MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Michal Raz-Russo
Associate Curator
The Art Institute of Chicago
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Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 27 minutes and 13 seconds

START TC 01:00:00:00

JOHN MAGGIO:

Let's talk a little bit about who-

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Michal Raz-Russo

Associate Curator

The Art Institute of Chicago

JOHN MAGGIO:

… where Gordon grew up like a little bit about his bio.

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Mhmm. (Cross talk).

Gordon Parks' early life

01:00:11:19

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What I was struck by is the years that he spent in Minnesota when he moved there, I believe, to live with his sister. So he spent several years in Minnesota was where he picked up his first camera, where he started taking his very first pictures, and he actually got work at a local department store taking fashion photographs for them and that was his first foray into photography. And it was interesting because I think that shaped his thinking in terms of how to work with subjects, how to gain access where he wasn't allowed access. But then what he talks about is when he was spending time on the train back and forth between his hometown in Minnesota, picking up magazines looking at magazines looking at those images and realizing the power of photography to tell stories, and at the same time realizing the flaws with those very same depictions, and growing up in a place that was segregated. Growing up in a place where he did feel very—you know, he felt firsthand the effects of racism, to then see how those same places were depicted in mainstream publications like *Life* Magazine and *Other Pictures* Magazine.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He immediately understood the power of photography through that lens, and that was his very first interaction with it. And from the beginning what's striking reading his memoirs and reading others interactions with him is his desire to get to know his subjects, his desire to—his desire to intimately get to know subjects gain access and work collaboratively with his subjects, and even before he honed his skills and perfected his practice, his approach was what set the tone for the rest of his career, and I think, you know, and you see that because the individuals that he worked with in Minnesota. And I forget exactly what was. See, I don't have all the names straight even. But there was, there was a woman who encouraged him to move to Chicago. And, you know, and hit the ground and spend more time in the street, and it was she immediately understood that his skills would be out in the world, that he had this ability to go out into any community and make connections and work collaboratively and go from there.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So that was—so that's really interesting you know that's kind of unusual is this idea that, you know, she gets he's working in the fashion industry but he's, you know, but even at that point you know

he's photographing for a department store creating these kind of catalog images.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What's really interesting about Gordon Parks' approach was that he wasn't necessarily always going at it from an activist standpoint. What he realized was that he was in a unique position as a Black man, but a Black man that was able to get access into White spaces, and his position was always: how can I tell the story that I'm familiar with, how can I tell the story that's personal to me? And that's what set him apart it ended up being an activist position, but I don't think he, at least in the beginning, he wasn't thinking about it in that way.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He always thought about each one of his projects the way he approached them was: how can I present the story collaboratively? How can I tell this story from the point of view of my subjects? How can I pass along the most truthful… story from the point of view of his subjects, and that's something that was really different, him taking the time to get to know his subjects and really focusing on the humanity of his subjects. And that, by default, created a kind of activist point of view, you know. That by default became an activist position. And so,

what's interesting is when he first arrives in Harlem, when Parks first arrives in Harlem in 19—he actually comes twice so he comes first in 1933 actually with a band which disbanded on the spot, and he ended up spending a few weeks in Harlem meandering around trying to find work, failed and went back home. And then he comes back in 1943, and he talks about arriving in Harlem and expecting to see a certain kind of environment, what he had read about, this kind of you know this vision of the Harlem Renaissance musicians, artists, etc.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

But what he finds there was completely different, and he talks about feeling like an outsider there and feeling like this, in spite of the fact that he was a Black man, he felt like an outsider there and like he didn't belong, and it wasn't quite what he expected. And so what he does is he takes the time to really understand the community, to get to know the community to figure out what stories he might tell there and from what point of view, and this is at the same time that he goes to Conde Nast and meets with Edward Steichen and start shooting fashion photographs, so all along, he's in this really interesting conflicted position where he's both an insider and an outsider, and he tries to mediate the two, and it is this kind of meeting in the middle that sets him apart from other photographers working at the time, Black and White, you know, is this kind of middle of the road position.

And it's a position that he celebrated for throughout his life, but it's also a position that fine you know that creates a lot of controversy for him as well you know. It's whose side is he on? And I think that that's where– that's where the activism piece comes in, you know, that's where he becomes an activist is through his process really it's not necessarily because he's got an agenda to fill.

FSA & Roy Stryker

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So, in 1940, Gordon Parks moves to Chicago, and he opens up a photo studio in the South Side Community Art Center and in his spare time he's walking around the city taking photographs of the local community. And he uses those photographs to put together an application for a Rosenwald fellowship, and he becomes the first photographer to win that fellowship, and he uses that money to go out east and begin work with the Farm Security Administration, but it's really about mentoring under the direction of Roy Stryker. He wants to learn from him. He wants to understand the goal–– of his goal is to kind of learn…

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He becomes—of course, many of the photographers who shot for the Farm Security Administration become heroes for Gordon Parks, and he's really interested in the process and their approach. And so his idea is, “let me go out there and let me mentor under Roy Stryker and figure out my voice,” because it becomes clear to him that photographing out in the field is– is the right fit for him. And so he actually doesn't spend that much time, when he is at the Farm Security Administration.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

You know, when he's in Washington, DC, he spends a lot of time with Roy Stryker. He creates those incredibly powerful, powerful photographs of Ella Watson, who he meets in the offices of the FSA, and he goes a step beyond and he spends time with her and her family and creates this whole portfolio of images of her life. And I think it's there, through this project and through what he sees, that he understands again how important it is to get to know his subject, to not just illustrate, to really depict–– not just to illustrate this story that the FSA is trying to tell, but really trying to depict the humanity of the subjects that he's photographing.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, and, you know, and I think what he sees at the FSA, beyond just the photographs themselves, and what strikes him is how those photographs get used, how those photographs become manipulated, how those photographs themselves are manipulating, and how he might be able to do more, you know, what steps can you take with these images, what can you do with these images. What purpose can these images serve?

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And that's the turning point for him so he sees– he sees those images circulating in *Life* Magazine. He sees those images being reproduced and books like Margaret Burke White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and he's struck by, again, how manipulating the combination of images and text can be, how manipulative those images are, and how they paint a very specific picture of poverty in the US, but even more specifically Black life in the US, and he begins to think about how his work and his unique position might be used to do something more, to do something different.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, and that become extrao– that becomes extraordinarily important for him. And then of course, you know, the FSA gets– the FSA program

closes down and gets subsumed by the Office of War Information, he does a little bit of work– that's how he first winds up in Harlem. And, you know, and from there he kind of sees that here's—he can use his credentials and his–– the tools that he's become aware of to create an alternative narrative. And more than just a corrective representation, but a kind of universal representation, and a representation that becomes appealing to the widest possible audience. And so, you know, I think, to answer your question, the– the Farm Security Administration for Parks is less about learning a particular process or particular way of photographing, it's more an eye opening experience in terms of the use and circulation of images.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And where are they circulating? How are they used? Who's presenting what narratives, and how can those narratives be changed? How can those narratives be used for a different purpose, eventually as a form of activism?

