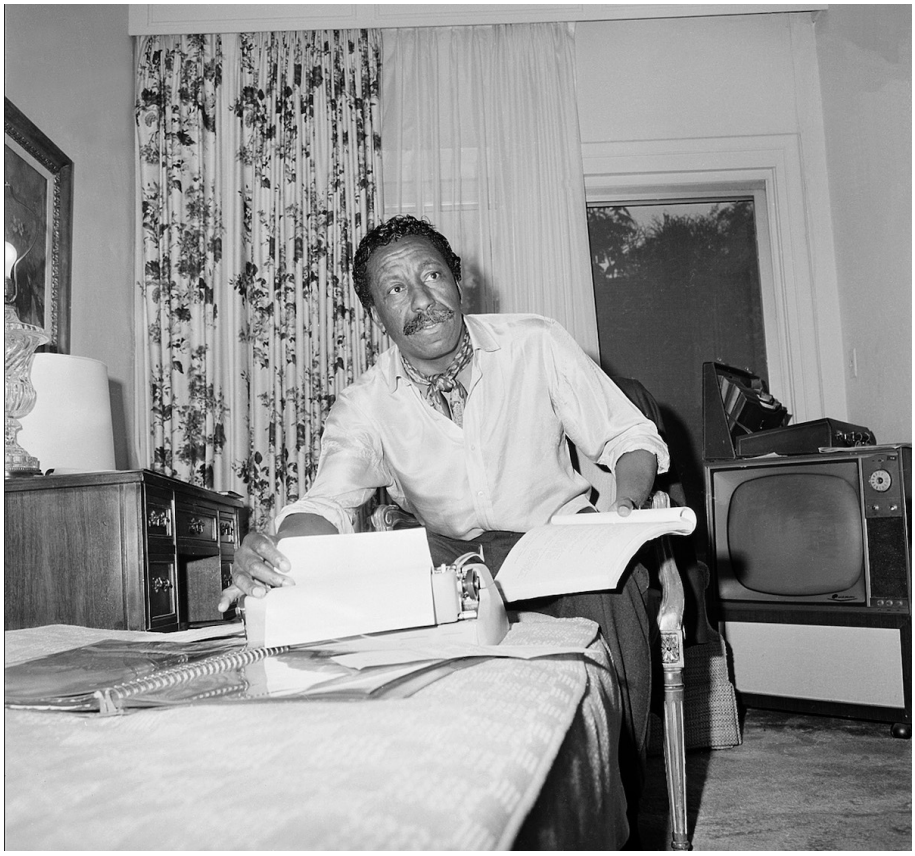
NEW FILM SHOWS HOW GORDON PARKS'S INCISIVE PICTURES OF RACISM INFLUENCED GENERATIONS OF ARTISTS

Alex Greenberger, *ARTnews*, 18 June 2021

Gordon Parks, A family drinking from a segregated water fountain, 1956. Courtesy: The Gordon Parks Foundation and HBO

Gordon Parks's 1956 photograph of a Black woman and her child beneath a department store sign that reads COLORED ENTRANCE is famous for a reason. It is an elegant image, with a zigzag composition that carefully directs the eye, and yet it is also a painful one because it finds a way of rendering the structural racism of the American South so visibly. Viewers might find themselves wanting to stare at this photograph forever because of its lush color; they also feel as if they want to look away immediately because its subject matter is so appalling. One detail in this searing picture often gets overlooked: the woman's slip, a strap from which dangles down her arm, puncturing her stately appearance.

As the late art historian Maurice Berger recounts in *A Choice of Weapons*: Inspired by Parks, an HBO documentary making its debut at New York's Tribeca Film Festival today, the picture never sat well with its subject, Joanne Wilson. She made sure she was always presentable, because she believed that if she wasn't, no one would take her seriously. Letting her undergarments show undid her carefully constructed persona. "I understand how she felt, but I don't think that Gordon would have told her to adjust the strap because, for him, it represented something remarkable," Berger says, adding, "You cannot be a mother and a human, and see that photograph and not feel a sense of drama and affiliation with Mrs. Wilson."



