

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

MAURICE BERGER INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Maurice Berger
Cultural historian
December 16, 2019
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 2 hours, 12 minutes and 41 seconds

START TC: 1:00:00:00

JOHN MAGGIO:

Alright cameras rolling and mark it.

CREW:

Maurice Berger interview take 1. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Maurice Berger

Cultural historian

A Choice of Weapons

01:00:18:07

MAURICE BERGER:

Gordon used the term “weapon of choice” as a way of describing the power of the camera to do what almost no other— almost no other object, vehicle, form of expression could do, which was to produce a picture of the world that would be so moving and so persuasive, that it could move people to change their views, to push back against the racism that they saw around them, to give themselves a sense of pride in the face of that racism.

01:00:55:16

MAURICE BERGER:

Um, I think the term itself comes from a— a— a story in Gordon’s past. He grew up in Fort Scott Kansas, the youngest of 15 children, born in 1912. Fort Scott was a deeply racist, segregated place. It was a site of not only Jim Crow segregation, but for Black Americans, a place of great poverty and privation.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So, there he is in this environment, and he thinks of how he’s going to get out, how he’s going to perhaps transcend all of this, how he’s going to leave, how— you know, he’d seen photographs in magazines, which inspired him, but he still didn’t know yet that he was a photographer. And then something happened. His mother dies when he’s 16, and he gets sent to live with his sister in St. Paul. It was a very difficult time in his life. His brother-in-law fought with him constantly. They had terrible fights, to the point where he

was thrown out of his house. And Gordon tells a story of his despair, and he says that, “At one point I was so despairing that I thought of robbing a man at knifepoint,” and he said, “and then suddenly I realized that was not how I wanted to live my life.”

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MAURICE BERGER:

Shortly thereafter, after have--you know, cycling through all kinds of jobs, he picked up a camera and he reminds us in one of his autobiographies that, that camera was a far more powerful weapon than that knife would have been, because rather than putting him in a compromised position: jail, arrest, ruining his future. The camera gave him two opportunities that he would not have had-- normally had as a poor Black man in America: One was a career, but more importantly for him, the camera was a means through which he could change the world. So his weapon was that instrument that allowed him to represent, to portray the world in ways that he thought could move people, could inspire people, could change hearts and minds, and hopefully change the world.

Fort Scott

01:03:42:01

MAURICE BERGER:

I think that we– we learn a lot about Gordon’s attitudes about Fort Scott less through his photographs than through the film he directed in 1969, *The Learning Tree*. Now *The Learning Tree* is significant for a number of reasons, some of them beyond Gordon. One of them was that it was the first major studio film directed by a Black director. So he broke tremendous ground with the film. But I think the second thing about the film is it’s semi-autobiographical. It’s based on a semi-autobiographical novel that he wrote. And in that film he unfolds for us in this very elegant and eloquent way, the world of Gordon Parks as a child. The protagonist isn’t named Gordon, but the protagonist for all intents and purposes is the young Gordon.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And what we see is a Fort Scott of limitless plains, of flatland, of agriculture. His father grew things. His father was a farmer, but what we see– we see something far more troubling, which is that Fort Scott was a full on Jim Crow town. It was– there was no doubt that this was a place where black people’s lives were going to be compromised at every turn.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And the beauty of the film is that Gordon shows those compromises. He shows, for example, at one point, the child having a conversation with his teacher about going to college, about having an education. And she basically

tells him, you know, that's ridiculous, you won't amount to anything. But the beauty of that film is that the child's optimism, his sense of possibility isn't diminished by the privation around him, and you know that that young man will grow up to be someone, and when you read Gordon's autobiographies, of which there are four, you have the same sense.

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MAURICE BERGER:

I mean you know that he's this great artist and photographer. There's no question in your mind, but when you read about his early life, you sense that he always understood that there was a way out of Fort Scott. Years later, he tried to make that point in a very salient way in one of his assignments for *Life* Magazine. Back to Fort Scott was essentially a tracking. He tracked his classmates at the all Black , middle school, elementary school that he went to, to see where they were almost 25 years later in 1950.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And he found that most of the kids in that class who graduated with him were in fact in places outside of Kansas. In fact, these young people had migrated, whether with their families or as adults, in the great migration, north, east and west. And he produced this, in a sense, this beautiful follow up and documented the lives of people who actually were, as Americans, living full and wholesome lives in places as far afield as California and Chicago.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The point that he was making was that, not only were the Black folks of Fort Scott living lives as normal and everyday as the white folks even under the oppression of racism and segregation, but that they were just like everyone else. Interestingly, *Life* never published the photo essay, because they looked at it and thought, okay we get it, but, you know, our audience is predominantly white, middle class. We serve a white middle class audience, and white middle class people don't understand Black life in this way.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And *Life* was often not a leader. *Life* was often a follower. So, when it did cover, in the instances where it did cover the African-American story, it was through suffering, conflagrations, protest. It wasn't really— And by 1950 it wasn't much of that even. It just wasn't— Black life in America wasn't greatly covered by *Life*. But *Back to Fort Scott* is this glorious photo essay. One of my favorite photographs is a family, I guess after dinner, sitting around, the parents are on the couch reading the newspaper. Their daughter, their high school student daughter, is on the floor doing her homework. It's this casual image of a normal wholesome life, and the very thing that *Life* almost never represented with regard to African Americans. Of course, white people saw themselves reflected in this way all the time, but Black folks didn't.

Media, race, and representation

01:09:11:01

MAURICE BERGER:

In the middle of the 20th century, when Gordon was in a sense professionally coming of age, the media was awash with images of white heroes, white celebrities, white family life, and I don't just mean the articles; the advertary, the advertisements, for example, reflected whiteness in all of its facets. Whiteness was, in effect, complicated. And it was reflected in a complicated way. White Americans, rarely if ever, interacted with Black Americans, especially outside of urban centers. So white people's views of Black America were shaped by a media that trafficked in stereotypes, and negative images, and all kinds of lurid notions of criminality, of poverty that was essentially the fault of the people who were poor.

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MAURICE BERGER:

If you were a Black person in America, you did not see your life reflected in the mainstream media. You just didn't see it. It wasn't part of the deal. What Gordon felt was that that was a problem in more than one way. On one hand, it meant that Black Americans lived in a world in which stereotypes about them circulated over and over and over again in compounded ways, so that you not only didn't see the wholesomeness of your life reflected, you saw

your life reflected in a mass culture in the most demeaning ways if you saw it reflected at all.

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MAURICE BERGER:

More often than not, your life was ignored. I think of a very brilliant statement that my friend, the writer, Telani Davis, once said to me. I was working on a project on civil rights imagery and we were talking about the difference in the work of African American civil rights photographers and white civil rights photographers. One of the main differences was that Black photographers were often more interested in the everyday activities of Black people, not just the conflagrations. And Telani said what to me is the most perfect line.

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MAURICE BERGER:

She said, “The world outside, the world of whiteness, the world of mainstream media, they didn’t know who we were. They did not know our lives, but in the end, in our lives we were whole. We lived just as wholesome a life.” And that is an important thing to think about in two ways, and Gordon thought about this a lot in terms of the issue of empathy. If you could get white Americans to realize that the lives of their Black brothers and sisters were in fact no different from theirs, except for may—perhaps the racism, except for the overlay of bigotry. Then you might be able to undermine one of

the basic tenets of racism, which is they are different from us. If that similarity could be grasped, that notion of difference could either disappear or at least be alleviated.

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MAURICE BERGER:

But there was another part of this story that white people don't think about, which was what would it have been like to have lived your life where every time you turned on the television or opened a picture magazine, or opened a newspaper, you either did not see yourself at all or you saw yourself reflected in ways which were demeaning or dismissive. So for Gordon, that was the other part of the equation. You show the wholeness of that life, not just to convince white people that perhaps their racist views of Black America were wrong. But also to give Black Americans a reflection of their own beauty, their own brilliance, their own triumphs, their own everyday triumphs.

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MAURICE BERGER:

You know, there were routine coverage of graduations in newspapers and magazines. White kids throwing their hoods—their hats, their whatever they're called, the hoods up in the air. And in the Black press and in Gordon's own work, there was an emphasis on those events. There was an emphasis on the events that showed not just the ordinariness of Black life, but the triumph. And I think we have to think about this for a second in that a Black

graduation, in a place of segregation, in a place of abject racism is a far greater victory than a white graduation because look what you've had to overcome for the same result. And Gordon knew this, he understood this, and he practiced this. He really knew that he was actually making photographs for all Americans. He believed that till the day he died.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Picking up a camera and using it to represent yourself, your family, your world in the context of a world that doesn't represent you is almost in the genes of Black Americans. And it goes back a very long way. Frederick Douglass, the great leader, was one of the most—in fact, we now believe the most photographed American of the 19th century. Harriet Tubman was an active user and promoter of her own photographic image.

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MAURICE BERGER:

In 1900 when the great American intellectual W.E. Dubois is asked to curate an exhibition on the American Negro—the exhibition of the American Negro for the Paris Universal Exhibition, he chooses photography as the centerpiece. And not just photography but portraits, 500 of them. 500 portraits of African Americans. In the late 19th century before the Brownie camera, before the domestic—the way in which the camera was

domesticated in the 20th century. Throughout the country, photos—Black photo studios opened all over the country.

