VELVET FILM

PRESENTS

FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
SPECIAL SCREENING

ERNEST COLE: LOST AND FOUND

A FILM BY RAOUL PECK

2024 –FRANCE, USA – DOCUMENTARY – ENGLISH – 106’

mk2 FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Ernest Cole, a South African photographer was the first to expose the horrors of apartheid to a world audience. His book House of Bondage, published in 1967 when he was only 27 years old, led him into exile in NYC and Europe for the rest of his life, never to find his bearings. Raoul Peck recounts his wanderings, his turmoil as an artist and his anger, on a daily basis, at the silence or complicity of the Western world in the face of the horrors of the Apartheid regime. He also recounts how, in 2017, 60,000 negatives of his work were discovered in the safe of a Swedish bank.

INTERVIEW WITH RAOUL PECK

What did Ernest Cole's work mean to you prior to making this film?

The first thing you should know is that, while I am probably a bit younger than Ernest Cole's generation, that's still my generation. So I remember a lot of those pictures. For example, the one of the older woman sitting on the bench that reads "White Only." But I didn't know it was Ernest Cole. And in the '70s, there were not many recognized black photographers. It was rare. That's why those photographs are so unique.

I grew up with the anti-apartheid fight. I was in Berlin when I was 17 and many people engaged in the fight were in exile. The ANC (African National Congress) was in exile. Various liberation movements were in exile and we did demonstrations together. I helped write a pamphlet and did photography at the time. So this is not a foreign story to me. On the contrary, it was something I could totally relate to.

The film is so powerful, partly because of your creative choice of letting Ernest tell his own story through your writing. You guide the viewer into his headspace with the help of his photographs and his words, braided with your own writing.

I wasn't going to tell this story through talking heads—that would have been a totally different story, like a biography. And I don't do biography, I tell stories. I want you to be able to watch this film twice, get into the story and be caught by it. That means you need characters, you need motivation, conflict, evolution, redemption, all of that. And because I write screenplays, I know how to attain that, both in narrative and documentary form. And so the most important decision here was that he tells the story.

It was important for me to understand is why Ernest, a well-known black photographer from South Africa, sort of disappeared. I was angry each time I read that Ernest was depressed, that he became homeless, or that he had paranoia. They didn't see him as a human being or respect him as an artist who was going through something. So I read all that and thought, "I know that nobody becomes homeless just because they are lazy, or because they are crazy." So it was important to me to really understand how he got there and give a human explanation to that black box.

Getting in Ernest Cole's skin was not hard because I knew that sensation of feeling that you're not at home, that you don't belong. I had it all my life. And the depression he went through, too. I knew what it meant not to have a room at some point. When in Berlin, I suddenly had to find a new room one day. I didn't have my family there. Yes, I had friends, I could crash on a couch. But it's not the same thing as having the people you grew up with. So I knew what that insecurity meant.

Another aspect is, I wanted to let Ernest respond to the mostly white experts' opinions about his work. And because I base my films on research, I bump into this in all my works: I go to all the experts, I read all their literature, their thesis and see that those experts are primarily white. White journalists, white historians… And you can't not see a sort of patronizing. You can't not see the lecturing. And I use that in the film.

On that note, it's unbelievable that Ernest Cole's powerful photographs in the American South, where he draws parallels between the apartheid and Jim Crow, were received coldly and labeled so inaccurately as "having no edge." It's startling to hear that false take for those incredible photographs.

You know, those sentences are true. I didn't invent "he didn't have any edge." Again, I let Ernest respond to that. And his experience reflects my own experience. When I became an official Black Filmmaker, one of the few well-known Black directors was Spike Lee. We were not that many. And from the generation before, filmmakers like Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima. And they were so politically involved that they were disregarded in the established media. So we had to fight for our voice. One of the things I had to watch out for is people with access wanting to help me. Because in order for them to help me, I had to somehow submit to their protection—as an artist, you can't accept that, going to a gatekeeper or a paternal figure that protects you.

And Ernest went through that. Even in his great friendship with Joseph Lelyveld of The New York Times, you could see that there was a tension. And you can see that relationship in the very precise post-colonial context. Newspapers condemned the apartheid, but not really all the way, because they were always, "We need to protect the blacks and the white who are fighting the apartheid." And that's the same hypocrisy when you hear Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher say, "We cannot boycott because that would be bad for the people of South Africa." But today, they do boycott Russia. And they don't say "The poor Russians are suffering, too. You could punish Putin, but don't punish the whole population." So I've been aware of that double reality all my life.

What crossed your mind when you became aware that 60,000 negatives of Ernest's formerly unknown photos were discovered in the vaults of a Swedish bank?