Gordon Parks. AP

A Choice of Weapons proposes that, with his photography and filmmaking, Parks was able to create images of the Black community that allowed for them to be seen on their terms, and that this is why his work matters. In this informative and incisive documentary directed by John Maggio, Parks's acute sense for intimacy and identification takes center stage. But the film does not blunt the forcefulness of Parks's pictures—it also shows how his camera was a weapon, in a sense. Parks saw it that way, too. In a manifesto for author Ralph Ellison, he spoke of how a 35mm camera might in some ways be more effective than a 9mm gun. And what a powerful firearm, too. As a filmmaker Spike Lee puts it, "That was a motherfuckin' bazooka! That wasn't no six-shooter or rifle."

Photography was a saving grace for Parks. During his childhood, he lived "a quintessentially Black experience," as Equal Justice Initiative director Bryan Stevenson puts it. During his upbringing in Kansas in the 1910s and '20s, Parks attended segregated schools; white boys threw him in a river, to see if he was able to swim. He soon turned to photography, buying a camera at a pawn shop when he was in his 20s. His kitchen became his studio, and he transformed tin cans into lighting equipment. As artist Jamel Shabazz puts it, "Luckily for him, he was able to get that camera."

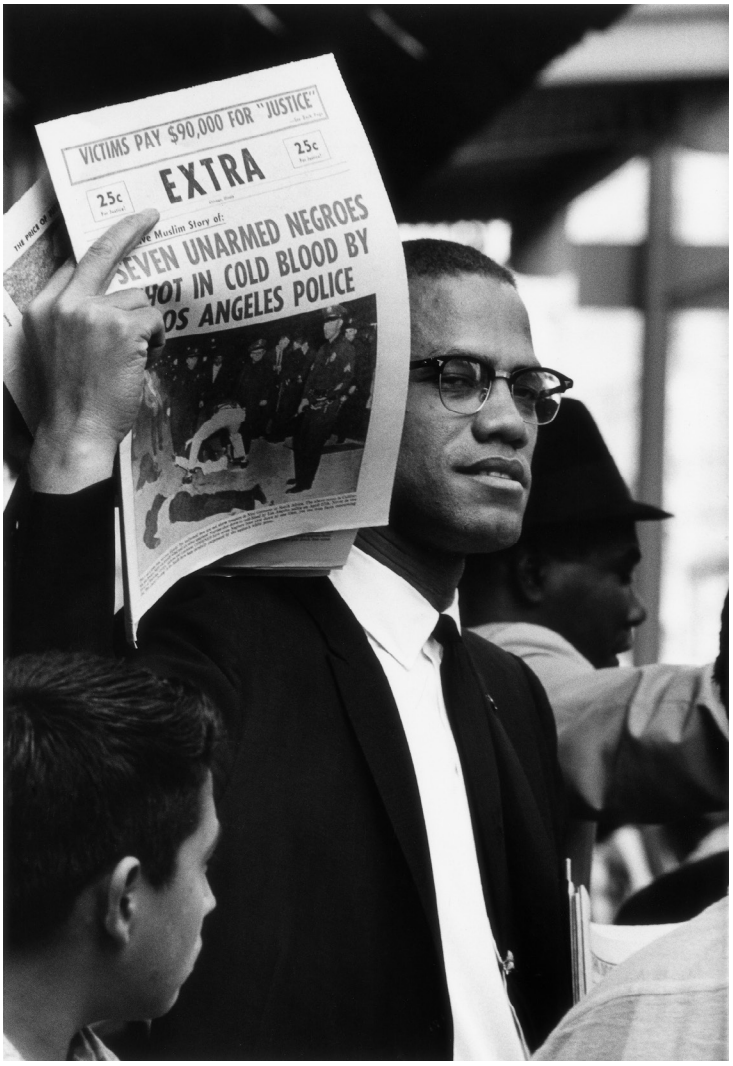
The Gordon Parks that we now know emerged during the Great Depression in the 1930s, when an organization known as the Farm Security Administration (one of the many short-lived New Deal–created governmental agencies) began hiring photographers to shoot impoverished communities across the U.S. Whereas most turned their lenses on ailing farmers and their families, Parks memorably photographed Ella Watson, a Black woman who cleaned the FSA offices—"the backbone of America," Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch III says in the film. In a brilliant 1942 image by Parks that plays on Grant Wood's famed 1930 painting *American Gothic*, Watson is pictured before the U.S. flag holding a broom. The image stresses her verticality—her ability to remain standing, even amid all the painstaking work.