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MAURICE BERGER:

There's a network of Black photo studios with the express purpose of representing African Americans in their own element as African American families and individuals wanted to be seen and to be seen to the world. There's an obvious reason for all of this, which is that African Americans did not see themselves reflected in the media. So in the 19th century, the newspaper, the magazine, the beginnings of the pictorial magazine left out Black folks. White folks were represented in myriad ways without limit.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So the idea that you could hold a camera in your own hands or have a— a— a Black photography studio take pictures of your family in their Sunday best, the idea that those pictures would become a means through which you could celebrate the beauty, the brilliance, the achievements of your life was extremely important. I think that Gordon naturally understood this, but I think that he began to understand it even more dramatically when in 1945 he became a regular contributor to Ebony magazine.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And Ebony was an interesting magazine. It was founded by John Johnson who was a businessman and one of the shrewdest businessmen, Black or white in the 20th century. And Johnson understood something. He understood that there was a hunger, in especially in— in American Black communities for a magazine about American Black life. And the magazine was not just limited to American issues, but it focused a lot on Black life in the United States and he had—you know, he had begun—he had published earlier magazines like The New York Digest in 1942, but it was not a pictorial magazine.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And Johnson really believed in the ethos of photography as a— as— as a tool of empowerment, as an agent of change. But he handled photography in a very interesting way, and he based it on an earlier publication. He based it, I believe, on W.E.B Dubois' magazine for the National Advancement for the Association of Colored People, The Crisis, which Dubois began editing in 1910 and edited for almost 25 years. The crisis had a very interesting attitude about pictures.

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MAURICE BERGER:

It understood that in some ways its Black readers, especially in the north who lived outside of Jim Crow segregation, maybe needed to be continually reminded of the plight of Black Americans in the south, so he committed his

imagery, often, to photographs of suffering, of privation, of violence. So that became one of the two forces that he—that the images fulfilled, that they represented. But the other aspect of his imagemaking had to do with the celebration of Black achievement. Not just famous Black Americans, but also kids graduating from a historically Black college.

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MAURICE BERGER:

You'd have a page of small photographs. He particularly loved the portrait. He said, "You know, white folks are themselves all the time in magazines." This was gonna be an opportunity for Black Americans to see themselves represented, and how better to do that than portraits. So the magazine was filled with portraits, but it oscillated between these two types of images. Johnson bought into that ethos. He also understood something, that there was this enormous Black middle class demographics that the mainstream magazines were frankly, stupidly not taking advantage of.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Of course, we now understand they didn't take advantage of the demographic because it would have alienated a lot of their white readers. So when Parks began working for Ebony, he took those two types of images, and with a special emphasis on the latter. A lot of portraits, a lot of images of everyday Black life. There's a beautiful story he did on a pullman porter and he

followed him for 24 hours. He literally followed him around the clock. And the layout is actually kind of cool because in the layout, the little photographs following him from 6 AM in the morning when the provisions came in, to the end of the day where he's getting ready for bed ran around the perimeter of the page with the text in the middle.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And it was images like that that gave him a sense of what the camera could do and working with very savvy journalists. He sometimes was able to make some very extraordinary points. The one thing in the piece about the railroad worker was that he acknowledged that this was—this job was a segway to something else and he tucked under his arm, at one point, a real estate manual and he said, “That’s what I’m gonna be. I’m gonna be a real estate agent.” And they reported that in the story. And you saw how hard the guy worked and how earnest he was and you kind of had no doubt he was gonna become whatever he wanted to become. So Parks got the value of the camera, but he also was in a very—he was the latest in a line of a very long tradition of Black photographers and Black political and cultural figures who used the camera in many savvy and dynamic ways to change perceptions, to inspire, to enrich people’s egos that were daily bombarded by negative stereotypes.

Life Magazine

01:22:37:04

MAURICE BERGER:

Before Gordon became a staff photographer for *Life*, he was assigned a project to track the everyday activities of a gang in Harlem. And *Harlem Gang Leader* was the result of that effort. Gordon just did not—Gordon never really liked being a passive observer. He wanted to understand the emotional import, the history. He used to talk about his preparation; even for a portrait he was a very prepared photographer. And in this case the preparation was he embedded himself in the life of a gang and particularly the life of Leonard ‘Red’ Jackson, who was a 17-year-old gang leader in Harlem.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Gordon had a very interesting take on what he wanted to do. Rather than play into the media stereotypes, Gordon understood something about Red Jackson, which is that Red was actually a good kid. He was a good kid who got caught up in some pretty... unfortunate, sometimes even violent urban activity, gang activity. But he also was a student, a son, and a very devoted brother.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So Gordon’s point of view was, ok, I’m going to show America the life of a Harlem gang and what I want to happen, what I want this to effect—in this

case this is how he wanted to use his weapon of choice, was that Americans, and particularly local officials, would realize the problem of gang warfare, the problems of gang—the gang ideology on the minds of young people and perhaps develop social programs that could remove these kids from that environment and give them hope in other ways where they didn't think that being a gang member was their greatest hope for the future.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So he produced a whole range of images. He produced images that indicated the violence of the story. There was an image of one of the—a rival gangs—a rival gang member was murdered and Red and his friends come to view the casket. But just as importantly, he photographed Red in his everyday life, and that meant being with his mother in the kitchen cooking, washing the dishes, sitting with his brother while his brother was reading; his brother was a very studious young man. Again, that part of the story, which would never have made it into a mainstream publication, that Red happened to have a brother who was reading all the time.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Ok. He takes his photographs, he takes a lot of them. He imbeds himself, Red trusts him, the gang trusts him. And *Life* Magazine balks. They don't get it. So what they do is that they—they- they embark on what I would call an act of

almost editorial vandalism. They start, for example, cropping photographs for dramatic effect. So a fight is cropped so tightly that it looks like a murder, right? Like a pending murder, a murder about to happen. There are these misty, foggy photographs of Harlem. And certainly, by the time of the photo essay in 1948, Harlem had gone through the Harlem Renaissance; it was a great cultural hub.

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MAURICE BERGER:

It was a part of New York that was filled with vitality, but that is not what the editors of *Life* were interested in portraying. To the extent that they actually showed Red looking through a broken glass window. The landscape of Harlem was only shown in dark and— and hazy light. There was this sense of foreboding throughout the whole piece and it was at that point that Gordon realized that he—you know, he had a problem. And the brilliance of Gordon was that he kind of figured out how to work the system after that piece came out.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The other part of the equation has to do with supply and demand. Suddenly, he was in demand. That story, among some of his earlier stories, enchanted a lot of writers and a lot of Americans. So by the 50's, Parks had a lot more

leeway at *Life*. He was able to do the things he might not have been able to have done when he assumed the position of staff photographer in 1949.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Life was largely a magazine of white middle class Americans, and if you think about it in those terms, you begin to understand, in a certain sense, why Black America was not very much on *Life's* radar. *Life* was also a de-sensually conservative magazine. So even when it covered civil rights, it sometimes did so in ways which I can only now in retrospect describe as—as sad and tragic.

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MAURICE BERGER:

One of the more egregious examples of this in the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1963, in May of 1963, we have in the city of Birmingham the children's crusade, in which Dr. King and a number of other civil rights leaders decided that to have children protest the reality of Jim Crow, the cruel reality of Jim Crow segregation, and to have them do it in ways that were out there and very open and possibly to have a response that was completely inappropriate or even violent would help to show Americans how depraved the forces of Jim Crow segregation and racism in the south were.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So you have this extraordinarily violent day. And there were newspaper journalists that were there recording it, photojournalists, and the new medium of television news. And what they were recording were things that I could loosely describe as acts of murderous violence against Black children and young Black people. Police dogs tearing at the clothing and skin of Black protestors.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The particularly cruel device of double water jets. Not single water jets, but double firemen's water jets that would knock these kids down to the ground. And this was being photographed.

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MAURICE BERGER:

You had, you know, particularly violent forms of reaction from the police and from the local officials. Young protestors being literally nipped at by police dogs, their skin and their clothing being torn, of the particularly cruel act of double water jets, which the police jerry rigged so these firemen's water jets would hit the children with such force and intensity that it would throw them to the ground.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Many children were bloodied. This was being reported on. But when the final story came out in *Life*, it was even worse than both sides. You know, we're gonna give each side a voice. Things like showing a Black protestor and the caption is, you know, "The picture of hate." Or implying in the text and in the captions that all of this violence was because of this virulent anti-segregationist demonstrations. That this—that this demonstration against the white powers that be in the rural south and the urban south, wherever, that wherever it was happening in the south, that these demonstrations, that these— that this outrage was somehow misplaced or unreasonably blunt or violent, and somehow it was their fault.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So *Life* was a fairly conservative entity when Gordon Parks began working there; moreso even in '48 than it was in 1963. So if you think about Parks becoming a staff photographer in 1949, you really have to remind yourself of how amazing that actually was, and how much he wound up getting away with. In fact, after that first contentious... problem that he had with this sort of contentious relationship with his editors over *Harlem Gang Leader*.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Slowly as the press that he began to get outside of the magazine, as the coverage he got, mostly because of the brilliance of his stories, as those got

out into the world and he began to be sought after, *Life* began to give him more latitude. So by the early to mid—more of the mid 1950's, Parks was able to do things that he could never have done in 1948 or '49.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Gordon was a brilliant media person. He— he really—you know, it's interesting that so many photographers who grew up in Gordon's generation grew up with the idea of... being shown at the Museum of Modern Art, which never happened for Gordon in his lifetime and it's just gonna happen, right? Or believed in the idea of the journal, you know, like Stieglitz, right? Or believed in the idea of the photograph hanging in the hallowed halls of the great collector of photography.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And remember, before the 70's photography didn't even have an in—it was not even terribly institutionalized. Then there were photojournalists who believed in the power of the media or did so to make money. Gordon's relationship to the media was out of—is kind of out of this world in comparison to his peers. He really saw the media as a space of art, a space of communication, a political space. And he oscillated between media to function within that medium.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So film was just an even greater way of reaching millions of people. He was deeply committed to his messages, finding a place in the hearts and minds of as many people as physically and conceptually possible. And that led him to make one decision after the next which, you know, one decision after the next, which propelled him into different media venues and contexts. He made television, which people seem to forget about. He made films, picture magazines. *Life* was the pinnacle of his picture mag—because when he became staff photographer for *Life*, that's when he knew he could reach millions of people.