I was more curious to see those pictures than to learn how they were discovered. Of course, from a producer's point of view, it was like, "Wow!" I knew that people would be interested in that story. But I more wanted to see those pictures and give them a new life.

And then there's the contradiction of this work disappearing for more than 40 years. Your work does not disappear like this. Just recently (on May 7, 2024), the Hasselblad Foundation published a press release that says they will give back all the pictures, including the 504 vintage prints I mention at the film's end in title cards. Those vintage prints are the other big scandal. I did not give too much detail about them in the film on purpose and I hope that the journalists will work on that. Ernest himself printed those pictures. They are worth between 10,000 and 30,000 Euros each. So you can understand why Hasselblad would hang on to those pictures. They said they were taking care of them during all those years and are happy to be giving them back. But that's not the story. That's a lie. The truth is what we say in the film—they asked the Cole Family Trust to prove that those pictures belong to them.

So those are the pictures and some additional material they decided to give back as of May 7, 2024. But that has nothing to do with the 60,000 negatives that were in the bank vault. We still don't know how they got there. We still don't know who put them there. When you ask Hasselblad, they say they don't know. When you ask the bank, they say they don't know. So they have no record? The reality is, Hasselblad put them in the bank. I can't prove that. But the people who were executive at the bank were, at one point, executives at Hasselblad. Sweden is a small country, so the powerful people are the same.

As Ernest Cole's voice, LaKeith Stanfield unearths the depth of the text with expressive power. How did you cast him and what was your direction to him?

From the get-go, I knew that Ernest was telling his story, so that I would need an Ernest. And my Ernest should be an actor, not a narrator, not someone who will just read the text in a monotonous voice. It had to be like I did with *I Am Not Your Negro*, with Samuel L. Jackson being James Baldwin, you know? And that's the magic of cinema. Once you are in it, you are in it. You don't go, "Oh, it's not Ernest." So I had a list of actors who I thought could be the voice—the criteria for me are the same ones I would use if I was making a narrative. Who could carry that soul? Who could be real enough to make it work?

With Jackson, it was obvious because he is a very clear person in his politics. He grew up in the South. He was a theater actor. And for me, theater actors know how to build a character. And I needed somebody who could do that kind of job in a character study. And LaKeith had the same qualities. He has done theater, and he's a very mature person. He's very grounded and he has a persona. And I love his voice, a very nonlinear voice. There is crackle in it. He's sensitive and sensible. He told me that he had been photographing the last four years. He bought cameras and he's really into it. So there was a lot of connection. And he really went through a journey throughout the film. At the end, I didn't tell him to cry. I just told him, "From now on, everything that comes out of your mouth is in character. So if you lose your voice, it's in character." And we mixed it in the way that we could hear his respiration, his silences. We were totally with him throughout. And when his voice breaks at the end, he was basically crying in the studio. And you cannot have that in a clinical way of doing stuff.

That's both a testament to his greatness as an actor and your authentic writing in Ernest Cole's voice. You mentioned earlier it wasn't hard for you to be in his skin. Could you open that up further? How did you write the text, which is adapted from testimonies of family, friends and those who briefly knew him (as you indicate on a title card near the start)?

It's an organic process. It's not that I sat down one day and wrote the film. It's building block after building block. I remember the first text I wrote was a question: "How did I get there?" And that's a profound reflection to understand. "Why am I depressed? Why do I not feel well?" So as I'm writing Ernest's journal, the more I'm confronted with the things he wrote with testimony from his family, friends and colleagues, the fuller the picture became.

And at the same time, I was working on organizing his photographs. I found an app where I could have a thousand photos open on my desk, and I started making groups very rapidly. You know, it's like a puzzle. And what do you do when you have a 3000-piece puzzle? You go, let's put the green here and the blue there. It’s the basic classification of stuff, because you have to enter it somewhere. You can't just look and look. You have to visually have groups. Then one thing that came up rapidly: mixed-race couples. So I started to put them in a group, maybe 60, 80 of them. And so the narrative was building there. And then I write, I take notes, I rewrite them, like 50 times as the edit progresses. So it's really an organic process that is refined and modified each time.

In terms of grouping the photographs, you also take notice of some less obvious patterns. There are various photographs that signify the looks, sometimes alienating looks, that Ernest Cole felt on himself.

That is something I saw immediately. A lot of good photographs has this thing: there is always somebody looking in the camera in his pictures. So I had to deconstruct them. And when they are looking at the camera, suddenly you see a human being, not a victim. There's always either a little boy, a woman or an older man looking at the camera. And then that’s the focus. So my choices were always very strict on that, asking, “Where does the photograph stand? What is he photographing? Why is he taking this particular photo?” You have to find it in the picture.

