



LESSON SIX

TELLING NEW STORIES

The Moving Image

“At a time and in a society where Black people are told far too often that we are criminals, that we are ugly, that we are less worthy to have the spotlight on us for any reason, Gordon put a lens and a light on us for ourselves, and allowed us to see the elegance of the lives we live and the places we are.”

Ava Duvernay, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*



Essential Questions

- Why did Gordon Parks expand from still photography into filmmaking?
- How did he want to use film as a new tool for storytelling?
- What was significant about Gordon Parks’ directorial experience?

In this lesson students will learn about Gordon Parks’ trailblazing work as a filmmaker. He was the first Black man to direct, write, and compose the music for a major Hollywood film, *The Learning Tree* (1969), based on his novel of the same name. Parks went on to make other movies, including the 1971 influential and commercially successful feature film *Shaft*. Still, systemic racism in Hollywood limited Parks to creating only a handful of film projects over the years. Students will examine this chapter of Parks’ career and listen to how he inspired some of today’s acclaimed Black filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay and Spike Lee.



Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Explore how Gordon Parks was a trailblazing filmmaker
- Critically examine the impact of racism on Gordon Parks’ career in Hollywood
- Understand the impact Parks has had on filmmakers working today



Materials

- Equipment for viewing film clips
- A shared online space for students to access additional resources
- Camera (phone or digital camera)
- Handout 1

All photographs by Gordon Parks courtesy and copyright of The Gordon Parks Foundation.



TELLING NEW STORIES

ACTIVITIES

1 OPENING

Organize students into small discussion groups.

Distribute Handout 1 and have students complete the handout using these steps:

- First, in the left circle jot down all the distinct ways that a photograph or a photo essay tells a story.
- Next, in the right circle jot down all the distinct ways a film tells a story.
- In the third circle in grey, think about the shared ways that photographs and film tell stories throughout this lesson.

2 BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Let students know that beyond Gordon Parks' work as a photographer, he was also a trailblazing filmmaker. In fact, he was the first Black director, writer, and composer to make a major Hollywood feature, *The Learning Tree* (1969). The movie was adapted from Parks' coming-of-age novel of the same name, which he wrote in part about his own life.

Before watching a segment from the documentary, have students generate a list of questions they have about Gordon Parks as a filmmaker in Hollywood prior to learning about this aspect of his career.

Share and document questions as a class. You will return to these questions as a closing activity.

3 ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT

Watch Film Clip 1: Gordon Parks and Filmmaking (4:06)

Access in "Film Clips"

In this clip we are introduced to Gordon Parks as a filmmaker beginning with *The Learning Tree*, his semi-autobiographical film based on the book of the same name, and extending to his Hollywood smash hit *Shaft*.

After watching this film clip, discuss these questions with students:

- How do you understand the reference to Gordon Parks being a trailblazer for so many Black artists working today?
- What is difficult about being the first in a field?
- What is your reaction to Parks' reflecting on his experiences in filmmaking: "I've never been offered some of the films that would have been offered to me had I been white. Let's put it very simply like that."

4 CLOSE VIEW OF INTERVIEWS

Teacher Note: The filmmakers conducted numerous interviews to produce ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks***. The full interviews are accessible in the Interview Archive on the [Kunhardt Film Foundation website](#). A selection of these interviews, edited and curated together here to create interview threads, are available to deepen students' learning and provide access to new scholarship.

Share with students that they will be watching three different perspectives on the legacy of Gordon Parks as a filmmaker from the interviews produced in the making of ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks***.

Begin with sharing the following biographical sketches of filmmakers Ava DuVernay and Spike Lee. Both artists pay homage to Gordon Parks and see his work and career as pivotal to their success today.

Ava DuVernay is a writer, producer, director and distributor of independent films. She is a winner of the Emmy, BAFTA, and Peabody Awards, and an Academy award nominee. Her directorial work included the historical drama *Selma*, the criminal justice documentary *13th*, and Disney's *A Wrinkle in Time*, which made her the highest grossing Black woman director in American box office history. Based on the infamous case of The Central Park Five, her series *When They See Us* premiered on Netflix in 2019. Currently, she is overseeing production on her critically-acclaimed TV series, *Queen Sugar*; her CBS limited series *The Red Line*; and her OWN series *Cherish the Day*. Winner of the 2021 Sundance Film Festival Best Director prize for her micro-budget film *Middle of Nowhere*, DuVernay amplifies the work of people of color and women of all kinds through her non-profit film collective ARRAY, named one of Fast Company's

most innovative companies. DuVernay sits on the advisory board of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and chairs the Prada Diversity Council. She is based in Los Angeles. (excerpted from <http://www.avaduvernay.com/>)

