

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL TO EVALUATE SOCIAL EVENTS

FOTOĞRAFIN SOSYAL OLAYLARI DEĞERLENDİRMEDE BİR ARAÇ OLARAK KULLANILMASI

Hale Zeynep AĞACAN*

Abstract

The aim of this article is to show how photography as an art form can be used as a tool to help us see the reality and the true color of the society that we live in. As it shows us the social reality with an objective look and from a different perspective, photography is also a very important medium to document history and important social events. The general question addressed in this article is whether it is possible to understand the social problems through camera lenses. This article does not intend to question whether photography is accepted as an art form, but rather it tries to understand how photographic images help us see the reality of the unseen. Since Gordon Parks has seemingly unlimited amount of photos, in this article only seven of his photo, which are seen as the vivid portrayals of racial discrimination in America, are going to be used. These photos are among the most popular ones and each one has a historical and cultural roots. Through these photos, it is intended to highlight the consequences of racist discourse in the US.

Keywords: Gordon Parks, Gordon Parks photography, Civil Rights Movement, Racism

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, bir sanat dalı olarak fotoğrafın, içinde yaşadığımız toplumun gerçekliğini ve gerçek rengini görmemize yardımcı olacak bir araç olarak nasıl kullanılabileceğini göstermektir. Farklı bir açıdan bakıldığında fotoğraf aynı zamanda tarihin ve önemli toplumsal olayların belgelenmesinde de kullanılan çok önemli bir araçtır. Bu makalede ele alınan genel soru, toplumsal sorunların kamera merceklelerinden anlaşılmasının mümkün olup olmadığıdır. Bu makale, fotoğrafın bir sanat dalı olarak kabul edilip edilmediğini sorgulamayı amaçlamıyor; daha ziyade fotoğrafik imgelerin, görülmeyenin gerçekliğini görmemize nasıl yardımcı olduğunu anlamaya çalışıyor. Gordon Parks'ın bir çok galeride neredeyse sınırsız sayıda fotoğrafı olduğundan, bu makalede onun Amerika'daki ırk ayrımcılığının canlı tasviri olarak görülen yalnızca yedi fotoğrafı kullanılacaktır. Bu fotoğraflar en popülerleri arasında yer alıyor ve her birinin tarihi ve kültürel kökleri var. Bu fotoğraflar aracılığıyla ABD'deki ırkçı söylemin sonuçlarının vurgulanması amaçlanıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gordon Parks, Gordon Parks fotoğrafçılığı, Sivil Mücadele, Irkçılık



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Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author

E-mail:

zeynepagacan@gmail.com

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* Master's degree student, South Denmark University, zeynepagacan@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-5439-3095



Introduction

According to Howard Becker, photography and sociology have approximately the same birth date. Even though sociology has some moral and metaphysical ends, sociologists have always been into understanding the structures of societies, and mapping its dimensions. And photographers simply record whatever is in front of them. Therefore, from its very beginnings, photography has been a useful tool for the exploration of the society, and photographers have taken this as one of their tasks. Becker believes that art and social exploration describe two ways of working, not two kinds of photographers, and many photographers do both throughout their career (Becker, 1974: 3).

Becker opposes the idea of making a distinction between science and art, taking science as the discovery of the truth and art as the aesthetic expression of someone's unique vision. He in fact claims that the elements of overlap and continuity between science and art are obvious. Photographers made it their business to photograph the social world and social scientists, from time to time, photographed the people and places involved in their research. And while photographers studied anthropology and sociology, social scientists have studied photography (Becker, 1981: 9).

For Sontag, to collect photographs is to collect the world. Photographed images do not make a statement about the world itself but they are miniatures of reality. They furnish evidence, something we heard but be doubtful about. And whereas a painting or a prose characterization cannot be anything other than a hardly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency (Harper, 2023: 8-9).