Godard has this expression: Ici et Ailleurs, the idea of here and elsewhere. That’s my motto. This is something that has dominated my work since my first film. I am here and I'm elsewhere at the same time all my life. Whenever I was in France, in Germany, in the US, I was also in Haiti, also in Congo. And I could see the resemblance of this reality in Ernest’s photos, too. People think, “Oh, you’re in New York, so you’re happy and you’re free.” No, you are carrying everything on your shoulder. There is this one sentence when Ernest says, “You carry the smell of the prison on you.” It doesn't go away when you go to New York. The humiliation doesn’t go away. It's embedded in you.

There were also groups of photos where I said: South Africa or New York or the South, you can look and see the racism there and racism here. You can see the parallels. People forget that New York in the ‘60s was basically segregated. James Baldwin wrote about that—he lived in Holland, but going to Manhattan felt like going to a foreign country.

You tap into something very haunting when you juxtapose the past against contemporary footage. It invites us to see history from the lens of today. What went into that thematic and aesthetic choice?

Narrative or documentary, I always try to make films that have all these layers, carry these different functions. One is to recuperate and preserve my own historical memory, and to still be engaged in the current fight for all the places I come from and the place I am currently at. And another important one is to deconstruct the world archive, world history. The history of the world is, there is a long hundred years where as a black person, you didn't have access to write your own story. This is a fact. I cannot change it, but it's still my history. So my job is to go and find those traces. And when I find them, I have to deconstruct them. So I would never make a film that is only about the past. So when I show there are still these ghettos near an incredible stadium that costs millions, it is about the reality today.

And at the end, when you see the photos after Mandela's speech, you can interpret them two ways. You can say, “Wow, it's peaceful now.” But then you see people doing nothing in empty spaces. For me, that means there is still work to be done.

And then I wanted to finish with Ernest, on his human notes. I knew I needed that because it's his film. He had the last word, and it's a human word. And the human connection, to look at the other, is what is important to me. And then the circle was closed for me.

What can you say about your collaboration with Ernest Cole’s nephew, Leslie Matlaisane? He’s so deeply in the DNA of the story.

That’s the thing for me—he's not a talking head, he is a necessary character in the movie. Without him, we would never have been able to do the film the way we did. We had total access to everything: to all the negatives, to the contact sheets, to the notebook of Ernest Cole. I had access to all the emails and exchanges between Hasselblad, the bank and him. So I had his complete collaboration. And also when some subjects did not really respond to our inquiry, I could ask Leslie to interfere and call. So it was a really collaborative process. He came to Paris twice to watch the edit.

I made sure that he knew the story I was telling, and he was okay with it. That was important. And I called him recently when I saw the Hasselblad press release. He said he didn't want to have anything to do with it, but now his picture is on it. He told me he felt that he was conned, you know? He went there to pick up the photos and Hasselblad had another goal. They knew they wanted the picture of him. But that's fine. It doesn't erase what is on the record in the film, and in the end credits. Everything there is true.

You use some disquieting footage from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings where we get to listen to some harrowing accounts of what people lived through during the apartheid. Those testimonies almost bring Ernest’s work full circle. Can you talk about braiding them into the film?

I knew that at some point, I needed to see and to show the naked truth: barbarity, abuse, torture… I went through those emotions. I cried when Steve Biko was tortured and assassinated. He was one of the great leaders for us. He was like a Malcolm X. So it was important that I showed that reality. That's also why I start the movie with the Sharpeville massacre. People forget it. They think apartheid is just a figure of speech. No, people were dying. People lived their whole life under constraints, like prisoners of their own country.

Those men in the film by the way, they were engaged in the ANC. They were not victims. They were combatants and it was important to show there was a resistant branch in the ANC. And they were tortured because of that. It was all over the press that the apartheid was torturing and killing people. So France, United States, Britain and their security service didn't know that? It shows the hypocrisy of those people, too. For me, that’s a part of the circle as well.

What's something you hope that people, both who are already familiar with Ernest Cole and those who are new to his work, will hold close after hearing his story and seeing his photographs?

I would say that this is more than the story of Ernest Cole himself. What I hope the audiences will keep from this is to learn to be critical of what they are served, to learn how to deconstruct the stories around them. And they should apply that to everything. Ernest Cole is just one example, but you could do that for many artists, many black artists, in South Africa, The States, in Europe. Challenge institutions who have been the gatekeepers and the so-called saviors of all their work. They need to be questioned. You know, there is a great movement right now to return all the goods to their original countries. For me, this film is embedded in that movement.

