

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

SPIKE LEE INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Spike Lee
Filmmaker
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 45 minutes and 40 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Spike Lee
Filmmaker

CREW:

This is Spike Lee interview, take one. Marker.

Introduction to Gordon Parks:

01:00:09:18

SPIKE LEE:

Well first of all, I'll just say, uh, Gordon Parks is one of my heroes. I'm a film historian — especially Black film, and *The Godfathers*, Oscar Micheaux, Gordon, Ozzie Davis. So, I first became aware of Gordon through his photography — *Look Magazine*. And, this is even before I wanted to be a filmmaker, when I was a kid, you know. We — my mother — we subscribed. *Look* and she was always — my mother always point out, my late mother,

Jackie, she always point out, "This is Gordon's photography, this is Gordon's photos. Gordon's a Black man." And so, you know, my parents were... woke (laughs). Uh, like, uh, anyway. It's a little inside joke. But, Gordon had so many ways to express his — his vision, camera. Still camera in front of his eyes. Behind the director, film. And also music. And I, and I — he came with some kind of, I don't wanna use the word weird, of notated way to write out. He came (laughs) — Gordon, forget the way music's been written for hundreds of years (laughs). Gordon came with some — Gordon came with some new shit (laughs). But that was him. That was him. And, uh, I got to meet Gordon in his late years, and he was always— gave me love. Always. There was a, you know, a thing between us. When I would see him — it's not like I saw him every day.

Shaft

01:02:16:21

SPIKE LEE:

1971. *Shaft*. I saw it on 42nd street. That motherfucking theater was jam-packed. And Black folks were going berserk. It's like, we ain't never seen no shit like this before (laughs). And — and then Isaac Hayes, OMG. Sh — Richard Roundtree. Black leather trench coat. Slapping motherfuckers. (Laughs). Got the lady, too. Richard Roundtree. When you seen those — that image of a strong Black man. Kicking ass. Taking names. And then of course, along with the — his — a film by his son, his late son. *Super Fly* (1972). In my opinion, I think Gordon got defensive in later years, 'cause it started a whole

trend of, you might say, the Black exploitation film. But you could make an argument, Melvin Van Peebles — I forgot to mention Melvin, also. Yeah, worked it out. Melvin. You gotta put Melvin in there in the show. Gordon. Ozzie Davis. And I'm gonna say, Michael Schultz. He's overlooked. Michael Schultz directed my favorite films, *Cooley High* (1975). And Richard Pryor was the biggest star in Hollywood. Michael Schultz, a brother, from here in New York, doing off-Broadway plays. He was directing it. So that was really, like, the gang. But I remember, I was a sophomore. John Dewey High School in Coney Island. And back — I'm talking about the Times Square Taxi Driver (laughs). Not this Disneyland shit. I'm talking about back in the day. We used to call Times Square, 40 Doo-wop (laughs). We called it 40 Doo-wop. And I remember one time, Bruce Lee — I think it was *Five Things of Death* — some Bruce Lee film, and when the movie came out, like two thousand kids would run up and down the street doing flying kicks, and knocking themselves up the head with nun-chucks. I mean, I'm talking about Times Square. That's where you went to see a movie. And that's where I went to see *Shaft*. Now, I know they had, you know — I didn't go to Harlem to see a film. I think they — they also might have been playing films at Apollo, too. But that was just the era. And also I'd like to add, '71 — Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" came out in '71. So, *Shaft*, "What's Going On," Vietnam — there's a lot of shit happening in '71. I mean, those were volatile years in America. The anti-Vietnam War, you know. The anti — the anti-Vietnam War movement. So it was like Nixon, Tricky Dick, and like (laughs) — shit was jumping off in America. And Gordon was a part of that. He — Gordon was right up in there. John Shaft represented