When it comes to documentary photography, which forms the basis of this article, there are two fundamental approaches. The essentialist view, which is more typical of the philosophy of aesthetics, art history, theology or ethics than it is to sociology, presumes that classifying photos as documentary suggests that documentary photos have some qualifications that others do not. Documentary photography shows what existed at a specific time and place. And it is expected to engage with the viewer. Photo historian Naomi Rosenblum notes that although social documentary photographer is neither a pure recorder nor an 'artist for arts sake's, their reports are mostly technically brilliant and highly artistic (Harper, 2023: 8-9).

The second view on documentary photography, which can be called constructionist view, eludes itself from the argument that whether the practice and its products can be defined by an essential ingredient. Since it is a sociological view, it studies how documentary has been emerged and developed in the practical activities of individuals, groups and institutions. This view takes documentary photography as a tool to produce objects made in the context of institutional practices and historical events or eras (Harper, 2023: 10). Michelle Bogreon in her book on documentary photography describes documentary photography as a tool to preserve history because it witnesses the social events, collects history and keeps society's memory alive. In a world full of motion and sound, still images has an ability to stop the time and make social events look humanized which otherwise would stay as abstract objects in people's eyes. Unlike other genres it connects humanity as every documentary photography exists in two spaces, the specific moment and circumstances of



the photography. As Roland Barthes believes that photography never lies, at least never to its existence (Bogreon, 2019: 20-36).

Gordon Parks, who was not only an art photographer but also photojournalist, documented so many important and crucial event throughout his life time. And today, his photography helps us understand the social - racial division in the society and gives us a clear vision about the impact of the social and political events in the black community. All of his art works are preserved in different museums in the US. As his collections of his photography seem infinite, this article only 7 of his photos have been chosen, which are closely related with what Parks and the black community at the time had gone through.

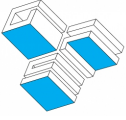
Gordon Parks as a Social Activist and a Photographer

Born in socially segregated society, Gordon Parks had many difficulties through his life. Gordon Alexander Buchanan Parks was born in poverty in 1912 in Fort Scott, Kansas. He was the youngest of 15 children, whose family was deeply effected by racial segregation used to apply Jim Crow laws in the South. After he lost his mother at the age of 15, he moved to St. Paul to live with his sister where he was exposed to poverty and racial hierarchies of the South. For a long time he was homeless and did many different jobs. He worked as a waiter, composed a radio hit, and played in a traveling orchestra. In a darkened theater in Chicago, while watching a newsreel, Parks discovered the power of documentary images. Shortly after that in 1938, he bought a camera in a pawnshop for \$7.50 (Kloehn, 2014). After getting his first camera in 1937, Parks went to Farm Security Administration (FSA) to work as a photographer. He had a remarkable talent that made him get a job in LIFE magazine as a first African - American photographer. He was not only a photographer but also a filmmaker, memoirist, author, choreographer, composer and a poet (MoMa, 2023).

Parks was many things but the most remarkable thing that made him a distinguished artist was the fact that he was an advocate for civil rights movement. Although he worked as fashion photographer, he is known for his socially realistic photos that he depicted the reality behind this racially segregated community. His photograph is important to understand that the brutal outcomes of the racial segregation and exclusion. He believed that his purpose was to communicate and to bring about the same response from a seamstress in Harlem or a housewife in Paris (Kloehn, 2014). His work echoes with my many central events of 20th century, recording the major social events occurred in the US, the time period starting from the end of Great Depression to the post - WWII, supplemented Gordon Parks a wide range of national narratives (Stange, 2006: 9). He was an activist and he tackled issues of race and poverty. Struck by the power of photography, which we would refer the camera as a “weapon of choice”, he decided to use his camera to produce historical records and to describe social injustices (Kunard, 2021).

Photography acquires limitless power from its ability to show rather than tell. Even though it is hard to collect sophisticated feelings, narratives and topics in one frame, a well structured photo can do that. Unlike written word, photos deliver the message directly. They exceed language and cultural barrier. They make it impossible to ignore harsh realities. And these images that sculpted in society's collective memory have an important psychological influence. Photos of such subject matter play upon human empathy and advance calls for change (Cooke, 2023).