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

I mean, I think it's important to keep in mind that no photograph is just straight evidence, right? Every photograph is manipulated in some way, there's what the photographer brings to that image and the

projections that the photographer's bringing. There's the subject and how the subject- the subject wants to be represented. And it's also the projections that we as viewer bring to any image. And I think Gordon Parks was keenly aware of that, you know, Gordon Parks was keenly aware of the relationship between subject, photographer and viewer and how those three can manipulate each other and project upon one another.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And he always thought collaboratively about any image he made, and he used his photographs as both document, but as symbol as well. And– and that was crucial to his practice, so he always wanted to take the photograph a step further than just illustrate a scene. He never went in as just a reporter, as an outsider documenting a scene. He always thought about: How does the subject want to be represented? What story does this subject want to tell? What story do I as a photographer want to make sure that the audience is seeing, and then how is that photograph going to be read by an audience, regardless of what text may or may not accompany it? And so I think, especially in the case of the stories that he created for *Life* Magazine. He was always thinking about those dynamics, and he always went in and kind of controlled the scene as much as he could so that his photographs can tell more than just, you know, can so that his photographs can be

much more than just the evidence, much more than just illustration of a story.

Life Magazine

01:12:32:19

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

When Gordon Parks was working for *Life* Magazine, he was very well aware of his unique position, and he talks about how he often felt like he was being sent to cover stories as *Life's* quote Black photographer, but not wanting necessarily to be in that position. At the same time, he understood that when he was covering stories that had to do with race that he was in a unique position to tell those stories from his point of view, and a great example of that was in 1963, when he was sent to do a story about the Nation of Islam.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He had met Malcolm X in Harlem, befriended him, and asked about doing a photo essay about the Nation of Islam, which had been headquartered in Chicago by that point, and Malcolm X tells him that in order to do that he has to go and get the permission of Elijah Muhammad, who was the leader of the Nation of Islam. So they traveled to Phoenix together, and they have a meeting, and Elijah

Muhammad is immediately suspicious' he asks why should he agree to do this because even though Gordon Parks was a Black man, he was being sent quote by the White devils.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And Elijah Muhammad is immediately aware that Gordon Parks is in this kind of odd position, whose team is he on is?—is you know, is practically the question that he's asking, and eventually Gordon Parks is able to gain his trust and is able to obtain his permission to do this story, and Gordon Parks spent several months with members of the Nation of Islam. He takes photographs in Chicago, in New York, and Los Angeles. He follows their day to day activities, daily prayers, school life, he even spends a time with a family in Chicago. And what's incredible about these photos series is that it becomes a true collaboration where Gordon Parks is allowed unprecedented access into the Nation of Islam, but at the same time, the photographs are very carefully choreographed, they are collaboratively done. They are approved by The Nation, and The Nation is certainly making sure that certain images are captured. The story gets published in a 1963 issue of *Life* Magazine.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

It is a massive photo spread, and Gordon Parks' photographs are accompanied by text written by *Life*'s presumably White journalists, and the text is quite critical, it presents this, you know, what was the popular view of the Nation of Islam at the time, as a kind of, you know, as an outsider group, as a somewhat violent group. And what's fascinating is that Gordon Parks actually contributes his own separate texts to that story. And this was something that was unusual for any photographer to do, but something that Gordon Parks does as early as 1953, as he becomes both a photographer and a writer for *Life* magazine, which again highlights his unique position within that publication. And in the text that accompanies the Nation of Islam story, what's fascinating is one can assume that the reason why the editors allowed him to write a text is that he would provide a sympathetic viewpoint, as someone who spent a lot of time in the Nation of Islam as a Black man; that he would provide maybe a counterpoint to the text written by *Life*'s journalists.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And instead, he writes this essay that is very much a– a kind of neutral text that explains his– the difficult position that he's in, he writes that he sympathizes with the Nation of Islam, but he doesn't necessarily—trying to think of his exact of his exact word, he says in his texts that he sympathizes with the members of the Nation of Islam, but he

doesn't necessarily agree with them. And he uses this essay to– to really explain hi– the difficult point of the- he uses this essay to explain the difficult position that he's often placed in when he's working for *Life* Magazine, and how very often he feels like he's in this conflicted position where he has a responsibility to tell this story about Black life in America, but at the same time, he's doing this for a predominantly White audience.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And it's the way in which he's able to– to bring those two viewpoints together, and that makes him unique, that makes him stand out in his field. Is he saying, this is my responsibility, is to tell the story to the widest possible audience, but also make it appealing and make it understandable and ensure that maybe this predominantly White audience understands that this is not just—that this is, this is not one aspect of American life, this is American life in a way. That this is– these are systemic problems across the United States. These are problems that are– that are relevant to everyone's life. These are problems that you should see from this point of view. And, you know, and that's where he becomes an activist, but also, again, this kind of activism can be seen as quite— you know, as quite controversial in many circles, and he's- you know, and he's frequently targeted for it.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So *Life* Magazine emerges in the 1940s as one of the most popular news publications. It becomes a way to disseminate news stories and other stories of interest, and it becomes immensely popular because of the—this idea of the photo story, these multiple page photo essays that combine images and text as a way to tell a story. And this is seen as a truthful evidence based way to disseminate news, right? You have a series of images coupled with captions, and they cover a huge range of stories, and it is the first time that you see photo documentary circulating in mass media in a way that becomes really appealing and really accessible to a mass audience.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And predominantly a White audience, right? I mean that's you know—that's what kind of sets it apart. So *Life* Magazine and there's several others *Life* is, you know, *Life* becomes the dominant magazine in the US, is widely accessible, but the audience base is predominantly White, and what becomes really clear very quickly is that this language of photo documentation and captions is an incredibly powerful tool. The way in which images can tell a story, but then the caption that accompanies them can manipulate that story a little bit further. And if you take it even a step beyond that, the editorial choice of images, how editors pick those images, how they sequence those

images, what images are they picking, and what sequence are they putting in is an incredibly powerful tool, and it becomes a political tool in the US and beyond, and one that photographers become keenly aware of.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What sets *Life* Magazine apart is that it's not just used as a news outlet, it's also used to tell stories about popular culture, about entertainment, all aspects of American life, which is what makes it so incredibly popular. Now, what you have to keep in mind is the role of the editors in those publications and the editors were keenly aware of how to use images and text together, and how those- the combination of image and text can be used to tell the kind of stories that they wanted to tell, and to promote the ideas that they wanted to promote.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And very often, photographers especially didn't have much of a say in how their images were being used. And that's something that Gordon Parks and others, and other authors, especially, became highly aware of beginning in the 1940s.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So what's interesting is so… when he gets to Harlem in 1943, that's when the second of two riots break out in Harlem in the neighborhood, and that story is sensationalized in the press. They use it as an opportunity to advance ideas about what the inner city was like, about urban decay, about poverty, all the stereotypes that Harlem became known for. So, at the same time that Harlem becomes the cultural capital of Black America it also becomes a symbol of the inner city and Parks sees this in the press. 1943, shortly after the riot, *Life* Magazine prints a two page spread, a kind of news story about the riot, with all the stereotypical images of violence in the neighborhoods. You see images of burnt out storefronts, you see images of youth, presumably— you know, presumably rioting and looting and so on. And it's exactly the kind of image that you see circulating in the press, that the idea that Harlem's becomes– Harlem becomes a symbol of poverty, a symbol of the inner city, and of course it's a Black neighborhood.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So, this idea and what parks understand when he gets there is that it's this incredible cultural hub, and why isn't that image being shown, and why doesn't, you know, why don't White audiences understand the systemic problems that have led to something like- to events like the Harlem riots?