The other narrative I want people to consider is those living in exile and the refugees everywhere. People don't leave their country just because they want to go west. That's a total falsehood. People leave their land because they have no choice. Nobody wants to live where they were brought. They always say, "I want to be able to return to my country one day." You know, how many of them are building a house back at home hoping they will retire there? And of course, most of the time, it doesn't happen. For myself included—I rebuilt my grandmother's house, always hoping to be back there. But with the political situation, it is hardly possible. So this is not only about Ernest Cole. There is a whole construct around his particular story.

ABOUT RAOUL PECK

Raoul Peck's complex oeuvre includes the films The Man by the Shore (Competition, Cannes Film Festival 1993); Lumumba (Directors' Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival 2000); Sometimes in April (Competition, Berlinale 2005); Moloch Tropical (TIFF 2009, Berlinale 2010) and Murder in Pacot (TIFF 2014, Berlinale 2015).

Raoul Peck was a member of the Berlinale jury in 2002 and of the Cannes Festival jury in 2012. In 2001, the Human Rights Watch Association awarded him the Irene Diamond Lifetime Achievement Award for his commitment to human rights.

In 2017, his documentary on writer James Baldwin, I Am Not Your Negro, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary and won the Audience Award at the Toronto Festival and the Berlinale. In 2018, it won the BAFTA and the Cesar for Best Documentary. This film was co-produced with ARTE.

His film, The Young Karl Marx, co-produced with Agat Films, was presented at the Berlinale the same year.

Exterminate all the Brutes, is a groundbreaking four-part mini-series, produced for HBO, which tells a counter-narrative to white Euro-centric history and was also co-produced by ARTE. The mini- series won a Peabody Award in 2022.

His latest film, Silver Dollar Road, had its world premiere at the 2023 Toronto International Film Festival.

His company Velvet Film was founded in 1989 and operates in the United States, France and Haiti. All of Peck's documentaries, feature films and television dramas have been produced or co-produced by Velvet Film.

FILMOGRAPHY

<u>**Fictions**</u>

1988 - HAITIAN CORNER - Locarno 1988, Forum - Berlinale
1993 - THE MAN BY THE SHORE, Competition - Festival de Cannes
2000 - LUMUMBA, Director's Fortnight - Festival de Cannes
2005 - SOMETIMES IN APRIL (HBO), Official Competition - Berlinale
2009 - TROPICAL MOLOCH, Toronto International Film Festival, Berlinale, Tribeca, Dubaï
2014 - MURDER IN PACOT, Toronto International Film Festival
2017 - THE YOUNG KARL MARX, Berlinale Gala

<u>**Documentaries**</u>

1991 - LUMUMBA – DEATH OF A PROPHET, award of best documentaries - Fribourg International Film Festival, New York Film Festival, Cinéma du Réel
1994 - DESOUMEN, DIALOGUE WITH DEATH (BBC, ARTE), NAAEE Film & Vidéo Festival

1994 - HAITI, THE SILENCE OF THE DOGS (ARTE)
2001 - THE PROFIT AND NOTHING BUT! (ARTE, RTBF)
2013 - FATAL ASSISTANCE, Berlinale, San Francisco, Hot Docs
2016 - I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO, Oscar®-nominee, BAFTA, Best Documentary - César, TIFF, New York Film Festival, Panorama - Berlinale
2021 - EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES, co-produced with HBO
2023 - SILVER DOLLAR ROAD, world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival

Unitary TV
1997 - CORPS PLONGÉS, Festival de Montréal
2006 - THE VILLEMIN CASE (6x60', ARTE, France 3), French Union of Film Critics
2008 - L'ÉCOLE DU POUVOIR (4x60', CHANNEL, ARTE), Festival Européen des 4 Ecrans

CAST & CREW

Directed by Raoul Peck

Written by Ernest Cole, Raoul Peck

Featuring the voice of Lakeith Stanfield (English version)

Featuring the voice of Raoul Peck (French version)

Producers: Tamara Rosenberg, Raoul Peck

Executive Producer: Laurence Lascary

With special collaboration from Leslie Matlaisane & The Ernest Cole Family Trust

Editor: Alexandra Strauss

Editing Supervisor: Marie Pascaud

Directors of Photography: Wolfgang Held, Moses Tau, Raoul Peck

Sound Mixer: Stéphane Thiébaut

Sound Editor: Aymeric Devoldère

Original Music: Alexeï Aïgui

Documentary Consultant: Marie-Hélène Barberis

Graphic Designer: Laurent Kinowski

Produced by Velvet Film (France), Velvet Film Inc. (United States)

In co-production with ARTE France Cinéma

With the participation of ARTE France – Society and Culture Unit

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