

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

PAUL ROTH INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Paul Roth
Director
Ryerson Image Centre
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Interviewed by John Maggio
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CREW:

Paul Roth. Take 2.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Paul Roth

Director

Ryerson Image Centre

Gordon Parks' early life

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PAUL ROTH:

Gordon was born in Kansas and was a farm child, and one of the youngest if not the youngest children in a very large family. And he grew up in a kind of manner that I think most people can't imagine. You know, extremely remote community on a farm where the children

had to work as hard as their parents, you know. And he wrote about that really movingly in a couple of books: *The Learning Tree* and *A Choice of Weapons*. I think that it really helped set him up for his future in the sense that it gave him a tremendous understanding of the different lives that people lived. It gave him a great empathy for the varieties of experience that people had.

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PAUL ROTH:

I feel like he—he probably as a child was always yearning for something greater. You really get that sense from the memoirs and what that means in a way is that he was always thinking about his place. So he was very self aware and while he never seemed in his memoirs, in his writing, even later in life when he was looking back at his life through a series of retrospective exhibitions and documentaries and so forth. He never seemed to have the—that sort of crippling narcissism of self-awareness that people often have. But he—but he did have a tremendous insight into himself, and he would frequently pause in the middle of his life on to take stock of how he got to where he was and how he fit in and how he didn't fit in.

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PAUL ROTH:

You know, how it is that he always felt a bit at odds with the world that he had entered. And I don't think he was ever terribly comfortable with his success while at the same time loving every minute of his success, so.

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PAUL ROTH:

I think he was no stranger to the extremes of experience that an African American could have had at that time or that a poor person could have. He watched all of that unfold throughout his childhood, and then professionally he watched it unfold through a series of assignments. He himself was in danger doing some of the work that he did as a photographer, especially. So I think that he was always aware of that and I think that he openly admitted in his memoirs to having experienced great anger and frustration, in particular frustration at the boundaries that would confine him and that would keep him from realizing his goals.

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PAUL ROTH:

However, I think he also had this incredible ability, probably part nature, part nurture to subsume his own anger, to subsume his frustration, to bury his negative feelings, and to think about how to move forward and how to achieve his goals. That made him incredibly

strong. It was a form of ambition that I think was tested all the time by obstacles, and for some people that would be crushing, it would destroy them, it would consume them in anger. But with him it sort of drove him forward. It was like he was able to marshal and channel the energy of his anger to do something productive and positive.

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PAUL ROTH:

You know, it's hard to know in a way because when I met Gordon, he was nearing the end of his life and had already had his incredible career, and I saw a person who is incredibly comfortable with his fame and very proud of his achievements. But I do think that if you look back at his life, what you see is a person who actually had to fight quite hard through a lot of barriers and who did somehow manage to give the impression of grace while landing on his feet while recovering from the blow.

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PAUL ROTH:

And that's I think incredibly rare, and it helped him a lot. I think that he had a grace that made it easier for people to open doors for him as opposed to close the doors that would keep him from achieving his goals. People wanted to help him. Throughout his career he had patrons who were very supportive of him, and I think that that had a

lot to do, not only with his skill, not only with his talent, with his innate charm, which was considerable, but also with the fact that he had tremendous grace in how he handled what it was that was thrown in his way.

Photo essays

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PAUL ROTH:

Yeah. Well you know, his first photo essay for *Life* Magazine was incredibly important and it really set the template for everything that followed and that was the project on a Harlem gang leader. This was a story that *Life* Magazine probably couldn't have even conceived of doing prior to Gordon's arrival because to photograph a Harlem gang meant that whichever journalist, whichever photographer was sent just uptown from the offices of *Time* and *Life*, they would have to fit into a Black world, to a world of teenagers, and to a world of violence.

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PAUL ROTH:

And I think Gordon felt, when he went to the picture editor of *Life* Magazine, that this was something he uniquely could do, something that he could bring to *Life* that they otherwise could not have published. And so there was tremendous power in those photographs

that came just from his access, and then on top of that the photographs are incredible. And *Life's* editors understood that; they did an amazing layout of pictures around it, and that really established his career at *Life*. So I think that was a critically important photo essay. Another one that I think was very important was the one that he did in the 1950's on the effects of segregation in the rural south.

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PAUL ROTH:

Photographs were color, whereas Gordon had before that photographed almost exclusively in black and white; certainly for *Life* Magazine he had photographed in black and white, except on some fashion assignments, and those photographs had tremendous impact partly because of the color. At that time a searing photo essay in the pages of *Life* was practically expected to be in black and white, and there was an abstraction of reality that took place when something was shown in black and white.

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PAUL ROTH:

It was somehow easier, I think, for the readers to accept wrongdoing, to incorporate it into their own understanding of the world, and the relationship of difficult events to their lives when they would see it in black and white. But these photographs were in color, and they were

really tough I think for a lot of people to look at. So that photo essay had a great impact on the audience, on the readers of *Life* Magazine, and I think that makes that one very important. And certainly now from our current moment, when you look back at his career, those photographs resonate even more now, I think, as history than they might have resonated then as photojournalism of a current event.

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PAUL ROTH:

They seem to have taken on power because of our own desire in the present day to really understand what segregation looked like, and that photo essay is one of the lasting documents of that time.

Black and white versus color film

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PAUL ROTH:

Well, I think color is the tonality of everyday life. You know, if you're a reader of a magazine in 1956 and you occasionally see a story in your small town newspaper about what life is like for a person of color living in another state, you know, hundreds of miles away, you're reading. You're reading text. It's in black and white, but it's words. And then if you see photographs, you might see black and white pictures of

a personality. You know, Martin Luther King at that time was a rising personality that people might have seen a photograph of.

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PAUL ROTH:

But in 1956, to see the lives of people portrayed so movingly and to see all of that in color I think had incredible power for people. The people that Gordon photographed were everyday people. They were not political people. They were trying to live their lives, but their circumstances were straightened by the boundaries and the barriers that were everyday for people who were poor, for people who lived in a rural area and for people who went to a one-room schoolhouse. These are people who had trouble getting jobs.

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PAUL ROTH:

Gordon made their lives real. He made their circumstances palpable and color really helped him do that. He was quite resistant initially to using color for photographic assignments but he started to understand over time how to photograph in color in order to help people translate experiences that were alien to them. And I think that he did it by focusing on the everyday. Those pictures stand out now partly because they're not political photographs, they're not of marches, they're not of speeches, they're not of famous people.

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PAUL ROTH:

Those pictures stand out because they preceded the days of the Civil Rights Movement that have—that are likeliest to have lived on through photographs. This is a period prior to that, and these are people who were the subjects of Jim Crow laws, the people who really suffered. And I think photographing those people in color only added to that. There was a sense then for readers at the time, and I think there's an even greater sense now that this is actually what was meant by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement when they fought for legislation, when they marched in the streets. They were trying to protect the lives of people like the people that were in Gordon's photographs.

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PAUL ROTH:

I think Gordon understood both intuitively and intellectually the power of representing recognizable circumstances in his photographs to an audience that he could very well imagine. I think he wanted to put himself in the feet—in the—behind the eyes of the reader of *Life* Magazine and imagine what it is that they would react to, what it is that they would respond well to. And I think that's what makes him such a great empathetic photographer. He was thinking about the impact of the pictures.

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PAUL ROTH:

He was thinking about the story that would be conveyed, and one of the ways that he did that was that he liked to embody whatever subject he had been asked by his editors to represent in a family, in you know, the face and body of a child, in a home, in a neighborhood, in a community because he knew that the readers of *Life* Magazine would be innately sympathetic to the circumstances of a child, of a family, and of a community because they themselves have experienced all those things. And I think he understood that people, once drawn into these images, would understand the differences between their relatively more comfortable lives and the more difficult and challenged lives of the people in the pictures.

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PAUL ROTH:

You know, he might have come on that subject himself. I don't know to what extent he read those texts. I suspect he did, but I don't know that. What I do know is whatever he intuited, he then became very serious about and very conscious of because when you look at his photo essays through the 50's and into the 60's, even into the early 70's, you have a really profound sense that Gordon wanted to represent lives in

a way that was visually dramatic, but not—but not dramatic in a way that would make people seem dangerous or unknown or unknowable.

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PAUL ROTH:

He wanted to portray people in a way that was everyday, that was quotidian and sympathetic, and I think that was critical to him because his empathy, he felt, could not be translated to the audience, could not be passed along unless he did that. He spoke very often about a lesson that he learned at the beginning of his career from the famous picture editor Roy Stryker who said that it wasn't easy to represent suffering or marginalization, racism, specifically, in someone's life. That you couldn't actually easily narrativize that— that it was very hard to tell the audience that somebody is suffering from an invisible force from something vast and impersonal like racism.

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PAUL ROTH:

But that if he as a photographer could figure out how to visualize that, that he would have great power in his images. And I think Gordon set about doing that right from early in his career, and by the time he was, you know, in his prime at *Life* Magazine, he knew how to do that better than almost anyone. He could make a picture that was incredibly

direct, straightforward, simple and pure. Free, if you will, of the external drama of the Civil Rights Movement.