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

When the 1935 riot happens, what he sees is Harlem being depicted purely as a—as a space of urban decay, a space that is poverty stricken, crime ridden, etc. And yet what Park sees is a place that is suffering from systemic problems, a space where residents have no choice but to act the way, you know, to react the way that they did. And at the same time, Harlem is a space that has so much to be celebrated for. So, he is immediately reacting to the way in which the specific events of 1943 get depicted in the mainstream press, and he gets to know other individuals who are living and working in Harlem at the time.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Authors like Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison. And he learns from them and begins to think alongside them about how can their images and text be used to promote an alternative corrective view of Harlem, but one that would be appealing to the widest possible audience? And that's when magazines like *Life* become really crucial and important.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

A pivotal publication for Gordon Parks is Richard Wright's and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices*. Book comes out in 1941, and it's a book that pairs images created for the Farm Security Administration with words by Richard Wright, and it's those same images that were circulating in magazines like *Life*. These were images that were used in the popular press, images that appeared alongside captions that were promoting the idea of poverty, the idea of the inner city, all these stereotypes of about Black life in America. And what Richard Wright does is he pairs those images with text that, instead, highlights how manipulating and how manipulative those same images have become. And this book becomes a kind of totem for so many Black artists and authors who are working, especially in Harlem at the time, and they begin to understand what a powerful tool the combination of images and text can be. Now at this point, Parks doesn't yet have access to *Life* Magazine, but he begins to think about alternative spaces for the circulation of images and text.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

It's interesting because part of what I argue is that Ellison kind of teaches Parks how to use it, right. He begins to explain to him that, you know, images are not enough, that he's gotta, you know, he's got to use both. So what's interesting, especially in a magazine like *Life* Magazine, you would get a photograph taken by photojournalist that was

presented as evidence, as documentation. And then, that same image would get paired with a caption that would suddenly manipulate the image to tell a story that the editors wanted to tell. And suddenly the image could not speak for itself anymore. The image was completely controlled by the caption, and vice versa. And this becomes an incredibly powerful tool, and the book *12 Million Black Voices* by Richard Wright and Edward Rosscam, really highlights that. It brings that to the surface right. It shows how images can be manipulated and how stories that promoted stereotypes were being circulated in the press. And this book also becomes a powerful tool, this idea that it wasn't enough to just show images, it's the combination of images and text that could be used as a powerful weapon.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

In fact, when the book comes out, Ralph Ellison writes a letter to Richard Wright in 1941 congratulating him on the publication of *12 Million Black Voices* and part of, there's a passage in the letter where he says that what Richard Wright has created is a weapon more powerful than a machine gun, that this was an incredibly powerful tool, this idea of a book that combined images and text. So the ability to control how the images were seen and how they were used, so that they could be used as a form of activism. And so what happens is in 1943, Gordon Parks winds up in Harlem, yet again. He's actually sent

there to take portraits of several African American authors Richard Wright among them for a book called *13 Against the Odds*.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He arrives in Harlem in 1943, and he spent several years there, and he gets introduced to a circle of artists and authors who are working there at the time, Ralph Ellison among them. And he is out of work. He does begin to do fashion shoots for *Vogue* Magazine, which is quite incredible for an African American man to be working in the fashion field was an incredibly powerful position, and he's already at that point known for the work that he did for the Farm Security Administration and the Office of war information, so he is seen as an established photographer. In 1947, Ralph Ellison gets asked, actually by *Life* Magazine initially, to do a story, to write a story about Harlem. It doesn't quite work out but Ralph Ellison decides to pitch the story anyway to a magazine called *The Magazine of the Year*, which was a small cooperative publication, and the magazine accepts this story and Ellison says, "The way I'm going to do the story, the most appropriate way to tell the story is with images," and he selects Gordon Parks to create those images.

Ralph Ellison

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

In 1947, Ellison is commissioned to write an essay for a magazine called *The Magazine of the Year*, a cooperative publication, and he decides from the start that photographs would accompany his essay, and the essay would focus on the Lafargue Clinic in Harlem, a clinic, the psychiatric clinic that it opened in 1946 that focused on Harlem youth, but was eventually open to anyone and everyone, and the clinic becomes an important social space within Harlem. And Ellison sees it as a perfect lens through which to examine what Harlem has become representative of across the US, and he selects Gordon Parks to create these photographs. And what's absolutely fascinating about the process of putting together this essay, which would be called *Harlem is Nowhere*, is that Ellison asks– approaches the photo, the photography for this essay in quite a different way. He doesn't want Parks to just create photographs that serve as illustrations for passages from the essay, or to just create documentary images that would– that would exist alongside the essay. He wants the photographs to do something that the texts cannot,

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

and he actually writes in one of his letters that he's hoping to do something new in photojournalism with this essay, which is absolutely

crucial to know, this idea of, like, what does it mean to make– to make something new in photojournalism. So, before he gets started on this—

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So what Ellison does as the first step to working on this essay, is he actually writes a manifesto for Gordon Parks titled *The Pictorial Problem*, which instructs Gordon Parks on the types of images that he wants him to create, and he does this before he even begins work on the essay. And in this manifesto he writes that he wants the photographs to function as both document and symbol. And this phrase becomes a kind of guiding principle for Gordon Parks' entire career. This idea that photographs could function as both document and symbol.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

They're not simply illustrations, they have to do something more. They have to—they have to provide the reader with information that can transcend what is just being depicted, and this becomes a really crucial turning point for Gordon Parks. And Ellison's text becomes a guiding—a kind of—something that he uses for the entirety of his career. So Ellison provides Parks with this guiding text, the essay,

