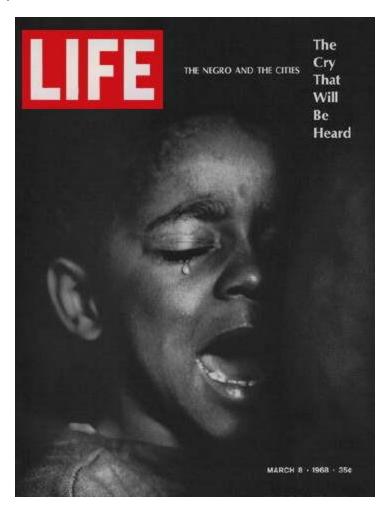
## From Object to Subject: Gordon Parks' 1968 Life Photo Essay

Thursday, January 26, 2012 at 08:04AM

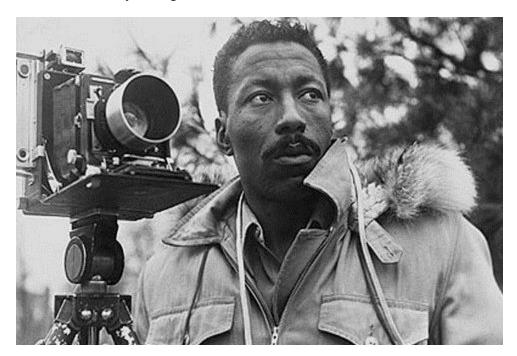
## Essay by Matthew Clair

In its March 8, 1968 issue, *Life* magazine ran a 16 page photo essay on a black family in Harlem. On the cover, a black girl is pictured with her mouth open, her eyes closed and a single tear lingering at the top of her cheek. Above her head are the words *The Negro and the Cities: The Cry That Will be Heard*.



Inherent in any photographic image of a human subject is an objectification. The photographer (objectifier) captures an image of the photographed (objectified). The photographer has many tools at his or her disposal: lighting, framing, zoom, aperture width, and the like. The photographed has very few, other than body posture (if, of course, he or she is even aware of the image being taken). And after the image is taken, the photographed is also left with little power or say in determining how the image will be used, cropped, framed, displayed and disseminated. Even more alarming, the

photographed has no say in how a viewer consumes his or her image. The objectification is further magnified when a significant social distance exists between the photographer and the photographed, as was true in the case of the black girl pictured on the *Life* cover – a girl whom we later learn is named Ellen and is one of the children of the Fontenelles, an impoverished black family living in 1960s Harlem.



Gordon Parks, the black photographer, pianist, poet and filmmaker who took Ellen's image, was aware of the complex arrangement of power relations involved in photography (particularly documentary photography) when he decided to undertake his 1968 *Life* photo essay. Earlier in his career, Parks had photographed for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) under Roy Stryker, the head of the Information Division of the FSA in the 1930s. As part of the documentary team that produced such iconic images as *Migrant Mother*, Parks intended his documentation to be a socially progressive undertaking. His goal was not simply to capture black inner-city destitution; rather, he intended to use the power of photography to stir emotions and bring about justice. But, as he was aware, the objectification inherent in the photographic image could have just the opposite effect. Instead of empowering its subject, the image could divest the subject of his or her subjectivity, thereby placing the subject and his or her image in the powerful hands of a potentially closed-minded viewer. Parks' editor Genevieve Young suggested a solution to the objectification problem in a letter to Parks before he ventured to Harlem with camera in hand. Young wrote:

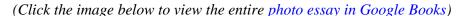
You should take this ordinary black family and put their innermost thoughts into words [...] You have to find a way to convey all this to a white middle-class audience. The ghetto is truly a foreign country to them [...] Your camera can show the facts, the present, the tangible. But only words can convey the web of thought and emotion, the influence of the past and the fears and hopes for the future.

"Only words," Young wrote. Only words could fully express the depth of suffering, thereby eliding the objectification of the photograph by enabling the objectified subject to speak, in a sense, about his or her context and social situation. Words would enable a fuller, more empowering social critique.

A re-assessment of the cover image reveals the way in which words can subvert the objectification of the image. If we are provided with just an image, just a picture of a little black girl crying, then we are left merely with our preconceived notions. Perhaps our racial biases will kick in. Or perhaps our socio-economic biases will take hold. Absent any context, we are left with the preconceived, static and inherently status quo assumptions about impoverished black children. However, the cover provides context through words – *The Negro and the City: The Cry That Will be Heard.* These words contextualize and interact with the image. Through the inclusion of these words, this black child is now transformed into a symbolic voice for inner-city blacks – a cry that must be heard (most likely by the viewer) for a seemingly societal reason. As Roland Barthes once termed it, the viewer's "store of stereotyped attitudes" is more fully activated and focused, aggregating the child to a representation much larger than herself. She represents a multitude of children, a multitude of cries and multitude of pains that are connoted to be derived from the city, or at least an institutional power structure, that needs to listen to and acknowledge the suffering.

Perhaps the cover's words are still an objectification, then - a positive objectification (if there can be such a thing), but still an objectification in an instrumental sense. From the cover image and its limited accompanied words, the little girl is used as an instrument to represent the larger suffering of a group. She still lacks her individuality.

