Gordon Parks Photojournalism and the Harlem Gang Leader

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The Photographer

A photograph is the equivalent of a thousand words, and for Gordon Parks, it is no exception. Being a photojournalist, he captured moments of the African American people telling their stories through photography. The paper highlights the life of Gordon Parks and his career as a photojournalist with a focus on the work he posted in LIFE magazine on the Harlem Gang leader.

Parks is known to be among the influential figures in the field of photography of the twentieth century. He was a known humanitarian who had a commitment to social justice. His works entail essential parts of American culture, mostly from poverty, urban life, civil rights and relations among races. Besides, Mr Parks is a renowned filmmaker and author. Born in Kansas in 1912 from a poor background, he found interest in photography after seeing images of migrant labourers that had been published in a local magazine. He bought the first camera from a local pawnshop, teaching himself how to operate it. Gordon`s early work as a photographer was at a department store in Minnesota as a fashion photographer. Despite not being a professional photographer, he acquired employment with the Farm Security Administration which at that time was reporting the social conditions of the nation. Parks developed a style that made him a celebrated photographer, breaking the racial stereotype in the profession. His experience in shooting fashion, together with documentaries, would later earn him a job at LIFE magazine.

He created vivid images which he used to explore the economic and social impact it had at that moment. In 1943, FSA closed, and this forced the park to embark on freelance photography with a focus on fashion and humanitarian issues. The photo essay highlighting the life of a gang leader from Harlem that he did in 1948 gave him the accolade as an African American photographer and writer to have worked for Life Magazine, further making him the most prominent photojournalist in the world at that time. He worked for Life for a further two decades, reporting on subjects relating to poverty and racism and taking pictures of prominent politicians and celebrities like Muhammad Ali, Adam Clayton Powell, and Malcolm X.

His famous images include American Gothic of 1942 and Emerging Man of 1952, which captured the essence of humanitarianism and activism during the mid-twentieth century of American history and have remained iconic images up to date used by the current generation to define the era. Mr Gordon

is known to be the first African American to have directed a major Hollywood movie adapted from the book The Learning Tree. He is recognized for having written the screenplay and composing the film`s score. His subsequent film was The Shaft, which became a big box office hit in 1971. It is this movie that inspired the Blaxploitation genre of cinema. He later directed Shaft Big Score of 1972. Trying to deviate from the Shafts series proved unsuccessful, with his 1976 movie Lead Belly not doing well, and he left Hollywood, though he continued making films for television.

Gordon`s journey as an artist started when he was working as a musician, playing the piano in a brothel together with a jazz band. Vienna orchestra performed Park's piano concerto in 1956. In some films that he directed, he also composed the theme music. He later produced a libretto in honour of Martin Luther King Jr. Park was equally an excellent writer of novels, poetry, memoir, and plays. He published two books on different techniques of photography. Among his famous books is The Learning Tree (1963) semi-autobiography accounts of him as a black boy living in Kansas. Books like Glimpses Towards Infinity and Arias in Silence deviated from Parks` way of writing. The last three decades of his life were accustomed to expansion in lifestyle, and He spent several years researching the English painter Joseph William, who inspired his last novel.

The Gordon Parks Foundation permanently preserves his works, making them available to the public through books, electronic media, and exhibitions. The organization equally supports upcoming artists and the education of young individuals. The help includes but is not limited to scholarships and research assistance. The headquarters in New York has an exhibition space which is always open to the public at no charge. The Gordon Parks Museum in Kansas also holds Parks` photos and other belongings. The museum has a collection of his awards, paintings, certificates and diplomas, selected articles and books, and the collection of LIFE magazine. Cameras believed to have been used by Gordon are also preserved in the museum.

Throughout his life, Parks earned various awards, with more than twenty honorary doctorates to his name. American Society of Magazine Photographers named him the photographer of the year in 1960. In 1989 library of Congress selected his film The Learning Tree as one of the films chosen for permanent preservation since it was the first film ever to be directed by a black American. In 2002, he was welcomed into the International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum.

Parks was a family guy, and in his lifetime, he had married and divorced thrice. Marrying Alvis in 1933 (divorced 1961), married Elizabeth in 1962 (divorced 1973) and married Genevieve Young, whom he met when Young was assigned the editorial role of his book The Learning Tree. They later divorced in 1979. He had four children: Gordon Parks Jr., who is the oldest and also a filmmaker; unfortunately, he died in a plane crash that occurred in Kenya in 1979. Parks died on 7 March 2006 at the age of 93, having suffered cancer. He is buried in Fort Scott.