Harlem Is Nowhere hasn't even begun, and they go out on the streets of Harlem photographing side by side for several weeks during the winter of 1948, and they're both photographing together. So Ellison is actually taking photographs along Gordon Parks. He's learning from Gordon Parks. He's using Gordon Parks as a mentor to guide his own photography.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And they're shooting side by side, which is how we know, eventually, how we were able to piece together this project is because we found photographs in Ellison's own archive that match Gordon Parks' own images.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So, over the winter months of 1948, Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison go out side by side creating photographs for this essay, and they shoot all around Harlem, images of everyday life, images of Harlem scenes. Really just you know, documentation of the neighborhood. And what happens is afterwards Ellison writes the essay, *Harlem is Nowhere*, as a response to Gordon Parks' photographs, which is quite incredible in the sense that he's using the photographs to guide his text, and again, he sees the photographs as being– as doing something that the text

cannot. So the photographs are not just illustrating the text. They're not just descriptive images that exist alongside the text. They're being used as a kind of symbolic references, symbolic visual symbols for the passages that he's describing in his text, and then Ellison writes a series of captions for the 12 or so images that he selects for this essay that, again, underscore the symbolic significance of these images.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Fanny Ellison, so Ralph Ellison's wife, kept a diary of Ellison's day to day activities and there were several diary entries where she makes mention of Parks having been at Ellison's apartment. And there's one entry where she talks about Ellison napping on—no, excuse me, where she talks about Parks napping on the couch while Ellison was printing photographs, and it is believed that Ellison might have actually printed some of those photographs that were taken in Harlem in 1948. And certainly, several of them wound up in Ellison's photographic archive. So yeah, I mean they had a very close relationship and I think, you know, again Ellison– Ellison saw Parks as a mentor.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And photography was hugely important to Ellison and his writing practice. He used photographs as guides for his own writing for passages in his writing, and he saw Parks as a master of the craft, and he felt like he had much to learn from him. And he, and he followed him, and the two of them would walk around Harlem side-by-side photographing in and around Harlem. And there's this great contact sheet that was taken with Gordon Parks' camera that actually has portraits of Ralph Ellison, and then they switched, and Ellison took a portrait of Gordon Parks. You know, so I think the two of them were very close and they felt like they had a lot to learn from one another, and certainly Ellison's own approach to writing influenced Parks' thinking about his own photography. Par—Ellison guiding Parks to think about his photographs as document and symbol was something that stayed with Parks throughout his career.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison go out in Harlem in the winter of 1948. They shoot the photographs together. Ellison writes the text as a response to their photograph– those photographs. The essay is supposed to be published in the May issue of *Magazine of the Year*, 1948 edition. Just weeks before it goes to press and they submit all the materials, they get proofs back for the layout, everything is done. And just weeks before the magazine is set to go to press they get a letter

from the magazine saying that unfortunately, it has to declare bankruptcy, and all of the materials are now part of the legal proceedings, and we're very sorry, but it's not going to happen. And so they sort of give up on it. Ellison is able to gain control of his text, but Parks kind of gives up on it. Parks does retain a copy of his photographs, which he later takes to *Life*'s picture magazine. And that's a portfolio he shows him, um, that gets him the Red Jackson story, that Red Jackson assignment for *Life* Magazine.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Ellison, on the other hand, doesn't publish *Harlem is Nowhere* until 1964. By this point, the Lafargue Clinic is closed. So he takes out all mention of the Lafargue Clinic out of the essay, and he publishes it in a 1964 issue of *Harper's* Magazine, with four photographs by Roy DeCarava that were taken from the *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a really interesting turn of events. And so that's kind of where the story ends.

Harlem Is Nowhere

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What we believe to be the opening image to the essay, *Harlem is Nowhere* is this image of a silhouette of a man walking down a

darkened alley, and you just see a sliver of light at the top of the image frame.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And this image, in many ways, can be seen as representative of what eventually becomes the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. The opening passage of the book, where he talks about–– the protagonist says in that novel, "I'm invisible because everyone refuses to see me." You know, this idea of a man whose identity we are unable to see.

01:37:15:01

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Maybe because of our own point of view, not necessarily because of external factors, you know, so it's idea of– is– is this man invisible because he does not want to be seen, or isn't this man invisible because we refuse to see him? And so that becomes the opening scene that introduces Harlem to the readers of this essay. This idea of this is not just an image of Harlem, this is the Harlem that you choose to see. This is the Harlem that is portrayed in the popular press. This is the Harlem that you've come to know, this idea that Harlem is in fact not nowhere, Harlem is everywhere, is—he shows through this image of this silhouetted man.

01:37:59:03

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Ellison's idea in writing *Harlem Is Nowhere* was to show that, in fact, Harlem was everywhere, the problems that are present in Harlem reflect systemic problems across the United States, and Harlem is representative of issues surrounding racism nationwide, and– and it aimed to show Black life in America in a way that would appeal any– appeal to any reader, and the images that Parks creates for this essay represent that. So they're not just everyday scenes in Harlem, they're these scenes that are meant to symbolize. What are… you know, there are images that are meant to show—that are meant to depict the struggles that any resident of Harlem is undergoing in a way that wasn't specific to Black life, in a way it was meant to show Harlem's problems as universal problems.

01:39:03:04

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He was trying to show that the– that… that the problems that plagued Harlem were–– reflected systemic problems across the United States, and the photographs were meant to illustrate Harlem as a psychological space that gave residents no choice but to live life the way that they did and react the way that they did. In the same way that the Lafargue Clinic became a space for Harlem residents to try and work through their problems, he was trying to show Harlem as a

psychological space that, you know, that– that created these problems in the first place.

01:39:43:04

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He did photograph inside the clinic, but only–– to our knowledge, there's only a single photograph that survives from that and it was actually found in the files of Frederick Wertham, who was one of the psychologists that founded the Lafargue Clinic, so his papers at the Library of Congress. And in those papers, we find that single photograph that is known to be taken inside the Lafargue Clinic, and it's an image of a man sitting in a folding chair with his hands buried in his hand. It's actually kind of. It's a version of Rodin's *The Thinker*, in many ways, it's a– it looks like that image, and again it's just a silhouette of a man.

01:40:17:13

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So you don't see the man himself, and that's absolutely fascinating, this idea that there are no real portraits in this series. It's all these abstract bodies, again, this idea of Harlem residents as representing for all of Black America this idea that there weren't–– It wasn't about documenting specific faces; it wasn't about showing the day-to-day operations of the Lafargue Clinic. It was about creating images that

were symbolic of all that was going on across the US of what Black life is like across the US through these images of this one space in the US.

01:40:59:20

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

That's where his– his position at *Life* becomes so interesting is because he's aware that *Life* Magazine itself was disseminating stories about Harlem and other places like Harlem, Chicago South Side, that were promoting this stereotypical… idea of what the inner city was like, of what Black neighborhoods were like, and he realized that to just create images that were uplifting wasn't enough. It wasn't just about creating counterpoint representations. It was about creating corrective representations and representations that would make it clear why those neighborhoods were being seen this way.

01:41:47:06

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Or these, you know, whatever it is, he was photographing whether it be, you know, particular neighborhood or group of individuals like the Nation of Islam. His goal was to– was to try… and say, you know, let me show you from an insider point of view, and he made it a point anytime he would go anywhere to spend time in a place, to spend time with a group of people, to work on a project collaboratively, so that he was able to create a story from an insider point of view, and that

insider perspective, instantly, made those photographs different than anything you saw in those publications, where very often, a photojournalist would come in and document as an outsider.

01:42:37:22

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What sets Gordon Parks apart is that he always photo—he always created his stories from an insider point of view, and he made it a point to do that. So, you know, there's the—and he—and I think what is—what makes Harlem such a—his years in Harlem in the 1940s such a pivotal point for him and his career is that he begins to understand how photographs can be used. He begins to understand how they're circulating, where are they circulating, who is seeing them, and how he can use this material to affect meaningful change.