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PAUL ROTH:

Free of the drama that typically would attach itself to descriptions of poverty and suffering, but somehow all the more powerful for that. That just looking in the proud face of somebody who is poor can help convey a million things about poverty and a million things about resilience.

Life Magazine

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PAUL ROTH:

It's really tough to describe *Life* today because *Life Magazine* had a kind of cultural force and power and such a tremendous and wide reach in the 1960's that it's difficult for us to really explain all the different ways that people might have seen or understood *Life Magazine*. I think that our common view now is that it was a middle-class magazine, that most of its readers were relatively comfortable. That on balance, the readership was White and suburban or urban, but it is also true that *Life Magazine* had something that they

called the pass along ratio, which is that every issue would've been seen, not just by the subscriber or the newsstand buyer, but also by, you know, up to 10 or 15 people after the first reader.

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PAUL ROTH:

So that if you were sitting in a barbershop, you might be reading a copy of *Life* Magazine that's three weeks old and that you didn't subscribe to, but it's sitting there. That if you were finished with your copy of *Life*, you might give it to the person next door. And so the readership was so wide that it's difficult now to go back and say oh, the *Life* reader was monolithically X. I think that becomes even more true when you look at other countries. *Life* Magazine was not viewed in Brazil the same way that it was viewed in the United States. There was a rich tradition in the media of describing both *Life* and its sister publication, *Time* as being political publications that represented US foreign policy.

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PAUL ROTH:

And this is throughout Latin America. So there was a great distrust you could say, certainly on the part of the media in countries like Brazil, and there was a suspicion that *Life* Magazine was like a stalking horse for US foreign policy. So when Gordon arrived in Brazil, there

was a very strong sense that anything—certainly anything about Brazil that would be written in *Life* Magazine or represented in *Life* Magazine would in some ways align with the foreign policy goals of the US Congress and the newly elected president John F. Kennedy.

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PAUL ROTH:

I think that if there is anything that we can say about the politics of *Life* Magazine at the time, it is that they represented the politics of the publisher, Henry Luce. And Henry Luce was known all across the United States and all over the world really as an ardent anti-Communist. Somebody who had tremendous knowledge of China in particular, and quite extraordinary knowledge as well of the Soviet Union and the various countries viewed as satellites of or dependent on the Soviet Union.

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PAUL ROTH:

He was especially animated by the revolution in Cuba, which had happened quite recently and at the height of the cold war, which is the period we're talking about here, he saw *Life* and *Time*, both of his main magazines as being bulwarks against Communism internationally, and that was very clear on the pages of *Life*. You could any week read an

anti-Communist sensibility in the middle of a completely anodyne article about say house ownership in the United States.

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PAUL ROTH:

And more extremely than that, you would frequently see editorials in the pages of the magazine that were possessed by a kind of fear of Communism in a sense that Communism could very soon sweep over the United States of America. So that was an absolutely pronounced political position of the magazine at the time.

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PAUL ROTH:

One can imagine, now looking back, that Gordon had enough of a developed sense of his position at the magazine that he could succeed, and over time. I think he really valued his position there. It was an unusually valuable place to be because whenever he would put photographs in the magazine, he was guaranteed to reach an enormous audience of many millions of people, and I think he wanted to protect that position. So, he had to figure out how to fit in. I don't think he had a choice. I think that's especially true because he was a Black man and the only person of color on the staff of photojournalists, which was a very, very famous and distinguished and professional and skilled cohort.

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PAUL ROTH:

He wanted to be in that club, he wanted to stay in that club, and he fought hard to get there so why wouldn't he fight hard to stay there. So I do think that he had a strong sense of it, but I think he also had a sense of the fragility of his position. That did make him nervous at times. He often spoke about walking a tight rope everyday at *Life* Magazine; having a very powerful fear that at any moment it could be taken away from him. And I think that that made him quite strategic in what he did to maintain his position. I think it also drove him to succeed, to constantly do really, really good work so that he would be invaluable to his editors.

The Flavio Story

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PAUL ROTH:

In 1961, *Life* Magazine was celebrating its 25th anniversary as a magazine, and the editors had, under orders from Henry Luce, the publisher, decided that they were going to refocus the magazine around anti-communism. At the same time they were redesigning the magazine as well, and there was this desire to have important, momentous, even, articles that would be of great interest to the

readership and draw readers to these newly designed pages of *Life* Magazine.

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PAUL ROTH:

And so, right in the middle of that redesign, the editors wanted to do a five-part, ten-week series about what was called a crisis in Latin America. A crisis of poverty and a crisis of Communism spreading across the region. Gordon was asked to photograph the second issue of that five-part series and to embody through his photographs the subject of poverty, and to demonstrate the tremendous risks that poverty put the population at.

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PAUL ROTH:

Not just the suffering that they experienced through poverty but the risk that they would expose their countries to Communism. It's hard to imagine now, but it was seen almost as a viral thing; that if Communism could sweep in that it would overtake a region, turn the governments into adversaries of the United States, and this was a very urgent problem. So Gordon, who I think didn't care that much about that political framing, was nevertheless asked to make an effective photo essay that would illustrate poverty dramatically, that would

help Americans understand the scale of the problem of poverty in Latin America.

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PAUL ROTH:

Brazil was selected by the editors as the country where the photographs would be taken. The decision was made that the quite graphic and picturesque Favelas of Brazil would be an ideal visual setting for the poverty that was to be depicted, and then Gordon was sent to Rio de Janeiro to bring this into visual form, to make pictures that would really be powerful and communicate the poverty that the magazine's editors wanted at the heart of their five-part series.

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PAUL ROTH:

There was this sense among the editors that the real danger of Communism's spread was a danger that would first reach the males at the heart of households, lower class and middle-class households throughout South and Central America. There was a sense that working age men were potential soldiers in a Communist army, and so the assignment that Gordon received was actually to focus his photo essay on a patriarch, on a male about thirty years old who had a family, a large family preferably. It's lost to history why *Life* Magazine wanted that. But they actually created a script.

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PAUL ROTH:

Um, and the editors in the Rio de Janeiro bureau of *Life* Magazine went so far as to identify prospective families with a male at the top of the household. So Gordon actually had the very specific assignment of photographing a man named Jose Gonzalvez, a man who would be at the heart of the picture story, and he had been cast for that purpose. It was Gordon who decided that this was not very visually interesting and that to photograph Jose would not really create empathy on the part of *Life's* readers.

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PAUL ROTH:

And I think while *Life's* editors wanted to frighten the readers of the magazine by showing them the potential danger of the spread of Communism. Gordon wanted to reach the readers of *Life* Magazine with an empathetic message about how terrible poverty was, how awful the suffering was in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro. So he had a very different motive when he made his photographs.

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PAUL ROTH:

Gordon had a list when he arrived in Rio. He was given a list, and the list was of a number of prospective families. The idea of the editors in Rio was that Gordon would visit each of the families in turn and decide which one would be best for the picture essay that he would make. This is a bit of background information that the readers would not have had and that even people today, looking back at history can't quite believe, that the subjects of a photo essay would be cast as though they were actors in a movie but that is precisely how it was going to happen.

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PAUL ROTH:

What is really interesting is that Gordon chose the first family on the list. He was walking to the top of a hillside favela called Catacumba in Rio de Janeiro with the expectation that he would reach the patriarch. But the patriarch was not home. Jose, the father, was actually at the bottom of the hill and Gordon had likely passed right by him on his way up the hill. The father was selling fruit and turpentine and bleach in a stand at the bottom of the hill working all day. So up at home, at the top of the hill was the family, which consisted of children, the oldest being twelve years old, a boy named Flavio.

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PAUL ROTH:

Gordon later remembered that as he was walking up the hill, he was passed by Flavio, this twelve-year-old boy. That Flavio was carrying a big five-gallon tin of water on his head, and that he was spindly and frail, that he seemed almost like the picture of suffering. But incongruously he smiled at Gordon, a big beaming smile, a charismatic smile, as Gordon remembered it later. And that in that moment, Gordon knew that this was his subject. It's hard to take that completely at face value.

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PAUL ROTH:

One imagines that it's really the next few minutes that made the difference as Gordon actually made it up to the house, knocked on the door, saw that the little boy he had just seen on the trail was the little boy in the house, and then as he entered the home and saw the dynamic between Flavio and his siblings, one imagines that that's really when he knew. But either way, it was all over. He never visited any of the other families on the list. He was much less interested in the father from that moment forward, and I think, in that moment, Gordon had forged a kind of metaphorical—you could even say father-son relationship with his subject.

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PAUL ROTH:

Where he was looking at an image of a child that reminded himself of his own childhood in Kansas, and where he became paternal almost by extension, very sympathetic to Flavio and to his struggle. And that's really what he tried to represent. And he did it in a very personal way that I think had almost nothing to do with the agenda of *Life* Magazine's editors.