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MAURICE BERGER:

That doesn't mean that the work he did for *Ebony* was in his mind any less important. He reached millions of black readers, but *Life* imagined another world for him in which he could reach millions of readers of all races, in many ways all over the world. So that media became, for Gordon, the space of enlightenment, and he used it with brilliant skill. You know, he truly was a media person. You know, when I think—it may sound like an odd comparison, but I have to make it. You know, it wasn't until Andy Warhol, in a funny way, that an American art maker got it in that way.

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MAURICE BERGER:

You know, and Warhol had different priorities. I mean, I don't believe that Warhol's motives were necessarily to change the world, although in a way he did dynamically, but maybe not to change the lives of ordinary people. Gordon used the media because he saw it as an outlet for massive social change and possibilities.

Southside

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MAURICE BERGER:

I think that the— that being in big cities, especially Chicago, granted Gordon opportunities he wouldn't have had had he stayed in Kansas. And the most important opportunities were that he met people. For example, you know, the meeting of owners of a department store that led him to become, early on, a kind of fashion photographer. This happened well early on in his career. Or spending time in Chicago with the painter, Charles White, and having these elaborate discussions about aesthetics and the value of a Black aesthetic, and how each of them viewed their artform. So these urban situations were— were rife with opportunities and Gordon being Gordon, Gordon knowing that he couldn't call his rich daddy or his rich mommy and get a meeting with, you know, a publisher in New York knew that he had to do it himself.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So this charming man was continually dialoguing with people and it was almost a non-stop string of opportunities for him. His brilliance, his style, his talent. So those urban settings became incredibly valuable for him as places to advance, not only his career, but his reach, particularly the idea of the media outlets that would disseminate his images to hundreds of millions of people.

Harlem

01:37:30:07

MAURICE BERGER:

You know, Gordon understood Harlem as one of the most complex and rich and generative urban scenes in the country. And he understood that Harlem was a paradoxical place. Racism and poverty meant that people were living in privation, but he also understood that even the poorest people in Harlem had a cultural life. That the Harlem renaissance had left its mark, that Harlem was a place of profoundly important culture. It was also a place of the church. It was a place of family, despite the stereotypes.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So, he never bought into the media—to the mainstream media cliches, which were very destructive and rich with stereotypes. He never bought into those cliches about Harlem. He was not only more empirical but more embedded,

just like when he embedded himself in Red Jackson's gang. He— he was a part of the culture, he— he wrote about it and photographed it, both from the outside and the inside. So that when he finally works with Ralph Ellison in 1951 and 2 on a project for *Life* Magazine, Harlem is Nowhere, um a project which essentially was *Life's* attempt to promote *Invisible Man*, which not only had just been published but had just been published to such critical acclaim that *Life* could not ignore—you know, it was no longer possible for *Life* to ignore it.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So they had to somehow deal with it. But again he finds he has the same problem with *Life's* editors because *Invisible Man* is an interesting collaboration. On— on one level, it is a visual retelling of Ellison's story. So you're dealing with a Black man who has dealt with unspeakable segregation and racism, who repairs to an underground lair filled with hundreds of lights where he eats ice cream and drinks gin. In this story, the protagonist talks about finally reascending, but he doesn't do it. In Parks's retelling— visual retelling, the last scene if you will is the protagonist with his head sticking out of a manhole looking out into the sunlit streets of Harlem.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Even more to the point, in his telling of the story as a visual producer as opposed to a writer, he produced a lot of pictures of contemporary Harlem, which were fairly buoyant pictures. People out with their families, people enjoying a Sunday afternoon. Those were in Gordon's mind part of his conception of Harlem is Nowhere. In many ways what he was saying is Harlem is definitely somewhere. And the editors of *Life* wouldn't publish those photographs.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So that what you wind up getting is a very extraordinary photo essay; it's really quite striking and beautiful and magical with some of Gordon's most aesthetically complex images. But what you don't get is the complexity of Harlem that Gordon was attempting to achieve in those photographs, and in some sense what Ellison had achieved. You get a more subdued—and the final photo essay is also relatively short, it's not one of the longer ones. Really quite beautiful and quite amazing and remarkable, but the complexity of Harlem, as Gordon saw it, did not make it into the final essay.

Writing

01:42:16:01

MAURICE BERGER:

Certainly one of the things that influenced Gordon the most, early on, was a collaboration—between Richard Wright and an FSA photographer, in which the story of a— of a people was retold through a nimble collab—a nimble juxtaposition of words and images. That project was Twelve Million Black Voices, and in it Wright’s really gorgeous text—they’re—I would describe them as poet—as a kind of creative nonfiction. They were poetic, they were beautiful. Those texts are juxtaposed with photographs from the Farm Security Administration. And what you wind up getting is a very poignant and very complex view of those twelve million Black voices. And Gordon looked at that book as his bible. He befriended Wright, they became friends. He was friends of course with Ellison. He was friends with a lot of—he was friends with Langston Hughes. He had a great affinity for great writers. I think Twelve Million Black Voices is one of the early examples.

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MAURICE BERGER:

I should also say that Parks was a writer. Not just—I don’t mean that in the literal sense. Yeah, he published four autobiographies, he was this great—you know. He was a film director who worked with, you know, pretty extraordinary screenplays, he wrote novels. He—he was a writer. But I mean it in a somewhat different way, and that was that um— when he went on assignment, he wrote. So as someone who has written a lot on Gordon and who respects Gordon very much. I’ve spent a lot of time trying to understand why he did what he did on a particular shoot. So for example, the segregation

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story that he- he shot for *Life* in 1956. His notes are copious, they're rich. They're very literary. So part of his working process was to record with his camera and record with his pen.

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MAURICE BERGER:

As a journalist he was very careful and he was very professional. And I don't think he walked into situations with a predetermined sense of what he was going to find. In fact, there are situations that are so... for want of a better word, shocking, or disturbing like discovering young Flavio in a favela, you know, outside of Rio de Janeiro where the poor child is nearly, you know, devastated by illness and he's, you know, half-dead. I think that you don't know what you're gonna see, so I think it's a process in which both things are going on. He's taking notes, but he's also photographing. And then at some point the two come together in a story.

01:45:43:18

MAURICE BERGER:

He often didn't write the text for his photo essays. They were often written by other journalists. But of course he—he was very interested in bringing those things together in some of his books. Certainly *Moments Without Proper Names* is a kind of eloquent juxtaposition of— of his photographs and his poetry.

FSA and Roy Stryker

01:46:14:10

MAURICE BERGER:

Parks applies for a Julius Rosenwald fellowship, he gets it. He takes his fellowship job, if you will, a position at the Farm Security Administration as a photographer. He works with Roy Stryker, who is the director. I'm not so sure that we know exactly how the FSA inspired him, but I think there were three things that we have to acknowledge. One of them was he was in Washington DC. And remember, he'd lived in Minneapo—he lived in St. Paul, he'd lived in Chicago, he spent time in New York. Washington DC was a dastardly segregated city, so all of a sudden Gordon was thrown back into the Fort Scott milea.

01:47:03:01

MAURICE BERGER:

He was in this hideously segregated city, and I think it made his urgency to represent Black DC-er's in ways which showed that all of that segregation and that racism was not defeating people. There's a beautiful photograph of a mother looking out of a window and watching her children play in the Frederick Douglass low-income housing project where they lived. I mean, he cared about the community and I think his Ella Watson photographs come out of that. You know, Ella Watson was a local Black woman dealing with all kinds of realities, but she was also a remarkable person.

01:47:48:18

MAURICE BERGER:

I think the second—without doubt the second sphere of influence was Roy Stryker. Roy pushed Parks, he pushed Gordon. He really pushed him and pushed him to be—to report more accurately, pushed him to be, in a sense, more sensitive to what kinds of photographs would persuade— Remember, the Farm Security Administration existed to produce a body of work that would persuade... skeptical Americans across the country of the need for anti-poverty programs and for aggressive New Deal programs.

01:48:29:09

MAURICE BERGER:

So I think he learned a lot about the art of persuasion. He loved Stryker. He really did, but I think the other thing that we can never discount is his interfacing with other FSA photographers. Now I don't, as a scholar, know exactly how much of that happened, but he does talk about his cherished time working with other brilliant photographers in that period, and I assume that must have had some effect on him.

Fashion

01:49:05:03

MAURICE BERGER:

Well, there were two things that Parks did when he was commissioned for a fashion shoot that were unusual. One of them was that he was very interested in his models. They were not muses for him. They were actually women with stories. There's a very famous photograph, and I have to say so many people have missed the nuance of this photograph, where he's photographing a model who was kind of his muse, and behind her was a fellow photographer, a female photographer, Frances McLaughlin, who was also photographing the same model.

01:49:45:12

MAURICE BERGER:

So it's a kind of mirror-like image in which Parks is unseen in the frame photographing in midrange the model, and behind her McLaughlin is photographing the back of the model. And Parks— Parks has said that... models are not just beautiful women or beautiful men. They're working people, and they have stories to tell. So he was very interested in the emotional effect of the faces of his models for example, but there was a little bit of a nuance in that story that I will admit that I may be the only person who figured it out.

