

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

AVA DUVERNAY  
*A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Ava Duvernay**  
**Filmmaker**  
**September 11, 2020**  
**Interviewed by John Maggio**  
**Total Running Time: 25 minutes and 39 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Ava DuVernay interview, take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Ava Duvernay

Filmmaker

## **Visual storytelling**

01:00:11:02

AVA DUVERNAY:

For me, they're just different tools that allow me to achieve the same end, which is tell the story. And a story, you know, knows what it wants to be. It

just needs a teller. And, you know, some stories want to be narrative, some want to be uh doc. Some want to be short, some want to be long. Some want to be audio only. Some want to be told, you know, with epic proportions. And so, you know, I think the thing for Black filmmakers is for far too long, we've been relegated to one set of tools, if any, and, I think, one of the things about Mr. Parks is the ability to work within many boxes and to use many tools. And so, that's something that- that's something I've really studied with him, the true definition of a Renaissance person. And I've tried to emulate that in a lot of ways.

### **First impressions**

01:01:14:03

AVA DUVERNAY:

Um, I was a publicist for Mr. Parks' documentary, Half Past Autumn. That's when I had the occasion to actually meet him and spend time with him. But before then, just as a fan of the photographs. I can remember looking at the photos since high school. I was a big Norman Rockwell fan when I was young, someone when I was really young gave me a Norman Rockwell book, and, you know, those are paintings, but it got me interested in art books. And, um, and there was some other book that it wasn't all his work, but it was a book that had some of his photographs in it. And I remember that was the first occasion that I had to come across the work. And the photo was the famous photograph of the woman coming out of the store in Alabama with her

daughter next to her, the Whites only sign. And I remember thinking it looked like a painting. Was that real? It looked like a Norman Rockwell painting, but it was really a Gordon Parks photograph. And that introduced me to him.

**Working in black and white and in color**

01:02:28:01

AVA DUVERNAY:

Well, I mean, the- the black and white-- his black and white work is sublime. And in many ways, ethereal and dreamy in a way, but his- his work in color is some of my favorites. His series, I think, is the Shady Grove Kansas series. It's so hard to say, but one of my favorite photos of him in it, is a lesser known series of work, but it was in color. And, you know, it's soft, you know, it has a focus but the edges fall off into something really soft and gentle.

01:03:02:14

AVA DUVERNAY:

So some of my favorite work of his is in color. The Fort Scott Kansas series is exceptional- exceptional to me, it has some of my favorite photos of his lesser known photos, but those are in color, many of them in color anyway. And it's just beautiful. I remember looking at those photos, and I look at them often, they inform, you know, even choices that I make in cinematography for my films. And I wish that I was with him that day or whatever the days were that he was there going through those places. And there's something about the

color that feels very painterly in a way that's different from the black and white. I mean, some of those images look as if they could be painted because he's using lenses that- that, you know, have a very soft focus and the edges fall off into something that's very, like I said, painterly and gentle. Um, fuzzy in a way, something that creates a distance between you and the subjects, and yet has an intimacy, too. So, anyway, I love that series so much. There's one particular photo in it that I love a lot, but I think there's a power to the color work that doesn't get mentioned as often. I think, you know, when we think about color, we think of-- about that Alabama Whites only sign photo.

01:04:22:05

AVA DUVERNAY:

You know, that work is- is- is really important and beautiful, but it has a different effect.

### **Capturing Black life**

01:04:33:23

AVA DUVERNAY:

I think that he didn't bring an elegance to Black life, he captured the elegance of Black life. He didn't create it. He were a witness to it, he experienced it and he captured it. There's nothing that he's doing. It's important. Words are important. There's nothing that he was doing that was contrived or manufactured. All that beauty is there. It was there then, it was there before he captured it and it's there now. And, you know, his work asks you to

question your own eyes, your own lens. Why do you look at that same thing and not see beauty? You know? And I think that's what he challenged people to do in his work. Not only for White people, because in my conversations with him, he was not performing elegance for White people.

01:05:23:11

AVA DUVERNAY:

He was bearing witness and capturing and preserving, archiving us for us as well, even more so. And I think at a time and in a society where Black people were told far too often, that we're criminals, that we're ugly, that we're less worthy to have the spotlight on us for any reason, that if we do have the spotlight on us, it will be for something negative, that he put a lens in a light on us for ourselves and allowed us to see the elegance of the lives that we live in, the places where we are. And I think that piece of it is more important than anything he did to share those photographs with White America.

