

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

NELSON GEORGE INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Nelson George
Writer and filmmaker
November 21, 2019
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 1 minutes and 54 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

JOHN MAGGIO:

We good?

Introduction to Gordon Parks

01:00:14:00

NELSON GEORGE:

It's hard to tell because it's all tied up with *Shaft* (1971) to some degree. He's someone I probably knew about from school. My mother was a teacher herself. She brought a lot of books home. So, we had a lot of Black history stuff in the 60s. I can't remember when exactly, but I knew that once the *Shaft* thing happened, and there was a lot of talk about his other work. Actually, you know something? I knew about *The Learning Tree* (1969). I knew about the book. I didn't see the movie in theaters, but I remember the book was something that my mother brought home. So, I knew about his arc as a

storyteller. I don't remember really being really versed in the photographs until after *Shaft*.

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NELSON GEORGE:

I was, you know, when *Shaft* came out I was like... twelve, thirteen, and it was a huge event. I'm from Brooklyn, I'm from Brownsville, way out. I lived in a housing project, public housing. It was such an event to have this kind of Black superhero movie that literally my mother and two other mothers, we went as a group.

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NELSON GEORGE:

I would say there was like six or seven of us, went from all the way in the far end of Brooklyn to Times Square. And on the-- I think it was called the Criterion movie theater at the time. It was on 45th and Broadway. I remember it vividly because there was a giant cutout poster of Richard Roundtree on top of the theater, which you'd never seen before like that. So-- So, *Shaft* was a major cultural event for us, and so that led me back to: who is this guy Gordon Parks? There was a lot of stuff in the newspapers about him, and *Ebony* and *Jet*, which covered the movie extensively. So I believe that's-- I believe that was my gateway drug, I do think I read... I knew something about *The Learning Tree* memoir before *Shaft*.

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NELSON GEORGE:

People take things for granted now. In the 70s, it was still an era of breakthrough, breakthrough, breakthrough, pushing through, pushing through, for Black acceptance, Black employment. And so, the fact that he, way before this kind of wave happened, had been on *Life Magazine*. And *Life Magazine* was-- we got *Life Magazine*. It was the journal to have. We all looked at the pictures, they were spectacular. They were part of the dialogue about life, literally. *Life Magazine* helped define the world for people. So the fact that he was shooting for *Life Magazine* as a Black man was amazing.

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NELSON GEORGE:

When-- as I got older and got a little more access to information, especially in my college and high school years in the 70s. The fact that this guy was able to shoot the Paris collections, that had nothing to do with race in any way shape or form, it was just fashion, and also did things like the Red Jackson, *Chronicles of a Harlem Gangster*, also Malcolm X. And as I found out later, he did a lot of Industrial work. I mean, I saw some photographs of him, more recently, of coal miners in Canada.

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NELSON GEORGE:

So the range of work that he was able to access, that really struck me. And it was actually, I mean Gordon is for me one of the inspirational figures in my life in the sense that I've always tried to do a lot of different things, not because I necessarily wanted, but if an opportunity presented itself, let's try

and see if we can work in that art form. And as I dug into Gordon's life: he was a photographer, he was a composer, he was a memoir writer, you know, kind of a musician. And he didn't limit himself to quote unquote Black culture. He was a renaissance man in almost every sense of that word, in that he was able to do many different things, did them at a high level. And was also able to negotiate space.

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NELSON GEORGE:

I think one of the things about Gordon that's very important for someone of my generation, who came of age more or less in the 80s, was who would I look to before me who was able to move through different environments and— and not be a sellout, maintain their identity, but also be able to move with other people and not let your race be the only determining factor of how they connected to people. And he seemed to be a master of that. His ability to move in high and low places.

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NELSON GEORGE:

I think that's what really was exciting about him, to me as a figure, was— to be Black in America to me, there's this connection to the struggle we've had, and the struggles we continue to have. And it's also these aspirational aspects: how do I move up in the world? How do I connect with a wider world and— and not necessarily to advance the race, but just to advance me. How do I move? How do I as an individual move? And Gordon was one of

those people who was a role model for me. Like, okay I see he does this, he does that. He doesn't let any barrier sort of keep him in, box him in. And he rises to the level of his failure. Some things he did may not have been great, but he wasn't someone who was afraid to try a new art form, and learn from that, and still come back to his core, which was photography and excel.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Gordon is definitely one of those-- I mean I would say-- Actually, it was Gordon and Melvin Van Peebles, because they were guys I actually could touch. When did I first meet Gordon Parks? You know something, I don't remember the first first meeting, but I remember I fell into a circle of people who knew him, and I was able to be around him quite a few times through the last, I would say the last ten years of his life. I was at his place on umm, by the United Nations (CROSS TALK) The UN Building over there a couple of times. I was at a couple of cocktail parties with him. And his ability to-- It was actually, cause he was a guy who... you could strike well, maybe he's pretentious you know, he's done this, and he's done that. He had an ability to be, you know, reach out and be sort of elevated but also have a common touch, which is very hard to be b-- to do both.

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NELSON GEORGE:

You know, and so that struck me, like any young guy I'm like, "Ok, how does he move? What does he wear?" I still dress... I'm still influenced by *Shaft*. I

still wear turtlenecks and I've got a leather jacket. There's definitely moments when I hear the wah wah pedals going when I'm walking through Times Square, I just do, it's part of, you know, DNA. But what I found out is I saw Gordon was that Gordon himself-- a lot of what Richard Roundtree was wearing was Gordon's clothes.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Some of the check jackets, the blazers, the way he wore earth tones, you know, his color palette. A lot of what I see in the movie is a projection of-- of-- of Gordon's world. In fact, I look at *Shaft* now in retrospect. Shaft is a guy who has an office in Times Square, he has a place in the village, but he's able to move in Harlem and other spaces as well. He has a relationship with the police and the authorities, but he also has a relationship with the radical element in Harlem. To me, that's, you know, that's Gordon.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Gordon was this guy who could do all of these things and connect with all of these people. And not necessarily be everyone's best friend, but gain respect enough to move in their spaces. And as a photographer, and I learned this myself as a journalist. The ability to be there and be present, but not to interfere with what's happening, to be able to sit back, let it happen, observe closely what's going on and find out what's interesting about it. He had that ability and it comes through in all his work. So, like I said, *Shaft* was a

gateway drug, then I saw *Leadbelly* (1976). Then I began seeing, you know, the body of work as a photographer. To this day, if there's a Gordon Parks exhibit somewhere that I can get to, I go to it. I find that there's more to his body of work than I thought. I just recently-- I went to DC. I think the Smithsonian or one of the institutions there, had a big exhibit of a lot of his work.