01:43:18:10

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

There's this great set of images that he creates for *Harlem is Nowhere*, where he does something that is absolutely brilliant and completely groundbreaking. It's a passage where, in Ellison's captions, he talks about how African Americans are seen and how the common—the common reaction is to turn one's head and– and how does, you know, and what are the kind of stories of violence that are being disseminated and how the reaction is always to turn one's head to

those kinds of– to those kinds of events, and what Gordon Parks does is he- he takes two photographs, and he couples them together so one photograph appears as if it is of a man who's been struck by a car. So you see a man laying on the ground with two headlights of a car in the background.

01:44:13:17

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And then the next image is of the same man, just taken from a different point of view. It's a man lying on the ground with a group of individuals standing around him looking down at him. Some have turned their heads away. And what he's showing through the coupling of these images, is how easily manipulated images can be, how a point of view, how a particular cropping, a particular caption can completely manipulate a scene and an image. So if you look at the first image you might think, oh, this man is a victim, he's been struck by a car, you feel sympathy for him.

01:44:48:14

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And then the next image you might look at him as if he, you know, was a drunk, he passed out on the street, look at all these people kind of turning their head away from him, but it has everything to do with the point of view of the photographer, everything to do with how that

scene was being shot, and it's an absolutely brilliant thing to do is to show, you know, how he's keenly aware of how–– or through his time in Harlem he becomes keenly aware of how images can be used, how images can be manipulated. He's aware that editors may take his story and do something completely different with it. And he– and he begins to think about how he might create images that will work the way he wants them to work, regardless of how they are seen, and how they might be used in a way that enables him to get his message across.

Red Jackson

01:45:53:16

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So, what's interesting—so in 1948, he—in 1948, Parks takes the portfolio of images that he shot for his collaboration with Ralph Ellison, which was titled *Harlem is Nowhere*. He takes that portfolio of images to *Life*'s editors to pitch them a story about a Harlem gang leader, Red Jackson. And this is the first story that he does for *Life* Magazine, and it's the story that earns him his position as staff photographer at *Life* Magazine. And this story becomes an incredible—becomes a marquee story for him. It's incredibly important for his career, but it's a story that's also incredibly manipulated by *Life*'s editors, as we know. It's a story that—I think it's

a point of which, you know, Parks realizes, oh you know I can try and tell these stories.

01:46:46:19

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And we know what prints he brought to *Life*'s editors, and we know how he thought about Red Jackson and the kind of story that he wanted to tell about Red Jackson, but that story is not necessarily the story that *Life* published at the end, and was not the story that made it– that made it out to a wide audience. And from that point on I think he's aware that he's got to kind of tweak his narrative a little bit.

A Man Becomes Invisible

01:47:19:14

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

In 1950, he leaves New York for Paris. He actually cites his frustration with racism in the US as one of the reasons that he leaves, and he spends two years in Paris photographing mostly entertainment stories for *Life* Magazine; a lot of Hollywood stories, etc. And in 1952 he comes back to New York. And at this point he's a celebrated life photographer. And he, what is believed to have happened is he approaches Ralph Ellison who had just published *Invisible Man*, and he says to Ellison let's, let's try at another collaboration, the 1948 project

didn't work it was never published. But here's another try. Let's create another collaboration for *Life* Magazine, to celebrate the publication of *Invisible Man*. And– and they go out on the streets once again, and they create photographs that represent nearly every single scene in the book that takes place in Harlem, and they create a combination of photographs. Photographs that are just street scenes in Harlem, that hue to Ellison's, you know—well no, what I should say is they create…

01:48:33:03

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So they go out together, and they shoot a range of photographs that hue to Ellison's style of writing. So some photographs are just documentations of everyday scenes in Harlem, and other scenes are stage scenes with an actor that portray what the protagonist goes through and some of the more symbolic scenes that take place, and…

01:48:54:08

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Uh, *Life* Magazine ends up publishing only four images from this project, and they pick four of the most fantastical surreal scenes, all the staged scenes that Parks shot from the book that were intended to illustrate the symbolic surrealist scenes in the book, and they leave out all the—all the everyday scenes in Harlem, and it creates this kind of false notion of what the book is actually like. It completely misses

the point. And– and– and, I think, what happens from that point on is Gordon Parks realizes that if he's going to tell a story, he needs to—he becomes—I think from that point on, he becomes much more of an editor himself.

Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church

01:49:52:22

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Gordon Parks is sent to Chicago to do a story on the Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, which was an important community church. It was led by Pastor Ledbetter, who'd become this nationally known pastor, and they sent Gordon Parks to shoot a story on it along with a White journalist. And the story Gordon Parks tells is that he arrives at–– he arrives at the church with the journalist, and the journalist was wearing a hat. And the Deacon saw this as a sign of, as Gordon Parks put it, the White man's disrespect and they forbid the White journalist from entering the church. And so Gordon Parks is left on his own to do the story, and he was actually assigned to write the text as well. And again he spent several weeks in Chicago getting to know the community, getting to know the pastor and shooting their—the church's services as well as the day to day community life around the church, and the church's leaders. And he ends up

submitting, actually, the text that would go alongside the photographs in *Life* Magazine.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

The story never runs in *Life* Magazine. It gets cut for one reason or another, but Gordon Parks himself says that that story sets the tone for the rest of his career, and it is the first time that he's allowed to not just create the images, but also write the text that goes alongside those images. And, again, you see him approaching this assignment very differently. So the photographs are doing something that the text is not, the text is not simply illustration for the images. The text is trying to tell a broader story about the church's significant for the community.

01:51:32:20

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He talks about the community's day-to-day struggles, what it's like to live in the South Side of Chicago. What this church represents as a community space for residents of the South Side of Chicago, and the photographs become, then, powerful symbolic documentation that works alongside the text. And you see him doing this over and over and over again. He's—he doesn't just prepare photographs for *Life* Magazine. He's also thinking about the text that goes alongside it. He's

thinking about his own perspective when he's shooting these images, he's thinking about how the subjects want to be portrayed, and he's thinking very carefully about what images he's going to provide the editors to pick from, and how those images might get used.

The editing of Gordon Parks' photographs

01:52:27:23

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What's really interesting is that for nearly all of Gordon Parks' stories they submitted for *Life* Magazine, we know what he submitted. Those prints exist, they have the *Life* story number stamped on the back. And we, you know, so we have a sense of how he wanted to show the story versus how that story was later edited, and how much twists—you know how much manipulation happened in that translation.

01:52:53:13

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So yeah, I think with Red Jackson he shot—well, I think, you know, there were a lot of images that were not used. He was actually quite disappointed that—he shot a lot of images of Red Jackson in his own neighborhood, and with his family, and with his friends that showed his day to day life, and showed his positive role in the community that were not used by the magazine. The magazine chose to edit those out,

you know, of course, the mag–– you know very often a magazine like *Life* Magazine wanted to show– sensationalize a story, you know, wanted to make a story appealing, wanted to make a story intriguing, and that often meant not showing subjects in the most positive light, and that's exactly, I think, what happened with Red Jackson is that ultimately they sensationalized the story more than Parks would have liked.

