyrics, but it spread by word of mouth in black neighborhoods around the country, in campus coffee shops and nightclubs in West Philadelphia, Harlem, Watts, Chicago's South Side, and Atlanta. Poet Nikki Giovanni remembers seeing Gil perform the song at a store in Harlem and feeling encouraged that his voice--strong, black, political, poetic--was out there, shaping the minds of his generation.

The song became an anthem for a revolutionary era, honored as one of the top 20 political songs in history, and compared to Allan Ginsberg's "Howl" and Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." Later, it became recontextualized and distorted into a message that became the medium again as a slogan on T-shirts and endless headlines that misunderstood the original meaning of the song. In a bitter irony, Gil himself allowed

the song to be coopted and used in a TV ad for Nike back in 1994, a decision he always regretted. At the time he was battling a drug addiction and desperate for money, so he accepted director Spike Lee's request to let rapper KRS-One transform the lyrics into an ode to basketball to help sell the sneaker giant's new Air Jordans.

Until his death in 2011, Scott-Heron was alternately proud of the song's power and resonance but also frustrated by the way its meaning had been consistently misunderstood by many listeners who took the song's title literally, that the revolution won't be aired live on television. But what Gil meant in the song, and it's obvious from hearing the lyrics, is that you have to be active, you can't be a passive participant in the revolution. When the revolution happens, you're going to have to be in the streets. If you want to make change in society, you have to get off your ass and take action. You just can't sit on your couch and watch it on TV.

Marcus Baram has worked as an editor at Fast Company, the "New York Observer," the "Wall Street Journal," and the "Huffington Post." He has written and reported for the "New York Daily News," ABC News, the "New York Times," and the "Village Voice." He's also the author of the critically-acclaimed biography "Pieces of a Man: Gil Scott-Heron," and has waited on tables, bartended, dee-jayed at nightclubs, driven an ice cream truck, and taught elementary school.

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