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NELSON GEORGE:

So, so the photographs of these miners in this Canadian town are amazing. They're beautiful black and white work. And it's the humanity of these workers. So, I think about it Gordon, you know, he's a Black man, I guess he's probably in his 30s, or maybe 20s, 30s at that point. Going to a place where I'm sure they hadn't seen any Black people or very few. And being able to sit there, and not--and be part of it, and let it happen in front of him. The landscape work is great in it, but really what's striking is the faces. You know, I remember the faces of miners coming out with, you know, coal on their face. Faces of them at bars and restaurants where they hang out.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And so it struck me that's the ability of a great artist: to be able to move into a space, and then sit there, be part of it, and let it happen around you and see what's interesting about it. That really is a big lesson.

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NELSON GEORGE:

He's interesting because he's actually not... 'social realist' I guess as a phrase. He's not really... his work doesn't have... even though he's shooting, sometimes, very gritty stuff. Like the photos of Red Jackson and that whole Harlem series. He's in tough places, you can tell the conditions are terrible, the place probably smells horrible, but because his eye is so sharp, the work itself, I wouldn't say it elevates it, but his aesthetic is always elegant. And there's a compositional beauty that you-- that's from Red Jackson looking out the window. There's one shot of him I think looking out a window, by a window. It's a haunting image. And it's beautifully framed. And that's the same eye that's shooting the technicolor Paris collection stuff, you know, or that's later shooting civil rights marches.

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NELSON GEORGE:

So he brings a kind of compositional grace. I have a, I remember, where was I? Damn. There's some story, slightly second hand. But a friend of mine was somewhere with him on location for something he was working on, and he had a Polaroid with him. And Gordon saw something and said "Can I use your polaroid?" and he shot with the guy's Polaroid. So you know, back then it took awhile for the film to be developed, and it took a couple weeks and finally he gets the roll back and he looks at the roll of film, and like that image that Gordon shot was so different from everything else on that roll of film, because he just picked it up like this and bang. He had seen the exact framing that was

necessary for that shot to work as something more than just, you know, a snapshot. And I think that that's--That's the magical thing about any artist, that he has about his photography. Is that he had an eye that was just... it almost seemed like every shot was perfect.

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NELSON GEORGE:

I'm sure there must be stuff that may not have been, that we never saw, maybe, but everything that's on those prints that you see from every era, they're compositionally amazing. Story: So I went to his apartment in the UN plaza. So I get to his apartment and I'm over there and I go: "Oh shit." There's a terrarium, and I go: this is the book. The photographs were taken in this terrarium, you know, and like "What the hell?" So, you know, it looks like a terrarium you see in your grandma's house. You know it's like these little things, and rocks, and sand, and backdrop. And you realize that he has taken his camera and shot this not exceptionally big space and made it into a book of haunting images. That's like 'wow'.

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NELSON GEORGE:

That's worth seeing. If you see what he shot, versus what the book looks like, and what his framing looks like. That was it. That was the capper, because he took rocks and sands and made them look epic. Epic.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Well it's also interesting, I mean again, that's the ability of a great photographer and a great artist to move in space. How weird was it to be in that world at that time with his camera? And there had to be people looking at him like, "Who's this Black guy or Colored guy" I'm being generous, you know, "taking these pictures?" And it looked like it was Main Street of that town.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Those pictures are quite-- and you're right, because that era, most of the stuff was photojournalistic, so it's black and white. Again, he was able to-- there's an elegance, even there's an elegance even to his depictions of evil, basically. Cause that, those pictures of the woman and her child, cause they're dressed up looks like, either it's a Sunday, or when they went downtown, they got dressed up to go shopping, and so the contrast of the mother and her child and their kind of- kind of dignified presentation versus that sign hovering over them that says 'You're less than human'. That's basically what that sign was about. Again, he's able to take the mundane and even the evil, and give it a quality that's very singular to his eye.

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NELSON GEORGE:

The biggest struggle, and it was a struggle that was representative of the Civil Rights Movement, was this idea of Black humanity. And that in order for King and the other people to show that we deserved equal rights you had to

believe that we were equal people, which was an idea that was a radical idea in much of America, that Black humanity was something to be respected. So his films do capture, uh films, well they do that as well, but his work does capture that level. Yeah there's a lot of stuff of families, and of the idea of community, paralleling the community-- I don't know if this was totally conscious, but perhaps it was, or if this was just the facts of life, is that the everyday photos of Black families, they mirror the everyday photos of White families cause they are the same.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And to think that that was a radical idea, and it was in 1940 something and 1950 something and in some places today, unfortunately it's still a radical idea. So, I do think that there had to be an intentionality behind his work in terms of making the mundane elegant. And by making the mundane elegant he draws people's eyes to it in a way that if it was done in a less heightened way wouldn't have the same sway.