He used the camera as a weapon to fight racial discrimination and poverty that had engulfed his subject society at that time. Gordon exemplified black press ideology when he became a photographer and worked for mainstream media rather than going to the then-established black

magazines. Parks followed a sixteen-year-old Harlem gang leader by the name of Red Jackson, documenting his life as a gang leader from Midtown. Gordon uses his identity as a black to give a story to the public, a story never seen before. Jackson trusted him, even allowing him to move along with the gang. It would be impossible for a white photojournalist to be believed by Jackson. While approaching the editor at LIFE magazine, Parks insisted he had a story no white photographer would do, like penetrating a Harlem gang.

Photographs were first published in the newspapers around the early 1900s, though the media was divided between the Black press and the mainstream press. The mainstream press rarely covered events relating to African-American culture, hence the emergence of the Black press to combat shortcomings. Photography as art gives an individual the freedom to express their feelings and thoughts, and Gordon did that correctly. Through his photos, he shows the world what the mainstream reluctantly refused to reveal. He brought a black press mentality to the mainstream press.

In the first photo,

https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.collageplatform.com.prod/image_cache/1010x580_fit/548b3beaaa921a8b5be4cbcc/bc0cd2c46c765df01e8bfc16c701252e.jpeg, Mr. Red, wearing a fleece shirt, is standing beside a window; he is gazing outside the street with a cigarette stick between his lips. He is watching keenly the events happening outside the window, or maybe he is just in deep thought. The window in this photo is broken, showing horizontal waves. The lower part of the window does not have glass. Light is seen from the outside, possibly the picture taken during the day though the room is dimly lit, likely an abandoned hideout due to the dark contrast behind Mr Red Jackson. Looking at his face, he is not very happy; his arms are crossed, perhaps hiding something. Mr Parks later revealed he was holding a gun. The light penetrating through the broken window reveals the facial features. The picture speaks a lot, mainly about the use of drugs among young individuals. The subject in the photo, from an outward appearance, seems to be a young man in his teens but already under drug use. The photographer chooses his theme, in this case, very well. Mr. Red here is an African American, and the photographer uses him to express some of the challenges the race is undergoing, especially the young members of the community. Park's uses of shadows and highlighting to show only parts he would like the viewers to see the moment is very vital in his photographs.

In the second photo,

https://www.featureshoot.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/319_Parks_e-e1507046682948.jpg, Red Jackson is with his mother and brother. The brother is seated down, reading a book, while the mother on the chair is knitting. Jackson himself is sitting on the left side of his mother on the arm of the chair rest, holding a cigarette between his lips and holding yarn for his mother. Mr. Red and the mother are probably having a conversation, mother and son talk maybe which has triggered some laughter between the two as the woman is seen smiling, same as Red. They are seated facing the window as the light is seen shining on their faces.

There are two lampstands visible in the picture, and on the wall though not clear, seem to be hangings and a picture frame. The wall is not evenly painted, or rather, the original paint appears to be fading away. The boy reading is seen to be focused and deep into the book is reading likely not distracted by the conversation or the happenings around him. This shows the take of education in modern society: those who stay focused and avoid external distractions are bound to come out victorious.

Mr Parks` choice of this setting is very characteristic. First, he depicts a happy family even though one crucial member, the father, is not in this photo, which was and to some extent still is a problem in society. Families are raised by single parents due to either neglect, the death of one parent, or even divorced parents. The reading boy also shows how such families can use education to free themselves from their miseries. The mother here also shows a typical black woman who works to ensure the family gets something to eat. Maybe she is knitting the pieces for sale to get a little money for food.

In the third photo,

https://timedotcom.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/140919-gordon-parks-harlem-18.jpg?quality=85&w=838, there is a group of children playing out. The picture probably was taken in the afternoon based on the length of the shadows. They are enjoying the jets of water from a street hydrant. Behind, there is a group of adults and slightly older children watching the children having a moment of their lives. Surprisingly the leader of the pack is Mr Red; he is the one responsible for opening the tap to let the water flow. The children must be thrilled based on the smiles a number of them have on their faces, and some even have their shirts off. The moment is a good time for the children to relax their selves away from the everyday troubles facing their neighborhood.