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PAUL ROTH:

When Gordon was at the top of the hill, he was looking at shacks on stilts, essentially, constructed from cast off pieces of wood and tin roofing. Broken pieces of lumber just sort of stitched together if you will, quite haphazardly and somewhat dangerously. You can even see when you look at his photographs that the pilings that were used to keep the houses aloft were— were rotted wood; wood that was probably left over from the construction of other shacks cascading down the hillside.

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PAUL ROTH:

The poverty at the top of the hill was actually much worse than the poverty at the bottom of the hill. The houses at the bottom of the favela were relatively comfortable and large by comparison. They typically had closer access to the plumbing at the bottom of the hill

and to the electricity that was sometimes patched in from the city's electrical wires. At the top of the hill, it was quite muddy, filthy from rain and mud and sewage. There was no plumbing up there. There was no sewage system of any type, so it smelled terrible.

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PAUL ROTH:

It was overtly dangerous, even to walk. It was very dangerous for the children that he found in the household because they were playing amidst all of this dangerous construction, and on top of all of that there were dogs running free biting the children. The children were beating up on each other, and there was the ever-present danger of crime. It was a society that was in many ways unpoliced, and I think that for Gordon it was quite shocking. He had seen poverty in many circumstances and in different countries by that point.

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PAUL ROTH:

This was poverty that he said was beyond a scale he had ever seen. And although it seems a bit crass to say it, I think it was visually very compelling. So while he was disgusted by it on some level, he also was moved by it, and he thought that the readers of *Life Magazine* would be able to really see what suffering was like because it was so

pronounced in this community, and I think that's why he wanted to focus on it.

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PAUL ROTH:

Flavio was very compelling to him because he was an interesting mixture of extreme suffering and a charm that was startling to Gordon. He referred to him as having an almost chaplin-esque kind of physical charisma. The way that he walked, herky-jerky motion that was somehow very charming. The way that he looked. He had enormous eyes. He was a very beautiful child, but those eyes were in the body of a twelve year old that was soon to die. Flavio was always smeared with dirt and mud and wore rags for clothes.

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PAUL ROTH:

And he looked as though he was a consumptive, being overtaken by tuberculosis or some ailment like that, and it was later discovered that he had horrible asthma, terrible asthma. But it was very clear that he was in danger of dying quite young. Gordon actually took Flavio to a doctor for the first time, and that doctor said that he had very little time left to live, no more than two years and probably much less than that. So all of this was present and visible in the body and the face of Flavio.

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PAUL ROTH:

And yet at the same time, he had this incredible spirit, this charisma that Gordon often remarked on, and a kind of happiness that belied his suffering, and all of that was very appealing to Gordon. It made him fall in love, in a way, with this little boy.

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PAUL ROTH:

He was in Rio for, I believe, five weeks making these pictures, and he spent a great deal of time with the children. He didn't live in the house at the top of the hill. He would leave the favela every day, but he was up there most days, usually very early in the morning to very late in the afternoon or early in the evening and essentially became part of the household. I think that was important because he needed the children to be very comfortable around him, so that they would simply go about their daily activities without overt awareness of him and his camera.

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PAUL ROTH:

He was there with only one other collaborator, a man named Jose Gallo who was there primarily to interpret, to translate between

English and Brazilian-Portuguese. But it was a very small, very intimate kind of setup. That was really all that was possible. The shack was incredibly small, and you can imagine that there was a great deal of awareness on the part of neighbors that there was a photographer from *Life Magazine*. And Gordon himself was— was not an easy person to miss. He was a very good-looking man, he had a kind of gravitas, a way of carrying himself that you couldn't miss. And he was obviously dressed better than most of the people that were in the favela.

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PAUL ROTH:

So there was this concern that he had and that his editors had, that he not become too much of a spectacle and that he try to fit in. All of this made it difficult, I think, to do what he did. All of this, at the same time, made for an evolving circumstance that led to richer and deeper photographs. We have a sense now, looking back at the photographs, that there was a real evolution to Gordon's documentation in the favela. That he started by making pictures of the kids and how they related to each other and that as time went on, he made more and more photographs about Flavio's particular circumstances and his isolation within the family.

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PAUL ROTH:

He was also, toward the end of his documentation, ordered by his editors to take more photographs of the father. The editors had found out that Gordon was focusing his reportage on the son, the child, and they were not happy to hear that their assignment was being tossed aside. So toward the end, Gordon made a lot of the pictures that he had originally been assigned to make. And those are, I hate to say, some of the least interesting pictures in the documentation because Gordon's heart wasn't in it. He had already decided that the real story was this little boy and his relationship to his family.

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PAUL ROTH:

You know, it's hard to project backwards and find skepticism. There's no real evidence of that. He was—he was covered as a news story. His presence was an event. He was actually met at the airport by reporters, which is hard for us to imagine now, that—you know, that—I mean, CNN journalists or television journalists can be quite famous, but you still don't imagine that you would be met at the airport as you're arriving to cover a story by other reporters who think you are the story, and yet that's exactly what happened to Gordon.

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PAUL ROTH:

And the stories that were printed were— were laudatory, and they were personality pieces if you will. They focused on the fact, the event of a famous photojournalist and more importantly a famous Black photojournalist because *Life Magazine* only had one Black photographer, arriving in a country like Brazil and bringing the attention, the klieg lights if you will of American media to a Brazilian story. That was a big deal.

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PAUL ROTH:

So when you look at these stories now you have this great impression of a star who had arrived in order to bring attention to a problem in Brazil. There was full awareness of what the subject was, while Gordon made very sure that he was not followed on his way to the favela everyday by reporters, he, nevertheless, was open with the journalists who were covering him, spoke freely about what his goals were for his reportage, and so that's all right out there in the open.

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PAUL ROTH:

One of the reasons why Gordon left *Life Magazine* as a staff member in 1960 and then hired himself back as a freelancer, was because he was branching out. He had been writing poetry and in other formats for many, many years. He was interested in many things at this point;

music as well, he was composing music. But in 1960 when he left, he had the very specific goal of doing more writing. And this eventually led to the publication of his first novel just a couple of years after the Flavio story appeared.

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PAUL ROTH:

So the editors of *Life* Magazine knew that Gordon was a writer, and they had actually included some of his writing in pieces that he had done earlier. That was very unusual. Not—it didn't—it's not that it never happened that a photographer would write something to go along with their pictures, but it was not the normal format. Normally there were reporters who would collect information and do interviews alongside the photographer, and then writers back in New York City that would write the text.

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PAUL ROTH:

And in fact, that's pretty much how this story played out. However, because Gordon was having such an extraordinary experience making this photo essay, the editor's kind of midway through Gordon's documentation realized that something special was happening, and so they asked Gordon to write a text to go along with the photographs, and they wanted it to appear in the format of a diary, because he was

right there. He was on the ground, he was still working, still every day going to the favela and making these pictures. So, I think that that was the—in a strange way the most truthful format, an imaginary diary if you will.

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PAUL ROTH:

He had not been making a diary to that point, but it was the best way to place him at the scene and then by extension, when the text appeared later as a diary by the photographer, an extension of—for the viewer so that they could find themselves in this story by imagining that they are day in and day out going with Gordon to the favela and seeing what it is that he saw. So it personalized the story for the readers and gave a kind of richness to it.

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PAUL ROTH:

It also had the effect of placing Gordon in the story so that he became effectively like an ambassador for the reader. A person that the magazine had sent to represent them and to witness poverty in the favela. Not just through his photographs, but also through his own experience of making the photographs, so it's very powerful.

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PAUL ROTH:

I think Gordon did see poverty as a set of traps that were always there for the poor. You know, a set of circumstances that were almost impossible to overcome, and I think it's instructive now to remember that at the time, poverty was analogized in— in typical popular language in the United States to a thing that could be overcome, to a set of circumstances that, while unfortunate, were temporary. And then along with that, there was this sense that people who were poor, intractably poor, generationally poor were at fault for their poverty. Because they should be able to get out of it, that because it can be escaped, only a weak person doesn't escape.

01:40:00:05

PAUL ROTH:

So in Gordon's generation, the belief that poverty was incredibly persistent and complex through generations, making it nearly impossible for people to find their way into a different tier or a different class of success in American society, that was a quite radical perspective. And it was one that a lot of people didn't agree with. Gordon, I think, saw that he had a challenge in representing that. That to make images that would convey that was incredibly difficult but worth the effort.

01:40:40:16

PAUL ROTH:

And by this time in 1961, I think that he was such a great image-maker, that he had so much experience trying to represent seemingly invisible social ills. Things that were, you know, not taking visible form, but rather affecting the fabric and the texture of people's everyday lives. He had such experience with that that he could do it, that he could do it really well and that he could engender extraordinary sympathy, which of course is what happened with the Flavio story.