Early life

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NELSON GEORGE:

I mean like, where New York-- because there was a lot of official chaos, you know, there were garbage strikes, there were teacher strikes, the police-- I

used to see cops you know-- we used to call it 'cooping.' A police car would be parked in the side street, and another police car would come up, and they'd give them takeout Chinese food, they'd eat and then they'd take a nap in the middle of the day. And you'd see that. I saw a, they used to have, I don't know who was getting paid off, but there was an elevated subway by my house in Brooklyn, in Brownsville, and people would leave a little brown envelope inside one of the pylons.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Someone would come by and pick it up. There were drops. There was all kinds of stuff going on. So, the fact that there was a lot of heroin, and a lot of drug selling was not surprising, since a lot of the police, especially in Black and Latino neighborhoods, wanted a take. So it was, there was all this official corruption. At the same time, because of that, it was cheap to live here. And there was a lot of-- The city, and I always say this about New York, the street is a theater. So, you've got your house, and you know there's Stickball, there's all these games we got from the Italians, there's Ringolevio, there's Dodgeball, all these street games... Skelly. So there's a lot of life, you lived your life in the streets of the city. Getting on the subway, I got on the subway. I was going into Manhattan, like 11 or 12 by myself.

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NELSON GEORGE:

You know, going to Times Square with friends. We go to Time Square, spend the whole day in Times Square, and you know see 3 Kung Fu movies or 2 Charles Bronson movies, or whatever the hell was going on, blaxploitation movies. So, you lived in the streets, and so you saw everything, and sometimes you saw bad stuff, but sometimes you saw amazing stuff. That's how hip-hop was being born, but you could also see drum circles, salsa bands. You could walk through certain parts of town, like SoHo, when I was in high school and you could hear jazz musicians practicing, and music flowing out of these lofts.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And now they're a million dollar, two million dollar, three million dollar lofts. Then they were like empty buildings where jazz musicians-- and actually a lot of punk rock guys, what they called No Wave music. For me the city was very alive with culture. In fact, the social, the official chaos made it easier for artists to do things. There were all kinds of weird things happening all over town. Different parties, I mean disco... official disco was happening in like 54, but there were lots and lots of clubs where people were learning the hustle. And so you know, drugs and parties, there's no party without drugs.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And so there were lots of drugs and lots of parties. So for me, it was a great time to learn and to also be curious. So if you were a New Yorker, and you

were at all artistically bent, or you just wanted to get out of the house, you could be out all night. Places didn't close down. People were out all night.

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NELSON GEORGE:

I tell you what, there's this whole-- This whole group of films that start I guess in the late 60s into the 70s: New York is Dying movies, they were called. But they were great. So you got things like Klute, which is '68 I think, around that time. Klute, you have... a lot of these things were going-- what's the other one, the one with Robert Redford, Three Days of Condor. You have Klute, Three Days of Condor, you have the paranoid thriller thing. There's a couple of good Frank Sinatra movies in there, shot in New York. And then there's this whole thing, French Connection and blaxploitation movies. Things like 100-- Across 110th Street, which is both a blaxploitation movie and an Italian gangster movie. So you have this whole body of films, Serpico... that are about New York. And they capture, if you look at them now, they capture a certain city, a lost city, which is a dirty city, a vibrant city, an ethnic city, Italian, Black, Puerto Rican, Irish, Jewish.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Those movies are all about really, a lot of them are about ethnic succession or ethnic rivalry in the city. And you felt that, I mean living in New York... So in Brooklyn, where we went to school there was definitely a Jewish neighborhood, there was definitely an Italian neighborhood, there was

definitely an Irish- like when you went to school, you had to negotiate these neighborhoods. Because we took school buses. There were mad racial fights: in schools, football games, basketball games.

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NELSON GEORGE:

You know, certain neighborhoods you went into. I remember I was on the baseball team at my highschool in Brooklyn. We went out to play Sheepshead Bay, and I was like, it's all the White guys. I'm with you today, don't leave me out in Sheepshead Bay. I'll get my ass kicked out here, and you could get your ass kicked out there for real. So, all that stuff that, you know, later on you had the Korean grocer stuff that happened when Koch was there. I mean, this is all real stuff. It was very, very, uh... The tension between the races, it wasn't even the races, I would say the ethnic groups. It was really, there were definitely Puerto Ricans and Blacks, there were Jamaicans coming in. Every group that came into town, there were Black Americans vs Jamaicans fights in my high school. Because who are these guys coming in? So there was always-- It felt like that. It felt like there was very much a town of ethnicity and racial turmoil, you know, which was fun. I hate to say it, but it was fun.

Shaft

01:21:45:15

NELSON GEORGE:

Oh *Shaft* was mammoth. *Shaft* was mammoth. I mean, everyone went to see *Shaft*. I don't know what the box office would be extrapolated by these numbers, but it was... it was *Black Panther* (2018). The way that people, I guess that's the best analogy, in the sense that everyone went to see it. At least in New York, it just captured the city. I mean, you were sitting in a theater, watching scenes that happened two blocks away. There's a scene where *Shaft* eats hotdogs, and a cop comes in and bothers him at Nedick's. That was right, we used to eat there, right on the corner of 42nd street and 7th avenue. So that world that the film captured, that was our world. We knew all of those spots.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And you know, *Superfly*, and all of those other things that happened later as well. So, *Shaft* was mammoth in terms of, you know, there had been Van Peeble's film, *Sweet Sweetback* before that, which I think kind of in a way is an outsider film, sort of started the movement, improved it, but *Shaft* was kind of the mainstream Hollywood movie that really proved that this could make money, and then the floodgates opened.

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NELSON GEORGE:

You know, *Shaft* was a guy: he talked back to the cops. He had White and Black women in the film, which was pretty radical. You know, because you know, just a couple years before, Sidney Poitier had done *Guess Who's*

Coming to Dinner, and had one kind of kiss in the back of a taxi cab. Well Shaft is in a shower having sex with a White chick he met at a bar. That was, you know, and then they have a whole banter when she leaves the house. That was 'woah.' You know, was that possible? Did that happen? Of course it did, but was that on screen? Was that something that was part of the dialogue of the culture? So that Shaft was this guy who made love to whoever he wanted to, he talked the way he wanted to talk to whoever he wanted to. And that included the police, that included the Black radicals, that included the Harlem gangsters.