Parks chose to use his camera as a tool against all the things that he disapproved about America, poverty, racism and discrimination (MoMa, 2023). His sensibility combined with versatility, his



ability to capture hard-hitting news, feature stories, life on the street, individual portraits and fashion collections made him exceptional and remarkable to his editors. His ability to capture social reality and narrate African - American experience through the fullest, and his extraordinary success to touch with subcultures made him a cultural power. That also enabled Parks to explore the civil rights and Black Power movements, and the rising now generation of African - American leaders (Seiferle, 2024).

Social Developments in 1950s and 60s

In order to understand Gordon Parks' photography as historic documentations, it is important to take a closer look at the American society in 1940s and 1950s. America has always been controversial about racism. As much as they want to seem like that they are a color - blind country and a melting pot for different cultures and races, the history has shown that the country actually is far from being racially equal. In fact, they have always been a race - conscious country. From the very early stages of the US history to present day, race has been a profound factor in many different aspects of one's whole life, and it has got an undeniable influence on people's political rights, their location in the labor market, and their sense of identity (Omi and Winant, 2015: 8). This state of being color/race - conscious has always had a great impact on social and political life. Although different racial groups have been treated differently, they have witnessed the same tragic consequences of racial oppression. And the waves of racial turbulence and quiescence that the country has been experiencing has a deep historical roots. 1950s can be considered as a turning point for Black citizens in the US as they started an upheaval against racism and inequality that they had been experiencing for decades (Omi and Winant, 2015: 8).

With famous Brown vs. Board decision, which ended "separate but equal" ideology and claimed that in the field of education all students were equal, and Rosa Parks' refusing to yield a bus seat to a white passenger, the civil rights movement against legal segregation gained momentum (Jenkins, 2017: 196). From that time on America had witnessed so many boycotts and protests challenging legal segregation as widely as possible. Southern notables were in a desperate dilemma: either they were going to abandon discrimination, or they were going to use repression on a scale that would create national and international embarrassment (Jenkins, 2017: 196). This movement and protests took a long path. It advanced thorough so many southern states and as a southern, Gordon Parks had witnessed same racial discrimination in his childhood and in his adulthood, therefore, African - American experience of racism and poverty had a great impact on his photograph. And in the next section, some of the most famously known Gordon Parks' photos are going to be examined thorough social - political events that the US had gone through.

Gordon Parks' Photographic Style

From the very beginnings, the invention of the camera has helped the exploration of society. Some photographers saw camera as a useful tool to record what they had seen at faraway communities that their contemporaries could never see. Earlier photographers also understood that what they did, their photos and records, had both artistic and sociological meanings. At some point, as they had shown us the shifting characteristics of the society they even considered that what they were doing was sociology. Based on these thoughts, Becker claimed that the issues studied by sociologists and photographers overlapped, and they mostly worked in a similar way (Becker,1974: 3-6). Twentieth century photographers like Lewis Hine and Jacob Hills, and also the photographers of

Farm Security Administration helped form the “documentary” tradition of photography, which had a major influence on photographers for decades. Thanks to the certain abilities of their tools and materials, photographers tend to talk about “truth” mostly without trying to explain what they might mean by words (Fairclough, 2018: 110, Thompson, 2008: 25). However, there is a postmodern critique against documentary photography that put some ethical concerns about practice of documentary photographers and also question whether the photographs reflect the pure reality of society (Fairclough, 2018: 110).

One of the important aspects of documentary photography is that documentary work that comes within the culture mostly show people a different reality than work made by outsiders. It depicts what existed at a specific time and location. Therefore, documentary photography is expected to engage with the viewer and it is also expected to address a political or social issue. Photo historian Naomi Rosenblum claims that social photographers are not a mere recorder of social events. And they are not “artists for arts sake” either. Their works are often technically brilliant, highly artistic and they involve imagination and art at the same time (Harper, 2023: 8-9).