01:50:26:23

MAURICE BERGER:

The reason why I figured it out is biographical. In—the photograph is taken in an alleyway. And beyond the alleyway, beyond the model, beyond the

photographer that he's shooting is a big—of a—of an inscription on a wall. Well, the inscription is an inscription from Ralph Waldo Emerson. The wall is Hunter College in New York City. I went to Hunter College, and I can tell you something remarkable about Hunter College. It was the first great integrated, serious women's college.

01:51:03:08

MAURICE BERGER:

One of the first, not the first, but one of the first great public women's colleges. That's the college where Nobel Laureates who were female went. That's the college where Academy Award winning actresses went. That's the college where Pulitzer Prize winning women went. There was a reason why he wanted the frame—the shot to be framed in that alleyway, because he felt it wasn't just an exercise in female beauty; it was an exercise in humanity just like everything else that he did. So when he went to Paris he felt the same way.

Ingrid Bergman

01:51:44:15

MAURICE BERGER:

He was sent by *Life* to- to- to uh- to Stromboli, Italy to photograph Ingrid Bergman. And *Life* had a—for want of a better word, ulterior motive that wasn't ulterior at all. It was a pretty overt motive, which was to photograph a

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scandal. Ingrid Bergman had been having a quote, unquote illicit affair with Roberto Rossellini, her director. She was in Stromboli, Italy to film the film *Stromboli*, which Rossellini directed. And I think what *Life* envisioned was that Gordon would go over to Italy and he would find Ingrid and Roberto in some compromising pose, and the result of that would be that he would have a scoop.

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MAURICE BERGER:

But *Life* didn't understand Gordon Parks. They didn't understand his heart and they didn't understand his mind. Gordon knew what it was like to become a stereotype. He knew what it was like for the media to demean. He understood how easy it was to slip into something as a photographer that was—that would have made him an accomplice. He also was a humanist. Now, from my perspective, and I'm sure that Gordon understood it this way as well, Ingrid Bergman was probably the most intellectually gifted actress of her generation. Her mind was incredibly complex, she was in fact quite brilliant, and her performances were layered and nuanced and human. With all of her intellect, her performances showed—without—without uttering a word, Bergman was able to show a panoply of emotional responses. So I think Gordon arrived in Stromboli sympathetic. But what was more interesting, in a way, was he arrived in Stromboli with an actress kind of infatuated and in love with him.

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MAURICE BERGER:

She had seen *Harlem Gang Leader* the year before in *Life* Magazine, and she got it. That's how brilliant she was and that's how brilliant he was. She understood what he was trying to do, she trusted him. And because she trusted him, Bergman basically said come into my life. One afternoon, I believe it was or maybe it was early evening, he had his camera and there they were in a very private moment in what was essentially the intimate shot that *Life* would have lusted for.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And he put his camera down. The next day he said, "Let's go out. Let's just walk on the streets of Stromboli." And they were walking, and he suddenly looked at her face and I think what he saw was her vulnerability and he said, "I'm gonna take a photograph now." So he positions her, she stands there and as she's standing there with a look of such hurt and confusion in her face, three women are scurrying by behind her who are looking at her. So the photograph almost becomes a rye commentary on celebrity.

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MAURICE BERGER:

But in a funny way in her vulnerability and the ordinary clothes she's wearing, she's one of those—she's just another woman in the shot, in a way, and the photograph is one of the most humanistic photographs I've ever seen

of an actor because it's not about glamour, it's not about beauty. In fact, because of the sadness on her face it's not even about her glow. It's about her. And it's really a remarkable photograph and became one of his most famous photographs, and one of the most famous photographs taken of Ingrid Bergman. The whole—the way in which he thought about portraiture really, which we can talk about later, really comes to the fore in a photograph like that. I mean, it really is something that's beyond glamour, beyond beauty, beyond social standing, beyond fame.

Doll Test

01:56:16:22

MAURICE BERGER:

I have a theory about Gordon, and it's something I've thought about a lot. Part of it is shaped by my own life and my own childhood, which was not—in some ways was not dissimilar from his. Of course it wasn't the Jim Crow segregation but the privation, the poverty, the bigotry that I experienced as a Jew. Um— I think that- that when you- when you grow up in a place like Fort Scott, you see—what you see around you are broken people. You see a lot of together people, but you see brokenness. And I believe that if there was one thing that Gordon wanted to accomplish in his life before he died, it was to become whole and to impart that wholeness to others.

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MAURICE BERGER:

To find ways of representing people, to show that in their lives, as the great Telani Davis has said, “They are whole.” And I think his humanity emerges out of that. There are so many works of Gordon’s where you look at and you realize that he understands how deep and widespread the struggle to become whole is. And if you’re a Black American and you’re living what Dubois calls double consciousness, it’s a real struggle to be whole because you know who you are, you know the success, you know the triumphs, the brilliance, the glory, the achievements in your life.

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MAURICE BERGER:

But that second part of your consciousness is looking at a sea of images that either won’t show it, ignore it, deny it, or denigrate. So the struggle to become whole, I think, was central to Parks’s entire career, and not just because he found a wholeness in his life, but because he wanted other people to find that wholeness, too. I think that there’s one photograph, of all of the photographs he took in his exceptionally long career, that to my mind exemplifies the terms of that struggle. In 1947 for a story for Ebony magazine, Parks does—has a—spends a series—does—spends a series of days at the Northside Testing Center in Harlem.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The Northside Testing Center was established by the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, and the center's goal was to examine the effects of racism on young minds and hearts and bodies, and to figure out a way of countermanding those effects through psychological means. As a way of helping these young people to find wholeness, to find themselves, and I think there is no more remarkable photograph than the photograph he took of their most significant experiment, the doll test.

01:59:37:14

MAURICE BERGER:

And the doll test was so important that it became a key bit of evidence in Brown versus Board of Education. And the doll test is the examiner shows a Black child a white doll and a Black doll, holds them up and asks the child to select the doll that they want to play with. And in many instances, the Black child chose the white doll. And this was a dynamic indication of how racism becomes internalized and how that internalization is so destructive. The photograph is very—in some ways to me very heartbreaking, but it's also revealing of something. If you look at the little boy, he's not looking at the white doll that he's pointing to, and he is pointing to the white doll.

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MAURICE BERGER:

He's looking at the examiner, he's looking at the psychologist and the look on his face is one of almost panic. He's fraught because on an instinctual level he

understands that he's caught. He understands that his answer is meaningful. He understands that maybe his answer isn't the best answer in the whole world, and he doesn't have a place. He's looking at the examiner, he's looking—he's pointing to the white doll and he's somehow suspended. And I think for Gordon that would have been the most heartbreaking image of all because that's a representation of what it means not to be whole.

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MAURICE BERGER:

I think every portrait—I don't care if it was of a white person or a Black person, even a rich person or a poor person, a famous person, a person who isn't famous. The idea that he could in some ways restore a sense of the full humanity of that person meant a great deal to him. I mean, you look at that picture of Ingrid Bergman, she's in the middle of a moment in her life where her whole career could be ruined, where she's ridiculed and practically run out of town. He finds the space within her where her wholeness, her humanity, who she really is comes through. He said it once in a kind of adage, "I do research when I do my portraits." And he did. And you see it in these portraits. They're extraordinarily resolved.

Emmett Till

02:02:15:12

MAURICE BERGER:

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old teenager who, for part of his summer in 1955, was sent down to—to Mississippi to spend time with his parent’s family. I believe it was his mother’s family. And um... before he left, he was given very strict instructions on what life in Mississippi was like and what he should and shouldn’t do. And to the best of our knowledge he listened and—and then something happened. And we still don’t know entirely what happened, but we do know that some of the reports of what happened were fabricated. The story goes he was—got—went into a shop with a group of friends and he either flirted or whistled with— with one of the women who worked in the shop.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And the reality is that never happened. Many, many years later Mrs. Bryant actually recanted the story. She—he did not whistle at her, he didn’t flirt with her, but the response of her brother in law and her family was vehement and immediate. And Till was dragged out of his house in the middle of the night and he was beaten to death, brutally beaten. A fan, an enormous industrial fan, was tied to his body and he was thrown in a river where his body was found. The—the story from that point on is both extraordinary and remarkable in so many ways.

02:04:06:03

MAURICE BERGER:

His mother . . . was the prime force in getting the story out. His mother was the prime force in getting the story out. What the coroner wanted and what the sheriff wanted was for the body to be packed in lye, the casket sealed, which would have degraded the body considerably, and sent back north. And he ordered the mother not to open the casket. She took the body home and would not follow his orders, and had the mutilated body of her son photographed.

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MAURICE BERGER:

She actually worked with a photographer, and then she agonized over exactly what to do, and she finally said to herself, "If the world in some way cannot see what they did to my little boy, then the world will not even know how horrible and venel these people are." So she decided in her own words, "To let the world see what I have seen." And she worked to have the photographs distributed to press. No white mainstream periodical would publish them, but Jet magazine, John Johnson's magazine, The Chicago Defender and I think of several other black newspapers published the images.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And they became—it was like a lightning bolt. It literally generated what we now call the Emmett Till generation, in which thousands of young people,

young Black Americans saw this picture and at that point made up their minds to join the movement. That's how compelling the image was. And the image is absolutely brutal. Interestingly enough, it did not circulate in white identified publications, so its major effect, at least initially, was in motivating activism in African American communities across the country. The image was important in another way in that it- it really signaled the power of a certain kind of disruptive, heartbreaking, dramatic image to shift public opinion. And you increasingly began to see images of brutality published, even in *Life*, ultimately.