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NELSON GEORGE:

So the badassness of it, just the straight up badassness of it was amazing. And he wasn't a cop. One of the mistakes they made when they made the remake was to make Shaft a cop. The whole point of Shaft was that he wasn't part of the system, that he had agency outside of that. And once you make him a cop, it just takes away the independence of the character. You can make him a rebel within the force, but it's very different to be someone who is outside that, has his own space, and is negotiating all of these different places as an independent person. I think that was an important part of why the character worked and some of the remakes have not worked. That he became too much a part of the system, when he was actually always supposed to be an outsider. He was representative of Black people outside of the system who are working the system inside and out, and have tentacles everywhere.

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NELSON GEORGE:

So, I think that was one of the-- I've actually read the-- one of the things that's interesting, I actually read the book that it's based on, and he was a Vietnam veteran. Which you kind of suspect when you watch the movie, but that was a big part of the character's development in the novel. And there were lots of these guys who came back from Nam, who were trying to figure out what to do with their lives, you know, who were badass guys, who just ended in Vietnam. You know, had killed for the government, and were trying to-- were walking around with a lot of anger. Shaft was kind of like, to that degree, a polished version of these ex vets who had agency who were trying to figure out where they fit in. Shaft had kind of made his own space.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Again, I'm a New York guy so I know exactly, I know the subway stops, I know when he comes out of the exit where he is. I know, I even know where they cheat when they're cutting the thing. They're cheating, why is he over there? That's too far down. Cause he goes by Bryant Park to buy the newspaper, which is like straight down 42nd. So he kind of walks up the subway, he crosses 42nd and 7th, then suddenly he's all the way past 6th avenue to get his newspaper, then he's back over the shoeshine stand, which is basically, I think that actual spot, or spots like that were on, between Broadway and 6th, no, yeah, Broadway and 6th. So, I remember that, I knew that world

intimately. So yeah, the wah wah pedal thing as the opening. It's almost, it's a joke now. It's so much to its moment. That (imitating bass guitar) wank a wank a wank a wank. Donk a donk a donk a donk. Everyone can do that, but that's the power of sound. And the collaboration. I mean Isaay Hayes. It's a masterpiece, and the other piece of music I think worth mentioning is "Soulville."

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NELSON GEORGE:

Because that's really Gordon getting a chance to do a photo essay of Harlem. And you know, there's beautiful shots of him walking-- I wonder what street that was? There's a great shot of him crossing the street, I'm not sure what street in Harlem that is. There's stuff, there's spaces in there that are gone. There's a couple of bars and restaurants that he walks through. So, "Soulville," and it's a great song by Isaac Hayes. In fact, if you go to Memphis now, there's a neighborhood in Memphis they call Soulville. There's a big mural that says Soulville on it, and there's a big picture of Isaac Hayes on the side of a liquor store, which is perfect. So yeah, that and also the Cafe Reggio, which is literally around the corner from where we are. The interesting thing about that soundtrack is that it's a very kind of Wes Montgomery smooth jazz thing.

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NELSON GEORGE:

It wasn't all funk. It was a variety of different textures. The love theme was Elliot, a beautiful sexy song. Vibes. You know, that album is one of the best albums of all time. And in the canon of soundtracks, it's Academy Award winning, but in the canon of like great Black music, what's really interesting about it is that it's a mix of really the latest funk, wah wahs, great bass lines, great drumming, but also Isaac Hayes was sort of the epitome of a kind of elegance as well, the string arrangements were fantastic, the way he uses vibes. So, it has this jazz element, this cool jazz element on top of Memphis funk, so it's a unique record. He'd been building to that already with his other records, but I think that's kind of the epitome of what he created. And again it's a perfect accompaniment for the idea of Shaft who is both a street guy, but also someone with access to these other worlds.

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NELSON GEORGE:

You know, it says "I see you," to the audience. I see the world we live in. I see the conditions we live in. Then there's that other shot where he goes and meets Antonio Fargas over, I think it's on Park Avenue in Spanish Harlem, right by the elevator train, I think it's Metro North line, I don't know if they called it that then, but again it's a beautiful thing, the framing, the depth you get of the city is great. You know, I mean, he did a, you know-- The second film isn't quite as elegant, it felt, maybe because he was doing too much, but the first film felt really really thought out and really well executed.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Number 1: the versatility. The great thing to me about New York has always been, you can go from the most elevated, elegant dinner party, to the most grimy club or party, to the most avant garde crazy art thing in two hours. And you know, not even go ten blocks in three different directions depending on what part of town you're in. So the city has always had that sense to me of-- I always call a New York night is, you know, you hit three spots, they're all different, and yet you're able to float through all of them. To me *Shaft* is kind of like a New York night. In that, you've got Times Square, you have all the grittiness in the shoe shine guys, the blind newspaper guy, and all of that stuff, and hot dog stands.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And then you have the village, and there's kind of, there's a gay bartender, there's hot girls at the bar, there's guys making drinks, it's got a whole different vibe, that part of the village. You go to Harlem, different parts of Harlem, you know, you're in tenements, you're also in Bumpy Johnson's underground world. They have official New York where the police work. And then you have all these great scenics of the city throughout.

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NELSON GEORGE:

So to me, that, those layers, that seemed to be Gordon's life. Going from his life as a photographer at Life, and then what I saw of his life as a sort of an

adult acclaimed guy. He always was able to move through these different worlds. And to me that's what *Shaft* delivers, it delivers a kind of uber New York experience, and I think that's what in some ways makes it sort of different from the other blaxploitation movies of the time, and even some of the other commercial White movies of the time, is the variety of environments of the city. You don't really see that village world with the gay bartender. He's speaking to what's going on down there very specifically in the village at that time. When it's becoming a gay mecca, right? But you don't really see that often in those films, or you see it in a voyeuristic- it's very funny, and it's kind of, the fact that Shaft is comfortable with the gay bartender and they have a good relationship.