One fantastic feature in the photo is that there are those children courageous enough to play in the water while others are watching, but from the expressions on their faces, they have a burning desire to join the other mates in the game, but perhaps they have a fear. The fear may be the parents' punishment or just the fear of associating with peers. Mr Red`s association with the children gives the other side of him. Despite being a gang member, he has compassion for the young, especially from his neighborhood. Mr. recounts that he could do the water opening to the kids more often, and they loved him because of that. In the photo, two cars are seen parked along the street.

The fourth photograph,

https://www.featureshoot.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/289_Parks_e-e1507046749647.jpg is of an African American boy in a striped shirt making graffiti painting on a wall surface. Bottom right, there is also another topless individual whose face is not seen. The message on the wall is written using a regular paintbrush, probably the only tool the `artist` has. Part of the message reads JOE OF THE GYPSYS, LUCKY OF THE GYPSYS TINY. Looking closely at the boy, he has a torn shirt around the armpit area, and he is enjoying his piece of art. Graffiti is a common form of art in different hoods, even in the current time.

They pass messages relevant to a certain area. Prominent or influential people`s images are drawn on their area's walls to act as models the young around the region can look up to and, at the same time, celebrate with their peers. This photograph shows the evolution of graffiti has gone. Today, they are made using high-standard spray paints, coming with different fonts, designs, and colored paints. The Gypsy at that time was an ethnic minority, and they were facing persecution in Germany just like the African Americans were facing social injustices back in America. The message here, therefore, signifies the individuals were standing with the minorities who were facing hardships just like them. Talents within the community are also portrayed here. Despite being members of a criminal gang, they have other talents which, if well harnessed, can be useful and change their livelihood.

Conclusion

In the 1940s, picture magazines were a vital source of information for the average middle-class Americans. The Harlem Gang series exposes Parks as a humanist. He did not focus on his negative life of Jackson only but included photos where Jackson was a soft and regular guy, like holding the yarn while the mother was knitting, playing with the kids by opening the fire hydrant and doing dishes. Unfortunately, when he approached LIFE, they were interested in the harsh images of Jackson, like those of him fighting with other members of his gang. Such impartiality in the mainstream media depicted African Americans in a negative way, hence the constant conflict between the two. Park's input into his photos was minimal once he presented them to the magazine as they were given to the editors who fashioned the story to satisfy their audience. Harlem Gang Leader is an excellent example of how art can be used to showcase urban problems and bring them to national attention. Mr Parks intended to draw the attention of the public to a serious problem facing young citizens and perhaps, in return, would encourage the establishment of programs to help these youths. The photo essay could have helped the white readers to connect the experiences to their own lives, and this would have challenged the stereotypes and misconceptions built of the African Americans.

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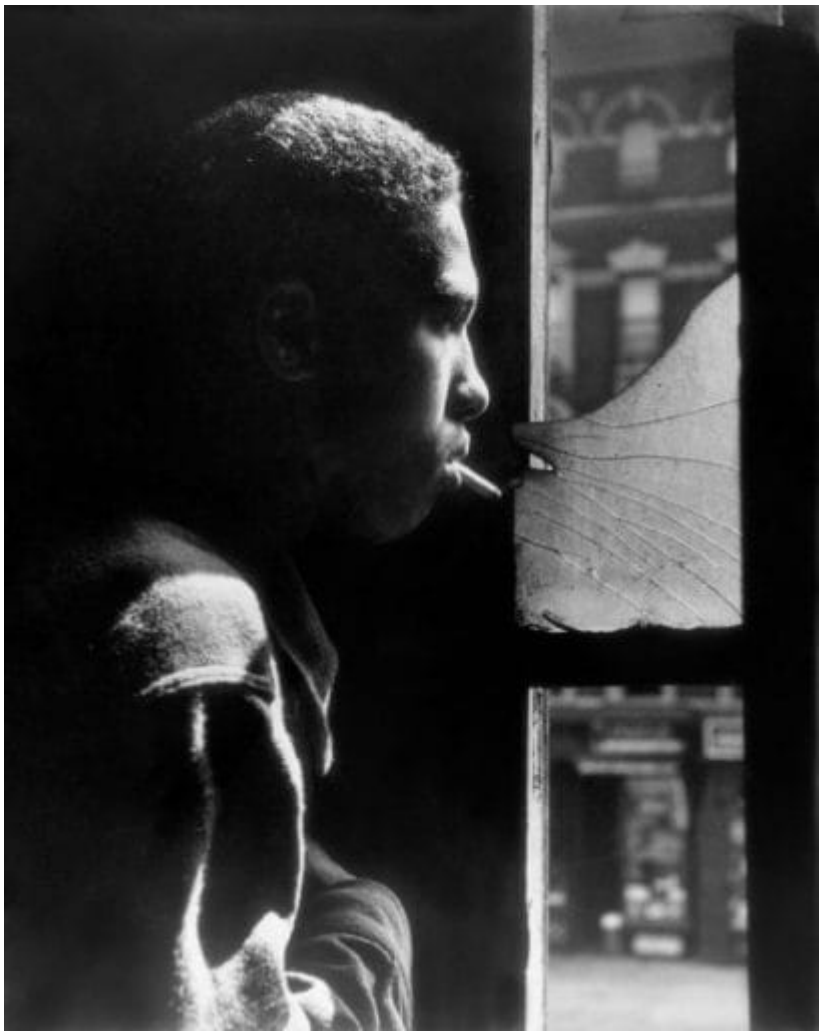