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MAURICE BERGER:

We owe that gesture to Emmitt Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, who realized instinctively what needed to be done. She did something else with photographs, which is perhaps written about considerably less. She asked that the casket be open at the child's funeral, and on the lid of the casket she taped several photographs, and they were photographs not of Till in death, but of Till in life.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So that when you peered into the casket and then you looked at these photographs, you- you- you in some visceral way, in some humanistic way realize the totality of the—this was this happy kid standing in front of his

family's new television set in one of the photographs or, you know, smiling for the camera and here he was, a brutalized, mutilated corpse. So she even understood that, again, that notion of oscillating between two types of imagery could inspire activism and change minds. It—it was an image that changed the world, it propelled the movement in a way. It was that remarkable.

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MAURICE BERGER:

But also I mean what's interesting about that image was Joyce Ladner, who's a great sociologist, she coined the phrase the Emmett Till generation. What she said was built on that photograph. The greatest effect that photograph had was on teenagers who were Emmett's age. Muhammad Ali saw the photograph, and he became very activated by it. And he was—I think they were like the same age or similar in age, and he talks about how that image propelled him. Gordon was a little older in 1955, so I mean it's impossible for that image not to have had an effect on you but, again, I can't tell you what—there's no way for me to know in my memory bank or in reading if there is even any evidence of him talking about the image.

Segregation Story

02:09:13:13

MAURICE BERGER:

In 1956, *Life* sent Gordon to Alabama to do a story about—vaguely about the—unclearly—it’s unclear to some extent exactly what the parameters of the story were, but about segregation in the Jim Crow south. And he chose as his subject, which Gordon often did, he focused on a family or a person in order to humanize it even more, the Thornton—the extended Thornton family. And significantly and rather unusual for civil rights photography, he shot the photographs in color.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So he—he really goes about photographing the extended Thornton family. Now, being Gordon, he doesn’t shy away from the segregation signs or the signs of... deprivation. There is a heartbreaking photograph of a dilapidated one-room schoolhouse, for example. So he shows you that. He shows you what the article's title implies. The restraints open and hidden. So the ways in which the culture of southern segregation restrains, in obvious ways and in less than obvious ways. But interestingly enough he does what Gordon typically did when he photographed situations like this. He wanted *Life's* readers to see... the wholesomeness and the complexity of Black life in the south, and to understand, in some sense, that that complexity was almost identical to their own lives, but being acted out enacted in a world of severe restraints, violent restraints, overt restraints, and subtle restraints. Basically saying to *Life's* middle class white readers, look at this. You know, look at

these folks who are just like you, look what they're enduring, and look what they still achieve.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And to say to *Life's* Black readers, I see you and I see you in all your wholeness and all your complexity. The photographs are extraordinary. They're among the most extraordinary photographs that Gordon took. Again, *Life* didn't entirely buy into Gordon's point of view. It did report, for example, on one person's very vocal—and she was not an activist, but one of the subjects of the story talked about the need to end segregation. She said, "I don't want stop-gap efforts. That's not what we want. If you don't end it, it's not gonna change for us."

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MAURICE BERGER:

It's not like they can—the article and writing for the article shied away from the— the political issues and it's not like it didn't show how tough it was in terms of life in Alabama, but the prosaic images were the ones that really get to you. So that if you're a white reader and you're comfortable in your belief that they're different from us, these photographs are showing you a couple doing their taxes, for example, or two girls looking at a baseball—you know, watching a ballgame or look—well actually it's girls looking at amuse—through the fence of an amusement park.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Or a grandmother and her granddaughter looking at clothing in the store of a—in the windows of a department store. He took many more photographs than *Life* published. And in fact, we didn't know about the series, the depth and the breadth of the series until 19—until 2012 when the Gordon Parks Foundation discovered at the bottom of a box, a duct taped box that was filled with slides of the— of the shoot. And they also were able to contact his shooting notes. It was so dangerous he was threatened.

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MAURICE BERGER:

They sent him across the area with a young man who grew up in Alabama just to protect him, a young Black man who was there to protect him. And he said the moment the plane took off was the first moment he—when—he said, “When I was coming home to New York, the moment I was on the plane and we took off the ground, that’s when I was able to breathe again.” It was incredibly dangerous. He was attacked, he was threatened.

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MAURICE BERGER:

They were being followed. Subsequently, some of the subjects of the story were threatened. But there’s—there’s one photograph that Gordon took that, in some ways, is my favorite photograph, and that’s a funny thing for a

cultural historian to say because there are so many photographs I look at, and so many photographs I care about, and so many photographs I love. So obviously, it's a—maybe an overstatement but I kind of feel it in my heart that this, in some ways, is the one photograph that to me says it all.

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MAURICE BERGER:

I'm an Americanist, I write about American society and American culture, and this kind of says it all. It was taken on a Sunday afternoon, Mrs. Joanne Wilson was walking with her young niece in their Sunday best, beautiful white lace dresses... down the street in Mobile, Alabama. And they were walking by a— a segregated movie theatre, and they were walking by the back entrance, and the little girl smelled popcorn. And you might ask, how do I know this? Because I interviewed Mrs. Wilson 60 years after the moment—almost to the day that that photograph was taken.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And I asked her about it and she said, "Well, my niece smelled the popcorn and she wanted popcorn." And she said, "And I was standing there and I was feeling a sense of almost panic of what to do. I wasn't going to take my niece into a segregated back entrance. I wouldn't do it." And she said, "If you notice, I'm sort of looking across the street to see if there's a candy store or something I could get my niece to pacify her." So I asked Mrs. Wilson about

the experience of the shoot and I said, “Was there anything about it that upset you or bothered you?”

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MAURICE BERGER:

And she said—and she loved Gordon. And she said, “Yes, yeah. There was something that really upset me.” She said, “When I looked at the photograph, I realized that the strap of my slip had fallen.” She said, “You know, I was a proud Black woman in Alabama, and I never left my house not being dressed perfectly.” In a sense, she was saying, I was representing. I never wanted them to hold those stereotypes against me, so I showed them who I was. And there was the strap. And I understand how she felt, but I thought about it. And I thought, I don’t think that Gordon would have told her to adjust the strap because for him it represented something remarkable. If we think about a mother or an aunt or a grandmother and a child, it isn’t easy walking around in an urban setting or in a small town or in a rural setting with a child with distractions all around you. The child wanted popcorn. She was concerned about where she was gonna get the child a treat.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And like any mother, white or Black or of any race, she did what any mother would do, what any aunt would do or what any grandmother would do, she focused on the child and what she could do to help the child. She was

distracted like any woman would be. She didn't notice that the strap had fallen. And that to me sums up Gordon's brilliant sense of the power of empathy, because you cannot be a mother or even human and not see that little—what Roland Bart used to call the punctum or the puncture or the moment of drama in a photograph, and not feel a sense of affiliation with Mrs. Wilson.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And it truly is to me one of the great photographs in so many ways. You know, the other thing about that photograph is that Mrs. Wilson and that child—that photograph is so beautiful that it could have been a fashion photograph. It could have been one of his fashion photographs, but there are those telling details. The segregation sign above her head, the fallen strap, the look of bewilderment on the child's face, the look of anxiety on her aunt's face, that tell you that this was not a fashion photograph, but something far more complex and humane.

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MAURICE BERGER:

You know, I think that—and I don't know that this is in fact what Parks was thinking, but it's hard for me to look at those photographs and they're—they're richly saturated images. They're rich—they're not just color photographs, but they're richly saturated, and not think in some ways in

Gordon's mind color was a metaphor for color and color is a metaphor for race. That the vividness of them... was applying a photographic—sort of a gift that he had... to portray the vividness of Jim—of the reality of Jim Crow segregation.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The vividness of the sign above Mrs. Wilson's head, the vividness of the whiteness of her dress against the blues and browns and— and points of light behind her. That there's something about the photographs that are almost metaphoric. They become a metaphor for the reality of race in America during this contentious moment when Jim Crow segregation was finally being tested and in some part coming to an end.

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MAURICE BERGER:

One of the photographs in the segregation story is actually of the matriarch and patriarch of the family, Mr. and Mrs. Thornton. And they sit in their living room, a proud couple, married for quite some time, with a large extended family. And

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MAURICE BERGER:

What's so interesting about the photograph is if you look above their heads, there is a—what seems—what appears to be a wedding photograph of Mr.

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Thornton and Mrs. Thornton in elaborate wedding dress. He's wearing—I believe he's wearing a suit, she's wearing a wedding dress. And clearly the image commemorates their marriage. But if you look very closely at the image, it's actually two photographs that have been spliced together. So that, in a sense, the photograph is a metaphor for photography in Black American life. It's a restitution. It restores a moment in history that maybe wasn't captured for some reason and brings it into the present, in the same way that photography restored to African American life... its wholeness in the face of racism and segregation and the ways in which the media represented Black Americans.

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MAURICE BERGER:

If you look even more closely in the photograph, the coffee table in front of the Thorntons is actually a sheet of glass under which there are family photographs. It's almost like an altar, which by the way was—photographic altars were quite common in African American homes in the twenty—early twentieth, mid-twentieth century. It's almost like an altar, in which the celebration of their extended family exists for them in this glass-covered table top of photographs.