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NELSON GEORGE:

Those are the kind of little beats that are in there that are very different from a lot of the other works that were being done then, and I think that reflects Gordon's life.

Gordon Parks' style

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NELSON GEORGE:

Like I said, when I finally met Gordon as an adult: mustard colored turtlenecks, tweed jackets very well tailored, you know, the kind of slacks he wore and kind of the cut of the clothes. This was Gordon, the way Shaft-- I

don't know if Gordon wore the leather jacket. I think the leather jacket was-- maybe he did, but the blazer, earth tone look that he wears throughout the film, that's Gordon to the max. That's his swag. And then it became partly my swag, and partly the swag of tons of other guys, and some women too, who are looking for-- what am I, twelve or thirteen when I see the movie? So I'm looking for, you're already looking for- what's my thing going to be? How am I going to look like an adult? Cause you're desperately trying to look like an adult.

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NELSON GEORGE:

And eventually that became one of my go-to looks, because to me that always in my head: that's what an elegant guy looks like. That's what a guy who-- and you know, quite honestly, Gordon got lots of women, so this is what a smooth operator wears. I better get with the game. That's how it goes down. So if Shaft is doing that, then Shaft is a projection of Gordon's own swagger, his sense of elegance, his sense of style.

01:33:42:01

NELSON GEORGE:

Well I mean *Shaft*, you know, one of the main threads of *Shaft*, plot points is, this relationship between Shaft, the gangster Bumpy, and these sort of Black nationalist, Black radical guys. So I think that was very intentional to have that. To make sure they were represented as part of the dialogue. So I mean, I think that you know it's interesting because Gordon was someone who

Malcom came to like and respect, but you know he also definitely was a part of that group that the next generation of Black nationalists probably didn't like as much or didn't respect as much.

01:34:19:02

NELSON GEORGE:

Precisely because there was a lot of skepticism about the idea of that-- of that-- not of... working in these White institutions. Were you a sellout or were you not? I think that's something that I'm sure he had to wrestle with. Not so much from the Panthers, but from some of the other more radical elements because there were-- People forget that in the early 70s, you know, in New York there were lots of-- it wasn't just the Panthers were here. There was the Black Liberation Army, the people who ended up joining Chesimard who became Assata Shakur. There were people robbing banks, and you know there were a couple of murder cases associated. There were a lot of factions within what was considered progressive Black thought, and not all of them would have been as... just as in the movie they're sort of skeptical of Shaft, and they're even... they're very skeptical of Bumpy. There was- there were lots of people- there were people who were robbing drug dealers, who were like, you know, the only way to get rid of them is to really get rid of them.

01:35:19:18

NELSON GEORGE:

So, I imagine that was a challenge, in some respects, for someone who was perceived as a mainstream guy, especially after he did the Hollywood movie.

You know, are you really down afterwards? I mean I don't know if that was-- I don't know specifics, but the vibe was very judgemental for a time about what it was to be in the system.

01:35:42:18

NELSON GEORGE:

What I remember of it was that it was well received, overall. Everyone knew that it was iconic. I mean, it's still a kind of formulaic movie in some respects with these different things that Gordon put in it that made it feel special. I don't remember really the reviews other than like, "Oh blaxploitation movies, that's a terrible thing." There was all of that. There was a you know. That was a whole interesting mainstream Black agenda, NAACP-- NAACP is the ones who named it blaxploitation, and it was this critique that these movies were bad for Black people. Some of the critiques were really leveled at hip-hop later. You can look at some of the reviews and some of the comments, and they're actually are in a very similar language to what *Shaft* and other movies were talked about, how they were critiqued.

01:36:37:03

NELSON GEORGE:

Which is ironic because, you know, Gordon is clearly not a guy trying to exploit Black people for money, so he's the last guy to make something that would be totally trivial. And I think he invested a very-- boiler material with a lot of different feelings and a lot of different textures.

01:36:57:19

NELSON GEORGE:

You've got to remember, so there's this... "We shall overcome. We need to fit in to get in." And that was the 60s up until late 60s, and then there became a critique of that by the next-- a younger generation who didn't believe in noble struggle, who didn't want to be hit with hoses, who didn't believe in any of that. "Burn Baby Burn" was coming up, you know, and the idea of Black power became very very popular with younger people. So, in a sense, *Shaft* makes a nod to that with the radical element in there, and the idea that Shaft is this independent entity, and not beholden to any of these- whether it's the Black radicals or the White policemen. He takes on a job to help this girl and then he decides I'm going to see it all the way through.

01:37:49:10

NELSON GEORGE:

So that, it's not necessarily-- he wasn't a civil rights guy. He curses, he's having sex with this White woman on screen. He's, you know, kind of badass. That's not necessarily what a lot of people thought they wanted to see for Black images on screen. Remember Sidney Poitier is the dominant civil rights era star, and he's one of the biggest stars in America. In '67, he is the biggest star in America, and that's only 4 years before *Shaft* comes out, but there was a shift in the community's view of-- People got tired of Sidney being so nice and wearing a white shirt and tie. And they were ready for rebellion, another kind of rebellion. And you were seeing that in the streets. You were seeing

that in the pop culture. And so *Shaft* was the movie that took... kind of mainstreamed a lot of that rebellion through this sort of detective character.

Speech duality

01:38:59:03

NELSON GEORGE:

You have to have... you have to speak-- if you're going to be a successful Black person in America, you have to speak a couple of languages, and one of them is official presentational language and one of them is like what you say to your friends behind closed doors, or on the corner. And that's Gordon, Gordon was able to do that because he was a real dude. But he... that particular generation also, we've got to remember, let's say up to hip-hop. Hip-hop people have sort of shifted the paradigm a little bit.

