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Gordon Parks

The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957

Main description

When *Life* magazine asked Gordon Parks to illustrate a recurring series of articles on crime in the United States in 1957, he had already been a staff photographer for nearly a decade, the first African American to hold this position. Parks embarked on a six-week journey that took him and a reporter to the streets of New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Unlike much of his prior work, the images made were in color. The resulting eight-page photo-essay "The Atmosphere of Crime" was noteworthy not only for its bold aesthetic sophistication, but also for how it challenged stereotypes about criminality then pervasive in the mainstream media. They provided a richly-hued, cinematic portrayal of a largely hidden world: that of violence, police work and incarceration, seen with empathy and candor.

Parks rejected clichés of delinquency, drug use and corruption, opting for a more nuanced view that reflected the social and economic factors tied to criminal behavior and a rare window into the working lives of those charged with preventing and prosecuting it. Transcending the romanticism of the gangster film, the suspense of the crime caper and the racially biased depictions of criminality then prevalent in American popular culture, Parks coaxed his camera to do what it does best: record reality so vividly and compellingly that it would allow *Life's* readers to see the complexity of these chronically oversimplified situations. *The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957* includes an expansive selection of never-before-published photographs from Parks' original reportage.

Co-published with The Gordon Parks Foundation and The Museum of Modern Art.

Biography

Gordon Parks was born into poverty and segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912. An itinerant laborer, he worked as a brothel pianist and railcar porter, among other jobs, before buying a camera at a pawnshop, training himself, and becoming a photographer. In addition to his storied tenures photographing for the Farm Security Administration (1941–45) and *Life* magazine (1948–72), Parks evolved into a modern-day Renaissance man, finding success as a film director, writer and composer. The first African-American director to helm a major motion picture, he helped launch the blaxploitation genre with his film *Shaft* (1971). He wrote numerous memoirs, novels and books of poetry, and received many awards, including the National Medal of Arts and more than 50 honorary degrees. Parks died in 2006.

Bibliography

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