

FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE



MAURICE BERGER
FOREWORD BY THULANI DAVIS



FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE

VISUAL CULTURE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

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For
the brave men and women
who fought for racial justice
and
equality in America

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I Am A Man, Sanitation Workers Assemble
Outside Clayborn Temple, Memphis, TN
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FOREWORD BY THULANI DAVIS

What if history granted white America only one or two individuals in each era to stand as its representative, the summation of its character, accomplishments, and perhaps all that the world would know of white America? Take the 1960s—who would be chosen—John F. Kennedy and Doris Day? Lyndon Johnson and Abbie Hoffman? When I put this question to a white friend, he asked what I meant by “represent.” This is a logical question for anyone whose culture is known to have many facets. White America doesn’t have representatives—it has people who represent the United States as a whole, Olympic athletes, for example. My friend could well have also asked, “represent white America to whom?”

When I asked this same question of several African-Americans, people who grew up with exactly this sort of selective representation, they simply answered that the most nationally prominent Negroes in the sixties were probably Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Sidney Poitier. Though they all volunteered that Malcolm X was an icon for African-Americans, and King was often denounced, they saw King and Poitier as acceptable black Americans for white America.

In every decade since escaped slaves began to produce narratives of their lives in bondage, there have been one or two African-Americans whose lives and images have appeared in the mainstream and have been characterized as representing our experience. Take the era from 1900–1910: Despite some of the incredible souls building African-American culture during that time, it is easy to claim that the names of educator Booker T. Washington (lionized and accepted) and boxing champion Jack Johnson (demonized and criminalized) may have summed up general knowledge of the race. Who similarly embodied white America? Theodore Roosevelt? Lillian Gish? It’s an impossible parallel to make because we have all been taught the complexity of white America.

The representation of African-Americans in the cultural mainstream, however, has been so selective, narrowly conceived, and determined by anticipation of white reception that widely accessible black images also became iconic. Most of them still exist in a shorthand of African-American fame rather than history: Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Bessie Smith, George Washington Carver, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey. We have a list of demonized figures too, captured in names like Marcus Garvey, “the Scottsboro Boys,” and Malcolm X.

What existed around these icons? What took the place of all the unknown and unseen in stories, folklore, and imagery of all kinds from advertising to photography? Standing in for real African-Americans and their stories was a world of fictional constructs uncannily similar in all forms. These were friendly African-American servants doing work of every kind—Negroes depicted in ways

viewed as comfortable to most white Americans. Even if this is not news, it is still obvious by our continued reluctance to look at the role of race in the entire visual field that most Americans have never learned to discern the dominant presence of imagery constructed to address white audiences from imagery that realistically reflects the complexity of African-Americans.

Maurice Berger, in this vital and important work, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, takes us on a journey through the development of both the narrow field of African-American icons and the broadly influential legacy of blackface and other stereotypical imagery. Berger's text and a superb collection of images spanning the second half of the twentieth century give us a guide to visual literacy in African-American representation. He explores the modern visual myths of blackness and the ways in which African-Americans publicly and privately responded and resisted.

Berger, Senior Research Scholar at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and Senior Fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School University in New York, is also author of a revealing and incisive memoir, *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness*, which illuminates the ways in which one is taught how *not* to see.

In *For All the World to See*, he introduces figures who waged the "epic battle against invisibility," and shows how the southern civil rights movement in particular shocked white America (and the world) into seeing by deploying photographic or televised evidence of the brutal realities of segregation (Intro, 7). This was necessary, Berger observes, because African-Americans felt "ill-served" by a mainstream media that skirted the issue of prejudice and catered to the interests and allayed the racial anxieties of its white audience. In the decades of legal segregation there were two separate and contradictory sets of black icons such that Berger could write of many black activists as he writes of Paul Robeson: "The very gifts and attributes that made Robeson a great man placed him in opposition to the acceptable image of African-Americans in mainstream culture" (ch. 1, 15). One could even say that only widespread integration made it possible for white America to valorize black America's activist icons, though usually only after the deaths of these civic troublemakers.