01:39:28:18

NELSON GEORGE:

But up until then, the idea was to be able to fit in in White areas, not to impose Black style on... and he comes out of that world. So you always had that duality. I think some of the figures that have come up later, out of- post hip-hop, I think they have a slightly different approach to that duality, because they're... hip-hop has kind of imposed itself onto American pop culture in a way. So people have to come to them in a way, in the way they dress and speak. That wasn't the case then, and the case really up- through

the 80s definitely was like I have to come to White America on White America's terms while having another language or another way to relate when I'm not in the spotlight, and he definitely had that.

Relationship with Gordon Parks

01:40:21:13

NELSON GEORGE:

Well, I was just a guy, I don't think-- I don't know how well he knew me. I had friends who knew him, so I was able to be around him some. I'm assuming he's into some of my writing, and it was very... actually, I remember having a conversation with him about music because that was a passion of his. I didn't realize he was writing like orchestral works, he wasn't just writing movie scores. So he had a whole musical side to him that was very interesting to me because I was like, "Okay you're a photographer. I knew you did scores to..." He did the score for the second *Shaft* movie.

01:41:02:10

NELSON GEORGE:

But I didn't know how much that meant to him, and it made me realize that an artistic life isn't always about... everything's not about the work that becomes celebrated. That a big part of being an artist is being able to experiment and expand, and you may not be the same artist as a composer

that you were as a photographer or filmmaker, but there's information, and there's things you have to say that you can't say in those mediums perhaps.

01:41:32:08

NELSON GEORGE:

So I was really intrigued by that, that a guy who was so- it gave me a kind of window into the idea that a guy who was so accomplished, there's always other things to do. People who are so good at... I've seen this with other people who were really good at stand up comedy or writing pop songs or whatever. There's always something else they want to do. There's always another part of them that they're still searching for. And he had that. I think music, of all of his work, I think you, know you, have photography, you have cinema, you have books which he was quite successful. And the least successful I think of those four was his music, and I think that's one of the things he desperately wanted to be successful. So I mean I think that's part of being an artist, the idea that there's always something else to reach for. Okay I've done that, alright yeah whatever, what about this over here?

Leadbelly

01:42:27:03

NELSON GEORGE:

Instruction, you know, we have film school, there's millions of lectures on how to write this. I think people are making a lot of money telling people how to do things they already know how to do, in my opinion. And Gordon's a

good example of that. I mean, he was an excellent writer, had a very strong voice as a writer, a very particular point of view, which is all you need. And he had an eye. I mean, you know, like *Leadbelly*, I remember *Leadbelly* was, you know, I think *Leadbelly* was kind of a creative-- it didn't reach the level in terms of, definitely in terms of audience that he wanted, and I still don't think it's actually being seen as much as it's amazing.

01:43:07:21

NELSON GEORGE:

It's one of the early early, when you think about it, biopics of major Black American musical artists by a Black filmmaker, and it's probably one of his least seen works. So, I always felt like that was a quite beautiful film and had kind of a mythic quality to it that represented his-- I mean, his... I always saw it as a projection of him as well.

01:43:32:12

NELSON GEORGE:

Why would he want to do *Leadbelly*? *Leadbelly* was a great story and it's this story of this musician who's not a typical-- *Leadbelly* wasn't necessarily just a blues, he had a folk-- he had a lot of different-- he was a mix of many different things. *Leadbelly* was. And I think that's something that approached Gordon-- that Gordon really liked about doing that film. And you know Roger mostly gives a really great performance and it's kind of a shame that that film hasn't been seen more.

01:43:57:00

NELSON GEORGE:

It didn't do well. It's probably a topic that most of White-- it's very impressive he got it made quite honestly. That coming off *Shaft* and *Shaft's Big Score* (1972), some of the other stuff he's done. 1976 is basically the end of the blaxploitation era basically, there were a couple of other-- Richard Pryor starts getting work in 77 and so forth. So, I remember I was in college, and I was starting to do some film writing. I actually did some freelancing at the Amsterdam News starting around 78.

01:44:28:18

NELSON GEORGE:

By then, by the time I-- So 78, I'm getting invited to screenings and stuff while I'm still in college. There's Richard Pryor movies, and that was basically it. That whole wave of Black films. So it wasn't necessarily Gordon stopped getting calls. Almost everybody stopped getting calls. The only Black filmmaker, two Black- who kept going, that same year, 76 or so I think, or 75, Cooley High came out. So Michael Schultz gets in there. And he gets, he does Cooley High, he does Car Wash. So he becomes a go to guy. And Sidney because Sidney is a star is able to keep going and he has a couple of big hit movies, Stir Crazy and stuff. But basically if you were a Black director or writer after about '75 it was pretty much done for a long time. All those films had stopped being made.

01:45:21:11

NELSON GEORGE:

So I don't know if it was, I don't necessarily think it was just Leadbelly's failure itself. I think that that whole wave of Black film hit the Hollywood window and they moved on, and it became about Pryor. It became about a couple of other guys, mostly doing comedies, by the way. You know, Pryor did comedies, Michael Schultz did comedies, even Poitier's work, you know, *Stir Crazy*, he wasn't doing the dramas anymore.

01:45:48:12

NELSON GEORGE:

Aside from American International films, which still grinded out some stuff, it really went to a halt. So I don't necessarily think that it was just Gordon's Leadbelly alone. The same way that I think *Shaft* had started... I mean if you go back and say Sweetback and so forth started something, then *Shaft* blows it up. Then there'd been between 71 and 76 there'd been like 100 movies it seemed like. I mean you go back, there's movies I'd never heard of that were made during that time. When you think about the-- But, you know, *The Hammer*, and you know Jim Brown movies, all these guys. There's tons of movies being made. Not all of them-- and then it became a trend, it made money to a certain point. The audience got saturated with the same formulas. I think the marketing commitment from the studios got less and less. So I don't necessarily think that Gordon, it wasn't an artistic failure, he was caught up, the wave that he helped create, crested around the time of Leadbelly, and he suffered as a director after that.