01:41:14:06

PAUL ROTH:

He depicted the poverty that this little boy was suffering so vividly that people felt that he was really trapped and that his suffering was terminal; that he would in fact die if they didn't do something, and to have a reaction like that from the readership of *Life* was very unusual. But I think it's the power of Gordon's photographs that accomplished that. This of course was not the goal of the editors of the magazine. They never imagined that something like this would happen, but I think it is precisely what Gordon wanted to do. He wanted to invest people's sympathy in the circumstances of this particular boy's life, and he succeeded in doing it.

01:41:58:11

PAUL ROTH:

When we were working on our book and exhibition, we spent a lot of time with Flavio, and he remembers it well, but he doesn't like to verbalize his experience. And so asking Flavio, "How did you react to Gordon's presence?" you don't get much in the way of answer. He will typically kick back with a question of his own. "Well, what would it be like for you if somebody showed up with a camera?"

01:42:25:10

PAUL ROTH:

I think that when we look at the photographs and we can see not just the photographs that were published in *Life* or subsequently but the pictures that Gordon didn't use that are on his original rolls of film, what you see is a child who loved the attention. In many ways a natural born performer, a comedian we are told by Gordon and then by others who knew Flavio. Somebody who, on some level, and I know this sounds romantic, but on some level he was waiting for that camera to show up, and he made the most of his moment.

01:43:04:16

PAUL ROTH:

He had no way of knowing where these photographs were going to go. He might have seen the magazine, but at the age of 12 how can you conceive that—of what it would mean that people would see your life

portrayed to you know, in the pages of a magazine read by seven million people? You just can't possibly understand that, and yet on some level he knew that—that he had a relationship with Gordon, he had a relationship with the camera, and he participated absolutely fully in the making of this picture story. And I think Gordon really felt that way. Gordon felt that Flavio was the perfect subject, that he had as great a role to play in the making of this story as Gordon as the maker of the photographs.

01:43:53:20

PAUL ROTH:

Gordon was so moved by his experience with Flavio and by this relationship, that he couldn't have fully understood himself at the time, the connection that he had made with the subject. I mean, Gordon always related very well to his subjects and had many stories about getting along very well with people that he photographed over a period of weeks, and it seems very clear from the accounts of others who were present that his subjects often responded very well to him and adored him even.

01:44:26:20

PAUL ROTH:

And yet, there was something different about this. His reaction to Flavio was more powerful on some level, perhaps because Flavio

reminded Gordon of his own childhood. And so when Gordon left, I think he felt quite stricken by the prospect of leaving this little boy. I think he also felt very worried about him. There was a very strong sense that Flavio didn't have much longer to live, and I think Gordon felt a bit guilty about making these pictures and leaving, which of course was the traditional way that photojournalists worked, but not something Gordon was very comfortable with. Gordon didn't like the idea that he was just passing through. He didn't leave his emotions at the door.

01:45:11:16

PAUL ROTH:

And so I think that that was also stressful for him, and in a moment of what he later admitted was weakness, he said, "I promise I will come back." I don't think he meant it, and I think he knew that he didn't mean it as he was leaving, but he said it anyway and it turned out to be true.

01:45:29:04

PAUL ROTH:

The story goes that- that the editors were not happy with what Gordon brought back, even though they appreciated the brilliance of the photographs and the connection that Gordon had with this little boy, it wasn't the assignment, and this was a five-part series, and there

was a goal. The goal was to promote John F. Kennedy's foreign policy in Central America. It was very clear, and so the editors wanted what they wanted.

01:45:59:21

PAUL ROTH:

The story goes that when they saw that there was not a great picture story about the father, but rather a great picture story about the little boy, they initially shifted gears. They started to think about how they could make these photographs work for the story, and they ended up selecting one picture from among Gordon's reportage, we don't know which one, and putting it across the page from another photograph made by a different photographer, and using different imagery and text in order to— to satisfy the requirements of the editors for the second part of the story which was about poverty.

01:46:38:20

PAUL ROTH:

But what happened next is that... something was in the newspaper. The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, actually gave an interview to the *New York Times* and talked about the importance of combating poverty, which was precisely the subject of this second part. And this story was published in the newspaper at exactly the moment that the editors were finalizing the layout. And the story goes that Gordon and

his editor, a man named Timothy Foot, went to the bosses at *Life* Magazine, the editor and chief and said, "Look at this story. We absolutely have to do this fantastic picture story that we have."

01:47:24:01

PAUL ROTH:

And while it's impossible to retrace that and know if all these circumstances of Gordon's description are true, nevertheless, it does seem clear that this story had an impact. And the story can be found, right? You can go back as we did in the archives of the *New York Times* and find that original story and it was precisely at the moment that the editors were working on the final selection of photographs. So it does seem as though a last minute decision was made in reaction to the news that the Kennedy administration had emphasized the importance of making the scale of poverty clear to the American public, which is what Dean Rusk said.

01:48:05:09

PAUL ROTH:

And then *Life* reacted to that. They saw that they were in the middle of telling such a story and that they had a responsibility to tell that story as plainly and as dramatically as possible in order to serve the Kennedy administration.

01:48:21:06

PAUL ROTH:

At the time that Gordon made this photo essay, it was really typical for a picture story to be maybe five page spreads, maybe four page spreads. It was very rare that a picture story would occupy as many as six page spreads or twelve pages. And that is the number of pages that the editors assigned to this story. It's also important to know that at this moment the editors had just redesigned the magazine, and they were giving more central position to the photographs. The photographs were larger. The areas of text were smaller than they had been before, and it was precisely at this moment that Gordon turned in his photo essay. So he was one of the very first photographers to benefit from this new format that really emphasized the photographs. They were printed very often and throughout Gordon's photo essay at full size in this new style, in this new scheme. And so many of Gordon's photographs of Flavio were enormous, they were quite large. The pages of *Life* Magazine were substantial.

01:49:31:15

PAUL ROTH:

And I think that that really furthered the impact. There was also a sequence made of the photographs so that the pictures told a story that was really impactful and quite emotional, beginning with a

depiction of the world that Flavio lived in and evolving through a documentation of the way he spent his days. The hard work that he did taking care of his siblings, and then finally ending with a very graphic depiction of his suffering. The terrible asthma that he had and the fact that he was understood to be dying. All of this was depicted as a story of a boy heading toward death, and that, I think, conveyed a sense of urgency to the readers of *Life* Magazine; looking at these big extraordinary photographs on the page leading toward an inescapable conclusion, which is that this one twelve year old boy was in very dire trouble, initiated a response on the part of the readers that was unanticipated.

01:50:33:10

PAUL ROTH:

I think it took the editors by surprise. *Life* photo essays often had considerable impact on the readership and people would write letters in conveying empathy for the subject of one story or another. But I don't think the editors had ever seen anything at quite this scale and quite this speed. Letters to the editor just came pouring in, they came from all over. But even more interestingly and more unusually, people were sending money. And stories started to come in from different bureau's of Time-Life, not just in the United States, not just in Brazil but all over the world of people who had seen the issue and then

reacted by going to the offices in their community of *Time* and *Life* and leaving donations.

01:51:22:18

PAUL ROTH:

And this was just extraordinary. There's documentation from that time of the surprise, the astonishment really, of the staff of *Time* and *Life* who were getting these donations and opening these letters to the editor and the word went up, all the way up the chain at *Life* Magazine to the publishers office that the magazine had to do something because the readers wanted to do something. That effectively now, the magazine had a responsibility to the readers and on their behalf a responsibility to Flavio and to the family and to the community because people wanted to help.

01:52:05:12

PAUL ROTH:

They had never really experienced anything at quite this dramatic of a scale. They had in fact, become involved in the lives of some of their subjects at intervals in the history of the magazine, but it was rare and nothing quite like this.

01:52:23:08

PAUL ROTH:

You know, it was as I said not unprecedented but unprecedented at this scale. And so the magazine reacted in a way that was, you know, equal parts opportunistic and empathetic. There was tremendous emotion on the part of the staff of *Life* Magazine, and people were getting personally involved in offices, you know. The publishers office, there was an executive assistant who sort of adopted this project that emerged of saving Flavio and rescuing his family from their poverty and helping to ameliorate the conditions in the favela, and the money was really there at scale. Within a period of several weeks, as much as 30,000 dollars flowed in and was meticulously documented. And a plan was hatched very quickly because there was a sense of urgency; Flavio was not well, and there was a great deal of fear, and this is all preserved in the correspondence of the time that he might die at any moment. But the magazine was a very organized enterprise. It was highly professional. It was a very rich corporation, *Time-Life*. And so they embarked on this as though it was a mission that had to be taken seriously and addressed professionally.

01:53:53:23

PAUL ROTH:

The competing interests of these people who were emotionally involved with Flavio's life, both on behalf of the readers who had been excited by the story and because they themselves had become engaged with the life of Flavio, started to compete a little bit with the

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imperatives of the editors at *Life Magazine* who saw an opportunity. They started to understand that if, in fact, they took the reader's money and the reader's good wishes and carried them forward in Brazil and actually helped Flavio, that that would be great material for a follow up story.