African-Americans of a certain age can recall exactly when and how they came to learn of important events affecting the race that were not broadcast over mainstream media. The 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, for instance, was known only after his mother, Mamie Till Bradley, showed his mangled body to black citizens in Chicago and allowed photographic documentation (that only the black press agreed to publish). As Berger writes, the murder is one of the events of the era that left a generational mark. One of my friends recalls his parents returning home shaken from seeing Till's body.

As a six-year-old, I found Till's battered face in *Jet* magazine. Most white Americans were completely unaware that simply seeing that photograph was a trauma for thousands of African-Americans.

The warning Till's murderers may have wished to issue to blacks in Money, Mississippi was dwarfed by the effect of the photograph's publication. That single image recruited many young people Till's age (and thousands of others) into the civil rights and black power movements to come. Rev. Jesse Jackson, who joined King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Stokely Carmichael, a chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were also fourteen-year-olds when Till was killed. Many in SNCC were Till's peers, among them Congressman John Lewis, Julian Bond, now Chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), H. Rap Brown, also a SNCC chairman, and Doris Ruby Smith Robinson, a SNCC executive secretary. Almost exactly his age were the four college students who set off the sit-in movement at a Greensboro, North Carolina lunch counter, and Huey Newton, a founder and leader of the Black Panther Party.

In 1955, though many of us heard about the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott through the black press or by word of mouth, television had begun to bring the southern struggles to the public eye. In 1957, millions watched the desegregation of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas, with its mobs meeting the first nine students outside the school. A single photo of Elizabeth Eckford surrounded by screaming white women stayed with me. Several years later when an integration plan was made in my hometown, the image asked of me whether I could serve my community in that way. We didn't need a lone icon facing abuse for all of us; we needed more bodies than could be captured in one image. We wouldn't merely be represented; we would be there.

Activists realized early on the power of images to awaken public outrage. Journalists got it too. The first sit-ins of the era began in February 1960 in Greensboro, and were caught by a single local photographer. Those images showed powerfully the absurdity of segregation, the pains taken by protesters to refute with their appearance any charges that protesters were troublemaking thugs, and they showed college students across the Southeast what to do. In the 1980s when I went to Virginia to do research on the 1960 sit-ins there, a local newspaper editor informed me that there were no articles in the archives because editors in the state had met and decided not to print stories on the movement in an attempt to stop it from spreading.

For All the World to See shows the fruits of these insights as they played out in photojournalism, advertising, film, and television. As each battle won brought another attempt to maintain control of an expanding story of African-American self-definition, the sights and sounds of real events rewrote

fictional claims of who we were and what we wanted. The pictures of the March on Washington, or protestors attacked with fire hoses, female members of the Nation of Islam, or the organized sanitation men of Memphis, belied representations meant to scorn grassroots mobilization. Berger gives us the point-counterpoint of this struggle for the country's moral center.

It is hard to spend time with Berger's history of African-American imagery without reflecting on the almost sudden emergence in the twenty-first century of the one person whose face will for a long time to come be the most powerful and influential African-American image ever. What perhaps will set Barack Obama apart from the iconic African-American figures before him is that he literally represents the country itself.

The campaign and election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States made his image the most well known African-American face in history. Obama the candidate had his own logo and slogans—"Yes, We Can" and "Change We Can Believe In"—adopted as catchphrases in vernacular culture everywhere. As president he will be the subject of untold official imagery, perhaps even as a face on a coin of U. S. currency, despite jokes made during the primaries that he was posing for such commemoration. He is the focus of a host of books and periodicals consisting purely of photographs and other visuals, as well as scores of music videos, YouTube tributes, ads, gags, and documentary footage. A *New York Times* issue reprinted paintings of Obama across the front page for a story on a rising Internet presence of Obama art. A pundit described a recent speech by using the adjective "Obamesque."

The man and his media image embody the global ties that are common in contemporary life, mixed with the qualities most often replicated in "acceptable" African-American representations. While black voters often remarked on the echoes of Malcolm's tone in Obama's voice or the lines quoted from Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls . . .* in his memoir *Dreams from My Father*, white voters were won over by the blend of Sidney Poitier charm, Martin Luther King earnestness, Thurgood Marshall brains, Michael Jordan cool, and Oprah Winfrey-style bootstrap triumph. It goes without saying that any African-American destined to have an era named after him would have to deploy all of the culture's accumulated savvy on managing black representation.