01:46:50:01

NELSON GEORGE:

I mean it was... to Hollywood it was a trend, and it made money, it made stars. Some of those people went on. Even though someone like, I'm sure Roundtree's career, he stopped, he didn't get the jobs. Ron O'Neal *Superfly* (1972), he didn't get the jobs. Pam Grier kind of was able to go forward for a while. But even those- it all dried up for almost all of them except for the comic- If you weren't doing comedy, and you weren't in a Richard Pryor in the late 70s, there wasn't much going on.

Blaxploitation films

01:47:29:07

NELSON GEORGE:

I mean, to me-- to people now it's just a description. It was put on those films as a way to... because exploitation movies were what Hollywood you know, they were-- B movies were-- everyone took B movies-- now B movies are A movies, back then B movies were B movies. So yeah some people took it as a negative. It was a label. A lot of the filmmakers didn't feel their films- some films got labeled blaxploitation that weren't. *Leadbelly* is not a blaxploitation movie in the sense that it's not- it's an art film really.

01:48:00:06

NELSON GEORGE:

Souther, even Cooley High weren't really... blaxploitation movies tend to be gangster action movies with either drug dealers or detectives. And you know, Gordon kind of... if you can say that Gordon kind of created... *Shaft* became the template for Fred Williamson, Jim Brown, Jim Kelly, and a bunch of other people, Troubleman. *Shaft* was the big bang, because the detective had been, you know, was always a staple of Hollywood moviemaking. And Black detective became the new thing. And for 3 or 4 years, there were just tons of Black detective movies. But yeah *Shaft* had a good run. They did 3 movies, I think they had a TV show, he still works as Shaft in these bad remakes.

Legacy

01:48:53:23

NELSON GEORGE:

Well a film like *Leadbelly* has a, you know, is a direct line to *Moonlight* in terms of cinematic style, I think. I think, you know, Ryan Coogler, what he's been doing, muscular kind of male action things. You know, Wesley Snipes' career was definitely built on *Shaft*. He had a movie called *Passenger 57* which is a *Shaft* movie. He had a bunch of movies like that that he made during his height. So it's a lot of... I mean *Shaft* the movie is in the DNA of any action movie, cause you know if you're doing an action movie of any kind, you want a hot score of some kind.

01:49:36:22

NELSON GEORGE:

And you want iconic clothes. What you wear makes a big difference if you can make it work. So, I see like *Shaft* is in a lot of action movies, it's in a lot of the idea of how to even shoot a hero, how to ground them in their community. I mean, the movies that are made with sort of like that kind of vibe that don't have a good sense of place, like they make a lot of movies for New York and Toronto or whatever. They don't have the same... you know, when you're doing New York, *Shaft* along with things like *French Connection* (1971), they're New York movies. You can feel the call of the fall in those movies.

01:50:22:14

NELSON GEORGE:

You know, when you're doing... There's a language that *Shaft* has about a sense of place. And I think that's one of the things that, even if some parts of it don't work as well now, the sense of New York that Gordon created, that's indelible. You can watch that film now with the sound off and look at buildings, look at streets, and feel really like you're transported back in time.

01:50:46:18

NELSON GEORGE:

With *Sweetback*, Melvin got a young band called Earth Wind and Fire to do a lot of the music. He, himself, Melvin was himself a composer and had done albums well before he made *Sweetback*, but I think *Shaft* is the big bang, because it was a hit movie and a hit soundtrack. And this is before people think about *Saturday Night Fever*, which happened like 8 years later or

whatever. *Shaft* is the first, to me, modern contemporary urban movie, contemporary cutting edge hit laden soundtrack.

01:51:20:09

NELSON GEORGE:

That's Saturday Night Fever, that's Purple Rain, that's, you know, Eminem's movie. All of those movies that came, it's *Shaft* to me that is the beginning of that. The great hit artist, Isaac Hayes was at the height of his powers, imbuing this iconic character with his music, and the two of them kind of become symbiotic. There's very few movies that have been made since then that have succeeded that have that you know-- that's the wrong way to put it. When you think about movies with an urban sense, let's use that. You know, Saturday Night Fever, the music and the character go hand in hand. Purple Rain, Eight Mile with Eminem. you know. *Shaft* is to me, is the template for that. Hot artist, iconic character, sense of place.

A Great Day in Harlem

01:52:22:08

NELSON GEORGE:

My publicist at the time, a woman named Lesley Pitts, I think I was promoting a book or something, was telling me about XXL Magazine which was a very, then, new hip-hop magazine, was going to do a reenactment of the Great Day in Harlem photo that had been taken back in 58 I think.

01:52:38:14

NELSON GEORGE:

And I thought to myself, I'd then was just sort of... I'd done some Hollywood movie stuff then, but I was sort of dabbling more in doing documentary stuff. I said, "Well, I don't have any money, but maybe I can make some kind of deal with the magazine." And I had some friends who were really good documentary filmmakers. So we made some kind of reciprocal deal. I would have rights to the block, the actual photoshoot, (coughs) excuse me, the rights to shoot on the block, and I would make them partners in it.

01:53:09:20

NELSON GEORGE:

And we would get a bunch of guys, basically pro bono, I had no money, but it was great... everyone thought this was a cool idea. So I think it was 3 video cameras, and I think we had a 16, a little 8mm little handheld thing. And we got there the day before. Gordon-- Well here's the thing, they were trying to do the photo, but the big deal was: who was going to shoot it? And they were desperately trying to get Gordon. And he turned them down at least 2 times, maybe 3 times.