Criticism

01:53:49:18

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Very often. I mean he was criticized for working for *Life* Magazine and creating stories that were meant to appeal to a White audience. That was something he was very often criticized for by his contemporaries, and it was something that, you know, he was very– very aware of and that he frequently argued gave him an advantage and made him, you know, gave him a power and a voice.

01:54:16:04

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He was criticized for working for a magazine like *Life* Magazine. He was criticized for working for a White publication, essentially, that created these incredibly problematic stereotypical depictions of Black

America. But at the same time, he understood the advantage that gave him, and he understood that responsibility it gave him, and he saw it as a space for him to create meaningful change, as a space for him to be an activist, as a space where he could offer alternative and corrective representation of Black life.

01:54:50:11

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And he was very aware of this conflicted position that he was in, not just in terms of the final product, but also in terms of how he would have to go in as a photographer and the conflicted position that it put him in in front of his subjects as well and how his subjects might see him, and the concern that his subjects might have about how they might be portrayed, you know. And what's interesting about the *Invisible Man* story, so the four photographs that were chosen by *Life*'s editors were included in a small feature in the beginning of the magazine titled, "Speaking of Pictures," which was meant to be a space to show photographs that had a creative bend to them, small feature.

01:55:36:02

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

But in that same issue of *Life* Magazine, there's also a fashion shoot by Gordon Parks, a full color fashion shoot by Gordon Parks, and that was the cover story, was this fashion shoot, when in fact it, they picked a

photograph for the cover that was not shot by Gordon Parks. So the cover story is this fashion shoot that Gordon Parks shot inside, but they picked a photograph by another photographer to be on the cover. So it's this kind of amazing thing. I mean, I think, you know he was very much aware of how his photographs appeared in print. I think he was also very worried that he didn't have much control over it. And you know, and I think that's why he often submitted text. He was very careful about which images he would select to show in the magazine, how they were cropped, how, you know, they were selected, but he knew that his control, you know, that he only had limited control up to a certain point, and then beyond that it was up to *Life*'s editors to decide how his stories would come to life.

The Fontenelle Family

01:56:44:07

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Gordon Parks was always concerned with showing the humanity of his subjects with getting to know his subjects, working collaboratively with them. So I think even when he focused in on a particular individual or group of individuals, his goal was always to get to know them and tell their entire story as a way to convey broader truths. So I think yes that's—that depending on how that gets edited, how that gets presented, how that gets shown, it could be twisted into a kind of

voyeuristic point of view. But I think that's why he always tried his best to show all aspects of their life, to really get to know them, and really try and tell their story. So with something like the Fontanelle family, he's not just documenting their—he's doing more than just documenting their day to day life; he's spending time with them, and he makes sure that their story is told as one of many stories of struggle in everyday Black life in the US. It's not just about the singular family, it's about a broader narrative, you know. So yeah, I mean it's hard, I think at the time that were just that–– you weren't seeing that many…

01:58:02:08

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

There were not that many intimate stories being shown and being circulated. So I think there was—it was very tricky that when you did see a story like the Fontanelle family in the popular press, it was, you know, it was so different than– than all the other stories that were circulating about these neighborhoods and about these places. It was so intimate. It was… So… it was so incredibly intimate that there was no choice for viewers but to feel like they could relate to it and feel like it was a story that they could understand because it was told from such an intimate perspective.

01:58:48:08

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

It's interesting also to think about what were the images that Parks selected to be given to the magazine to work from. It's interesting to compare what was provided versus what the story ended up being like. And, you know how, you see him trying to provide alternative perspectives, you see him trying to shape the story very carefully in the press.

01:59:13:07

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, and sometimes it worked, and other times the magazines completely undermined what his goal was. And I think as his career progresses he becomes more and more mindful of the editorial hand, and he becomes much more calculating about the kind of images that he provides the magazine. He becomes much more calculating about the kind of images that he creates, so that every single image can act as both document and symbol using the words that Ellison had written for him in 1948.

01:59:51:13

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And I think that's, you know, that as time goes on, you know, you start– you compare the stories that he did early on and 1950s and 60s to those that were done late 60s, early 70s, and you see how much more cautious he is about what he is providing the magazine, and how,

you know, every image is its own world in a sense and kind of packs in everything he wants to say about that particular situation.

Style

02:00:27:12

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What Gordon Parks does, and you see this happening with a lot, um–– You see this happening with quite a few African American photographers at the time, is what—what happens is Gordon Parks is drawing from a range of references for his images. He's pulling from the–– he's pulling ideas stylistically and otherwise from popular culture, from mass media, from– from fine art, and he is using all of these tools that he's surrounded by to inform his own practice and his own image making, so that he can create images that pack in as much symbolic power as possible. So he's not just simply concerned with documenting a scene, he's trying to pack in all these other references so he's drawing in from fine art, from popular culture, from mass media and staging, in some cases, scenes in order to convey the idea that he wants, you know, and that's what sets him apart.

02:01:40:09

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

You know—and then in the 1940s and 50s, when he begins to photograph for magazines, you know—in 1940s and 50s he does fashion shoots for *Vogue* Magazine. He goes to Paris, and he shoots models and create some exceptional fashion images, which were especially exceptional when you consider that he was a Black man, and, you know, fashion designers and fashion models in the US might have refused to work with an African American photographer, and he's able to do this work and you look at the images that he's creating.

02:02:15:10

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, and they're absolutely exceptional for their power because he's using his experience as a photojournalist, as a street photographer. He's looking at the history of fashion photography, and he's marrying the two together to create these fashion images that are incredibly beautiful, incredibly powerful. You know, look outstanding in the pages of *Vogue*, and then you consider who he was and how he was working during this time period, and it's just exceptional. So I think in his entire career, Gordon Parks was always looking around him, and he was always seeing what was happening in the world of photojournalism, in the world of fine art photography, and just fine art in general.

02:02:59:02

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He—and he was borrowing from a range of sources in order to inform his own practice as a photographer. And that's evident also in him being not just a photographer but a writer, and a musician, and a filmmaker. He was always thinking about the range of influences that could inform his own image making. And so any image that he creates is a combination of all of these different elements put together. It's never only about photography or only about photojournalism. It's about, you know, this kind of interdisciplinary approach to making an image.

02:03:37:23

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

What set Gordon Parks aside from other photographers, working in the street, other photojournalists is his desire to get to know his subjects. You know, I think that was, that was something that set him apart from—from others in the field. And you know, it was something that was important to him throughout his practice, yes he was photographing his own community, but anytime that he was sent in as an outsider, he made it a point to get to know those individuals, get to know that community. And in a way, even if temporarily, become a part of it, and work on those photographs collaboratively.

02:04:13:08

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, I think given his unique position at *Life* Magazine, he was aware that he had a very important job to do, and he had a responsibility to tell certain kinds of stories, and to do so on behalf of his subjects, and he was sometimes the only representative voice for those subjects, and he took that position very seriously and anytime he would go in, especially to do stories that dealt with racism or the Civil Rights Movement or the Black Power movement. He made it one of his goals to– to work hand in hand with those subjects to produce something that they would consider to be a collaboration, but at the same time—and this is where he was put in a really difficult position, is he had to do so objectively, right. So, I think that time he spent with every single one of his subjects was really what set him apart. The time he spent, the care that he took to get to know them.