Reading *For All the World to See* will make clear why Michelle Obama is perhaps an even more stunning icon for this country, given our past and her heritage as a descendant of enslaved people. As one will easily spot in this book, iconic African-American images have rarely been female. Despite attempts to paint her as a latter-day angry black nationalist (disturbing to mainstream whites), she defies that stereotype and the older female types, whether mummies, vixens, or a Julia, living outside of the black world. We recognize her instead as one of

those familiar women of unassuming beauty captured in the black photographers' studios—our sisters, classmates, colleagues, daughters, and sweethearts.

As Maurice Berger shows in *For All the World to See*, the discourse around African-American images, especially the consistent efforts of African-Americans themselves to shape and influence their representation, made possible a shift in the national body politic that has been seismic. We may all need this book as a guide to the confusing, sometimes homemade representations of our larger than life president rising in awkward hand-painted clouds, fist bumping with his wife in pseudo Muslim garb, pointing at you as a bobble-head doll, growing water-melons on the White House lawn, emerging bare-chested from the Pacific Ocean, staring back from the face of a watch, or dominating the front of a rather cool tee shirt that reads, "Black Man Running—but Not from the Police."

*The black world must fight for freedom.
It must fight with the weapons of truth,
with the sword of the intrepid,
uncompromising spirit, with organization
in boycott, propaganda and mob frenzy.*

W. E. B. Du Bois

Dusk of Dawn (1940)

INTRODUCTION: WEAPONS OF CHOICE



On April 23, 1968, CBS News aired a half-hour documentary, *The Weapons of Gordon Parks*, about the acclaimed photographer, filmmaker, composer, and author (fig. 1). The program was unusual for its time. It celebrated black accomplishment, still a rare subject on American television. It uncompromisingly addressed the topic of racism from the perspective of a black person. And it departed from the conventional television news format, opting instead for an artful and impressionistic structure in which photographs, music, and narration, all by Parks, were elegantly interwoven with CBS footage of the artist at work.

In its opening sequence, the documentary makes clear one of its central themes: that racism could easily have destroyed Parks had it not been for his artistic talent. In a voiceover, Parks ruefully describes a prison execution he once witnessed as a journalist. Reflected on the glass wall that separated him from the condemned man, he observes, he could see his “own image emerging from his. . . . I recall the elaborate conspiracy of evil that once beckoned me towards such a death.” As the narrative unfolds, Parks is shown in his New York studio, engaging in what are for him empowering and life-affirming acts: loading his camera with film and looking through its viewfinder. “Years ago I found them, one by one,” says Parks of the aesthetic “weapons” on which his survival would depend. “They were all half hidden, in obscure cubbyholes, stretching along the labyrinthine corridors of my early life.”

The program’s second vignette also alludes to the power of images to save its subject. Parks is seen sitting at a light table examining small color transparencies through a magnifying loupe. In voiceover, he remembers the difficulties of his childhood. He speaks of the abject poverty and discrimination his family faced in rural Kansas, of his mother’s early death, and of her final wish to send him, the youngest of fifteen children, to live with his married older sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. He speaks of a stoically silent father, unable to express his feelings or desires, not even to the son he is about to lose. He tells of the breaking up of his family and the loneliness and isolation he felt as a teenager. As he talks, the camera pans across the slides on the light table, and then focuses on the image of a single black hand, palm open, raised in a gesture of defiance—an icon, perhaps, of Parks’s own rebelliousness, the symbolic hand into which he would continually place the weaponry he would employ to fight prejudice.

The loving attention to Parks’s photographs, as well as the idea that they possessed the ability to liberate and embolden him, provides what may well be the documentary’s most unusual angle: that visual images could play a formidable role in the struggles of a people, both personal and public. Until this time, television coverage of African-Americans and the civil rights movement was predominantly story-based: producers and writers tended to see the battle for racial justice as a continuum of news—protests, civil disobedience, legislation,

fig. 1 (previous page)
The Weapons of Gordon Parks
 1968
 (Gordon Parks)
 Courtesy of CBS News Archives

verdicts, and legal decisions. The camera was the tool that recorded these events, made them visible, more immediate, and even, in a sense, more real. But rarely did the media consider the power of visual representation itself—the authority of images to change the world, as *The Weapons of Gordon Parks* suggests—despite the hunger of TV news for compelling imagery that it could use to captivate, and potentially increase, its audience.