The problem of instrumentality, however, diminishes when the viewer opens the magazine and begins to read and view the photo essay. Here, within the pages of the magazine, we learn about the Fontenelle family. A photograph of Norman Fontenelle Sr., Ellen's father, opens the photo essay. Positioned to the left of his image are a few lines of enlarged text that read: "What I want/ What I am/ What you force me to be/ is what you are." The image alone communicates that the man in the picture may be distant from the viewer. His watery eyes speak to his despair and his destitute situation. His forehead is hidden behind a sheet of glass or other structure that obstructs part of his face from the viewer, making him appear as if he is confronting the viewer from a world of darkness and despair. From this image alone, the viewer is vaguely empathetic and understands that the man has fallen on hard luck; yet, the viewer still remains detached from the man. The man remains a visual object. The large text to his left, though, forces the reader to find commonality with him. But the commonality is found in his larger representation as impoverished and black – what Barthes would see as the easily recognized, socially derived stereotype – and not in his subjectivity. Put another way, the man (Norman) is still just an instrument. But it is by reading the part of the essay to the right of the photograph that we learn the man's name is Norman – a common name with which many can identify. We also learn that he is not simply unemployed – a stereotype that many had of blacks in the 1960s inner-city – instead, he has been laid off and is actively searching for job after job, being denied employment because of his race. All of a sudden, Norman has become a human, someone with whom the viewer can sympathize. The glass dividing him and the viewer seems to shatter, his instrumentality (perhaps still present) overwhelmed by his subjectivity.





Through the interaction of captions, quotations and text, Parks' photo essay enables the reader to move from photograph to essay and learn about the Fontenelle family in particular (subjective) and families like them in general (instrumental). Each section of the essay begins with a quotation from a member of the family, usually Bessie, the mother and delves into a longer, textual exposition accompanied by one or several images. The quotations and text bring the photographed subjects to life. The presence of their words reclaims the power stolen from them by the camera. Parks' use of their words enables the Fontenelles to influence the viewer's reading of the photographs, and thus, of their lives. The viewer's belief in the accuracy of the quotations (and the essay as a whole) stems from the trust of the documentary photographer as neutral and from the visual evidence that confirms the Fontenelles' subjective words. Absent the images, many of these quotations would lose their power and truth. For example, Norman Sr. states in one part of the essay that "[the building] ain't fit for dogs – but what can you do?" Without the photograph of one of his sons sleeping against a bare mattress lined against a crumbling wall, Parks' essay would not have the evidence necessary to bring about its social critique. Unlike other documentary photographers and social photographers as early as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, Parks is not as concerned about the aesthetic, artistic image as he is with the simply evidentiary image. The image is a means toward, not the end of, the social critique. Thus, both the text and the photograph are integral to one another and to the larger project.

It is both interesting and instructive to note that the images in this 16 page *Life* spread have been reproduced elsewhere. In Parks' book *Moments without Proper Names*, many of the images of the Fontenelles are republished; yet, the images do not carry the same social significance in this book as they do in the *Life* spread. In *Moments* Parks does not provide the verbal contextualization so ubiquitous in his life essay. When one views these photographs without words surrounding and explaining them, the viewer is oblivious to the conditions of the Fontenelle family. The viewer leaves the image caring, certainly, but utterly impotent – *who are these people, what are their names, why are they crying?* These questions go unanswered, and the social critique suffers.

And the social critique would suffer as well if Parks' images were not so real, so fluid, so candid. Parks' documentary method of the Fontenelles is a distinct departure from his previous documentary methods and the methods he learned in his days with the FSA. The FSA photographers (Parks among them) were interested in finding evocative images that could stand alone as an index for social inequality and would eventually become a symbol of the New Deal. Multiple photographs would be taken of the same scene in order to construct the most meaningful picture. A certain level of artifice and simulation was a necessary part of the FSA photographer's methods. In his earlier work, Parks' methods included such artifice. His iconic photographs of Ella Watson and her family (particularly the photograph American Gothic) exemplify FSA methods. For American Gothic, Parks (as he comments in his autobiography *Voices in the Mirror*) placed Ella Watson in front of the American flag, told her to hold the broom and mop, and instructed her to make a stern face. The parody of the original, eponymous painting by Grant Wood is obvious and exaggerated. Parks blatantly criticizes the American Dream and mainstream society by appropriating and inverting an image that represents America's values. The absence of a male counterpart, the replacement of a pitchfork with a broom and mop, the presence of a blurred American flag, and the reversal from an outdoors (unbounded) setting to an indoors (bounded) setting all conspire to deliver Parks' critique of American injustice. Yet, the "mood," in Parks' own words, is lacking. The subjectivity of Ella Watson is missing from this staged image, as it is from many other FSA works. Her objectification for the purpose of a larger critique takes precedence over her subjectivity; yet, the larger criticism falls flat precisely because of that. The image appears concocted and illusory because of its unapologetic critque, causing the viewer to view it as a piece of art and failing to gain his or her sympathy.



For his project on the Fontenelles, Parks' methods were different, as his images and their accompanying text reveal. In *Voices*, he explains that he happened upon the Fontenelles, befriended them and came to know them as individuals and as a family before he began documenting them. Parks' documentary methods involved getting to know his subjects and listen to their words before placing a camera's lens between them. Moreover, he treated his camera less as a tool to create artifice and more as a tool to capture reality. For his documenting of the Fontenelles, he shot scenes as they were rather than as he created them. His approach bridged a distance, both conceptually and literally, between the photographed subject and the photographer, between the photograph and the viewer. His photographic approach, coupled with his revealing essay, brought the Fontenelles and individuals like them to life, thereby enabling an effective social critique.

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