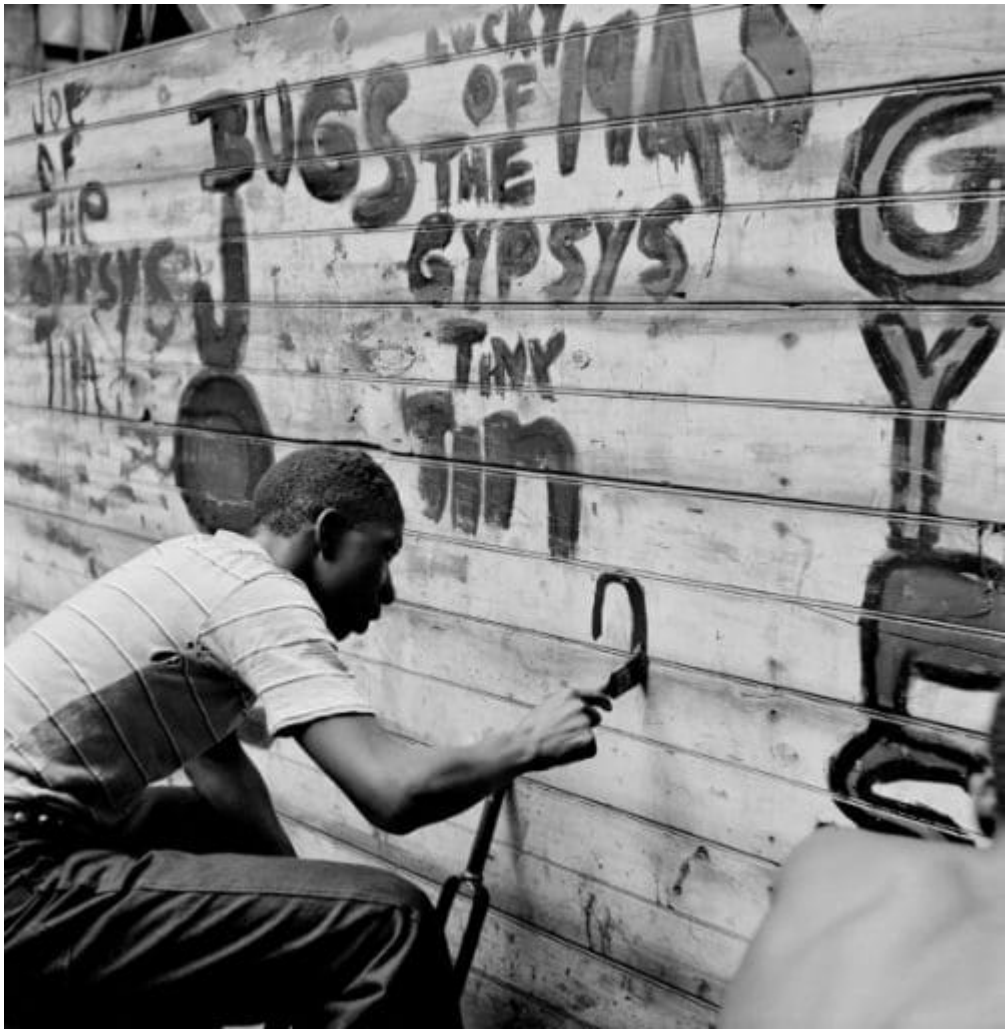
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