01:53:42:04

NELSON GEORGE:

A woman named Sheena Lester was an editor at XXL magazine. She finally got Gordon on the phone. I'm not quite sure what she said to him, but she was able to convince him that this was a culturally important thing that he needed to be part of, and that he... there was a connection between the jazz world

and a new generation. And she made a very compelling argument and he finally agreed to do it.

01:54:04:13

NELSON GEORGE:

And he doing that photo made the photo really important. And there's so many artists who were there precisely because Gordon Parks was shooting the photo, who might have been like "Eh I don't know. I don't want to go." Gordon Parks shooting a photo of all of these guys reenacting the jazz photo, connecting the generations between the hip-hop world and the jazz world, between old Harlem and contemporary Harlem of 98. That was compelling. And there's so many folks who were there: Most Def, Willie D from Houston, from the Geto Boys. They were doing a wide range, not just... a wide range of artists, all saying part of the reason for being there was Gordon Parks.

Gordon Parks' work

01:54:51:21

NELSON GEORGE:

I think, you know, it's interesting... we talked about it earlier, I guess. You know, it's that this ability to move through different environments. I mean, a photographer particularly, really a good photographer isn't supposed to be, in my opinion at least, imposing-- especially if you're doing photojournalism. If you're doing a stylized photo shoot with blah blah blah and sets. That's another thing.

01:55:15:04

NELSON GEORGE:

His whole thing was to be there, but not to be... and have a point of view, definitely had a point of view about Black liberation, Black freedom, White oppression, fashion, a lot of stuff... but not to impose that in the environment. To be able to be there and look around and find those moments where 'boom, boom, boom.' So that's an interesting, you know... because I know other photographers from that era who... I just don't think- he just was a better photographer than a lot of other people. It really, I just think it really comes down to that. He had this skillset. There were a lot of other people around who took great pictures. It wasn't like he was the only guy taking fantastic photos of the movement or of Malcom X, but he was able to be there and take the best photos. And you know, we were just here talking, and there's so many iconic photographs. That I- you mentioned. "Oh yeah that was down in Alabama," and then the stuff he took in Harlem, the stuff he did in Canada of the oil workers.

01:56:30:16

NELSON GEORGE:

Yeah the Ali photos. I mean, his own self portraits. Some of the fashion photos that he did in Paris. The stuff he did in his apartment with a bunch of rocks and sand. You know... you know... He's up there with the great American photographers. And maybe because he's also a multidimensional artist, as a filmmaker and a writer, he was also able to leap out of the world of

photography into the world of popular culture. I think that's one of the big differences. He wasn't just a guy who photojournalists knew or other people in the photo art world knew. He was part of the dialogue in pop culture.

01:57:14:10

NELSON GEORGE:

And you know, we were talking earlier about him as a role model for people like myself, and that is, when you think on this current... last couple of generations, there's a big emphasis on being multidimensional. "I'm a rapper, but I also act, and I have a clothing line. I have a- My website sells this." Gordon in his own way was a predecessor of all of that because he was able to be so many good... great in so many different things.

01:57:50:23

NELSON GEORGE:

And that's you know, I to this day, aspire to the standard that he set as an artist. Because it's about getting out there, being curious, be willing to fail, and just not being scared. Clearly, he wasn't scared of being in dangerous situations where he was shooting. Or to put himself out there artistically in places. I mean, to do *Shaft*, you know. I'm sure, coming after *The Learning Tree*, which was something that was very much his life that he was invested in. To go and make the leap to make an action movie. That's a big leap back then. Knowing also that there was... he was, if not the first or second Black director to make a Hollywood movie.

01:58:44:05

NELSON GEORGE:

When he shot the images, these amazing images of oil workers in Canada, that's a job. Now the fact that it's a Black guy is doing it is important, but it's still a job. There's not much else you're going to do with that. So I think when you look at the Red Jackson films... I mean when you look at the Red Jackson photos in Harlem, when you look at the photos of the Black girl with the White dolls, he clearly knows what he's doing. He clearly knows that these things are impactful. When you shoot in Alabama and you frame your shot so these very well dressed Black woman and her child are seen with the 'Colored' sign you know what you're doing.

01:59:24:13

NELSON GEORGE:

So it's a duality-- I think a career is a duality. I don't think everything you do in a career is going to, be move the needle for anything. I think some of them are just things so that you can pay the bills that week, and you need to pay the bills so that you can do the work that moves the needle. So I think he had- he did both. His wife is right, that some of these are just jobs.

01:59:46:21

NELSON GEORGE:

And he knew he could do them and get paid and buy a nice turtle neck and move onto the next gig. And then some were very clearly, "I have a statement to make or I can help these people here make their statement better," you know. So I think it's that duality. I think that's the truth is that no one is a

social justice warrior 24 hours a day. It's exhausting. Some stuff you just have to do cause you do it and then some things you do cause you need to do it.

Gordon Parks' relevance today

02:00:23:03

NELSON GEORGE:

Well I mean listen, his work pops up all the time on my IG feed, you know. He took great images, and in an image– in a world where Instagram is, I don't know, to me feels like it's the number one communication tool right now. It's all about images, and it's all about striking images. And he's– his work... I mean, I went to see the show in D.C. I'd never seen the work that he did in Canada. It's stunning stuff.

02:00:48:17

NELSON GEORGE:

To see those in context, you see the work that's for hire about working people. You see the work that's sort of artistically driven, but again, it's the same aesthetic. I think what's really interesting, it's not like he changed what he did from place to place. He always was Gordon Parks. He always had his eye.

02:01:08:10

NELSON GEORGE:

He always... It's just the context was different because of the time. And so those pictures have legs because they're great images. They're not because

they're agitprop. They have legs because they're really amazing. The idea of the American Gothic. That's a very political statement, but it only works because it's really well executed, and it has legs because it's well executed. I'm sure it wasn't the only political image that was shot during that time. So, I think that the combination of artistic integrity and subject and time makes them that, but his work when he wasn't doing that is just as good.

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