

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

DARREN WALKER INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Darren Walker
President
Ford Foundation
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 21 minutes and 22 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Darren Walker interview, take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Darren Walker
President
Ford Foundation

Artists' influence in society

01:00:16:06

DARREN WALKER:

I believe that in order to have a more just America, we have to have an America that appreciates the arts, the humanities, culture, literature, painting, dance. We know from the research on the brain that exposure to the arts builds empathy. It imbues in the human being the ability to see the

dignity of other human beings. So, when I look in the world today and I see leaders who use words that are inhumane when they talk about other human beings, I know that person has not had exposure to great literature. They've not read beautiful poetry. They've not been embraced by the painting of Renoir, the photography of Gordon Parks, has clearly, they've never had that experience. Because if you do have that experience, it's life changing, it's life altering, it allows you to see the dignity in every human being. And in order for us to be a more just nation, we have to see the dignity in every human being.

Using art for social justice

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DARREN WALKER:

It's important that we know that artists have always been on the front lines for justice in this country, and certainly, there's no artist more identified with the move for justice in America than Gordon Parks. Gordon Parks' photography demanded that America look at itself. His work did what art does at its very best. It makes the viewer engage deeply in the subject and to see narratives about life, about our history. So, when you look at those beautiful photographs that he did of people going to church in places like Montgomery, what you saw was dignity in the face of remarkable discrimination and bigotry. But people were afforded dignity through Gordon Parks' work, and that wasn't always the case because the history of the way

art and images of Black people in America manifest was one of derision, comic relief for the White viewer, reinforcing memes and stereotypes. So, Gordon Parks did something radical. He showed White America the real beauty and dignity and depth of the Black community, and he also made White America look at itself and look at the hypocrisy, look at the cruelty, and look at the contradiction of American life for so many. The contradiction between the words, the ideas of justice for all, and the reality of the lived experience for most Black people in this country, which was characterized by injustice, bigotry, prejudice, bias, and being marginalized by a system of White supremacy.

Gordon Parks' impact in Black America

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DARREN WALKER:

I think Black Americans, until Gordon Parks' photography, were taught through the representation of themselves that we were, in fact, defective. That there was something wrong with us, or that we were here to simply be entertainment for Whites. And the hold of White supremacy on the Black psyche was profound. And it was when we started to see the images that made us be dignified, that lifted us up, that made us feel that we were worthy, that we began to really demand justice. And so, Gordon Parks was a warrior for justice. Yes, he was a great American photographer, but he was a warrior. In the words of Dr. King, he was a firefighter for justice. He knew that art

could change America, that through art, we could reach the hearts and minds of White America, most of whom wanted to do the right thing, but most of whom were also stakeholders in a system of racism and White supremacy.

Life Magazine

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DARREN WALKER:

The fact that Gordon Parks had *Life Magazine* as a platform made it possible for him to change America. Because during the 1960s, there was no more American publication than *Life*. It was through *Life* that Americans saw themselves, that Americans, in fact, had their ideas of American exceptionalism narrated, where they validated and valorized our culture. So, for this Black photographer to insert himself into that narrative, which was really according to Mr. Luce, in some ways, there to make Americans feel good about being American. *Life Magazine* made you feel good about being an American. It covered suburbia. It covered consumerism. It brought America news that Americans wanted to hear and see. And along come Gordon — and along comes Gordon Parks, who hit America in the face, softly, elegantly, but nonetheless, profoundly. He put images of America that many White Americans were not ready for. Did not want to see, did not want to acknowledge; knew existed, and had hoped that they could continue their comfortable lives. But Gordon Parks demanded that they stop, look, and listen, and in the process, Gordon Parks changed America.

Segregation Story

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DARREN WALKER:

I think that series was brilliant in its contradictions. On the one hand, there was tremendous deprivation of Black people in Mississippi, in Alabama, in the Black Belt during that time, and he captured that. But he also gave people dignity, he gave people voice. He — by simply photographing them, people sat up. When he was in the room, he made a difference to people. And it's the contradictions that — that Gordon Parks captured in that series that I find so incredible, because it was a time of, of remarkable tumult. I mean, there was the nation, and certainly African Americans, in the wake of Emmett Till's death were stunned. Even Black people who saw untold cruelty were shocked by what happened to Emmett Till. And I think the nation, the Black community in this country, was grieving. And he captured the sorrow. He captured the grief and the anguish, but also the aspiration, which was something Gordon Parks could do. He was able to both capture the sorrow and the grief of racism. But also the boundless hope of the victims of racism, that there was still the hope, the hope that we heard from so many people, the hope that we heard from Langston Hughes in Let America Be America Again. Gordon Parks spoke to that hope. So the woman is standing dressed in Sunday best with her daughter, and it is — she is so elegant. If she were White, she might be like any other solidly middle-class White woman

