

Gordon Parks: The Making of An Argument

September 12, 2013 – January 12, 2014
New Orleans Museum of Art

OVERVIEW

In 1948, Gordon Parks began a professional relationship with *Life* magazine that would last twenty-two years. For his first project, he proposed a series of pictures about the gang wars that were then plaguing the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, believing that if he could draw attention to the problem then perhaps it would be addressed through social programs or government intervention. As a result of his efforts, Parks gained the trust of one particular group of gang members and their leader, Leonard "Red" Jackson, and produced a series of pictures of them that are artful, poignant, and, at times, shocking.

Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument traces the editorial process of Parks' 1948 photographic essay, "Harlem Gang Leader." During each step of the process, as Parks chose each shot, and as the picture editors at *Life* re-selected from the artist's negatives-any intended narrative was complicated by another voice. Parks made hundreds of negatives. From this large body of work twenty-one pictures were selected for reproduction in a graphic and adventurous layout in *Life* magazine. The original shots were often cropped or details in the pictures were enhanced. Exhibition curator Russell Lord notes, "By the time the reader opened the pages of *Life* magazine, the addition of text, and the reader's own biases further rendered the original argument into a fractured, multi-layered affair."

The exhibition considers Parks' photographic practice within a larger discussion about photography as a narrative device. *Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument* features vintage photographs, original issues of *Life* magazine, contact sheets, and proof prints. The exhibition raises important questions about the role of photography in addressing social concerns, its use as a documentary tool, and its function in the world of publishing. The examination of the selection process leads to many questions: "What was the intended argument?" and "Whose argument was it?"



Gordon Parks; American, 1912-2006;
Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948;
Gelatin silver print; Courtesy of
The Gordon Parks Foundation.

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DISCUSS

- What is the relationship of photography and journalism?
- What is a photographic essay?
- Who determines what photographs are presented in a magazine or newspaper?
- What is the job of the photographer?
- What is the job of the photo editor?
- What are some ways that photographs are manipulated to enhance/change/alter meaning?
- What are some ways that digital images are manipulated to enhance/change/alter meaning?
- How can media shape public opinion?



Gordon Parks; American, 1912–2006;
Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948;
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The Gordon Parks Foundation.

ENGAGE

Write

Without reading the captions or essay in “Harlem Gang Leader,” write your own captions for the series. Include the date and location. Compare your version with those in *Life*.

Think about the structure of a photo essay. It is a narrative and must tell a story as clearly and compellingly as possible. Choose one of the Parks images and develop a story around it. What happened just before this photograph? What happens next?

Documentary photography has traditionally been presented as a primary source, a truthful documentation of reality. Look at a series of photographs by Gordon Parks or a contemporary photojournalist and write two different stories using the same images. Discuss how different viewpoints can be derived from the same images.

Wilson Hicks, *Life*'s picture editor in the late 1940s and 1950s, claimed that photographs “lend themselves to something of the same manipulation as words.” Cropping, selection, arrangement and captioning were not controlled by the photographer, but by the photo editor. Rewrite the essay accompanying *Harlem Gang Leader* using photographs that were not included in the published essay. How might this change the public opinion of Red Jackson?

Editors must consider their audiences. Screen *The Learning Tree* and write a review for *The Gambit*. Would your review be different if it were for a family magazine or *The Times-Picayune*?

Research

Explore the history of *Life* magazine. How did it come about? What were some of its sources and precedents? How did *Life* magazine alter public knowledge and perception of international events and issues? What role did it play in American life during the 20th century? What medium has that capacity today?

Debate

Can photographs like those of Gordon Parks help lessen urban violence? Why, or why not? What are some ways these photographs might encourage different ways of resolving conflicts?

Many of the photographs of Gordon Parks were taken 50 years ago. Are they still relevant today? Why or why not?

When does photojournalism or documentary photography become propaganda? Is this necessarily good or bad?

Compare

Discuss differences in how editorial magazines such as *Life* or *National Geographic* present stories compared to tabloids, newspapers, websites and the paparazzi. What are the similarities and differences? Discuss the moral and ethical implications of responsible photojournalism.

Screen the Gordon Parks films *The Learning Tree* or *Flavio* and compare the ability of film and photography to “make an argument” for social issues.

EXPLORE

Gordon Parks Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective. Phillip Brookman in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art. (New York: Bullfinch Press, 1997).

Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument. Russell Lord. (Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2013)

<http://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/>

<http://www.lens.blogs.nytimes.com/>



Gordon Parks; *American*, 1912-2006;
Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948;
Gelatin silver print; Courtesy of
The Gordon Parks Foundation.

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GORDON PARKS: LIFE AND EVENTS

- 1912** Gordon Parks is born on November 30 in Fort Scott, Kansas.
- 1937** Parks begins work on the Northern Pacific Railroad (North Coast Limited).
- 1939** World War II begins in Europe.
- 1941** Parks received the Julius I. Rosenwald Fellowship, the first photographer to receive the grant.
- 1942** Parks joins the Farm Security Administration (FSA).
- 1943** Parks assigned to the Office of War Information (OWI) as a correspondent to the 332nd Fight Group, the first black air corps. He was not permitted to accompany the 332nd Fight Group to Europe, denying publicity to black participants in the war.
- Farm Security Administration disbanded.
- 1947** Parks publishes his first book, *Flash Photography* (NY: Grosset and Dunlop).
- Jackie Robinson breaks the color barrier in Major League Baseball as 2nd baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers.
- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organizes first freedom ride through Southern states to integrate transportation facilities.
- 1948** Parks publishes *Camera Portraits: Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture* and becomes a staff photographer for *Life* magazine. Parks shoots his “Harlem Gang Leader” essay.
- 1950** Parks moves to Paris as a European correspondent for *Life*.
- 1954** Supreme Court declares that “separate but not equal” education facilities are unconstitutional in *Brown v. the Board of Education*.
- 1955** Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat to white man on Cleveland Avenue bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Four days later, on December 5th, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. leads the Montgomery Bus Boycott.



Gordon Parks; American, 1912-2006;
Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948;
Gelatin silver print, printed later;
Courtesy of The Gordon
Parks Foundation.

1956 Gordon Parks documents the effects of segregation on one family near Birmingham, Alabama.

The Supreme Court rules bus segregation unconstitutional. The Montgomery Bus Boycott ends on December 21st.

1957 A civil rights bill affirming the right to vote is enacted after provisions strengthening school integration are withdrawn.

1961 Parks travels to Rio de Janeiro to photograph life in the slums. His photographs of 12 year-old Flavio Da Silva in *Life* galvanized the American public.

1963 Civil rights leader Medgar Evers is assassinated outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

Martin Luther King organizes the March on Washington (August 28). Over 250,000 marchers demand legislation to end discrimination in education, housing, employment and judicial system.

Four black school girls are killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Gordon Parks' autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree*, is published (NY: Harper and Row).

1965 Parks publishes his autobiography, *A Choice of Weapon*.

1968 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, TN.

1969 Parks' autobiography, *The Learning Tree* is released, as a feature film. Parks directed, produced, wrote the score and adapted the film from his first novel.

1971 *Shaft*, directed by Gordon Parks is released.

1988 Gordon Parks receives National Medal for the Arts from President George Bush and Commander de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres in France.

1995 Parks donates his archives to the Library of Congress.

1997 *Half Past Autumn: The Art of Gordon Parks*, a retrospective exhibition opens at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC and travels to other venues including NOMA.

2006 Gordon Parks passes away at the age of 93.



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