### **Creating connection**

01:06:16:16

AVA DUVERNAY:

I mean, I think what he was doing out in the field, out in the world and trying to create connections with people so that he can capture them at their most relaxed or organic is a completely different animal than, you know, what I would do to create connection with someone who that I was interviewing. So, I wouldn't- I wouldn't even try to make a comparison there, but certainly

you're- you're- you're wanting to be of like-mind when you're talking with folks, if not politically and culturally, in a space of shared time, you know.

01:06:58:05

AVA DUVERNAY:

And in a space of understanding, in a space of safety. And I think, you know, certainly when you look at his photos, you see that people felt safe, they feel comfortable to be observed by him. A lot of times, it feels as if they're in conversation with him. And I've always think the best conversations happen in silence. And, you know, when you're comfortable enough to just be yourself with someone and not say anything and that's all through his photos, you know, folks that are being themselves within his--being themselves with him present. That's really, really difficult to do and difficult to conjure as an artist with other people. You know, we think of photography, I think is like a solitary art practice. It's the photographer and their camera, but really they're in relationship with their subject, you know.

01:07:58:11

AVA DUVERNAY:

Um, and when I look at his work, I think, God, how'd he get that? Like, how did he get them to do that? Or how did he get them to relax that much? Or how, or did they even know that the camera was on them? Just because of the- the- the ease and the intimacy that comes through in so much of his work.

01:08:21:06

AVA DUVERNAY:

Yes, you're trying to achieve the same ends of intimacy, of a connection of an understanding of the material and each other, but it's a much longer process than I would imagine he was going through. So, but yes you certainly try to create connections that you can get to those true places.

***The Learning Tree***

01:08:44:01

AVA DUVERNAY:

I think *The Learning Tree* (1969) is an extraordinary... work of cinema. It is not mentioned hardly enough among the great films. The cinematography, the narrative propulsion, you know, from costume to music, everything that he added his hand in, the script is itself from-- adapted from his own work. I mean it's masterful and yet, you know, not widely known. Even beyond the realm of Black filmmakers, you know. My White male contemporaries don't know that film and then I'm required to know all the films of their heroes and expected to know that. And if I don't know that, then I must not be fully steeped in American cinema, which is bullshit.

01:09:40:06

AVA DUVERNAY:

And so, you know, if I'm having a conversation with someone and they can't talk to me about *The Learning Tree*, then it's going to be a short conversation because it is an essential film. Certainly an understanding of the Black cinematic cannon, but it should be a part of the conversation and deserves to be a part of the conversation as we talk about the American cinematic cannon.

01:10:06:04

AVA DUVERNAY:

I know that he had multiple roles. I also know that he demanded that Black crew members be around him, and that he really lifted as he climbed. I know that he had to fight hard to get that movie made. That he had experienced a lot of rejection around it. That folks had the audacity not to believe that he could tell his own story and that he could, you know, that a Black person could direct a film. You know, the uh-- that story makes me angry when I think about all of the obstacles and the doors that were closed to get that done, and that it really came down to one man, I think his name was Hyman was the guy's name, but yeah, that he was not only able to direct the film, but to, you know, play direct parts in a lot of the other art practice and disciplines that went into making the film.

01:11:08:23

AVA DUVERNAY:

When you think about what was going on in the country at that time, and, you know, the fact that really the country was at war in many ways with itself and



elsewhere, and then you have this Black man leading the charge, you know, and pioneering the space that was unwelcoming. And, you know, he came in and did his thing and he excelled. And the sad thing about it is, you know, the short memory that we have. And so I'm happy that we're having the occasion to talk about him now.

***Shaft***

01:11:52:03

AVA DUVERNAY:

I didn't see *Shaft* (1971) till much later. Sorry. I didn't see *Shaft* until much later. My mother didn't want me watching that early on. So I didn't see it until I was an adult. She thought it was a little too risqué for her baby. So I didn't see that until a ways later. It's not my favorite film of his. I prefer the lyrical quality of *The Learning Tree*, but that's just a taste thing. I think what's remarkable is that the same filmmaker made *The Learning Tree* and made *Shaft*. And when you think of that in terms of--and even filmmakers now, you know, our trajectories and the kind of spaces that we get into where, you know, it's consistency. People are-- have a vision for what they want to say and how they want to tell a story. But most of us, you know, have our style. You know, if you look at me, if you look at Barry Jenkins, if you look at Ryan Coogler. You know, we have a style.