Grady sees images as iconic constructions. They are continuously framed representations of something meaningful created for some objectives. Therefore, as they travel from one source to another, they have a career along with their social and political history. They are also a part of communication strategies as in the way that they tell, inform, stories of one kind or another. They construct rich sources of information about various different subjects and aspects of social life and cultural life (Grady, 2007: 64).

Documentary photography directly demonstrates the social and political events at hand. It records important historical and social - political moments. In the next part, some of Gordon Parks’ photographs are going to be explained and it is going to be shown that how photography as an art form can give us a line of vision about social realities.

American Gothic - 1942



Image 1. Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, 1942, Photography, The Gordon Parks Foundation, Washington D.C.

American Gothic, as one of the most famous photos of Parks, is Ella Watson's, an African- American employee, portrait (Parks, 1942). She worked as a cleaner in FSA (Farms Security Administration). Parks also worked in FSA when he won a photography fellowship (Fulleylove, 2023). In the photo, Watson stands in right in front of the American flag hanging down the wall. She in a polka dress with her hair pulled back, holding a broom and a mop. She may seem like she is looking at us, however, her gaze looks off to the side. It is pretty clear in the photo that she is exhausted and indifference. It is a clear depiction of mental state of African - American workers at that time. This photo is a parody of Grant Wood's iconic painting with the same title. Wood's famous art works portrays a middle - aged couple standing in front of a house that was built in the Carpenter Gothic style. While they stand in the painting, the background is barely visible. As different from Parks' depiction of a black worker, Wood wanted make a representation traditional American values. He wanted to demonstrate this gloomy era through the lenses of a white American couple while Parks seek to make visible the invisible labor done by black Americans (Burke, 2023).

Red Jackson - 1948

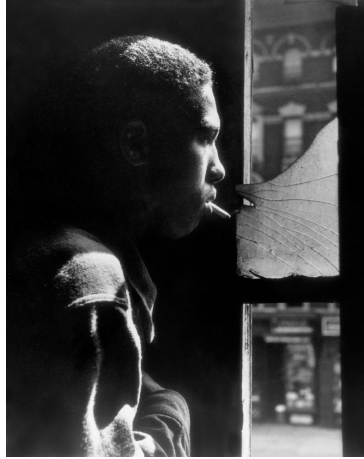


Image 2. Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson*, 1948, Photography,

The Gordon Parks Foundation, Washington D.C.

This photo was taken from one of Parks' photographic essay on a 17 - year - old African - American gang leader called Red Jackson (Parks, 1948). He spent 4 weeks with him in Harlem and through his essays he depicted the violent and difficulties that these teenagers went through (Fulleylove, 2023). It was a challenge for Gordon to gain their trust. After he met Jackson, he spent a week with him and his companions, trying to become friends with them before he used his camera. He tried to show the brutality of Harlem life. However, he wanted to do that without giving any harm to either to it's residents or himself (GPF, 2023).

In mortuary Red and Herbie Levy study wounds of Maurice Gaines - 1948

A photo that captures three friends all together, except one of them passed away (Parks, 1948). One of the boys in the photo is Red Jackson, one the left, and the other one is Herbie Levy, who were the members of the Harlem gang that Parks photographed a month ago. While people tend to avoid people like Red, hoping to create a sense of empathy between these gang members and the others, Parks tried to capture the silent moments in their lives. He wanted to diminish the idea of "us vs.

Them” mentality that dominated the society (Burke, 2023). Although, these gang members were seen as outcasts, and they were not really welcomed in the society, this photo shows that they are really any different than the rest of the society. And it is obvious that what Parks was trying to do by becoming friends with them and trying to depict their lives was to show the society that they were actually human beings that in need of being seen and recognized.



Image 3. Gordon Parks, *Red and Herbie Levy study wounds of Maurice*

Gaines, 1948, Photography, International Center of Photography, New York, NY.