Spike Lee is an Academy award-winning director, writer, actor, producer, author, and a tenured film professor at NYU. He has directed and produced over thirty films since his first feature film, the independently produced *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), which also premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1986 and received the esteemed Prix de la Jeunesse Award. His film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) earned Lee an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay. Recent projects include *Blackkklansman* (2018) and *Da 5 Bloods* (2020). Lee has also produced several documentaries, including the Academy Award-nominated *4 Little Girls* (1997), the Peabody and Emmy Award-winning films *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006). and *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010). Lee has directed and produced numerous music videos, worked in commercial film, and created Spike/DDB, a full-service advertising agency. Lee is the author of several books, including *Five for Five*, a pictorial reflection of his first five features, *Best Seat in the House*, with Ralph Wiley, and two children's books *Please, Baby, Please* and *Please, Puppy, Please*, co-authored with Tonya Lewis Lee, his wife.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia and raised in Brooklyn, NY, Lee returned south to attend Morehouse College. After graduation, he returned to New York City to continue his education at NYU/Tisch, where he received his MFA in Film Production. After graduation, he founded *40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks*, based in Brooklyn. He began teaching a course on filmmaking at Harvard in 1991, and in 1993 he joined the faculty at NYU/Tisch in the Graduate Film Program, where he was appointed Artistic Director in 2002, a position which he still holds today. (excerpted from <https://40acres.com/about-us/>)

(1) Watch Interview Clip: Ava DuVernay (5:23)

Access in "Interviews"

- Watch and listen to these excerpts from Ava DuVernay's interview.

After viewing, return to this quote and ask students to share their responses to the sentence in bold.

"One of the things about Mr. Parks that had been really inspiring and informative is the idea that if I pick up my camera, I can say something and show something and that I will be heard, and that it will be seen, and a story will be told and that my camera will give me the power to do that. To think of the camera as a weapon is a strong way to think about it and something that I have come to embrace."

(2) Watch Interview Clip: Spike Lee (5:37)

Access to *"Interviews"*

Content note: Be aware that in this interview clip mature language is used.

- Watch and listen to Spike Lee speak about his relationship to Gordon Parks and the role he played in his development as an artist.

(3) Watch Interview Clip on *Shaft*: Maurice Berger and Bryan Stevenson (8:06)

5 CLOSING DISCUSSION: THE LEGACY OF GORDON PARKS

"Of course Hollywood has changed from the late '60s when he started making films, but it's changed because he changed it, you know. It's changed because you know he opened the door." —*Ava DuVernay*

Before watching the last film clip, return to the questions the class generated at the beginning of the lesson.

- What questions were answered?
- What questions remain?
- What new questions have arisen?

As a class, share any additional insights you have learned about Gordon Parks as a trailblazing artist before watching the final film clip in the curriculum.

Watch Film Clip 2: The Legacy of Gordon Parks (5:03)

Access in *"Film Clips"*

In this clip LaToya Ruby Frazier looks back on how influential Gordon Parks has been in her work as a photographer and as an artist working for social justice.

Closing:

As a final question, have students share what films they are watching now and who are their favorite Black filmmakers. Explore how these filmmakers may or may not be influenced from the work of Gordon Parks.



PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS: TELLING NEW STORIES

Sample Educator Script

"Choose one image from your previous Portfolio Assignments that you would like to highlight and share with your class. It could be a photograph that is really meaningful, one that was challenging to compose, one that turned out to be a complete surprise, etc.

This photograph will be your contribution to the "Inspired By Gordon Parks" photo project that we will be creating as a community. There is not a specific topic or theme to this exhibition, rather it is an opportunity for you to exhibit your work and tell your own story.

As a reminder, here are the photography exercises you have completed over the past five lessons.

- Lesson One: Composing a Self-Portrait
- Lesson Two: Image and Agency
- Lesson Three: Close Observation
- Lesson Four: Image and Relationships
- Lesson Five: The Camera as a Weapon and the Photograph as a Platform for Social Justice and Cultural Change.

Here are your steps:

- Select your image
- Give your "Inspired By" photograph a title using this format:
Photographer Name, *Title of image*, date.
- Write an artist statement for this singular photograph. Feel free to draw inspiration from your previous artist statements, but this artist statement needs to be original writing that explains your process for creating this photograph and for choosing it for the exhibition.
- At the end of your artist statement, please add your answer to this prompt: "If this photograph and artist statement were developed into a film, what storyline would you want to develop?"
- Upload it to the shared classroom drive

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To request the full film for an educational screening, visit www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

HANDOUT 1: PHOTOGRAPHS AND FILMS