01:12:47:19

AVA DUVERNAY:

There are very few that are able to, I won't even say successfully because any film is a success that's made, but adeptly and comfortably move across genre and to make something as lyrical and intimate as *The Learning Tree*, and then, you know, create a cultural phenomenon like *Shaft* from the same filmmaker untrained in the ways of, you know, the White man's ways of Hollywood. Um, and, you know, who didn't start his art practice until very late in life, you know--it's remarkable when you think about it. It really is, you know... very seldom duplicated the- the- the variance of the work that he was doing as it relates to filmmakers of all kinds. You know, he's one of the few that can do that... or did, I don't think he's one of the few that could do it. I think he's one of the few that was brave enough to do it and try something different.

**Opportunity in Hollywood then and now**

01:13:57:03

AVA DUVERNAY:

Yeah. I mean, of course Hollywood has changed from the late sixties when he started making films. Has it changed in terms of there being a lack of consistent interest in our work so that no Black filmmaker experiences their phone stop ringing? No. But I think, you know, it's changed because he changed it. You know? It's changed because, you know, he opened the door and kept it open for so many people who came after him, and really innovated within the space. And, but yeah, I wouldn't say that, you know, that's not something that Black filmmakers still experience. I think there's

now enough institutional memory, right, of Hollywood and what it's capable of and what it does. How it can chew you up and spit you out. And we have enough examples of what happened with Mr. Parks to know how to safeguard in other ways. Part of my safeguarding is that I practice more than one discipline within the film space.

01:15:06:15

AVA DUVERNAY:

In my view, hey, if I'm not going to be able to get the money to make a narrative film, I'll make a doc. If I can't make the money to make the doc, I'll make TV. Can't make money to make narrative TV, I'll make a doc series for TV. Can't do any of that. I'll do some branded content. Can't do any of that. I do animation. I also do non-scripted, like, I'm- I'm- I'm into podcasts now. Like I am going to keep moving to safeguard my ability to tell story in whatever way I can. And I think, you know, when you look at him and, you know, the nature of the many disciplines and tools he was using, you know, photography, he was writing books, he was making movies. I mean, he was doing it all. And so, you know, that was really--that which I--that's really formative to look at the multiple disciplines that he was working in with film just being one of them.

01:16:06:03

AVA DUVERNAY:

Um, you know, kind of gave me permission to think, go outside of just film.  
Don't just relegate yourself to that. You can do more.

01:16:14:19

AVA DUVERNAY:

I don't know if a Black person is being asked to make a White film, could they if they wanted to, I'm sure. So many ways to get films made these days. What a waste, though. Why on earth would you want to make film about some White people? We got a lot of them. I mean a lot of them, but- but yeah. I think certainly if- if- if a Black filmmaker wanted to make a film with an all White cast, you know, it could be done. Would it be easy? Certainly not. I don't think they're being asked. I'm not being asked. Actually, I get asked to make a lot of films about White women, but I don't think my Black male counterparts are being asked to make Dunkirk. So, I don't know. Maybe they haven't changed that much.

### **Gordon Parks' relevance today**

01:17:11:21

AVA DUVERNAY:

Oh, I wasn't aware that he was having a moment. I've never experienced a moment that he's not of the moment. I mean, it feels like his work is so present, always. I mean, in any Black space with any Black artists that you're talking to, it's constant reference, you know, in photography and poetry, in

literature, in film, in music, he's so present. So, I'm not sure what the moment is, but I'm glad he's having it, whatever it seemed to be. I mean, Gordon Parks' work is like... every day. It's like a part of Black culture in a way that whatever moment is being said that he's having is having outside of the Black community, because he is--that work is part of the heartbeat of the Black community

01:18:11:22

AVA DUVERNAY:

And so, you know, whatever that outside gazes that's making that moment happen. Great. But, you know, his work is, I think, is so-- always present because it's always relevant because the poverty, the oppression, side by side with the glory, the majesty, the joy is how I define the Black community. No matter what is thrown at us, we thrive and shine amongst ourselves. You know what I mean? When we close the door and at home or at home, in our safe spaces, when we sleep. You know. There's a beautiful photo of a Black boy who was asleep in his bed. It's just the head up and you see all the holes in the wall.

