

Applying a range of critical theories, identify and discuss an artwork of your choosing

Gordon Parks was born 30th November 1912, Fort Scott, Kansas. From such a young age he had to face the troubles of discrimination. Parks attended an elementary school where segregation played a massive part. Unfortunately, when Parks reached high school, he was unable to join in on activities, due to his race. Running alongside all of the discrimination he faced, even teachers were very strongly opinionated on discouraging African American students, for going on to do further education. However, when it came to the passing of his mother, Parks took it upon him and left home. After staying with relatives for a short while, Parks embarked on his own journey, searching for any potential jobs available.

After looking at images of migrant workers in a magazine, Parks was inspired and decided to pick up a camera for the first time. Further down the line, when Parks and wife Sally at the time relocated to Chicago in 1940, Parks became interested in low-income Black neighbourhoods of Chicagos South Side. "I saw the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs. I knew at the time I had to have a camera." This essay is aimed to look deeply into the imagery of Parks work to discuss the the struggles African Americans had to face on their day to day lives. *Oral history interview with Gordon Parks. (1964).*

Semiotics is the study of signs and how they relate to the social world. Semiotics can be applied to how we look at images and make us think in a critical way as to what is going on in an image in terms of any social issues and events happening. It allows us to break down an image by what we see and how we interpret it. You can use different formats within this to communicate information including, drawings, pictures, videos, audios. The main purpose of it is to try and discover a deeper meaning into a source of information, looking at all aspects found within the source.



Outside Looking In, Mobile, Alabama 1956

Parks image focuses in on the prime factor of racial segregation. Racial segregation is the act in which a certain class of society are cast aside from others as they are noticeably differentiated from everybody else, in which they are treated differently. Within the image we can see a grouping of young children, which assumably could range from the ages of 3-9, potentially. Grouped together behind the gate, it seems as though they are looking out and watching a group of white ethnic people at what appears to be a park. Something key which stands out quite symbolically here is the fence. Fences can be seen as something in which is used to section something off. *Gilroy, P. (1987), There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack, Great Britain, Hutchinson. Pg, 16.* As it is also a metal fence, the metal could signify strength. In this case, with the children being stood

behind the metal fence, it could be suggesting a strong barrier between black and white people and the different privileges white people got compared to black people. Black people were unfortunately cast aside and were treated with nothing but disrespect. Families, such as the Thorton family, we see in this image, had to face the struggles everyday becoming an outcast in which Parks is able to show. As you see, the middle two girls are holding onto the gate. This can imply that they want to have the privileges, freedom and fun the white people get. Feeling like a prisoner, they are trapped behind the gate wanting to be set free. The girl on the far right is comforting who is assumably her younger sister, putting her arm on her shoulder to make feel safe. The hand on the shoulder is a sense of comfort, reassurance, whilst ensuring they feel protected. This is something in which you shouldn't have to do just from looking at other classes of society, considering how young these people are and the unfortunate circumstances. *Fanan, F (1986), Black Skin, White Masks, London, Pluto Press. Pg, 13.* Being children, you would want to be able to go out and have fun, have the free choice to be able to go to parks without feeling eyes on the back of your head the entire time, feeling judged and out of place. As we are given no indication as to any emotion from the children's faces, we as viewers can only go off from we see, which is the

back of their heads. Even so, just from looking at the back of the children you can tell that the despairing children just want to be able to go out and have fun like others. From the other side of the gate, we can see a wide space of grass. This can show the amount of space, indicating freedom that the white people get. Where as you look where the Thorton's children are stood, which is only what we can assume is a smaller space, not big enough for them to go and have fun in as they are stood against weeds and overgrown grass. Alongside this, in the photograph, we can also see that on the opposing side is a ferris wheel, continuing to tie in with the key aspect of luxuries the white children get. *Gilroy, P (1993), The Black Atlantic, Harvard University Press, pg 19*. Even though the children would have had an area to play in, the image continues to feed the viewer with more ideas of how children who are similar in age had such differences in the way they are treated. *Gordon Parks: Segregation Story. (2014-2015) High Museum of Art*. With the restrictions that they have, they are unfortunately learning from a young age that they are different to others and are taught a lot of things from their parents that they can't do, such as we see in the image, not being able to go to parks, which is only so they are keeping their children safe. We can use semiotics to look into this image by seeing the main highlighted factor which is racism which this image strongly represents. Due to the fact that from such a young age, Parks dealt with all the difficulties, which as stated, was discrimination and had clearly had an influence on his body of work. As you look more deeply into the meaning behind the image, we can discover that these are the issues Parks faced as a child. This including not being able to participate in activities and have the luxuries like others. "I had to experience firsthand the frustration and humiliation of being a man in a white world before I became a black man witnessing the struggles of others in that same white world". It strongly highlights that aspects of feeling isolated and cast aside. Images such as this Parks, G 1956 documentation, help to show people the issues faced in segregated Alabama. From being asked by Life Magazine to document these issues in Alabama, Parks could go on to compare it to his own experiences. The way in which it is documented plays a part as well, as Parks has followed a family showing the struggles they encounter on a daily basis. Yet the work of Latoya Ruby Frazier, *Frazier, L.R. (2001-2014) The Notion of Family*, is highlighting the way of protesting to get their voice heard as we can see a group of African Americans, coming together in the streets, with posters "UPMC stands for Unfair, Profit, Making, Corporation". *Gilroy, P (1993), The Black Atlantic, Harvard University Press. Pg, 7*. These African Americans are facing the struggles of political differentiation and the living crisis they are having to encounter. Even years later with the 2001-2014 imagery, African Americans are still being faced with racism and discrimination.



Parks, G. (1956) Outside Looking In, Mobile, Alabama

Semiotics is being used in this image, *Parks, G. (1956) Outside Looking In, Mobile, Alabama*, to help communicate the main factor of racial segregation, understanding the main issues faced within that time period and the struggles they have to face in their everyday lives, which is having an impact on children and how they are unfortunately having to learn from such a young age that they are being treated differently in an unfortunate matter. As seen, Parks has explored this deeply as he is someone who can relate to this story and can understand the difficulties these families are facing. The key social issues have been explored throughout this project, and show the emotional and physical problems it can have on African American families, as they go about their everyday lives.

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