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MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, the care that he took to make sure that their voices were heard, to make sure that that story was told collectively, was incredibly important to him, and anytime, especially with stories that dealt with racism, or the Civil Rights Movement, or the Black Power Movement, what's interesting is that there was always a connecting point that he had to his subjects. He never just went in, you know, blindly. There was always someone he knew, the community that he had some sort of access to or gotten to know. And he always walked in with some

sort of an in that gave him a leg up on that story, you know, and that– that's reflected in the photographs, it's reflected in the final outcome.

02:06:08:19

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

The kind of– the resulting portraits that you see, they're powerful portraits. They're portraits where you could feel the sitter actively engaging with him. You could feel the sitter partaking in that image. You feel the conversation between the subjects and the photographer taking place. And that's a testament to the connection that he had with the subjects and the care that he took to portray them in a certain light.

Shaft

02:06:43:06

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

The backstory on *Shaft* (1971), you know, is that the studio actually, insisted that–– initially insisted that he shoot it in Hollywood, and he actually refused to do it and said, "You're never going to get the story that we're supposed to get by shooting this on a Hollywood's stage set. We have to shoot it in New York, in Harlem, in order for this to be the story that it needs to be." So again that echoes his sentiment about all of his projects right, about telling a story truthfully, or telling a story

from a particular perspective, really engage with the space and the individuals that you're telling the story of. And I think *Shaft* reflects his thinking across the board, which is that–– his thinking about the range of influences that informed his perspective and informed as practice. By the time *Shaft* gets made, you know, you have–– the Civil Rights Movement is raging. The Black Power movement emerges. The Black Arts Movement emerges. Or rather you'd say it's the peak of the Black Power movement, it's the peak of the Black Arts Movement, and the Black is beautiful movement is also emerging, and so he's looking at all of these…

02:07:56:00

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

He's looking at all of these influences, and he's using them to inform how he makes this film. And so, he's very much aware just like when he worked at *Life* Magazine that this, you know, the same way that *Life* Magazine was a mainstream publication that appeared to the widest possible audience. He sees *Shaft* in the same way; it's a Hollywood production. It has to appeal to the widest possible audience, but here's an opportunity for it to convey certain ideas to do something more to become a kind of form of activism.

02:08:30:11

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And you know, he succeeds to a certain degree. I think that film gets criticized as well, you know. It's in the same way does, but I think once again with *Shaft* he's using a range of influences to inform how he's able to shape this film, and he's using the languages that– that he learned while working for *Life* Magazine, again, another mainstream publication, he's using that same language in a mainstream Hollywood movie. And that's what kind of, you know, sets that movie apart and makes it extraordinary. So, yeah I mean it's all about like the Black Power movement, the Black is beautiful movement, and he's using these very, kind of, you know, what are considered to be–– He's making these kind of outsider, you know, movement that are outside the mainstream he's making them mainstream in the movie.

02:09:25:08

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

But he worked—you know, the way he talks about it is fascinating because he talks about it as a completely collaborative endeavor. And that's fascinating. I think that– that sheds light on his entire practice. His entire mode of thinking is he—is he really talks about working on the screenplay together, about how he thinks about how to actually physically shoot the film in Harlem, the music for that film, he talks about as a completely collaborative venture, and the collaboration was as important as the final outcome, and he saw it as a kind of stepping

stone to doing other things, you know, at least in the way that he writes about it later on.

02:10:07:11

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

I mean, but I think he always saw any subject that he was photographing, he saw as a subject that had agency and power, and that was his goal throughout his career, is that even when he was photographing, you know, an area that was poverty stricken, you know, when he was photographing the poor and the disadvantaged, he always wanted to give them a voice, he wanted to give them agency and power in his photographs, and he saw that as his primary job. And you know, you see that across the board, you know, whether he's photographing, you know, an impoverished family in Harlem or he's photographing Muhammad Ali, they all have the same agency and power. And that's, you know, that's incredibly powerful.

The impact of photography

02:10:58:09

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Photojournalism wasn't accepted into the mainstream art world until fairly recently. It's only recently that museums are looking at, you know, looking at photojournalism as a—as, you know, an artistic

practice. Of course it's an integral part of the history of photography. So I think that's an important part of it, for sure, you know, photojournalism is new, you know, is only recently being thought of, you know, as part of this, you know important history. Because I think photographers who—photographers who approached me, or–– I think for, you know, photographers who approached their work in the popular press as an opportunity to do more than just document are standing apart right now, and I think again because we're surrounded by images, we're being flooded by images.

02:11:57:23

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Photographers whose photographs become a kind of more—photographers whose photographs are more symbolic, carry the weight of more than just documentation, more than just evidence, are, you know, rising to the top and are, you know, becoming increasingly aware of their work. I think what's—what's incredible, looking at Gordon Parks' photographs from the 1940s, 50s and 60s, today, what's incredible about them is that they're timeless, they're– they're– they're as relevant today as they were, you know, 30, 40, 50 years ago. Um, and, you know, and that's what gives them incredible power. I think, you know, what's, what's amazing is you look at the photographs that Gordon Parks created in Harlem in 1948, the photographs he shot in Harlem in 1952, and they're as relevant today

as they were back then. They are completely timeless, and it is because of the way he approached them. They're not just documents of a time period, they're intended to be these kind of symbolic images, and they were intended to be universal and timeless at the time that they were made and they have proven to be that today.

02:13:19:17

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Yeah, and I think also just another point as far as like a, you know, a finishing touch… you know, especially with his images that dealt with- his images that dealt with racism, with segregation with the Civil Rights Movement, he wasn't just trying to show a part of America, he was trying to show this is America. This represents systemic problems across the United States. This is who Americans are. This is what America has been. And I think that was also really important is that he was never just trying–– everything–– Whenever he dealt with issues surrounding racism, segregation, civil rights, his goal was to try and make images that appeal to the widest possible audience. Images that show that this is America, and images that anyone could identify with and become aware of what the systemic problems were across the country.

Harlem

02:14:29:11

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

The draw for him to come to Harlem, it was this poetic notion of what Harlem was, as depicted by certain outlets versus how Harlem was, again, depicted by mass media outlets. And so I think the reality of what Harlem was was something in between. It was neither one or the other. It was both. And I think what he tried to show was Harlem as a space that was in between these completely opposing stereotypical images.

02:15:05:05

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Harlem was the cultural capital of Black America, but Harlem was also poverty stricken, and it was also a symbol of the inner city, it was a symbol of urban decay, and so his goal was to show how and why it was both, and how it could be and why it was such an important space for Black America. It was because it was both of these things. It was a cultural capital and it was a poverty stricken space, you know, that had a lot of systemic problems with, you know, with crime, with poverty, etc. And I think, you know, it if– it– it changes a lot, and it changes very quickly, and I think it does all of those things at different moments, you know.