Impact

02:22:31:19

MAURICE BERGER:

Again, we have to—I think we have to look at the history of photography within African American life and culture and African American politics to realize that when—to realize how absolutely perfect Gordon’s notion of a weapon of choice actually is, because if you think of what segregation and what racism sets up, it’s a combative relationship to its subjects, to the people it victimizes. And the camera becomes, in many ways, one of the most powerful ways to fight back by asserting everything that is absent from the dominant culture in terms of you and how you are reflected. So the photograph becomes, for almost from its inception—I mean in fact, relatively early on, a person as brilliant and strategic as Frederick Douglass is using photography in this way. Even that early photography becomes a means through which you assert, not just your humanity, but everything that’s important and great and smart and triumphant and beautiful.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And I think Gordon—Gordon understood that. But in a way, Gordon, many times, said he felt that photography could be an advantage for any disadvantaged American. So when he does Moments Without Proper Names, it becomes a kind of—a kind of this very lyrical story of survival and triumph as well as adversity in the face of poverty. And he did it for people all over the world. I mean, when he took pictures of Flavio da Silva in Brazil, he did so knowing that those photographs would not just inspire a response, in terms

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of I don't know, foreign aid or whatever it is that he thought they might do, but in a funny way they saved Flavio's life.

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MAURICE BERGER:

He, in part, survived because of what the photographs represented and what happened as the story of Flavio unspooled in the American press. And Parks was such a humanitarian and such an incredible human being that he brought the boy to the United States, had him treated in a hospital for his debilitating asthma, and that boy is now a man... and that story is now enshrined in history. And little did that child know and perhaps little did Parks fully understand that the moment he took a picture of that boy in his tattered clothes, they both walked into history.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The Restraints Open and Hidden was a dangerous prospect for Gordon when he shot it, but it became, actually, an even more dangerous situation for some of the subjects of the photo essay. Joanne Wilson, who was featured in the photograph with her niece in front of the segregated back entrance of the movie theatre, Joanne's sister actually suffered so severely from the ramifications from the photo essay that she actually had to leave Alabama. Her sister was a teacher and... she taught in a one room schoolhouse, but she was also—activist is not quite the right word but she also was extremely

aware of the devastating effects of segregation and not hopeful that stopgap efforts like separate but equal would work. She felt that that was not going to enrich the lives of Black people in the south. The result of that was that when she was interviewed for the story, she talked about the need for segregation to end.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Almost immediately, there were repercussions when the piece was published. She was called in by the school board. She was asked all kinds of invasive questions. She was asked whether she meant what she said. She ultimately was, you know, fired from her position, forced to leave it. Her husband was—they repossessed his car, his truck which he needed for work, even though he had no debt on the truck. They just made something up. And ultimately she was forced to leave and she and her husband never came back, and even more tragically she never taught again.

02:28:02:07

MAURICE BERGER:

She was a schoolteacher and never saw a classroom again. Some people were actually spared, mostly because they never made it into the story. The incredible photograph that I spoke about, the photograph of Joanne Wilson and her niece, one of the most beautiful photographs that Parks took in the series never made it into *Life* magazine. One of the siblings wound up a

college professor at a historically Black college, he was the professor of agricultural science, he was so far away from the story that even though he experienced a completely full life and was respected in the historically Black college where he taught, he lived in Tennessee and his life was even fraught.

02:28:52:14

MAURICE BERGER:

But not as a result of the article. It's simply that he had to live the world a full respect of the university and that moment he left it he was a Black man living in a segregated town. But there were some real repercussions for the people who said things and were quoted in the story or were photographed in the story.

02:29:13:09

MAURICE BERGER:

Parks stayed in touch with the Thornton family, particularly the matriarch and the patriarch. He stayed in touch with the family and checked in on them to find out how things were going. *Life* magazine, actually, on his urging raised money for Joanne Wilson's sister and brother in law to relocate. He really cared about the people he photographed. In fact, in the case of Flavio da Silva, he not only retrieved him from the dire poverty that he lived in to bring him back personally to the United States, the child received healthcare.

02:29:54:18

MAURICE BERGER:

His severe asthma was in some—pretty much corrected. Though he went back, he went back to a new house, something that Parks and *Life* magazine conspired together to raise funds for. Many, many people who read the piece sent in money to help the kid and his family. So—and Parks stayed in touch with so many people. He stayed in touch with Ingrid Bergman. He stayed in touch with Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali began as a reluctant assignment. I mean, Parks wasn't quite sure he wanted to interview Muhammad Ali.

02:30:31:13

MAURICE BERGER:

Wasn't quite sure who Muhammad Ali was, his conversion to Islam. You know, the fact he sort of transformed from Cassius Clay into a much more radical political figure. And when Parks began to speak with Ali and follow him around, the two of them realized they had a tremendous amount in common. And in 1966, when the story-- by the time the story ran, Parks and Ali were friends, and Parks continued to photograph him for the next four or five years. So I would say that, unusually, for a photographer Parks often stayed in touch with his subjects. And he was a very—he was a very warm person and liked to talk, like to listen, and I think that he saw in these relationships that he made as a photographer, people he cared about, people he would want to help, people he would want to keep having a dialogue with.

02:31:39:04

MAURICE BERGER:

The reality is that in bringing Flavio to the United States for medical care and in raising money to help his family, it helped one family. But did it actually fundamentally change the conditions in—you know, in—back in Brazil for people living in poverty? Probably not greatly. I think Parks imagined that the right story could— could result in major social changes. I mean, when he went about his *Harlem Gang Leader*, he really did hope that that story would lead to the founding and development of programs to help endangered youth in Harlem and in urban centers. I think he felt, with Flavio, that he would show a representation of poverty in South America and that might lead to a shift in understanding in terms of government aid, in terms of national and international support. I think he believed that those things were possible, but he was only one man.

02:32:52:18

MAURICE BERGER:

And as we know, journalism can have an effect or it can't. Even a certain kind of media or advertising campaign. I mean, a very good example of this was the difference between the... attempts to publicize the story of cancer in the middle of the 20th century, and how to sort of get funding and get people interested in it. People like Mary Lasko were involved in this who was a great philanthropist. And it was very slow in a funny way even though people were dying of cancer all the time. But the March of Dimes. It was a story to be told. You know, President Roosevelt's polio. The fact that they had a pre—you know, the fact that they had powerful people behind them. The March of

Dimes became this wildly successful aid program when in fact, cancer was killing so many more people. So you can't necessarily rely on a good story to change things. Other things have to happen.

02:33:58:23

MAURICE BERGER:

Do I think that Parks changed the world in some ways? I do. In remarkable ways. I think one example that I think about a lot is he managed, in his photographs, to show the lives of his subjects, particularly if they were Black or poor in ways that were so dramatically different from the mainstream media. That without, you know—I don't have quantitative proof, but there's no question in my mind that those images did change peoples minds, did inspire people in some ways.

02:34:39:11

MAURICE BERGER:

And then you listen, for example, to young artists today, so many of them, young photographers, and you say, "Well, who influenced you?" And I think I've heard, especially with photographers, Gordon's name more times than any other photographer. And I think it's because he represented something that was both dynamic in its own time and years ahead of its own time. The idea that the artist could be in the media positioned to speak to millions of people, that wasn't on the mind of a lot of artists. And yet when a young, brilliant artist like LaToya Ruby Frazier says literally, "I use my camera as a

weapon of choice.” And she’s quoting Gordon. She’s doing so with the full hope that she not only could change the circumstances of her own world that she grew up in in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Grew up in dire poverty surrounded by people who were ill with inadequate healthcare, with inadequate social services, but she’ll do it for—she’ll say, “Flint is family.” And do these lyrical black and white photographs of an extended family of women in Flint, Michigan.

02:36:03:06

MAURICE BERGER:

And suddenly we as her viewer become aware of this ecological disaster, but more importantly in one sense she’s not doing it so that it hangs in a gallery or a museum. She said, and she literally said this, “Like Gordon Parks, this has to be seen.” So *Flint is Family* became an incredibly profound story in *L* magazine both online where you can view it for free and in the magazine. A story about Black childbirth and the disparities of child mortality and mother mortality in childbirth was an extraordinary black and white lyrical photographs for the *New York Times*.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Or her work on the shuttering of the GM factory in Lordstown, Ohio. The same thing. It’s like LaToya to me embodies what Gordon was the model of. A really brilliant artist who goes out there to change the world through their

images, and the thing that makes I think LaToya and Gordon similar in a less obvious way is that they both did this as insiders. Gordon knew what it meant to be so poor that his mother died when he was 16. He knew what it means to be discriminated against. Well, LaToya growing up in Braddock knew many of these same things, and I think she was able to look at someone like Gordon and understand that not only did she have a future but that she could do extraordinary things. And to my mind her book, *The Notion of Family* is our *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, it's our *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It is our, you know, *Moments Without Proper Names*. It is our photog—it is the photography book of our generation. And what is it a book about?

02:38:05:04

MAURICE BERGER:

It's a book about her family's survival. It's a book about three generations of women in her family enduring the indignities of poverty, enduring a decimated healthcare system, enduring the realities of a town that was once a bustling steel mill town and now is a town that knows both poverty and then the impulse to gentrify. And LaToya went back—she did what Parks did. She would not forget where she came from and that's a lesson that Parks has taught us.

02:38:43:22

MAURICE BERGER:

And it's a lesson—I mean, getting personal, my greatest connection with Gordon Parks is the idea that what I do I do for the people I left behind in the projects. Because I think that even writing for the *New York Times* or curating exhibitions that young people see, and I work mostly for young people, what I do I do for young people, that these projects can save someone, can inspire someone. I think LaToya believes that, I certainly believe that and Gordon believed it and he became a model for us.