It would take a figure as commanding as Parks, and a news organization no less respected than CBS, to make the point that pictures mattered in the war against racism. This was an abiding concept not just in the TV documentary but also in the text on which it was based: *A Choice of Weapons*, the autobiography that Parks had published two years earlier, in 1966. In the book, he conjures a time when African-Americans were “always in battle,” to quote Richard Wright, forever toiling against the insidious forces of bigotry.¹ This struggle meant that Parks, like millions of black people before him, would hold many weapons in his hands, most tragically a switchblade he contemplated (but refrained from) using to rob an elderly trolley conductor on a cold, desperate night in St. Paul. Parks faced an uphill battle, trapped in a world of racist loathing, a place where “achievement seemed almost impossible.”² And eventually, he reached his breaking point: “It was becoming more and more difficult [for me] to live with the indifference, the hate. . . . I wouldn’t allow my life to be conditioned by what others thought or did, or give in to anyone who would have me be subservient.”³

For Parks, the crusade for dignity and freedom was principally a search for his voice—for a way of being heard, of transcending the muteness that imprisoned his father. Ironically, it was Parks’s understanding of the authority of visual images, “the power of a good picture,” as he would say, that allowed him to speak loudest.⁴ He encountered this power in the book that had become his bible, *12 Million BlackVoices* (1941), which told the story of African-American oppression and survival through the eloquent words of Richard Wright and uncompromising images shot by Farm Security Administration photographers. He saw this same power in the paintings and sculptures he looked at carefully on frequent visits to the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1930s. He saw this power in the photographs that he, himself, had begun to take. These images were commanding enough to merit him the first Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in photography in 1941 and a job in the Farm Security Administration, for which he documented American poverty and racism (fig. 2). He would soon be working for *Life* as a photojournalist, and as editorial director of *Essence*.

Parks was not alone in his understanding of the potency of visual images. The civil rights movement, in its campaign for racial equality and justice, would come to equate pictures with weapons, the tools that Parks had relied on for decades to fight “effectively against intolerance.”⁵ “The history of black liberation