Parks's big break came with the 1948 series "Harlem Gang Leader," which offered an empathetic look at the neighborhood's inhabitants. In these pictures, children dance amid water shooting out of fire hydrants, and a member of the Midtowners gang graffitis a wall. *Life*, then among the most widely read magazines in the U.S., picked up the photo-essay—and soon ended up running many more by Parks. By the end of the 1960s, Parks's work for *Life* had given him entrée to the upper echelons of society, photographing Gloria Vanderbilt numerous times and even becoming a friend to her.

Some in the Black community were suspicious of Parks because he cozied up with a white-led publication like *Life*. As Parks recalls in archival footage, when he was sent to photograph Malcolm X during the '60s, Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, asked Parks, "Why you working for the white devils?" To which Parks replied, "Well, you ever heard of getting behind the iron horse and finding out what's going on?" Muhammad then said, "I don't buy that." But Parks eventually won him over with the pictures he took of Malcolm X, whom he imaged as a human being in addition to a divisive revolutionary. Few others at the time were able to visualize both sides of Malcolm X.

A Choice of Weapons enlists a star-studded cast, including filmmaker Ava DuVernay, photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier, and retired basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, to discuss Parks's significance. (Kasseem "Swizz Beatz" Deal and Alicia Keys, who have the world's largest collection of Parks's work, served as executive producers, as did journalist Jelani Cobb and Gordon Parks Foundation director Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr.) Their interviews tend to focus on only a few aspects of Parks's oeuvre, however, and the film downplays some of the more complex parts of the artist's rich, multifaceted body of work.

Formal aspects of Parks's photography are given little weight. His choice of color, for example, is labeled a way of portraying that "this was your America, right now" by Stevenson. In actuality, it was this, and then some: at the time, color photography was still stigmatized by artists like Walker Evans as being unartistic, the stuff of advertising. Parks was well aware of that when he began shooting in both formats, and his images played a role in elevating color photography to the realm of serious art.



Gordon Parks, Malcolm X holding the Muhammad Speaks newspaper, 1963. Courtesy: The Gordon Parks Foundation and HBO

Other crucial facts are also glossed over or altogether elided. Parks's remarkable fashion photography, the subject of a memorable exhibition at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery in 2018, is given short shrift—even though it, too, has impacted generations of younger Black artists, as critic Antwaun Sargent pointed out in his 2019 book *The New Black Vanguard*.

And then there is the issue of Parks's small but impactful filmography. *Shaft* (1971), his film about a detective in Harlem, is credited in *A Choice of Weapons* as being the first Hollywood movie by a Black director. That thriller may have helped spur on a genre now known as blaxploitation, but first does not mean best. It's Melvin van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, released the same year, that is now seen by many as having been more influential, thanks to its harsher and less commercially friendly depiction of racism. (Even still, Van Peebles's film, which was independently distributed, wound up grossing more than *Shaft* did at the box office.) This all goes unmentioned, as do the criticisms that *Shaft* perpetuated harmful stereotypes.

Even if the nuances of Parks's work get lost in *A Choice of Weapons*, the documentary still makes its point, and it does so with passion and grace: that his photographs have empowered others to take similar images. As proof, the film opens with words from Devin Allen, whose photograph of a Black Lives Matter protest in Baltimore was featured on the cover of a 2015 issue of *Time*. While taking that photograph, Allen said, "For the first time, I understood what Gordon Parks was talking about: that the camera is a real weapon. I realized how powerful I am with a camera in my hand."