Muhammad Ali

02:39:27:21

MAURICE BERGER:

I don't understand why he was reticent. It could have been because Ali was so controversial that Gordon thought, well maybe this isn't a good guy, maybe he just didn't know what was in Ali's heart. But I don't know. And I tried to find out because I thought they became friends. I mean, he took the greatest—his photographs of Ali are really very interesting because... I read an essay by a young writer, and he was talking about a certain generation of Black photographers. And he was talking about Roy Decarava and I knew Roy, Roy was my colleague at Hunter, we were friends for many years. Unlike Gordon, I knew Roy.

02:40:15:21

MAURICE BERGER:

Um, he talked about chiaroscuro photographers, those photographers, Black photographers who worked in shades of black and grey. But that actually wasn't generally true of Gordon. He often had very vivid, very bright palette, especially when he photographed in color. But his photographs of Ali are those chiaroscuro photographs. They remind me very much of Roy's photographs. They're very moody and they play on shades of black and grey, and I think it's because Ali repre—finally represented for Gordon the quintessential Black leader and hero.

02:41:00:09

MAURICE BERGER:

And again just as the photographs he took in Alabama for the segregation story used color to play up the idea that color was a real issue. I think the blackness of the story gets played out in the shades of black and grey. It's just something that's going on in those photographs that seem oddly different from most of his photographs of famous people. And I don't know if it's that Ali was somehow a very brooding personality. I have not been able to figure it out, but certainly it's interesting to figure it out.

Malcolm X

02:41:39:19

MAURICE BERGER:

You know, I think that Gordon saw in Malcolm X another leader, Malcolm X was a political leader and a cultural leader and Parks was a cultural—I think he saw in Malcolm X another leader who understood the idea of the public face in a way that Gordon did.

02:42:03:12

MAURICE BERGER:

I think he saw, in the same way that Gordon did, the power of the public face. That the representation of a particularly charismatic figure could be a powerful tool of persuasion. I think he saw in Malcolm X a political leader who loved photography as much as he did. Malcolm carried a camera with him at all times. He prized the camera because the Nation of Islam was maligned in the media. The Nation of Islam was the victim of white fear, which led to white lies about what it represented. Through the camera, the Nation of Islam could represent its complexity, and the Nation of Islam was very complex. It was about community activism, it was about issues of—of basically taking care of communities, health issues, educational issues, food. All of these became part of the Nation of Islam's mandate.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Certainly Parks looked at Malcolm X as a kindred spirit. I think that Malcolm looked at Parks as an honest... portrayer. He knew he could trust him. And when the story came out in *Life*, the headline and the disposition of the text to

photographs turned it into something very inflammatory. But that was—but that really was not on Gordon’s mind. I think Gordon realized how powerful the Nation of Islam was. Yes, I think he being, you know, maybe less radical than Malcolm X may have thought that some of the positions were too anti-white, but I think he saw in the Nation a tremendous amount of wisdom about self-sufficiency. I think he saw in Malcolm the kind of leader that he admired. Not to mention that Malcolm was one of the most photographic political leaders of the 20th century.

02:44:34:23

MAURICE BERGER:

He’s very photogenic. Um, and there were so many photographs of him. He loved—he loved the idea that his image could be part of his political strategy. And I think for photographers like Eve Arnold, who took one of the most famous photographs of Gordon—of Malcolm. I think for Gordon, taking a picture like that was a way of showing that leaders matter and I think for Malcolm, Gordon was someone who would be honest and would be an honest broker in the story that he was trying to tell.

02:45:12:22

MAURICE BERGER:

My personal view of all of this, which kind of is a little illuminating, is you know, Malcolm is one of my heroes. Malcolm X is one of my heroes because he wasn’t—it wasn’t that he wasn’t compromising. It was that he understood

that if you were going to change things, it had to be holistic. And if white people were not going to go along with you, then you had to change everything yourself. Yes, he became more conciliatory towards the end as that famous photograph of him shaking Martin Luther King's hand. He did become more conciliatory in a way that, you know, was probably advantageous and helped the cause, but the positions that he took were focused on making the lives of his people, not only better, but as rich as they could be. He knew that there was all this incredible culture. You know, his leader, you know, Elijah Muhammad, you know, published a newspaper, and the Nation had what was essentially a very powerful, you know, a sort of political organ and that was the paper-- a network of radio shows popped up all over the country.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So, when you're dealing with someone who's that holistic, who sees the whole picture, who gets it all and who is really is fight—what I think what Parks realized, what Gordon understood was he was fighting for his people. And I think there was something in the brilliance of that struggle and the elegance and the eloquence of it that was very appealing to someone like Gordon. I mean, it was an—I mean, what the Nation managed to do in the 1960's was to change the discourse towards Black self-sufficiency and away from the idea that, you know, we had to wait for white people, you know, to save Black America, which was an absurd idea. It remains an absurd idea.

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02:47:30:11

MAURICE BERGER:

On the other hand, Gordon also believed that with empathy you could convince white people to change their attitudes. I think there's a limit to empathy. I think we find that there's just so much—you know, if we think about empathy for a second, it works. We have very powerful political and cultural examples of where empathy works. But there is actually a real limit to empathy. You know, if you think about it in more personal terms, if someone you love dies, your capacity to feel that loss is limitless. If... you know, Mrs. Smith down the hall from your apartment who you saw everyday on your way to work dies, you probably still have some capacity to feel that loss. If your teacher or one of your students is murdered in a racially driven murder and you—then you probably still have enough emotional capacity both to be sad about the loss of that child and angry about the circumstances of that loss. But on a more global scale, there's just so much that we as human beings are usually willing to feel.

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MAURICE BERGER:

We are naturally empathetic, but we're not necessarily empathetic in a way that allows us to feel for broad swaths of the population. It's harder, I think, to make the case that a white person sitting in their living room watching the Ed Sullivan show in 1959 or in 1970 and that person is sitting there with their family and a Black entertainer comes on the screen, that that act is suddenly

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going to shift that person's understanding of Blackness to the point where, oh my God, you know, it's Eartha Kitt. My God, I really—oh my God I love Black people or I think we have to change our attitudes.

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MAURICE BERGER:

It doesn't work that way. So I think that Parks was invested in this extraordinary idea. I think he was in part successful. I think some of his stories, without doubt, moved people, but we still in retrospect have to question how fully effective those strategies of empathy are, which leads me to a more basic point, which is I think that oddly enough photography around African American life has been more successful in its ability to affirm and reflect back to Black America its story. To inspire, to shore up egos that are being bombarded everyday by stereotypes, racist slights and behaviors. It's more effective than that in terms of the story of photography and Black life than it has been to globally change white people's attitudes about Blackness.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Having said that, we do know that photographs have affected people in pretty dynamic ways, particularly during the modern Civil Rights Movement. So from that perspective I think Gordon was fairly successful within the context of an empathy that still has limited application.

The importance of photography for the Civil Rights Movement

02:50:59:18

MAURICE BERGER:

I think that photography was one of—you know, I can tell you a story of how important it was, kind of a beautiful story. In 2010 I curated an exhibition called *For All the World to See: Visual Culture in the Struggle for Civil Rights*. And it was the first comprehensive exhibition that looked at the ways in which photographs, film, television, advertisements, even toys, how visual things changed the discourse of race in America. Mostly how not only the leaders of the movement, but the rank and file of the civil rights struggle used those images to affect change. Interestingly enough, when you walked into the show and read the opening statement, next to it was a monitor of Gordon Parks picking up his camera—sitting in a window of his New York studio, picking up his camera and looking through the viewfinder. It was a documentary that he produced about himself for CBS. One of the things that the show revealed over and over again, was that images mattered perhaps as much as words. Ok, move ahead six months—actually move ahead three years.

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MAURICE BERGER:

The show is traveling, it will continue to travel through 2023. Julian Bond, the great civil rights leader, comes to the campus where the show at that point in

the fall of 2013 where the show had just opened and he was talking to the audience. And he said, “If you really wanna understand how we changed the world, if you really wanna understand how the prevailing ideas about race in America shifted, don’t listen to me. Get up from your seat and walk across campus and go to see For All the World to See, and you will learn a lot about how images mattered.”

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MAURICE BERGER:

And I was, you know, very honored when he said this, but I also understood what he meant. It’s pretty—it’s a really interesting thing because images mattered in so many different ways, from the photo altars that were in the home of so many African American families that celebrated the stories of those families, to the snapshots that were made everyday to affirm the wholesomeness and the complexity of Black life, to the photographs shot by white and Black civil rights photographers in the midst of terrible conflagrations.

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MAURICE BERGER:

You know, the protestors being beaten in Selma or children being nipped by dogs in Alabama or, you know, the—really, the terribly tragic photograph of Emmitt Till’s mutilated body. They all made a difference and Gordon knew that. But he was not—I wouldn’t call Gordon like a classic civil rights

photographer because he felt that images could make a difference. He even felt a fashion photograph could make a difference. That's how committed he was to the idea that visual culture could change people's ideas, could alter prevailing opinion, could inspire people to think in different ways, and as importantly can inspire people to see themselves in different ways.

