SESSION 23 · UNIT 3 — LIGHT & BRIEF · Mar 16, 2027

Gordon Parks

1912–2006 · American

The camera as a weapon — photography as an instrument of justice



American Gothic · 1942

"I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapons against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty."

— Gordon Parks, A Choice of Weapons, 1966

KEY WORKS

- American Gothic, Washington D.C., 1942 — the response to Grant Wood
- Flavio Da Silva, Rio de Janeiro, 1961 — the Life story that changed a family's life
- Muhammad Ali series, 1966
- A Choice of Weapons — his autobiography

CONTEXT

Parks grew up in poverty in Kansas, taught himself photography, and became the first Black staff photographer at Life magazine in 1948. He used his camera as what he called 'a weapon against poverty and racism.' American Gothic — a portrait of charwoman Ella Watson standing in front of an American flag with her mop and broom — was a direct response to Grant Wood's famous painting. His Life story on Flavio Da Silva brought in roughly $30,000 in reader donations (about $325,000 today) and led to a rescue effort for the family.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

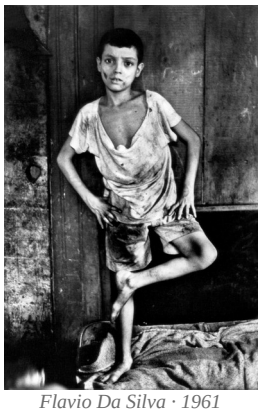
Parks demonstrates that photography can be a political act, a social act, a weapon — while still being beautiful, rigorous, and artistically serious. He also represents a crucial voice in the history of American photography that is too often absent from photography education.

THE FLAVIO DA SILVA STORY

In June 1961, Gordon Parks traveled to a hillside favela outside Rio de Janeiro on assignment for Life and found Flavio da Silva, a 12-year-old boy with severe asthma who was raising his seven younger siblings while his parents worked. The resulting photo essay, "Freedom's Fearful Foe: Poverty," ran that June and drew an overwhelming response from readers — more than 3,600 letters and roughly $30,000 in unsolicited donations (about $325,000 today). Life used the money to move the da Silva family out of the favela, fund improvements to the community, and fly Flavio to a hospital in Denver for treatment. It remains one of the clearest examples in photographic history of a photo essay directly changing its subject's life.



Life magazine spread · 1961

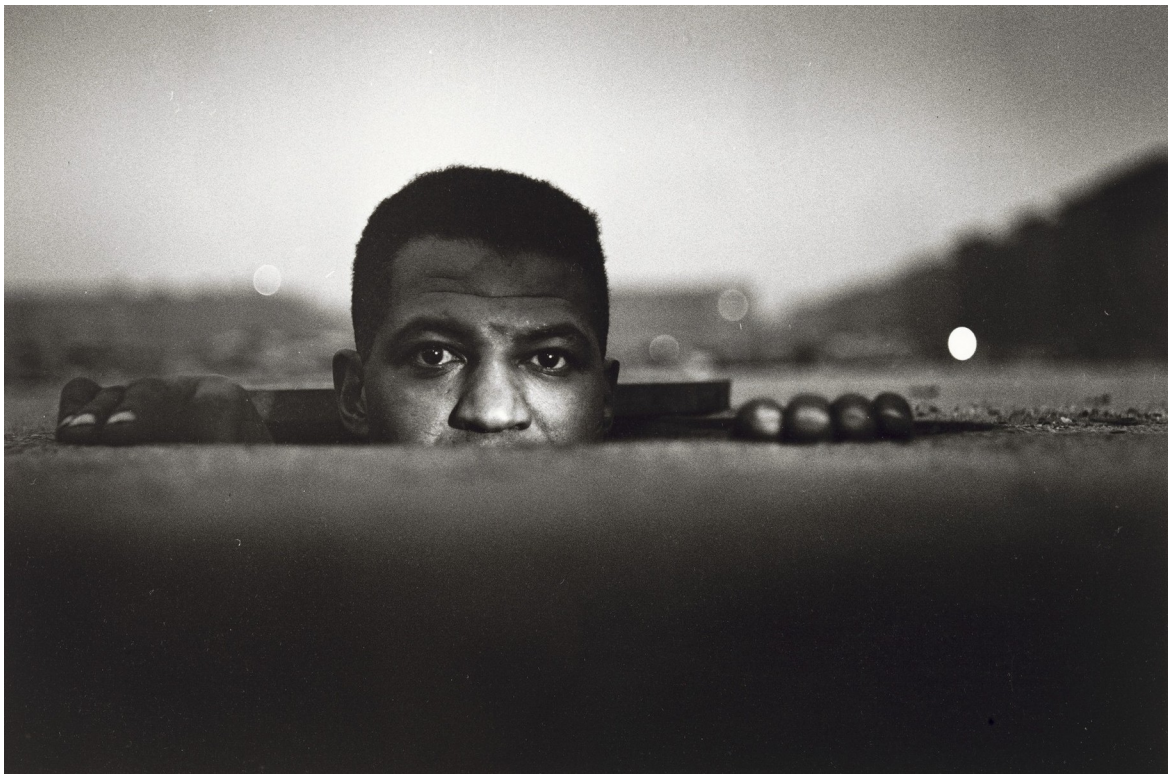


Flavio Da Silva · 1961

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Parks said the camera was his 'choice of weapons against poverty and racism.' What can a photograph actually change?
2. American Gothic puts a Black woman with a mop and broom in front of an American flag — the same formal pose as Grant Wood's famous painting. What does that juxtaposition say?

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Emerging Man



Alicia Hansen, NYCSalt's founder, with Gordon Parks