01:54:31:04

PAUL ROTH:

That it would help drive further attention to the five-part series, maybe add to their readership, add to their subscriptions, and so very quickly a plan was put into play where Gordon himself would go back to Rio and take the money of the readers and the good wishes of the readers and bring them into action. And that happened so quickly that it's hard to imagine now. It was just a few weeks after the story was published and I mean, really three weeks, I think, and just a few months after Gordon had been there. And so Gordon, who had told Flavio that he would come back, actually did come back, and he didn't just come back. He came back to help. So that was really extraordinary, it happened fast. Flavio was with his family, moved out of the favela. They took their very few possessions, and they went to a new house that had been purchased for them by the magazine's editors. But that very night Flavio didn't even stay, he got on a plane, and he went with Gordon Parks back to the United States, and the idea was that he

would actually be treated for his illness in the very best facility in North America, perhaps in the world.

01:55:50:00

PAUL ROTH:

A hospital that existed entirely to treat terrible cases of asthma in children; a pediatric hospital in Denver, Colorado. And then, over time, over many, many months, the magazine looked after Flavio while he was in that hospital, looked after the family who had moved into a new house on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, and then put into effect a public works program in the favela, which actually went on for years. This was just extraordinary. The magazine essentially became the guardians of the community.

01:56:28:02

PAUL ROTH:

You know, it was interesting because the magazine had a very strong sense that they had to keep this quiet as much as possible because they were very well aware of what could happen if the media found out about it and started following Gordon around. There were also fears that it would place the family in danger. That in the middle of a very large community, the favela had over 13,000 people living there, that for one family to be saved would be very controversial among all the other families. And of course that's true.

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PAUL ROTH:

So, it was all done in a very well organized, planned out way. Gordon went back. He was quite excited by the attention to his photographs, very happy that he could actually help Flavio. But it's important to remember that he was also ambitious, and he saw an opportunity for himself. So he actually bought a movie camera, a 35 mm film camera and took it back with the intention of making a film about Flavio and his family. And so for the first couple of wee—days actually, first few days, Gordon actually shot film of the very same things that he had photographed when he had been present a few months earlier, and that gave the people in the *Time-Life* bureau in Rio the time they needed to find a house, to buy furniture, to set it up, and to prepare the groundwork for what became a very, very rapid operation of moving the family out into the new home and getting Flavio onto a plane.

01:58:08:13

PAUL ROTH:

So once the Brazilian media found out about it, they were not happy, and they were present. They had been tipped off, somehow, on the day that the family actually moved out of the favela, and this was quite distressing for Gordon, for the magazine, the Rio bureau people who

had tried to keep all of this a secret as they could, and most importantly to Flavio and his family, who all of a sudden had not just Gordon's camera on them, not just a still camera and now a moving camera by Gordon and his crew, but also the attention of the Brazilian media who followed them as they went from the favela to have a meal, to go to a store to buy clothes and toys for the children, and then to their new household which was some distance away and outside the center of Rio. They were stars and their story now appeared on every newspaper and magazine in Brazil and in broadcast media as well, and for days afterward, there was tremendous attention on the family. Gordon and Flavio however had left.

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PAUL ROTH:

This return to Brazil by Gordon and by *Life* Magazine precipitated a counter reaction. It took a minute or two to develop. I think it was really the event of the family leaving the favela and the magazine intervening to rescue the family and get involved in the life of this child that provoked Brazilian media outlets. And for days afterward, there were stories in the paper, pictures of the family, and then eventually editorials decrying the intrusion of this American magazine, the invasion in Brazilian affairs. And if you look now at the stories that were published, they were uniformly negative. I mean, they really only varied in the degree of their outrage. So in the

aftermath of that, one of the most important Brazilian picture magazines, a magazine roughly analogous to *Life*, called *O Cruzeiro* decided that they were going to turn the tables on Gordon Parks and on *Life Magazine*, and *O Cruzeiro* sent one of their best photojournalists to New York City, very deliberately chosen because that is where the corporate headquarters of *Time-Life* were located.

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PAUL ROTH:

And the editors of *O Cruzeiro* knew full well that there was tremendous poverty in New York City. So they thought, well, we'll document that. They set out to do a picture story very much like Gordon's; centered on a poor family living in New York and going through some of the same struggles as the Da Silva family.

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PAUL ROTH:

In Brazil, and you know, this took time to bring into effect. I mean, even for the photographer, a man named Henri Ballot, it took a period of weeks to find the family. He didn't have a New York bureau to help him out. So it took a period of weeks for him to identify the family, a period of weeks to photograph them, and then, eventually, the picture story was published some months later in the fall of 1961 in Brazil. And at that time I think that public interest in the story in Brazil had

waned just a little bit. And as a result, the real news that developed around this picture story was not sympathy for this American family, which would have matched the American reader's sympathy for this Brazilian family living in poverty, but rather a kind of media fight, a scrum between the Brazilian magazine and the American magazine. And so when the story was published, a new round of articles began in Brazilian newspapers about *O Cruzeiro* taking on *Life* Magazine and attacking them. And that brought a great deal of attention to *O Cruzeiro*, but like any kind of internecine media warfare, it sort of burned itself out pretty quickly because the audience didn't have much to do with that story.

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PAUL ROTH:

But it was exciting, I'm sure, for a moment, and it was very exciting back in New York where the editors at *Life* Magazine took very seriously that they were being attacked again and again and again in the Brazilian media for a story that they were very proud of and for an enterprise that they were very much involved in, which was the attempt to help this family. They thought they were doing the right thing, and they did not like being told by the Brazilian media that they were being colonialists and that they were intruding in Brazilian affairs. They didn't like that at all.

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PAUL ROTH:

I think that Flavio got caught up in the process of his rescue, if you will. The motives of Gordon and *Life* Magazine were absolutely optimistic and quite positive. There was a very strong sense that they had a responsibility to do something to save Flavio's life and also to change his circumstances, to give him the opportunity to succeed in life so that he wouldn't be imprisoned by his poverty. And now, if you go back and you look at every step that the magazine took over the next two plus years of involvement in Flavio's life, you can see that they thought they were doing the right thing at every turn. And so separating him from his family was the first really consequential decision, but it seemed necessary to the editors because there was a very strong sense that if Flavio stayed in this shack, that he would die very soon, and that if he went with his family to their new home, that he wouldn't get the medical support that he needed. There was even a sense that his family was dangerous for Flavio, that Flavio would stay trapped in poverty, that his parents would not take his health crisis seriously. So there was a very strong feeling that the editors had that they could do better.

02:04:30:01

PAUL ROTH:

That it was, in fact, critical to take Flavio to another context and put him in the hands of medical professionals in the United States. Along with that, of course, came an education in the United States and acculturation to American values. And so Flavio began a very different life and one that he fell very much in love with over the next two years.

02:04:56:18

PAUL ROTH:

Once the decision was made to send Gordon back, the editors turned their attention to making a great follow up story, and one that would further invest the readers of *Life* Magazine in the outcome, so that they could feel as though they accomplished something by sending in their money and giving their support to this enterprise of saving Flavio.

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PAUL ROTH:

When Gordon went back to Brazil on behalf of the magazine and on behalf of the magazine's readers, he became the subject, as importantly as Flavio was the subject of this follow up story, the rescue of Flavio, the saving of the family from poverty. So Gordon couldn't actually be the only photographer involved in this story. He did take some pictures, and some of the best photographs that we have from that return visit are by Gordon, but there were also other photographers brought into play. One in Brazil in particular and

another one in Denver, Colorado where the story ended with Flavio's arrival at the asthma hospital for children. So Gordon himself was a key subject and he was depicted with Flavio, comforting him and accompanying him on this new journey to a better life.

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PAUL ROTH:

There was this sense that the magazine had that in making the follow up story, that not only would they benefit the magazine by gaining readers and by exciting their existing audience with the agency that they now had in changing the fortunes in this child's life, but there was also a sense that in helping the family, the magazine could visualize for its audience what it was like to be an American that then uses power and goodwill around the world to help improve the lives of others. A kind of microcosmic version of the Peace Corps, if you will, so that instead of a whole community and a great deal of effort and trouble and a expenditure of money, this foreign aid program would be aimed at one child in one family in one community, and it would happen fast, and you would see pictures of it on the page of the magazine, which for the readership, is going to be very powerful. And that's really hoe it worked out. The photographs were actually published in the magazine under the headline, *The Compassion of Americans Brings a New Life For*

Flavio. In that one sentence, summarizing the goals of the editors in doing a follow up story.

02:07:40:00

PAUL ROTH:

And then telling the audience that they can change the world, that they have agency, that they don't simply have to react to these photographs, they can do something about them, which was a very heady thing, and it makes the follow up story, in it's own way, very powerful, maybe not as powerful as Gordon's original story, but a key part of this episode in Gordon's life where the pictures actually make change. Where you don't just make photographs, put them in a magazine and walk on as a professional photojournalist to the next story, but that you in fact can change the circumstances of someone's life. That was a really extraordinary thing for Gordon and I think for the readers of the magazine as well.