The Atmosphere of Crime

02:54:57:12

MAURICE BERGER:

At that point, in 1957 Parks had already become, for want of a better word, very established, especially at *Life* Magazine. So he was allowed to do things much more on his own terms. And he worked with a journalist for a story called *The Atmosphere of Crime* in which he and his journalist partner traveled to four cities. I think it was New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

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MAURICE BERGER:

To photograph what the times, rather histrionically, referred to as the American crime crisis. This was 1957. And yet he came back with a story that, for want of a better word, was somewhat disconnected from—it was a photo essay that was part of a much larger story about crime in America, so it was like a subsection. And the subsection was in many ways incommensurate

with the rest of the story, which was hyperbolic and-- because what Parks did—it wasn't that he didn't show crime and he didn't show criminals, but photographing in this gauzy sensual color photography, he represented crime as an ambiguity rather than as an exclamation mark.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And that ambiguity was interesting because it functioned on many levels. It deracialized the story of crime. Too often in the 50's if let's say a story on Harlem appeared in a mainstream pictorial magazine, it was on poverty and crime. But he deracialized the story. There were white criminals, there were Black criminals. He also, in terms of an ambiguity, showed the humanity around crime. There's an incredible—there's an incredible photograph of—it's a very tight shot of a—of a prison cell. And in the prison cell you see two things. You see a hand leaning over one of the bars with a cigarette, but on the bottom you see the hand grabbing the bar of the cell.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And that hand is an incredible moment in that photograph because what you see is the anxiety and probably even the terror of the person behind bars. And he kept doing that. There's a story about how kids were I guess gambling on the street and how the—or they were maybe just playing cards, I'm not really sure, and how the police broke it up. So there's this sense of-- I would

call it the ambiguity of crime. It seems to me that that's a more appropriate title for the piece than *The Atmosphere of Crime*. Although "atmosphere" does imply something hazy and complicated. It made crime a complicated story.

Film career

02:58:18:20

MAURICE BERGER:

My sense is that Gordon made pictures because Gordon was so interested in reaching as many people as possible, and the power of his messages. I think he gravitated to film and television because he understood the immense audience that existed for those two media. They were media that could reach so many more people than in 1969, when he directed his first film, than the picture magazines, which—they were fading. He was a very astute observer of the media. The picture magazines were fading in the 60's. Even newspapers, while extremely important, may not have been for him the best place to tell the stories he wanted to tell. So I think he saw in the movie industry a new home for the dissemination of his images and his messages. *The Learning Tree* was the first film, major studio film, directed by an African American director. It was semi autobiographical based on his novel, *The Learning Tree*. And again, it's a film about hope.

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MAURICE BERGER:

It's a film about this young man growing up in this horrible place in Kansas, which bore a remarkable resemblance to Fort Scott... with hope. There's a scene in the film where a teacher, a white teacher is basically telling the protagonist that he shouldn't even think about college because there's no reason to go. Nothing ev—nothing good will happen in his life. And you know when you're watching the scene that that's not true. I don't mean that—I don't mean—what I'm saying is—what I'm saying is you know that this is a kid who's destined not only to survive but to probably be successful. It's a film about hope, it's a film about will, it's a film about optimism. And it's very much a film about Gordon's—you know, it's very much a film about Gordon's sense of his own destiny as a child. It's quite powerful in that sense. It's also very lowkey.

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MAURICE BERGER:

So by the time you get to 1971 and the premiere of *Shaft*, you find Gordon in a much higher key making a film that was both a financial and critical success, but was also, in a funny way, more radical than *The Learning Tree*. Not on its surface. On its surface the film has been called the blaxploitation film and quite frankly I don't buy that title at all.

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MAURICE BERGER:

I don't buy the term blaxploitation in relationship to *Shaft*, because *Shaft* is not about exploiting anything. What it is about, I think, is complex and it's a dualistic approach to filmmaking. I think on one level *Shaft* is Gordon's gift to Black America and that gift is an action hero. Imagine going through all kinds of action heroes from western heroes to urban films to urban crime movies and cycling them all and all you see are white faces. And I think Gordon is providing in *Shaft* a movie which he himself said was a lot of fun but also gave young people models that they had not had before, and he cared about that. So here you have John Shaft, this suave, handsome, smooth, PI, private eye. And he is enlisted by a... Black man to track down the kidnappers of his daughter. To track down the kidnappers of his daughter. And on the surface that could sound like any movie you know, except the kidnappers and the villains were not always Black.

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MAURICE BERGER:

In fact, most of them were white. So the entire paradigm of American understanding of crime and power is turned on its head. Suddenly, the villains were white and the hero is Black. The imperiled woman is Black and the kidnappers, of different races, represent a different kind of evil. So *Shaft* becomes this rather extraordinary exercise in changing-- and sort of dynamically altering stereotypes about what sells, what's meaningful, what, you know, we understand heroes to be. Interestingly enough, the movie was a critical success and a box office success. It won an oscar for Isaac Hayes's

extraordinary opening, the song that he wrote for the opening credits, for the title sequence. But it really set into motion a different understanding of Blackness and heroism in American films. That's not to say that all of the films that followed were as benevolent and dynamic as Parks's, but so many directors credit Parks with setting the groundwork for their careers.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Everyone from John Singleton to Spike Lee talk about what Parks did with *Shaft* and how it literally set into motion something that had not existed before, which was a place for Black directors. The other thing, which was equally important, was Hollywood is still, in my opinion, a deeply racist place and deeply reticent and a place that produces portrayals that still resonate with stereotypes. Back then that was even more true, but of course if you think about that for a second, you have to ask yourself for a second. Did Black people not go to movies?

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MAURICE BERGER:

In fact, Black moviegoers were an enormous demographic waiting to be tapped. Hollywood basically didn't care. This film had an enormous Black viewership. It also had a lot of white—it also attracted a lot of white moviegoers 'cause it was exciting and adventurous and cool and whatever term you want to use. So you had these—so you have this acknowledgment,

suddenly. That acknowledgment also helped directors like Singleton and Spike Lee and many others because it literally set into motion the idea that there is a lucrative Black market out there and if you make Black films, people will come and see them.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Interestingly enough, there were many different ways in which the directors rethought that idea. From Gordon and Gordon Parks Jr. doing films which were essentially sequels to *Shaft* to films like *Claudine*, which really were about the life of a single—kind of a beautiful, lyrical film starring Diahann Carroll about the life of an urban Black family in New York City, you know, to films like Spike Lee's which were very global and politically complex. But I think it all started with independent Black cinema, but then you had a—sort of had a Hollywood marker in *Shaft*. So *Shaft* is part of that lineage and a very important part of that lineage.

Legacy

MAURICE BERGER:

I think that Gordon probably was a man of our time as much as he was a man of his time. That he's now been gone for 13 years... but he understood things

about culture, things about the media that we haven't really seen in the art and particularly in visual art and photography until much more recently.

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MAURICE BERGER:

He saw the media not as this—a kind of static enemy, but as a possible friend to be engaged. So there was a great deal of interest very early on in, not only disseminating images of the right people to produce certain kinds of responses, but in his own face being in the media. You know, if you think about it, what Instagram and Facebook allow us to do today was something that Gordon craved 50 years ago, which was the idea of allowing people to represent themselves in the way they wished to be seen and always representing himself in the way he wanted to be seen. And that's a very forward looking—you know, and in some ways Americans felt like they were at the mercy of television, or at the mercy of radio, or at the mercy of picture magazines. And Gordon's attitude was, you're not at the mercy of anything. You can take charge of these representations as best as you can. Now he knew what the limitations were, but I think when you look at artists like LaToya Ruby Frazier or Jamel Shabaz. Jamel is all about representing, he's all—he's—if Gordon were 40 today or 50 today, he would have an Instagram account.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Maybe not but I think he might have because what an artist like Jamel Shabaz is doing is using photography to represent communities that are still imperiled in order to empower them, and to represent himself. The thing that's remarkable to me about a photographer like Jamel Shabaz that is very Gordon Parks like, when Jamel walks into a room, you take notice. He is the best dressed man in the room. And we've talked about this, we've talked about it. And I'm like, you know, we've talked about what representing that way means. It's not just that he's representing, he's the very best dressed man in the room. And he's said, you know, he will not go out of his house with hair out of place because he's representing. And the young people he photographs, he's a role model for them and they're an inspiration for him. This is very Gordon. LaToya Ruby Frazier going back to Braddock is the same as Gordon going back to Fort Scott in 1950. It's the same impulse. It's to go back to the disseminated community you left behind in order to help empower people in the present.

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MAURICE BERGER:

And I think he was just a man of his time and a man of today. I think it's one of the reasons that writers like myself who are so focused on the media find Gordon to be so captivating because he used media so brilliantly. And he never compromised. He was a brilliant artist. He never compromised his aesthetic gifts to prove something or to be more desirable. He was so wise and so smart that he knew when a picture would work. And it could be a

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picture—I mean if you take the picture of Ingrid Bergman and you think about it for a second, that’s not a picture that should have worked. When that picture was taken, you generally photographed celebrities in glamorous circumstances or in the studio. Gordon wouldn’t even photograph fashion shoots in the studio. He’s one of the first American photographers to principally shoot in situ out in the open.

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MAURICE BERGER:

Because that was part of what he said was the environmental portrait, the environmental information that you needed. He was always ahead of his time, and I think the final thing about Gordon that’s way ahead of his time was he was this personality. It was a beautifully finely honed personality. I remember one time I was at an opening at ICP and it was the only time I’ve ever been in the same room with Gordon. And he was walking—I was walking into the International Center of Photography and he was walking out. It may have even been for a show that I curated.

03:11:57:20

MAURICE BERGER:

I in fact think it was for a show that I curated. And I watched him walking out and the regality and the impeccable-ness of the whole look and the radiance and the brilliance, you could practically just read it on his face. Well, those are

the things that we now understand to be another part of being an artist or a cultural figure.

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MAURICE BERGER:

If you look at the photographs of LaToya, they are very glamorous; she's very glamorous. But they're not there to show a glamorous person, they're there as yet another way of signaling that we need to listen to what she has to say. Because what she has to say is from her heart, from her life and from her soul.

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