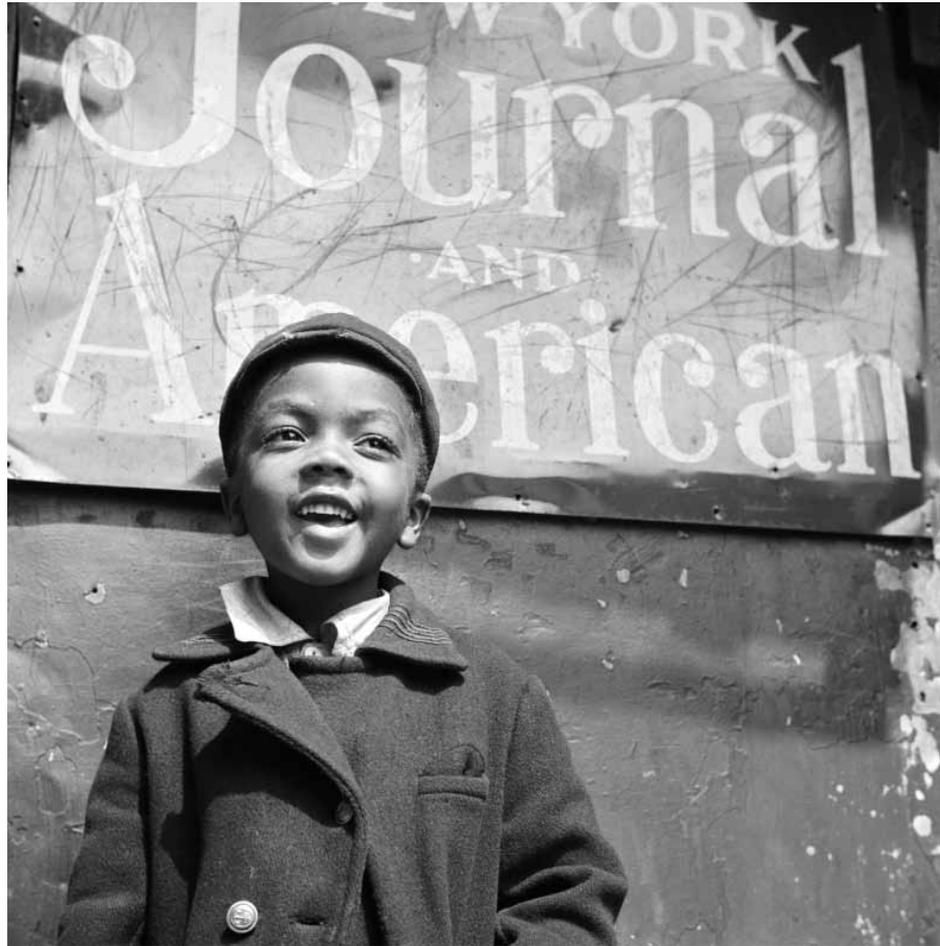


fig. 2
Gordon Parks
New York, New York. Harlem
Newsboy, 1943 May–June,
LOC, Prints & Photographs
Division, FSA-OWI Collection
[LC-DIG-fsa-8d28520]

movements in the United States,” as the cultural critic bell hooks perceptively observes, “could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, equal access.”⁶ These images could work in innumerable ways, from bolstering black pride to helping convince white Americans of the severity of prejudice and the ways it endangered democracy. Yet despite books, exhibitions, and documentaries on Parks and other artists, photographers, filmmakers, designers, and television producers and directors of the civil rights era, the story of the remarkable role played by visual culture in shaping and fortifying the movement remains one of the least understood in recent American history.

The modern civil rights movement—which spanned roughly a quarter-century, from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s—was born in a period of great social and cultural change in the United States. The end of World War II marked the culmination of a forty-year cycle of economic and military expansion, war, poverty, and political unrest. Broad demographic shifts, including the exodus of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North, were transforming America’s ethnic and racial landscape. In the “Great Migration,” black people, escaping the racism and poverty of the South, saw the North as a place to forge a better and more emancipated life. Northern cities, however, were not the solution that many were looking for: white racism was still a problem, and the challenges of living in urban environments proved daunting for many. But the North could be relatively fertile ground for African-American enfranchisement and antiracist activism.

The nation, having survived the Depression and vanquished its enemies in World War II, reluctantly turned its attention to its own history of injustice. As federal courts struck down segregationist statutes and some local legislatures advanced antidiscrimination laws, African-American leaders saw an opportunity to fight for true equality by appealing to white people’s sense of fairness and justice. They pointed to the injustice to thousands of black soldiers who had served with honor in World War II, only to return home to the indignities of bigotry and neglect.

The environment for activism was aided by other factors, such as the educational and economic gains of black people in the urban North and the increasing prominence of Negro colleges, black churches, and other institutions devoted to African-American expression, learning, and empowerment. The consolidation of black political clout was also important, as African-Americans migrated from rural areas to densely populated cities, in both the North and the South. The proximity and concentration of urban black populations, in turn, afforded ease of dialogue and communication. And the increasing popularity and financial support, tendered by both black and white patrons, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation’s preeminent civil rights organization, lent organizational muscle to the movement.

One element in the arsenal of the modern civil rights movement, though, is rarely included in its history: the vast number of potent images, disseminated by new or enhanced technologies of visual communication, that made their way into the culture at large. The struggle for racial justice in the United States was fought as assuredly on television and in movies, in magazines and newspapers, and through artifacts and images of everyday life as it was on the streets of Montgomery, Little Rock, and Watts. The movement produced myriad images in multiple formats, which reflected shifting sensibilities and contexts, from the modest illustrations in early black magazines such as the *Crisis*, to the CBS News specials *Breakthrough in Birmingham* (1963) and *Ku Klux Klan: The Invisible Empire* (1965) and other televised reports on the state of American race relations.