The relationship between *Life* Magazine and JFK

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PAUL ROTH:

You know, Henry Luce had written the foreword to one of JFK's books that he published prior to his presidency as part of his pathway to the

top of the power structure in the United States. Henry Luce also had a long relationship with Kennedy's father. And so by the time Kennedy became president, one could say he was indebted to the support of Henry Luce who was, by the way, a famous Republican, not a Democrat and typically not supportive in the pages of his magazines of Democratic candidates for the presidency. He made an exception for Kennedy partly because of this prior relationship, and therefore played an integral role as the most powerful person in media who had supported Kennedy on his rise. That gave him access and entrée, and it also gave him a sense of responsibility to now support Kennedy's policies. And Kennedy really insisted on that as president of the United States. So we can now, just by going back to the archives, we can retrace the history of Kennedy's indirect involvement in the making of the Flavio story.

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PAUL ROTH:

And it's only just indirect because it's very clear that the Flavio story was part of the magazine's push to support Kennedy's foreign policy and to promote the passing of legislation and the allocation of US funds to support that policy.

Flavio's life in America

02:10:15:18

PAUL ROTH:

There's actually an incredible photograph from Gordon's contact sheets of Flavio's arrival at the hospital, and it's like nothing I've ever seen. It's Flavio surrounded by a sea of children who are wearing their school uniform from the Children's Asthma Research Center and Hospital in Denver, and it captures his first minutes in Denver. He has flown on an airplane from Rio to New York, then transferred to another plane and arrived in Denver, and that's a long trip. But I don't think it can compare to the scale of the psychological journey that he had just made going from the direst poverty that he could have experienced in this favela in Rio, to a middle class hospital in one of the richest cities in the United States. And he was a celebrity because he was famous as the child of the favelas who was being rescued by *Life* Magazine. This was unfolding news. There were journalists covering Gordon's journey with Flavio to the United States, so the children at this hospital were very, very excited.

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PAUL ROTH:

And all of this was a lot to take for Flavio. He's twelve years old. He's never experienced anything like this, and it was startling to him and disruptive. And his family is not there. It's just—it's hard to even

conceive of what that must have been like. Things got normal, sort of, in the next few weeks. But that first few days must have been completely shocking to him. He also had a tremendous amount of medical care all of a sudden. After going to a doctor once in his life, he was now the subject of advanced investigation by many doctors who were at the absolute top of their field trying to get a handle on his illness and trying to help ameliorate it.

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PAUL ROTH:

What they found was that he did have this advanced state of bronchial asthma, and it was exacerbated by malnutrition and by a host of untreated ailments throughout his childhood. He had essentially been without medical care since birth, and when you put all of that together, he was just so fragile that a case of asthma that might have been, you know, relatively straightforwardly treated in the United States was much, much more complicated for him. What they found to their relief, these doctors, was that he was a great prospect for recovery because now he would be treated for his asthma, and now he would be monitored day in and day out for what was imagined to be and became a two-year period of treatment. So he would be fine, and they knew that in those first few days, and they were really relieved about it. So attention turned to the other problem, which is, he didn't speak English, and he had a completely different cultural

understanding of how to act, how to behave, how to get along with others.

02:13:27:16

PAUL ROTH:

And all of a sudden, he was in a world that was not familiar to him, and he had to adjust to that, and that was stressful and difficult and what it meant was that while the asthma was being treated more effectively than had been anticipated, and while his prognosis was better physically, there was a whole new set of problematics to deal with that had to do with his upbringing away from his family and his acculturation to a new way of life.

02:13:56:06

PAUL ROTH:

Flavio, initially, had a hard time adapting. He was used to fighting if he needed something. He was used to being aggressive with his siblings. He was used to having his siblings around him, and he was used to his parents either being very rough with him or ignoring him. And all of a sudden, he was the center of attention, and he was on his own, and he was learning a new language, learning new sports, new ways of relating to other children. And it wasn't just during the week at this hospital, which also sent him to school. Also on the weekend he was adopted, you might say, by a kind of surrogate family who looked after

him on Saturdays and Sundays and incorporated him into the lives that they were already leading with three small children.

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PAUL ROTH:

The Gonzalez family; Kathy and Jose Gonzalez and their three sons welcomed Flavio with open arms and helped him learn English and really taught him a different way of living in a family environment. And their family couldn't have been more different from the family that he had just left behind. And so Flavio reacted very positively to the love and affection and warmth that he experienced, and he still remembers this in a very uncomplicated way. He really believed at the age of 12 that this was his new family. He wrote to his old family because he was told that he had to. He wrote them a letter every week, but he never got a reply from Rio, and over time he started to—I won't say forget, but he started to leave his old family life, his relationships to his brothers and sisters behind him and adapt to this new reality. And he started to see himself as having three new brothers and two new parents, and that changed everything for him, and it was almost impossible for him to change back or to imagine even going back.

02:16:02:16

PAUL ROTH:

He remembers now that he thought his life had changed, and his every expectation was that he would stay with this new family, that he would live in Denver, Colorado, that he had made new friends, and that those people would stay his friends. I mean, he was a teenage boy, and at the cusp of being a teenager, and he was also a bit behind in development and education from his peers. So if anything, he saw his circumstances in a way that would have been distorted even for an American child. He's in first or second grade as he started to go to school and learn English. So he was taller than the other kids and had a very central position; both because of his height and his more advanced age and also because he was famous, as I said before. He was the famous child from Rio de Janeiro who had been saved by *Life* Magazine and it's readers. So all of this was very heady and very exciting. And it is easy to imagine that he didn't want that to stop, he didn't want it to end.

02:17:06:03

PAUL ROTH:

You know, there was a lot of dispute among the many people who became invested in Flavio's... improved hope for a brighter future. There were teachers who saw him everyday in school and watched his progress and became very excited about the possibility that he would be able to live a better life. There were the people at *Life* Magazine who had all of their hopes wrapped up in this, and there was Gordon

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who wanted to believe that Flavio could improve his circumstances through hard work, through effort, as he thought that he had done moving forward from his childhood living in rural Kansas.

02:17:48:07

PAUL ROTH:

But there were people, particularly psychiatrists at the Children's Asthma Research Institute and Hospital in Denver, who— who looked him over, gave him tests and concluded that he was too developmentally behind. He had been restricted for so long in his education and in his upbringing and his acculturation that he couldn't improve, and these people, I think, also probably had biases that they weren't even aware of, and that influenced their understanding of his chances. So they did. There are documents that show certain people, people in positions of authority helping to define his future opportunities who said that he had no real hope of improving beyond his circumstances, that he would always, in some way, be a child from the Favela, that he would always have blue collar work only and that his education would stop at a certain point, that he wasn't capable of going any further. And it had the effect of—interestingly, of intensifying the efforts of the people who really believed in Flavio and who thought that he could improve his life.

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PAUL ROTH:

They wanted to prove these doctors wrong. And so they stayed involved and they kept working on the project of Flavio's betterment, all of which, by the way, he was somewhat unaware of because he was just a kid living his life.

02:19:21:14

PAUL ROTH:

All along there had been a plan to send Flavio back after two years because the hospital in Denver had said that it was a two-year course of treatment. And Flavio's father in Rio at the airport had said to Gordon, "You have to bring him back safe and sound." And that was understood to mean, as soon as he is better, you bring him home. It's easy now to look at this set of circumstances and— and think that it was the wrong thing now that Flavio had a new pathway to force him to return to something like his old life. But it makes perfect sense, if you think about it in context. His family said bring him back. The doctors said this will take two years. So at the end of two years, Gordon, the people at *Life* Magazine who are involved in this project started to get very, very worried and unhappy about the now evident consequences of returning him to Rio and his family, and they had to take him because his course of treatment, his time at the hospital was

done, but they were not confident that it was the right thing to do to return him to his family.

02:20:39:20

PAUL ROTH:

There was a very strong feeling that his family would not be able to provide the right environment, that he wouldn't be able to continue on a good educational path, that the schools wouldn't be up to the standards of the ones that he had had—the one that he had had in Denver. And so a middle way was found because the magazine was still determined to make sure that his life got better. So, he was actually flown back to Rio, visited his family for one day and then taken to a boarding school in Sao Paulo, which is quite far away. Uh, and now began yet another new life, yet another chance at happiness and improved circumstances. And he was still very much under the stewardship of the magazine, now through a person from the Rio de Janeiro bureau, Jose Gallo, who had been the reporter that had accompanied Gordon on his original story. And Jose Gallo now became his surrogate father and overseer as Flavio continued through his teens to try to improve his circumstances.