Black manhood. Like, we're done with them Handkerchief-head Negroes (laughs). The Uncle Toms. Yazza-massa. Mazza we — Mazza we sick. (Laughs). I'm gonna curse. Them motherfucking days are over. We're Black — we're Black men. The sons of African kings. We're kicking ass, and we got lad — we got the ladies, too. So, we got it covered on all sides (laughs). And — and we ain't scared of White men. We ain't scared, you know? We're gonna be respectful and righteous, but if some shit jump off, there gonna be some consequences. It ain't going to be us. Melvin with *Shaft*. Gordon Jr. With *Super Fly*. Melvin with *Sweetback*. I don't think it was their intention to start this genre of the Black exploitation film. I don't think — I mean, I never spoke to any of them about it. But when people in Hollywood see something making money, they just jumped on it and took it somewhere else. And what was so bad about — unfortunate about the Black exploitation era; very few times would the — the story deviate from the same old, same old thing. And eventually, the Black audience got tired. The excitement that was there for *Super Fly* and *Shaft* and *Sweetback*. It was like, why they making the same motherfucking movie? It's same formula. And it gets, you know, you get a star and then you get the other version, with Pam Grier (laughs) and Pamela Dobson, you know, the — the sexy mama. And then you get Curtis Mayfield — you get Curtis, you get Marvin Gaye, Isaac do the soundtrack, and that was it. And the genre died out because they went to the well way too often.

The need to grow as an artist

01:09:19:19

SPIKE LEE:

Well, as I tell my students at NYU, this is a motherfucking tough business (laughs). They hear that day one (laughs). That's the first thing out of my mouth, first semester, grad film, NYU: This shit is tough as a motherfucker. For a tough AF (laughs). No matter who you are as an artist — Black, White, whatsoever — and you're not able to expand and grow for whatever reason, there's definitely gonna — it's gonna hurt your soul. Because — hurts your soul because your soul is what your art is. And when you're not — when you're not able to do your art, that's, you know, that's- that's- that's- that's- that's homicide.

Influence from Gordon Parks

01:10:29:17

SPIKE LEE:

I was looking at Gordon Park as like, I mean, honestly like Scorsese; it was just — it was the whole thing. 'Cause I had never seen a Black man... I mean, Melvin in Sweetback, but to see a hero like that, you know. A Black, you know, John Wayne, a Black Humphrey Bogart, you know. Some guys just kicking ass and taking names. So, I was — I was in high school, so it wasn't like I'm like looking at camera angles and sort of like that; it was like, two thousand Black kids, you know, going crazy in the theater, you know, watching our brother Richard Roundtree. Aesthetically. I'll be honest, aesthetically, I got more from Gordon from his — his photography than his filmmaking. Gordon had many more skills, I think, in a — as a still photographer than as a filmmaker. And —

and here's the thing; like he did- he- he only — how many films he make? Three? So, the more — this is what I tell again, I'm gonna keep referring to it, as a ten- tenured film professor at NYU; Ann Lee Earns Dickerson, one of my classmates, class of- class of '79 — the more you do your craft, the more you're in command in your craft. And you add up Gordon's films on one hand, and add up his life as a still photographer, it's not even. And also, it was his great talent, as a world-great still photographers that got he — that's — he made a transition into film. He knew where to put the camera (laughs). That's the biggest mystery for a young filmmaker. You walk onto set, and everybody's looking at you. And you're looking at them, and they're looking at you, and you — (laughs) you're looking at them, and everybody's looking at you because we can't do shit until you tell us where you put the motherfucking camera. Gordon, he — that still camera? And that's — this — and I wanna, you know, jump back on what you said: That camera in his hands was a weapon. That was a motherfucking bazooka (laughs). That wasn't no six-shooter or rifle. When Mr. Gordon Parks had that camera in his hands, that was a bazooka. That was a weapon. And you — the photographs, his body of work is a testament to that. Here's the thing: I love Gordon. And, you know, I didn't see him every day, but when I would see him — gala or whatnot, you know — we just had great respect for each other. And he's one of the guys, along with Melvin, The Godfather, Oscar Micheaux, Ossie Davis — without them, I would not be the filmmaker I am. So for me, that's enough. That's in my brain, so I never was like, "I gotta do this, I gotta do this because Melvin did this, I'm gonna do this because Ossie did this way or this is what

Gordon.” That was never in my thinking, but I knew without them, I would not be a filmmaker.