While scholars and writers have considered how these images documented the movement, few have looked beyond the subject of documentation to the ways they helped alter prevailing ideas and stereotypes. *For All the World to See* constitutes one of the first attempts to examine the roles of visual images in shaping, influencing, and transforming the fight for civil rights in the United States.⁷ It explores images in both high and popular culture, and tracks the ways in which they represented race in order to perpetuate the status quo, stimulate dialogue, or change beliefs and attitudes. The book argues that the modern civil rights movement, coextensive as it was with the birth of television and the rise of picture magazines and other forms of visual mass media, effectively capitalized on the power of visual images to edify, convince, and persuade.

There is no question that visual images have influenced how Americans see and think about race. This is true because much of what defines race in society was, and is, innately visual. Ideas and observations about race are, more often than not, communicated through visual cues, symbols, and stereotypes. To talk about race is to talk about skin color: black, yellow, white, and brown. To talk about race is to talk about the shape of the eyes or nose or the texture of the hair, about clothes or hairstyle or body types.

During the period of the modern civil rights movement, powerful visual images infiltrated the culture at large—locally and nationally—against a backdrop of extraordinary events. It was a time of segregationist bombings, brutal lynchings, race riots, sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and turbulent political campaigns. In the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. Supreme Court rulings on segregation, voting rights, and miscegenation were countered by an unending campaign of white resistance, exemplified by the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, and the states' rights movement. Antiracist activists and civil rights leaders were slain. And de facto segregation (even in the “liberal” Northeast) remained a stubborn, almost intractable problem. Ultimately, *For All the World to See* is intended neither as a history of the civil rights movement nor as a comprehensive accounting of its visual culture.

Many significant events, and many images and objects, will not be discussed. The book focuses on a select number of actions, objects, and episodes that most vividly or typically demonstrate the relationship between visual images and the struggle for racial justice.

In his landmark work as chief counsel to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in the 1950s, Thurgood Marshall often reminded his colleagues that success was as much about “morale and legitimacy” as it was about prevailing in individual cases. Marshall’s observation relates to a central theme of *For All the World to See*. It was not just through political or legal writing but also through compelling images that the civil rights movement altered perceptions about race, and thus advanced the case of black legitimacy within white America as it bolstered morale within black communities across the nation. This struggle for morale and legitimacy—for the hearts and minds of Americans of all colors—was fundamentally an epic battle against invisibility. The notion of the invisible was an abiding metaphor for a movement intent on confronting the numerous ways in which the realities of race in America were ignored and obscured in society—from the bigotry, both virulent and passive, that most white people refused to acknowledge to the mainstream culture’s erasing of black humanity, talent, and intelligence.

This metaphor lies at the heart of one of the most influential and seminal books of the civil rights era: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). The novel is an eloquent examination of the nature of bigotry and its effects on both victim and perpetrator, told from the perspective of a young, nameless black man in the midst of a nightmarish journey through the nation’s racial divide. On his way, he confronts racism in many forms—from a humiliating “battle royal” in the Deep South, where he is ordered by his college to fight other black men under the leering eyes of a white audience, to his work as a leader in the Brotherhood, a communistlike organization in Harlem that eventually betrays him. *Invisible Man* is an unapologetically political work, one that Ellison himself described as an appeal to “personal moral responsibility.”⁸ It boldly challenges the laws, rules, and conventions that render mute and unseen a people whose only crime is the color of their skin. The narrator constantly faces the heartbreaking paradox of a life lived under the tyranny of racism, that of a strong, gifted, and intelligent man who has almost no visibility, no standing in the society at large:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe, nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Ellison's narrator struggles to free himself—and the story of his people—from this invisibility, only to find his efforts rebuffed and thwarted. He is expelled from the Negro college he attends, for example, after he takes an elderly white trustee to a poor black neighborhood in order to show him the brutality and destructiveness of segregation in the South. *Invisible Man* explores the irreconcilable differences that shape how black and white people see race. The cruel history of black oppression that the narrator attempts to bring into the light is the very history from which his white tormentors avert their eyes, lest they confront ugly questions and even uglier answers and truths. The protagonist's self-image differs radically, as well, from white people's warped perception of him: a normal person transformed through the poisoned lens of racism into a sideshow freak.