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PAUL ROTH:

When Flavio left Denver, he was—it was very much against his will. He— he didn't understand at all. He was very upset. He had forgotten, to some extent, his family, and he was quite upset with them because they had not written to him, and so he begged to stay. He begged first at the school and the cancer hospital and with his surrogate family, but they all were committed to this. They all had been a part of the decision. They were heartbroken, but they felt that they couldn't say yes. They felt that of course Flavio needs to return to his family and needs to return to his country.

02:22:27:13

PAUL ROTH:

And then people from *Life* Magazine came and he begged them to adopt him, and he went first to New York City and saw Gordon, visited Gordon briefly before he returned to Denver, and in that visit he begged Gordon to adopt him. And so there's a really strong record that Flavio was deeply depressed about his departure and desperate to stay in the United States, and that he one by one asked all of the people who had become his new mentors and his guides to this new world. He asked each one of them in turn to adopt him, finally with Gordon.

02:23:08:15

PAUL ROTH:

And none of them said yes, none of them felt that they could. A few of them said that they wanted to. They didn't tell him that, but they told others, and they really felt very strongly that he had to go home, that he had to return. So when he landed in Brazil he was very unhappy, and we found photographs of his return, and you can tell he was not pleased to be back.

02:23:33:09

PAUL ROTH:

In later years, Gordon talked about this with an interesting combination of resolution that he had done the only possible thing by saying no and guilt, guilt that he felt even when he said no. Even in that moment he knew that if he said yes, that he would probably be a good father to Flavio, and Flavio would have a better life. And he had a great deal of love for him, a form of warmth and affection that went way beyond what he had felt for any previous subject that he photographed, and he felt a real investment in Flavio's life, having helped change the course of his destiny.

02:24:15:02

PAUL ROTH:

So, I think Gordon felt guilty then, and as the years passed and he got occasional word of Flavio's experience in Brazil, he felt that guilt all the more. But he, even in retrospect, felt that he couldn't possibly have

adopted him, that there was just no way, that it would have been a form of kidnapping, if you will, to keep Flavio from his own family and from his own country.

02:24:39:23

PAUL ROTH:

Gordon was a—he was a very thoughtful person. He really considered deeply his responsibility to his subjects, even long before this episode with Flavio. He knew that there was something not quite right about a journalist dropping into someone's life and then purporting to understand it, and to take a picture of it, whether that's in the words of a story or in the photographs in a photo essay, and pretend to understand the totality of someone's life. And once he started intervening as he did at different occasions of his career, different moments, he felt an even greater sense of burden because he felt, all along, this is not going to be easy, this is not necessarily the right thing to do, to try to redirect fate, and to believe—to have the hubris, if you will, that one can make change in someone else's circumstances, that's it much more complicated than one person can solve. And I think he knew that really deeply and really profoundly.

02:25:52:00

PAUL ROTH:

What is unusual is to admit to it publicly, and that's what I love about that sentence. Gordon, at the very beginning of his book about Flavio, suggests that he had probably been wrong to do what he had done. Before you even read the details, you understand that it's a conflicted story, and that's one of the things that I love most about Gordon is that he was really committed to the audience, to depicting difficult problems and challenges for the audience at *Life* Magazine. He was deeply committed to the subjects of his photographs.

02:26:28:19

PAUL ROTH:

He didn't want to just take images and walk away from them, but in the end he understood the complexities, and he carried that with him as he went on with his life, never losing his compassion, never losing his empathy, always still trying to help. He—what he experienced with the Flavio story he experienced on stories that he made later, but all along wondering if he was doing the right thing.

Flavio's current life

02:27:01:08

PAUL ROTH:

Well, it's been very difficult for him. He's had multiple lives and they've—you know, they've halted to be overtaken by a new pathway of life. That's happened to him again and again, and on some level, he's been trapped in the image of the twelve-year-old boy with intractable asthma and malnutrition, right? He's understood by people all over the world as his twelve-year-old self suffering from poverty. He's become a symbol of poverty in the favelas within his own country and in the United States. And— and he does feel trapped by that. He feels as though he can't escape his symbolic self with his real life and his real daily identity, which of course marches on as all of our lives do. So he's on different pathways at all times, and he's incredibly aware of that, and I guess he has to be. Every year or two a reporter shows up at his home and asks him to once again talk about that moment in his life when Gordon Parks photographed him and where he was taken in the United States. So he can't really get away from it.

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PAUL ROTH:

And when—when we went there to work on our exhibition and book, we knew that we were the latest version of the reporters who had come at intervals in his life and asked him to represent poverty in Brazil. And he knew that we knew that, and he, at least initially, wanted to make sure that we understood that he was aware of what we were doing and that he was aware of the complexity of it and that

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he was not going to make us comfortable. It was an incredible experience.

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PAUL ROTH:

Over time, I think Flavio—and this may be true of every encounter he's had with this story. After the initial shock of someone showing up and asking you to justify your place in history, he adapted and he participated in the making of our project because I do think that on some level he feels responsible to the story as well. He knows that a big part of the original story was not just that he had been photographed, but that he had fully participated in the representation of the story that Gordon wanted to take back to American readers, and he feels a relationship still with the United States and its readers, although presumably almost everyone that read the original story is gone. He still feels tied to Gordon and to Gordon's history, and he still feels indebted to the many people who helped him, who gave him money.

02:29:51:07

PAUL ROTH:

He remembers their names, the ones who kept giving him—sending him small checks as he grew up and he feels honored on some level by the exposure while at the same time being very aware of the pitfalls

and the difficulty that it's given him in his own life, which has not proceeded in any kind of rational way because of this intervention in his life.

02:30:17:02

PAUL ROTH:

Very complicated right from the beginning. Even when he returned to Brazil, he found that people were not very sympathetic to him, because he was now seen almost as a participant in this embarrassing anti-Brazil story. And that continues today. When we showed up to talk to him, he was a bit anxious about what his neighbors would think, about what his siblings would think. Because Flavio, from one perspective, was the one who had it good, he was, you know, the kid who was rescued by *Life Magazine*. So—so it is really, really difficult and he—at the same time, as a twelve year old through fourteen year old when he was in the United States, he was totally unaware of all of this because he wasn't in Brazil. He was in a very different place and living a very different life where he was the center of attention and where he was improving his circumstances. So it's very complicated for him, and it was a real shock to him when he went back to Brazil and since then although he's gotten used to it, he now has to deal with the fact that he doesn't represent a completely positive story to the

people that he knew then and that the people who have learned about him since then.

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PAUL ROTH:

Gordon did visit him once in Denver after he dropped him off, and then the two of them visited in New York City when Flavio was heading back to Brazil. They spent a day together, which was a very happy day for both of them, getting reacquainted and dealing with this shared reality where they were the two key players in an epic story... an international and geopolitical story that they starred in. And then in subsequent years, they kept in touch by letter very occasionally and then anecdotally.

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PAUL ROTH:

In other words, Flavio was always in touch with the *Time-Life* person from Rio de Janeiro and that person would send word back to New York and Gordon would hear third hand what was going on in Flavio's life. But at a couple of key moments in the late 1970's and then again in the late 1990's, Gordon did completely reimmerge himself in Flavio's life; once to write a book about Flavio and the circumstances of his—of his early life, his attempted reinvention of his life in Denver, and then his years subsequently back in Brazil.

02:32:57:01

PAUL ROTH:

And then again in the late 1990's when Gordon was working on a documentary about his own life. Flavio was very important to Gordon, not only as a person, but also as the subject of what he thought was his greatest photo essay, the greatest project that he did for *Life* Magazine. And so Gordon wanted absolutely for Flavio to be a part of that documentary. And on both of those occasions in the late 70's and the late 90's, Gordon actually went back to Rio... to find out how Flavio's life had gone, and in the 1990's that was filmed. In the 1970's, Gordon himself was once again a reporter revisiting an earlier story.

Hollywood

02:33:44:19

PAUL ROTH:

Hollywood was a tough environment for Gordon. It's instructive to think about the different episodes of Gordon's professional success as radical because they were. He was effectively like the equivalent of Jackie Robinson entering American media when he went to *Life* Magazine in 1948, which is just one year after Jackie Robinson joined the Dodgers. He was a civil rights icon. That couldn't have been completely clear in the moment, but it wasn't unknown, it wasn't

misunderstood by the participants. There was a real effort on Gordon's part to integrate the communities that he entered and on the parts of the people that hired him to integrate their staffs, their rosters of journalists at *Life* Magazine or at *Time-Life*.

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PAUL ROTH:

And so when Gordon went to Hollywood, that all started over again. He was the very first Black American film director to make a major studio motion picture when he shot his—the film, *The Learning Tree* (1969) from his own novel. And his pass—pathway into Hollywood was smoothed by an unlikely figure by John Cassavetes who recommended Gordon to direct—to adapt the script from his novel and then to direct when Cassavetti was approached to adapt *The Learning Tree*. And Cassavetti had enough power at the time to do—to actually make that happen. But it was never an easy fit.

