



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

ERNEST COLE: LOST & FOUND (15)

Director: Raoul Peck

Narrator: LaKeith Stanfield

US/France, 2024, 1 hour 46 minutes, English

Ernest Cole (1940-1990) was the first black freelance photographer in South Africa, working for the legendary Drum magazine. While working for Drum, Cole began his own personal project to document the evils of the apartheid regime, the result was his book *House of Bondage* published in 1967. In the book, Cole writes: "*Three-hundred years of white supremacy in South Africa have placed us in bondage, stripped us of our dignity, robbed us of our self-esteem and surrounded us with hate.*" The book was immediately banned by the South African government and Cole moved to the USA where he photographed the lives of black Americans. He died in 1990, a week before the release of Nelson Mandela and the final collapse of the apartheid regime.

Raoul Peck is a Haitian filmmaker, and the island's former Minister of Culture. He's best known for the acclaimed 2016 film *I Am Not Your Negro*, an exploration of the life and work of writer James Baldwin which won the BAFTA best documentary award.

In this Cannes award-winning documentary, the director Raoul Peck chronicles Cole's life and work through his photographs and writings – much as he dramatized James Baldwin's manuscripts in *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) – using an archive of 60,000 of Cole's long-lost negatives that mysteriously resurfaced in a Swiss bank in 2017. When Cole's nephew picks up the negatives from Switzerland, a thriller plot emerges in the form of a puzzle surrounding their provenance. Peck cleverly juxtaposes this with broader political aftermaths – the release of Nelson Mandela a week before Cole's death, testimony from the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission – as a reminder that for Cole there was no distinction between the personal, the political and the photographic: it was all "*my reality, my urgency*".

Annabel Bai Jackson, Sight and Sound

For Peck, *Ernest Cole: Lost and Found* is a reclamation of the photographer's voice, a film that forgoes talking head interviews and the opinions of others – and instead leaves the space for the artist to tell his own story.

"*It was about Ernest taking back his power,*" says Peck, describing how his film, and even the way his camera points in habits the artist's gaze. "*Because he had been disempowered for the last 50 years ... I wanted to give him the total podium to talk about his work, to talk about his life and even beyond his death.*"

Radheyam Simonpillai, The Guardian

Notes compiled by Steve Freer