“The very term ‘invisible,’” Frederick Karl writes of the novel's abiding theme, “suggests that not even what is seeable is indeed visible; that the invisible remains the stronger element; the more powerful and insistent presence.” In Ellison's worldview, the war against racism is, in great part, a fight to overcome society's pervasive need to obscure or obliterate the realities of race. One of the greatest lessons of *Invisible Man* lies in its awareness of this relationship: we are no more powerful, Ellison seems to say, than when we recover and reveal that which has remained unseen and unacknowledged.

This was a lesson that the leaders and supporters of the civil rights movement understood and learned to act on. In this regard, visual culture was an exemplary weapon, to paraphrase Gordon Parks, poised to do the job that words alone often could not. As the Reverend Wyatt Walker, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1960s, commented, new or advanced modes of communication in the mid-twentieth century were pivotal in supporting the cause of racial justice: “the media had a tremendous [effect] on our movement . . . because it gave a window to America to see what segregation was like. America had never seen it before.”¹⁰

In their unique ability to offer seemingly irrefutable evidence and testimony as an “objective record . . . of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality,” photography, film, television and other forms of visual representation have been innately powerful tools in the war against ignorance and bigotry.¹¹ Words, on the other hand, are hampered by their

physical and conceptual distance from reality: they are always and inevitably many steps removed from the corporeal world, the result of the translation of objects and events into a rigid linguistic system.

Verbal language, dependent on the point of view and biases of the speaker and subject to exaggeration, omission, and deceit, could be easily denied. To bigots in the South, words that described the brutality of segregation would be dismissed as lies or the protestations of fragile, ungrateful, or overly sensitive souls. To northern white liberals—complacent in the belief that racism was a southern problem, and fearful of any intimation to the contrary—certain words were best ignored, lest things get too uncomfortable. To African-Americans, long subject to the capricious behavior and whims of white people, words offered little more than false promises and shattered dreams.

Visual images—certainly subject to manipulation but also direct and vivid optical records of the things and events they represent—would come far closer to representing the “Truth” that the great writer and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois believed was black people's most potent weapon against injustice. No image could act alone, of course. No image could, by itself, change the world, for every visual representation is dependent on context: the words, circumstances, distribution, and beliefs that endow pictures with greater levels of meaning and influence. In this sense, the leaders of the civil rights movement—and their vigilant enemies—were often exceptionally gifted image-makers. They understood, and took advantage of, the complex relationship between innovative technologies for representing the world and a society eager for new ways of seeing. The adage that a “picture is worth a thousand words” was never more valid than in the battle for and against civil rights—the innumerable efforts to prove, or disprove, the idea that racism was a scourge that imperiled both democracy and the future of America.

*If what the white American reads in newspapers
or sees on television conditions his expectations of
what is ordinary and normal in the larger society,
he will neither understand nor accept the black American.*

Kerner Commission
Report of the National Advisory Commission
on Civil Disorders (1968)

IT KEEPS ON ROLLIN' ALONG: THE STATUS QUO



*You were born into a society which spelled out
with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible,
that you were a worthless human being. . . .
The details and symbols of your life have been
deliberately constructed to make you believe
what white people say about you.*

James Baldwin
The Fire Next Time (1962)



There is no more typical black character in early American film than the handyman Joe in *Show Boat* (directed by James Whale, 1936; *fig. 3*). The brief supporting role—portrayed by the venerated actor and baritone Paul Robeson—is at once incongruous and unsettling. The part of the obsequious, inarticulate servant seems inappropriate for Robeson, a classically trained performer with leading-man good looks and a formidable intellect. Joe straddles the line between slave and freeman. He is defeated by prejudice and arduous, thankless labor, yet is confident enough to sing openly about the racism that beats him down. Even the world around him is contradictory, a mythic, carefree South out of sync with the film’s urbane, socially conscious story of betrayal and intolerance.