02:15:54:05

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

If one were to look at the entirety of Gordon Parks' career, you would be struck by the range of work that he did. Um, it's absolutely fascinating how he's able to bounce around from photojournalism, to fashion photography, to portraiture, to narrative storytelling, to abstraction, and everything in between. He's able to bounce around between all these different practices, and yet somehow it's all tied together by his approach. Again, his—the idea that he's fully invested in every single one of his subjects. He's fully invested in creating relationships, and telling stories, and telling stories collaboratively, and making clear the relationship between photographer and subject, and having an understanding of how the viewer might see those as well.

Off On My Own

02:16:58:14

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Off On My Own is an image that he shoots for his collaboration with Ralph Ellison in 1948, but it becomes an image that he uses over and over again, most notably in a biographical essay that he publishes in *Life* Magazine in the 1970s. And it becomes an image that represents his ability to use a photograph as both a document and a symbol. It's

an image that represents, for him, I think it ,represents his position as a Black photographer, as a Black individual navigating a White space.

02:17:36:19

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

It's an image that represents, kind of, his– his– his search for, you know, for his own perspective and his search for the kinds of stories that he's trying to tell. And it's just– it becomes a kind of guiding image for him, I think, throughout his career.

02:17:56:15

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

The notion of invisibility, as told by Ralph Ellison, is Black America invisible because it is—you know it's—is it invisible because of its conditions or is it invisible because of the refusal of White America to acknowledge and see it? You know. So I think the notion of invisibility permeates all of practice of–– the notion of invisibility permeates all of Parks' practice right this idea of making visible the invisible.

02:18:32:00

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So, you know, I think, yeah, it's you know it's an important image. And also, you know, this idea of the, um, photographer as being invisible, the voice of the photographer, where's the voice of the photographer

in this grand narrative, you know, and it's the position of the photographer is something that is not often considered when looking at a photograph. Who is the photographer? What is their perspective? What are the projections that they're bringing to a photograph? And I think that that's something that he's very aware of and, you know, something that he's oft—you know, that he's often thinking about when he's making his own photographs.

Collaborations of image and text

02:19:17:17

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Baldwin wanted to do stories focused on Harlem storefronts and churches, and he approached Richard Avedon to do the photographs and Avedon said to him basically, "I'm not a street photographer. I'm not ready for this job." You know, find someone else. And Baldwin did end up collaborating, or commissioning Theodore Pelatowski to take photographs and those photographs survived, but the publication never went anywhere.

02:19:42:03

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So that collaboration never materialized and—but later in 1964, Baldwin and Avedon did publish *Nothing Personal* together, which was

a combination of Avedon's portraits with text by Baldwin written in response to them. So that was their collaboration. I think, you know, what's– what's interesting is this moment in the 1940s where authors realize– authors and photographers realize how their images and text can be used. They become acutely aware that the combination of images and text is a powerful tool, thanks to publications like *Life* Magazine. And they also become aware of how their images and text can be manipulated in a way that wasn't quite in line with their thinking. And so, they begin to think about alternative spaces and alternative formats for their circulate—for the circulation of their texts and images, and there's a lot of these collaborations that pop up as a result of that between photographers and artists.

02:20:52:13

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, Gordon Parks' and Ralph Ellison's is among the first. Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava. James Baldwin and Richard Avedon. Amiri Baraka and Billy Abernathy. They, you know, they go—they happen for 20, 30 years, and I think this was about this—these collaborations came about because there was an understanding that there wasn't—there weren't enough spaces for the dissemination and circulation of Black images and text, and the spaces that did exist had all these restrictions and agendas, even. And so, artists and writers sought to create alternative spaces for the circulation of this, of their

work. Some of the spaces were physical; galleries that form. Some of those spaces were, you know, the book format.

02:21:48:16

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

Um, and it was something that was really particular to Black artists at that time: is how can we create the spaces for this work, where's this work being circulated, how is this work being used, and how can we reach the widest popular audience with our– with our point of view.

02:22:07:15

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

It's an interdisciplinary approach to thinking about images, and I think what's interesting is photography's role within the Black arts movement is often overlooked. You know, there's a focus on painting and others, but photography played an incredibly crucial role within the Black arts movement, because those photographers realized how photographs could be used and circulated in a range of media, and the kind of power that they had to construct an identity, and you see this notion of, again, self representation, self determination in those photographs, this idea of this is how a community wants to represent itself.

02:22:51:02

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

This is how we construct an identity through images, and these are the references that we're going to make in those images. And, you know, Gordon Parks is certainly aware of it, and he's thinking about that when he approaches his subjects. You know, it's how– how do they want to be represented? How would they want to be seen? And at the same time ,how could this appeal to the widest possible audience?

02:23:15:07

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

The sense was images was how you could declare yourself, how you could declare your identity, and how you could project your ideas across, and images, you know, as early, you know, 19–– in the 19th century, portrait– photographic portraiture becomes available to the middle class, so suddenly the middle class and the working class are able to portray themselves as they want to be seen, and it becomes this accessible medium. And as a result for Black America, it becomes an incredibly powerful tool. You think about Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass using photographs as a form of activism, and not just the portrait sitting in itself, but also the idea that these images could circulate. These images could wind up in a variety of places, and it becomes this weapon that becomes this incredibly important tool for African Americans as soon as photography becomes, you know, available.

02:24:19:14

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And that's something that is carried through, you know, for throughout the 20th century to today. You know, what's really you know and this notion also of lineage, this notion of the images that came before hand is really important. So, last year I did an exhibition that focused on a network of—there was a network of African American photojournalists that were working in the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s and 70s, who were primarily documenting their own community.

02:24:59:08

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

They were working freelance for publications like the *Chicago Defender*, or the *Sun Times*, some for Johnson publications like *Ebony* or *Jet*, but for the most part they were just making their own work. And there weren't many outlets for the dissemination of their work. They would exhibit them sometimes in local organizations like the Southside Community Art Center, but for the most part, their work didn't have many outlets. And I met with many of them, and I spoke to them, and when you speak to them, they very often, one of the first things they'll say is, you know, Gordon Parks was my inspiration. Gordon Parks was where it all started for me.

02:25:38:15

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

And it's so interesting, you know, this idea of lineage, this idea of tradition, this idea of– of looking at historic images, recognizing that these are the kinds of images that– that have the most power, you know, these are the kinds of images that– that are able to do the most work and– and recognizing that that's the kind of images that have to still be created was a really interesting idea. You know, this notion of lineage, like that was what was so fascinating and meeting with these photographers who are like this is how it started. Because from here to here to, you know

02:26:19:20

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

So, James Baldwin in an interview that he did in the 1970s said that Black individuals need witnesses in a world that thinks it's White. You know, so I think so much of it is about witnessing, is about documenting, is about being seen. The idea of being seen, the idea of no longer being invisible. The idea of doing away with invisibility, I think that was central to all of this practice and it's why photography remains a hugely important part of the Black arts movement, this idea of being a witness.

02:26:53:10

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO:

But also being very much aware of what your role is as a witness, and what your position is as a witness, and who you are as a witness, and how that might impact the kind of stories that you're trying to tell. So I think that holds true for so many of these photographers and to Gordon Parks in particular.

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