Emerging Man - 1952

This image taken by Parks, Ralph Ellison’s book “Invisible Man” inspired this book, which was published the same year (Parks, 1952). As Ellison’s novel is about an African - American man whose skin color makes him invisible, in this photo, Parks’ figure comes out of a hole, making a reference to Ellison’s depiction of African - Americans. In the photo, we see his face not his whole body. He is not entirely in the underground but not wholly on the surface either, which is also a reference to Ellison’s novel where the main character finds himself in an abandoned basement (Bradley, 2023). This image, alongside with three other images, appeared in LIFE magazine (Fulleylove, 2023).



Image 4. Gordon Parks, *Emerging Man*, 1952, Photography, MoMA, Harlem, NY.

Outside Looking In - 1956



Image 5. Gordon Parks, *Outside Looking In*, 1956, Photography, Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta.

This photo belongs to Parks' series of 26 photography published in LIFE magazine under the title The Restraints : Open and Hidden. It is a clear depiction of the effects of racial segregation (Parks, 1956). He aimed to demonstrate daily struggles of African - Americans and he put is focus on Thornton family from Alabama (Fulleylove, 2023). Since he was exposed racial discrimination, Parks was deeply committed to segregation problem and social justice. As it has been mentioned before, his main focus was on race, poverty, and civil rights. This photo along with the rest of the series is a clear indication of racist segregation that the black community had been exposed to (Art Basel, 2023).

Untitled - 1963



Image 6. Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, 1963, Photography, The Gordon Parks Foundation, Washington DC.

During his life time, Gordon Parks had photographed many protests happening in Harlem (Parks, 1963). This man in the photo carries a sing saying that "We are living in a Police State" with a stern facial expression and he is directly looking at us. We can see that there are other protesters behind him. Parks was both an artist and a civil rights movement activist, therefore, it was important for him to capture this moments and document them. These protests and marching along with Martin



Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, gathered people together and encouraged them stand against indifference (Burke, 2023).

Muhammed Ali - 1966

In this famous portrait of Muhammed Ali, Parks captured him in an intense moment of concentration (Parks, 1966). It a close up portrait and direct lighting shows the sweat dripping off his face and chest. This is one of the photos of Muhammed Ali that Gordon took between 1966 - 1970. By taking Muhammed Ali's photos, again Gordon aimed to destruct the prejudices that people had. He wanted to change people's view about the boxer who was seen as an uneducated or a draft dodger (Burke, 2023).

This photo was used as LIFE magazine cover in 1966. Both Parks and Ali had similar flights in their lives. They both were exposed to discrimination and they were civil rights activists. They both played important parts in civil rights movement in different ways and all these similarities tied these two men together (Gordon Parks Foundation, 2023).

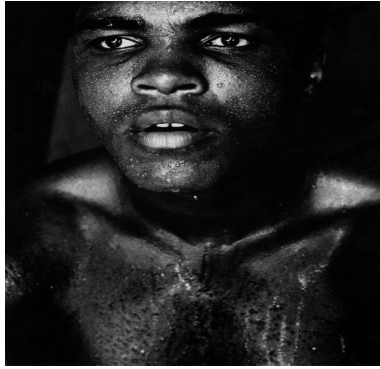


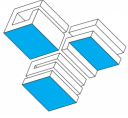
Image 7. Gordon Parks, *Muhammed Ali*, 1966, Photography, Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis.

Conclusion

Ever since the camera was invented, it has gone so many different stages and photography has gained different forms. Among different forms, I believe that documentary photography is the most important one as it shows us directly social reality. In this paper, through Gordon Parks photography it has been aimed to show how documenting the important social events can help people understand the social reality better. Parks in his life time aimed to fight against racial and social discrimination, poverty, and inequality. He did by using his art. By using some of his socially and historically important photos, it has been intended to show how documenting the ordinary people can actually give a sense of reality.

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