Show Boat was the second film adaptation of the popular 1927 Broadway musical by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, a production that was itself based on the best-selling novel by Edna Ferber.¹ In the film, Julie LaVerne, played by the white actress Helen Morgan in her last screen appearance, is the star of the acclaimed theatrical revue performed on the *Cotton Blossom*, a Mississippi showboat. After Julie’s black ancestry is revealed, she and her white husband and costar are forced to give up their act. Magnolia Hawks (Irene Dunne), the daughter of the ship’s white captain, replaces Julie, along with a new leading man, Gaylord Ravenal (Allan Jones), an inveterate gambler. The two eventually marry, leave the ship, and move to Chicago to start a new life with their baby daughter. No longer able to control his addiction, the now destitute Gaylord abandons his wife and child. In the end, Magnolia triumphs in the face of catastrophe: she returns to the stage and becomes a star.

The character of Joe, though tangential to the story, functions as the film’s icon of southern black subservience and its beacon of hope and optimism. It is he, in a dramatic, soulful rendition of “Ol’ Man River” at the outset of the film, who is given the task of setting up *Show Boat*’s message: that human beings can overcome almost any hardship. The song, which recounts the difficult life of a riverboat worker, is also a metaphor for the withering effects of racism on black people in the South. As Joe intones his tale—“You an’ me, we sweat an’ strain, body all achin’ an’ racked wid pain”—the close-up of his face alternates with a montage of him and other black men engaged in backbreaking toil. The implied perseverance and dignity of these people, not their oppression, is the point of the scene—and indeed the movie: the power of the human soul to deliver itself from adversity. Like the great Mississippi River, the song seems to suggest, life “keeps on rollin’ along,” no matter what obstacles stand in its way.

The scene is undeniably compelling. But it is also disturbing, beset by a melancholic, even tragic, aura. There is more than a hint of weariness and sadness in Robeson’s expression, that “uneasily tied knot of pain,” as Richard Wright described it, so evident in the faces of black entertainers of the period.²

¹ *fig. 3* (previous page)
Show Boat
1936
(Paul Robeson)

The situation in which the actor found himself—stuck in a small role, unable to reap the monetary rewards or recognition afforded to white actors of his talent and stature—was typical for black performers in mainstream American film. The character of Joe, as written, was little more than a stereotype. He was a shadow of the complex human being that Robeson struggled to reveal through the nuances of physical gesture and facial expression, body language that laid bare the character’s sorrow and doubt, and the actor’s as well. “[I am] sick and tired of caricatures,” Robeson stated unequivocally in 1937, the year after *Show Boat* was released, adding that he saw no future for himself in American films “because the South is Hollywood’s box office.”³

Even in its most progressive efforts, even in films that broached the subject of racial injustice, such as *Show Boat*, the motion picture industry reined in African-American performers. Sometimes, this suppression was literal, part of a strategy of racial appeasement that called for white actors to play black characters or that segregated black performers into a handful of scenes that could be excised from movies when they were screened in southern theaters. Other times it was subtle—substituting a cliché for a complex human being, for example—a means of dispelling the anxieties that the image of strong black people provoked even in the most liberal white audiences. In 1941, in an essay on African-Americans in film published in the *Amsterdam News*, W. E. B. Du Bois observed:

Negroes have received some recognition and employment; the roles [that] they portray have improved somewhat in character during the last twenty years; that is, the Negro appears now not simply as clown and fool but now and then in more natural and human roles. On the other hand, all Negroes are quite aware that anti-Negro propaganda still goes on through the films: that in every scene that brings in a jail there will be Negro prisoners prominently displayed; that the Negro clown is still frequently met and that almost never can a Negro take a role that involves real manhood.⁴

These ambiguous, subtly hostile depictions reflected the values and anxieties of the white people who controlled the mainstream media and, by extension, the pervasive racism that was the rule rather than the exception in the United States at the birth of the modern civil rights movement. These images, however, were more than just a “diagnostic tool, a measuring device for the state of race relations.”⁵ They were weapons that shattered the egos of black people and enabled the prejudices of white people. More than any other force, the media established the prototypical black person for most Americans.⁶ Thus, to understand the role and the place of media-driven pictures of race is to better comprehend the extent to which visual culture was both a target and a tool in the historical struggle against racism.