Still photography is storytelling

01:14:27:07

SPIKE LEE:

Oh yeah, I mean, definitely. I don't think that just because — I've never had, you know, the mindset, because you are still pho- because you are a still photographer doesn't mean you're not telling a story. I mean, uh, still photography is- is- is- is storytelling. And the great photographers, they're telling the story with one snapshot. Films is a bunch of — going past the cameras, 24, 24 frames per second. A great still photographer's getting — there's not 24 frames, they're getting that motherfucker in one frame. And, it's all — it could be a whole movie, your whole life, just in that one frame.

Fashion photography

01:15:21:19

SPIKE LEE:

I think sometimes his fashion photography gets overlooked. You know, we're gonna put Gordon over here in the ghetto, in Brazil, in Harlem. Look at the Black people, downtrodden. But his- his- his fashion shit was fly as a motherfucker (laughs). So, even he gets pigeon-holed, you know, like a, a cer- but he was versatile. And I, and I hope in the future people, you know, they, they dig more into his- his fashion photography, 'cause that shit was fly.

Life is not fair

01:16:05:06

SPIKE LEE:

Growing up here in the Peoples' Republic of Brooklyn, New York, I went to public school from kindergarten, the John Dewey High School in Coney Island. I remember it was second or third grade, this — back then they didn't mail the postcards. You— you would bring it. So one year I got a B+, and I ran home. I was so happy. I got a B+. My mother looked at me and said, "Why not — why didn't you get an A+?" I said, "Mom, I got a B+." She said, "Your Jewish classmates are getting A+. You gotta be 10 times better." And at that time, I said, "Mommy, that's not fair." My mother who could curse, said, "Fuck fair." I'm like second, third grade. I don't know what she's talking about. But my mother was not the only parent, or— or — my mother was not the only mother or father that told their children that this world is not fair, this world is not made up for you to succeed. And you can't use that excuse. And you just got to excel. Fuck fair. This the way shit is set up. And you... if you're not 10 times — if you don't at least try to put in the work to be 10 times better, you're not gonna make it. And I heard that from my mother. And what you just said, it sounds like Gordon heard that from his parents, too. I mean, that, that, that was common. And today what's common is Black men having that conversation with their sons. And about, you know, when you leave the house.

Gordon Parks' photos of Malcolm X

01:18:13:18

SPIKE LEE:

On Malcolm X, the late, great Ozzie Davis, who was in many of my films, his lovely wife, Ruby Dee, too. We brought back Ozzie to the studio to re-record the eulogy for the end of Malcolm X. 'Cause he had delivered it. Ozzie had delivered the eulogy. And there's a montage edited by my great editor, Barry Alexander Brown. And many of those photographs were Gordon Parks'. Especially the stuff dealing with the Nation, the Nation of Islam. And we're very happy that we got the permission, Gordon gave the permission to use those historic photographs in a montage of Malcolm X. My situation with Malcolm X — I took a flight to Chicago to sit down with Honorable Minister Farrakhan. 'Cause I didn't want no problems (laughs). I didn't want no problem with Fruit of Islam. I didn't want no problem with— with the Nation. I didn't want no problems with Minister Farrakhan. So, I went to Chicago to kiss the ring. And surprisingly, Minister Farrakhan said to me, "Spike, I respect you." And he was very honest. "Be very careful what you say about Mr. Muhammad." He wasn't concerned how we dealt with Malcolm X. He said, "Spike, now let me tell you, be very careful with how you deal with Honorable Elijah Muhammad." And afterwards, well I think later on the year after I saw him, he said he liked the film very much.

Establishing trust

01:20:29:18

SPIKE LEE:

Here's the thing, though. You're not gonna get the great photographs you get of... whether it's someone on the street, or famous people, if you don't establish trust. And- and- and Gordon had that gift. Gordon come in, light up a room. Gave everybody respect. No matter if you, if you were Gloria Vanderbilt or some bum off — bum on the street. You're a human being. "I care about you. Can I take your picture?" (laughs). But, you gotta- you gotta do that first. You just can't be sticking the camera in people's face. You can do that, but you're not gonna get a good picture. You're not gonna get — if you do that, people gonna shut off. It's only when people feel safe that they open themselves up, and then the camera will capture the essence. So, I used the word bazooka before. But before his camera was bazooka, it was a — a flower and a glass of wine (laughs). So his camera had that — Gordon was slick. You know, he wouldn't- he wouldn't put the bazooka in your, in your face first (laughs). It would be like a smile, flower, glass of Italian red, you know? And then comes out the bazooka, that — that captured that moment.