02:35:20:19

PAUL ROTH:

Gordon was, for most of his time in Hollywood, an uncomfortable fit, either with the typical genres that were consumed by White audiences going to Hollywood films or the Black audience which was at the time being shown primarily exploitation films; B movies of the era if you will. And Gordon directed one of the most important of those, *Shaft*

(1971). But the rest of his career in Hollywood, which was comparatively brief, just ten years or even a little bit less, was one of difficulty.

02:36:02:16

PAUL ROTH:

His budgets were not enormous. He was mostly directing genre scripts, and at a certain point in the mid 1970's, Gordon stopped making movies for reasons that I don't fully understand. He made a couple more movies later in his career but they were not Hollywood movies, and they were not big budget films at all. So it was a brief meteoric career, and then it was all over.

02:36:31:17

PAUL ROTH:

You know, it's tempting to try to read a lot into this. I'm tempted all the time to try to—I assume that there is some major reason why Gordon's career stopped, but the truth is it's actually really rare to have a long career in Hollywood. And Gordon was a really good workmanlike director, but he also was very much divided in his attention. He was—at the time that he was making films, he was also writing poetry, he was composing music, he was making photographs. Right up through 1972 he was making photographs for *Life* Magazine,

so he was doing a million things. And he was also busy being Gordon Parks.

02:37:09:19

PAUL ROTH:

He had become famous, a celebrity, and I think that it might simply have been that he was not going to have a long career in the first place in Hollywood, but it is also possible and tempting to believe that he was not a comfortable fit, that as—while he had been able to walk a tightrope at *Life Magazine*, he couldn't quite walk the tightrope in Hollywood. He couldn't quite be of such great value to the producers and the directors because of his talent that they wanted to keep him on. It may well be that he had a limited lifespan because he was not destined to stay a filmmaker, and that's an interesting story that I hope will be told one day by researchers, by scholars, historians who really try to figure out what was behind that.

Gordon Parks' work

02:38:09:11

PAUL ROTH:

There have been a lot of people that have criticized Gordon for working for *Life Magazine*. Not for his work per se, not for his

photographic perspective, which I think is pretty universally praised throughout his career and now. But I think that there were a lot of people then who understood *Life* Magazine to be a compromised environment for serious, purposeful photography. There had been many critics; fellow photographers, audience members who believed that *Life* Magazine had a heavy hand in all of the reportage that appeared in the pages of the magazine.

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PAUL ROTH:

And Gordon, simply by trying to work in that system, became a suspect figure for many people who were outside that system. And I think that he—it's hard to call it a form of victimization, but he was to some extent victimized by the... unforgiving reflection of success. When you are successful, you draw antipathy and animosity from those who do not share in the success, and Gordon as a singular Black man in an environment that had very few people of color, was a target for people who resented his success and who believed that he had sold out or compromised his vision in order to succeed.

02:39:52:19

PAUL ROTH:

I have never—I have never agreed with that perception. I think it's shortsighted, but it's understandable, and I think Gordon understood

it and didn't really fight back against it because it would have been a waste of his time and energy. He would always have been targeted for his fame and his success and also because he believed that it was—that it was contextual and completely—as necessary as his success is that there would be detractors to his success; people who opposed him. I think that's one key area of criticism. There are other people that think that his photographs are quite simple and direct and not very stylistically sophisticated, and I think that that represents a profound misunderstanding of his work, which is incredibly powerful precisely because he had worked out a rich, complex vision of directness and of plain-spokenness.

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PAUL ROTH:

I mean, that's a strange way of talking about a photograph, but they are nothing if not plain spoken. He was a communicator ultimately, and he was interested in, as a photographer, in evolving a style that would speak directly and clearly. And I think that his photographic expression is perched between description and metaphor in a way that very few other documentary photographers have ever matched, and that is why his photographs found such a big audience, reached so many people and moved so many people. But it's deceptive. His vision looks almost like not a vision but rather like a form of transcription,

and that criticism which I have heard many times I think is completely false and I completely disagree with it.

02:41:55:18

PAUL ROTH:

I mean there's so many different varieties of documentary photography, and-- I think that a lot of people evolved a style, as did Robert Frank, that was in the direction of the street. In other words, moving away from people's intimate environments into the exterior world. Making photographs that represent the perspective of an outsider to experience, as I think Robert did, looking from the outside in and trying to understand mysteries about people rather than describe everyday realities.

02:42:39:05

PAUL ROTH:

And I think Gordon is just a very different kind of documentary photographer. I think he always felt—certainly when he was at *Life* Magazine -- that he wanted to bring the readers into a world and that the only way that he could do that was by entering that world himself. And in photographic terms, the way to accomplish that would be to be direct and to be present and to sit between the subject and the audience and very often even depict the subjects of his photographs looking directly into the camera as though they are looking to their

future readers, to their future audience, the people who are looking in at them.

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PAUL ROTH:

And that required a certain kind of portraiture, which is really what he put at the center of his photography, a form of direct representation of people, and it required a form of transparency and directness and plain-spokenness so that he, as a photographer, would not stand in the way or over interpret or over explain what it was that the audience would look at. It's a very unvarnished perspective, and I think that its directness, the directness of his style, is deceptively easy. But it really isn't easy. He thought so carefully about every decision from lighting to framing to construction of the image and to the needs of the magazine, which was going to make the final decisions about how to publish the picture.

02:44:19:02

PAUL ROTH:

That he created a really unique style but one that does not look like a style and that directness of view I think made the audience feel not like outsiders dropping into a world but rather as though they were sitting right next to the subject, maybe even talking to them and trying to understand their lives. So there was great power in that.

Gordon Parks' influence in contemporary work

02:44:49:06

PAUL ROTH:

I think Gordon's vision has had such influence because he was very well known in his lifetime and much emulated because he was a pioneer. And I think also because he had such a big magazine audience in the pages of *Life* he reached a lot of people, and he— he filtered into the cultural vocabulary of American lives. The two that I am most interested in that I think about a lot as having descended from his example in photography are Dawoud Bey and LaToya Ruby Frazier, both of whom make portraits that invest in the lives of their subjects as richly and deeply as Gordon did.

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PAUL ROTH:

And in filmmaking, I see Ava DuVernay as somebody who is as precise and direct and unsparing in her description as Gordon was in his work, especially his work as a photographer and as a writer. And I do not know the extent to which she was influenced by him, but I am startled by the connection of her vision to his.

LaToya Ruby Frazier

02:46:08:13

PAUL ROTH:

I think of her complex construction of group portraits and singular portraits within an environment as being very much in line with the style that Gordon developed, where the images... on the one hand, are descriptive of the circumstances of someone's life and on the other hand they are constructed and overt in their construction and transparent in their mediation so that both the people who are being photographed and the people who are looking at the picture can be fully aware that there is a communication going on.

02:46:44:05

PAUL ROTH:

These are not fly on the wall images, they are images that are invested in telling a story that the subject wants to tell or to symbolize, and I think that's a very powerful thing. It makes the audience consider its own place in the story if they must see themselves as in communication with the subjects of the story. It's quite an interesting approach, and I have—I have spoken only a little bit to LaToya about this, but I know that she's completely conscious of her debt to Gordon. And I would be interested also to find out to what extent the Detroit material exemplifies that.

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PAUL ROTH:

But I think that... certainly her investment in their lives after the pictures is also an inheritance of what she sees as the responsibility that Gordon felt to his subjects.

The Flavio Story: An analysis of a photograph

02:47:49:17

PAUL ROTH:

This picture is a really interesting one from *The Flavio Story*. It actually stands apart from the rest of the images that Gordon made of Flavio, even within *Life Magazine* where it was a critical picture. It sort of ended the story by suggesting that this was a child whose life was not going to go on much longer. I find it really interesting because Gordon had a very strong storytelling sense and was always thinking about how to make an image that would engage the viewers of the pictures, and he, at different moments of the Flavio story, used overtly religious symbolism, famously in the very first picture that appears at the heart of the first spread in *Life Magazine*.

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PAUL ROTH:

He shows the statue that's famous in Rio de Janeiro of Christ the Redeemer sort of coming out of the clouds above the favela in the foreground, in the favela where Flavio lives. And ending this story, there was this picture of Flavio in a subtly Christ like pose. And if you know your art history, this picture looks a lot like a painting by Mantegna of Christ after he descended the cross as he's laid out with the—the holes, the nail holes of his crucifixion visible in his feet. And although this is not precisely like that, it evokes that image and Flavio evokes the suffering of Christ in this picture, and in symbolic terms, it's very, very powerful.

02:49:34:04

PAUL ROTH:

The readership of *Life Magazine* would not even have had to think about the crucifixion, about Flavio's spread arms, about that painting by Mantegna, which I'm sure most of them have never seen or didn't know about, and yet somehow they get it. And that level of storytelling, description, symbolism, combined with the very precise details of Flavio's suffering, the outline of his ribcage as he experiences an asthma attack, the pain in his face and then the poverty in the bedding of this picture are just so, so powerful. So this became the summational image of the picture story, and I think the

photograph that really has to be credited with moving the readers of
Life Magazine to try to help him.

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