01:19:07:21

AVA DUVERNAY:

All the- the- the- the holes from a place that's falling down. And yet this boy is asleep and has found peace in that moment, in that space. You know, there's so many of those photos where he shows people at rest, which I love, you

know. There's a photo that I love of him. It's a little boy sitting in a field. I think it's part of that Kansas series. And it's a boy sitting in a field and he has a bandage on his head that has an X on his head. That's like a target in some ways, it's an X in tape. Like it's a wound or something. This head wound that's been taped with an X that looks like a target. And he's sitting in the tall grass... at rest just, you know, enjoying the day. And you just see the back of his head. It's like, wow, that image just says so much. And so the rest, the relaxation, the intimacy, those things that he was able to find juxtaposed against the oppression and the poverty is why, you know, he is so present and why Gordon Parks is having a moment. It doesn't make sense to me because, you know, he's a part of all of our moments.

**The camera as a 'weapon'**

01:20:35:11

AVA DUVERNAY:

I feel- I feel that my camera has- has that power. Yeah. And that's not something that I started out making films, thinking. That's something that I've come to because I've observed it. That's something that I've felt in myself pretty recently, even just this summer, this crazy summer between the pandemic and the racial reckoning. That fact that, you know, if I pick up my camera, I can say something and show something and- and that I will be heard, and that it will be seen that a story will be told, and that my camera gives me the power to do that. And so, in that way, yeah, I think, you know, his

camera as a weapon and to think of the camera as a weapon is a strong way to think about it and something that I've come to embrace.

### **Celebrity portraits**

01:21:32:03

AVA DUVERNAY:

So much of the celebrity stuff that he did with Malcolm X and the Panthers and um Eartha Kitt. Uh, he had some great photos of her. I bet they had fun together because he was a flirt. Okay. I- I worked with him for a very short amount of time as the publicist for that one documentary Half Past Autumn. But he was holding my hand through the whole time and talking to me through the whole thing. And he introduced me to some of "this is my girlfriend for the day." I was like, okay, this is before the Me Too Movement. And hey, I was, I loved being with him and sharing some time with him. And so I just imagine him and Eartha Kitt traipsing around. Oh my gosh, what was that like? So, but my favorite photos are not of famous people. My favorite photos are either just the everyday folk. One of my favorite photos of him is a photograph of a woman at her window with some flowers.

01:22:32:12

AVA DUVERNAY:

She's arranging the flowers. She's putting the flowers together. She's watering the flowers, I think. And it's a profile shot. And it's her completely into working on these flowers, and the sunlight is coming in through the window

and it's black and white. And I just thought what a--just what a beautiful moment of solitude and communion with something beautiful in a space that is probably not beautiful. Like it's clearly an apartment window. And yet, you know, these flowers have brought joy and beauty to her in this space. I think that might be, I mean, it's so hard to say, but that was one of my all time favorites.

**Gordon Parks' style**

01:23:34:05

AVA DUVERNAY:

Imagine Gordon Parks walks in. You see the younger photos, the hair slicked back, the caramel skin, the mustache, you know. Then you see some of the photos of him like out in the field where he's like a cowboy and he's got the hat and he's, you know-- the mustache. And then he starts to go gray and then it just gets even bigger-- because you know, with men you go gray. It's like, oh, distinguished silver foxing it. Right. And he's just-- and the hair, and the mustache, and the pipe, and the coats, and the collars up. I mean, that's fashion giving you fashion, always, and men are gravitating towards that. And women are gravitating towards that. And everybody is thinking, I want to be with that guy. When you think of that, that commercial, The Most Interesting Man In The World, it looks like a White version of Gordon Parks. That guy in that commercial.

01:24:36:03



AVA DUVERNAY:

I mean, literally, who is cooler looking than Gordon Parks? Can you imagine Gordon Parks going around Hollywood trying to get these White guys to make his movie? I mean, the audacity to say, no, you're never going to be as interesting as him. You should throw money at him. You should beg him to do it. I mean, you think about Gordon Parks-- if he lived--if he was alive right now, if the Gordon Parks who made *The Learning Tree* was around right now, pitching and Hollywood, none of us would have jobs because everyone would just be trying to get Gordon Parks. I just-- suave. When you look up a suave in the dictionary, you're going to see Gordon Parks. Just the charisma is just, you know, rolling off of him. In a still photo and a conversation, through the photographs that he made, through the photographs that were taken of him. I mean, don't make them like that anymore.

END TC: 01:25:39:05