01:22:19:08

SPIKE LEE:

At least with the films I'm doing — I've done — you gotta ask people personal questions about very painful moments in their life. For example, *Four Little Girls* (1997) was about the bombing of the 16th Street Birmingham Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. And when you're talking to someone whose sister was — dynamite blew their body apart, that's not easy. I had an advantage. I was just, I was not someone off the street. So people seen my

films, and knew the type of filmmaker, an- and what type of films they are. So that gave me an advantage. But it was still, you know, you gotta — it's what I said earlier. If- if you are a subject of a still shoot or a film camera, if your subjects aren't comfortable, you're not gonna get what you need. You're not gonna get it. If people- if people are on a photo shoot, whether it be a fashion or just portrait- portraiture, or in a documentary, as — it's the job of the artist to have your subject comfortable. And sometimes that means taking them out to dinner. Talking to 'em on the phone. Especially if you don't know them. I mean, if you can, at least have a conv — for me, at least, if it's possible, the first time you talk to them should not be the day of. Sometimes it's not possible. But if- if you can make it work, you know, if you can work it out like that, it just gives you so much persp- as I said before, I know I sound like a broken record. But people have to be comfortable.

Life Magazine

01:24:37:16

SPIKE LEE:

Gordon's work for *Life Magazine* was groundbreaking. As you said, you know, this description that very few Black folks get to have anything in *Jet*. So, Gordon's photographs were going to millions of American homes, and his photographs of Black people is their only interaction with Black people. And I don't think that can be underestimated.

Crooklyn

01:25:22:11

SPIKE LEE:

Crooklyn (1994) is autobiographical. Alfre Woodard played my late mother, Delroy played my father. That's about the Lees growing up in Brooklyn, down the block over there on Washington Park, Fort Greene. We were the first Black family to move into Cobble Hill, still an Italian — Italian American neighborhood. My mother said, "I want to own a home." My mother wanted to buy a brownstone. So we'd bought a brown — she bought our brownstone for \$45,000, 1969. So *Crooklyn*, which is written by my- my- my brother Cinqué, my sister Joie, and myself; it was about the Lees growing up in Brooklyn, and I don't think, I don't think Gordon had nothing to do with — that was just our family.

Social justice through art

01:27:27:05

SPIKE LEE:

Well, I been — I been, I think I'm going on third or fourth decade, I can't keep up. And I think over the years, because of films like *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Malcolm X* (1992), and — and the last two, *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), *Da 5 Bloods* (2020), you know, it was like... But if you look at overall body of work, you know, not every film is- is- is like that. You know, an example, we were talking about *Crooklyn*, you know. *Crooklyn* — that's Black family growing from Brooklyn during the late 60s, early 70s. So, I think I try to — I think when people use one word to label somebody, I just think that just does a

disservice to, especially artists. 'Cause you have an artist who say — this- this — put one word attached to an artist I think is not thoughtful. And I'm gonna use an example of an activist, you know. I'm a filmmaker. I'm a storyteller. So, I've told stories of Michael Jordan in a 30 second commercial. A four — a four — two four-hour documentaries on Katrina, *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and *If God is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise* (2010). A three-hour epic, *Malcolm X*. So I won't try to put my storytelling into categories. 30-second commercials, documentaries, feature films — you know, it's storytelling for me. I put it all on the heading of storytelling.