standing in front of a department store in Mobile, Alabama, and yet behind her is the colored only sign. And so she's elegantly dressed, she's got her Sunday best on, and in her very finest is standing in front of the department store in downtown Mobile and she is being seen. And there's got to be something dignified about that. We all feel good when we get to dress up, and Black people especially felt good because most Black people didn't get to dress up very often because most were domestics. Most had to wear uniforms during the week. And so, the opportunity to dress up and to put our very best finery on was an opportunity for dignity, an opportunity to be respected, an opportunity for you to have your identity outside of that uniform you had to wear when you clean the White families' homes. And yet, there she stands in front of a sign that reminds her, even in her best finery, she must enter that department store through the colored only entrance.

The Atmosphere of Crime

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DARREN WALKER:

I think what he was trying to get at was that these were stories of people who had, for whatever circumstance, found themselves in a condition; a condition that was really rooted in poverty, in racism, in geography. It was no surprise about where they lived and where they came from and the environment in which their crimes were committed, and the environments that they had to go back to. And so, I think some would say that it reinforced ideas about the

pathology in the Black community, and for some, I think, it did because they wanted to use it. Whereas, that was not Gordon Parks' objective. His objective was to hold that mirror up and say, "Actually, this series is not about Black pathology. It is about White pathology, about the poverty of vision and poverty of belief by White Americans of what Blacks can do."

Harlem

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DARREN WALKER:

Well, Gordon had an arc of work in Harlem that began when he went to Harlem as part of the great migration, to come to this Negro Mecca, as it was known at the time. He chronicled the life that was both glamorous and a little not glamorous, shall we say? I think what — what Gordon Parks did was to show Harlem as a center of culture, and I think that was the stark contrast from the early work to the work that he did for *Life Magazine* in the '60s, especially the work around the Fontenelle family. The early work where people, I think, it was a community that was stronger, it was a community that was more resilient, that was less depressed. By the time the '60s came, Harlem was truly a place of deprivation. The level of disinvestment, the level of racism that Baldwin and so many others chronicled, was revealed in that series on the Fontenelles. I think it was heartbreaking for many White readers of *Life Magazine* to witness what Gordon Parks put on the pages of that magazine. Because it was so jarring, so antithetical, so violent that I think

people, truly, were lost. And what he did with that series was to show what happens when a family disintegrates, because there is no economic opportunity for the father and the mother. And there is no economic opportunity because racism has made it impossible for the economy to work for them. And he brings that story to life with his essay, with his photography. And this is also happening in a larger context in America. So Parks, not only did he help to write the narrative, he responded to context outside of his narrative. And the context of this time was one where we were beginning to see our cities disintegrate, we were beginning to see the results of years of disinvestment, of racism, of White supremacy on communities like Harlem. And the Fontenelle — the Fontenelle family were the manifestation of that disintegration. They were the manifestation of White racism. And yet, what many Whites could not do was to fully understand, to fully own their culpability, because this is what Gordon Parks in the Fontenelle series did.

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So, the series on the Fontenelles demanded that White Americans take responsibility for, accept their own culpability in the condition of this family. And this family was a metaphor for Black families across this country in cities that had been left for dead and our romanticized White flight for the great new suburbs, where White utopia would exist. So, I think the series did a great service because it made White America uncomfortable, and getting uncomfortable, as we learned from John Lewis, is an important step towards justice.

Gordon Parks' character

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DARREN WALKER:

Gordon Parks was more than a person. Gordon Parks was a phenomenon, and Gordon Parks knew this and he served us up Gordon Parks. And what I mean by that is he understood that Black people needed models, needed to be represented. He was elegant, dignified, articulate, comfortable in Harlem or on Park Avenue, and confident. These were the things that Black people were taught not to be. Black men especially risked great safety and security by asserting confidence, by asserting their right to be in the room. And Gordon Parks would not be denied his right to be in the room. Indeed, Gordon Parks was the center of the room, of every room he walked into. It was not only his charisma, his intellect, his ability to be a great raconteur. You wanted to be in the room with this man, whether you were White or Black.

Shaft

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DARREN WALKER:

Shaft (1971) was a cultural moment in Black America. In many ways, it was because Richard Roundtree was just so confident and so self-assured and so prepared to take on anything. Nothing seemed to scare him. And there was

something very radical about the idea of a kind of a Black superhero. We — we'd never seen a Black superhero on the big screen. It was truly a cultural moment, not only for Black America, for White America. And to this day, I would say that *Shaft* remains one of the most important films in the history of filmmaking, certainly in the history of the genre of Black films.

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