Being famous

01:28:24:08

SPIKE LEE:

I think Gordon liked being famous (laughs). And there's nothing wrong with that. You know, Gordon — Gordon was like, he was on the town, you know like, he was — he was hitting the spots. And he was — he was living his life. And why should he be, you know, shut up in a — in a room? He's in New York City. He's in Paris, he's in London. Go, go, go, you know. So, God bless him. I mean, he was — he was enjoying his life, as we all should. If people know your face, you can't be anonymous, you know? (Laughs). Unless — that's just the way it is. I mean, that's just the way it is. I'm telling you. And it's the truth: people know me don't even know my, don't even — people don't have to see my face to know it's me. They can tell by my walk (laughs). Swear to god. Be like, "Yo, Spike." I'm like, "What? Where? Who's calling me?" (Laughs). I gotta

walk and people just know it. You know, pigeon-toed. You know, and I'm not mad, that's just the way it is.

Influence

01:29:46:14

SPIKE LEE:

James Van Der Zee. In fact, in that room over there, that wall is wall-to-wall James Van Der Zees. One of the most famous one's being Marcus Garvey's in there. Jack Johnson signing a contract for a fight. Father Grace. The Black Yankees. James Van Der Zee. Oh, Avedon, too. I got — when *Malcolm X* came out, I called Richard Avedon 'cause he took a great portrait of Malcolm. And he signed it, "To Spike." That's hanging on the wall. I recently bought two Gordon Parks prints. Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland. Just bought them, and they're gonna go up on the wall. Famous people wanted their portrait to be taken by Gordon Parks. So it goes both ways. 'Cause they get a million requests, and I think that Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland — I mean, go on — they knew who Gordon Parks was. They knew the shit he was doing (laughs). He's a great photographer. So they were honored for Gordon Parks to take their portrait. I know that for sure. Another one of my favorite photographers, Irving Penn. On the wall over there, is the great Irving Penn. I like his — his series where he will put people in the corner.

Being a Black artist

01:31:44:00

SPIKE LEE:

I think any time people of color see someone attain a position, it gives you — it... I mean, it's easy. How... most recent is Kamala with Howard University. Sister. And I go by the — for me, I go by the one-drop rule: she's just Black. (Laughs). I know, I know. Kamala's Black. She went to Howard, AKA one-drop rule (laughs). So, the same impact that Obama had on young Black boys, the same impact young Black girls gonna — that Kamala is making on them. And so, when you see Gordon Parks — anybody who's a first: Jackie Robinson, Tiger, I'm thinking about the- the- the- the gymnast, you know — especially when you see us excelling in- in- in what it feels like we're not known for. It gives you the power to say, "She's Black, he's Black, they did it, I wanna do it. I could do it, too." I do think that if you're of something, you're of the essence. So, it might give you the ability to see something that somebody might not see.

Da 5 Bloods

01:33:30:11

SPIKE LEE:

My newest film, *Da Five Bloods*, begins with Muhammad Ali. Archival footage. And the film ends with Dr. Martin Luther King giving one of his great speeches at Riverside Church. And a year later, to that day, he was assassinated.

Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King, Jr.

01:33:57:13

SPIKE LEE:

Ali, with his very famous quote which begins *Da Five Bloods*, "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger." And Muhammad was a outspoken critic of the war, an immoral war. And it was really — and for me, I'm gonna talk about Muhammad Ali and Dr. King. Dr. King, I know. What happens to a lot of our heroes, they're- they're like, softened. One of the most famous images of Muhammad- Muhammad Ali now is lighting the torch in Atlanta, and his hand is shaking with Parkinson's. And people forget, at one point in history of time in the United States of America, Muhammad Ali was the most hated man in America. But they don't want — they wanna, "Ah, let's not talk about that." Dr. King spoke of peace and love, but when Dr. King came out and started talking about how immoral the Vietnam War... we are not hearing that. This weekend, all we're gonna hear is again and again and again, "I have a dream." That is not the only speech Dr. King, a Morehouse brother — oh, I don't want to hit the mic — Morehouse. The house. That is not the only speech Dr. Martin Luther King ever gave. They keep going, back and back, "I have a Dream"!

01:36:09:01

SPIKE LEE:

Where are the speeches about how immoral Vietnam, the Vietnam War is? And I don't think it's coincidence he was assassinated within a year after talking about — because when you talk about anti-war, you're talking about, you're going, you're going up against the economy of war. War is a big business. And he wasn't affecting the economy — he wasn't affecting the

economy desegregating lunch counters. But you talking about Vietnam War, you talking about Dow Chemical who was making Napalm, and we going outta line. That's big business, and them cats got together and said, "He got to go! He got to go!" So, I have a problem how our— our strong, Black men — it's like they've been... in the later years, once they've gone, they've been de-neutered; like their nuts — 'Scuse me, their testicles — have been like cut off! And the powers that be wanna present this image, this docile image. Muhammed Ali was stripped of the heavyweight title — I can't remember exactly how many years he lost. Prime of his fighting! Physicality. That's why he begins *Da Five Bloods*. And that's why Dr. King ends *Da Five Bloods*. Two great humanitarians who made sacrifices... who made choices knowing what would be the ramifications of those choices.

00:38:16:18

The sad thing is— is— is complex and tragic. And, look, I'm not saying nothing — there's not known public — but Malcolm got the word. 'Scuse me. Ali got the word, "You can't hang with him. Malcolm, Malcolm's been excommunicated." And that was it.

01:38:45:03

Imma show you some Gordon Parks pictures now. It's a session. Had to get permission from my queen, Tonya, takin' them off the wall. And this is such a beautiful photograph of Muhammed; looked he just finished sparring, and the bottom right here, silv— a thin silver sharpie signed by Gordon. This is a very special photograph, and, I'm — and we know that Gordon and— and Mohammed were tight. So this is hanging on the wall. Hanging on the wall.

Invisible Man

01:39:32:06

SPIKE LEE:

This is one of the greatest photographs ever taken. I don't know the backstory, but to me... it's Black people live in a hostile environment, and were living in the tunnels underground, and were coming up from underground. Before we make a run for it (laughs). Or looking around, like to see if the motherfucking coast is clear (laughs). Okay. Sorry about my brother Gordon. The title's 'Invisible Man', the title of one of the greatest novels ever written by brother Ralph Ellison, but this— this tells us, for me — you know what? I just thought about this. This picture could be, could've been taken during slavery; we're tryna watch out for the motherfucking slave catchers. And my brother here ran off the plantation. And he's being chased, and the motherfucking bloodhounds — they had them bloodhounds, even today — and he's running for his life. And this looks like this picture's taken, like, just when... the sun just comes out. And my man, my brother man here, getting away from massa to make a clean break for the North. For the North. To get out of this southern state. And who knows? Maybe even hook up with Harriet Tubman. Bring— bring — get to freedom. Again, signed by Gordon Parks. Taken off the walls of the Lee family.

Ella Watson

01:42:54:00

SPIKE LEE:

The Lees have four signed Gordon Park prints. Imma showing you three to four. And uh, this morning, Tonya told me, "When these going back on the wall?" (laughs). Keep saying, "Don't come back tonight, unless these are with you!" Tonya said, "Do not bring your Black ass home tonight, unless you have these three signed Gordon Park prints with you." (laughs) This is Ella Watson, *American Gothic*. But this is the rare one. The rare one. The one everybody sees as great. But they ain't got this one! (laughs) And it's not signed, either! (laughs) This, again, this photograph... to me talks about how our ancestors, from 1619, when that first slave ship hit Jamestown, Virginia... my ancestors, we have fought and died for this country, the United States of America. And this country, we love this country, we die for this country, but the love has not been returned. That's what this photograph says to me, with this American flag draped, and Miss Watson. You know, probably a maid. Doing her job to the best of her abilities, and tryna make a better life for her children. And that's just a generational thing. And it's photo-- for me, it's photographs like the last three photographs I showed demonstrate to me the power of Gordon Parks. He's a bad motherfucker (laughs). In fact, I'm — I'm quoting *Shaft*! Shh! Shut your mouth! Shaft! He's a — you could take out the word Shaft and say Gordon. Shaft's a bad motherfucker. Shut your mouth. (laughs) Quoting the great song, the title song, from *Shaft*. Isaac Hayes. And so this is why — because every time I said, that's why I'm proud to hang Gordon Parks' works in my house, and I see it every single day. Signed!

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END TC: 01:45:40:02