

American Museum of the

Moving Image

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RAOUL PECK

April 2-4, 2004

Presented as part of the festival *Haiti on Screen*

Friday, April 2

7:30 p.m. INTRODUCED BY CLYDE TAYLOR

MAN BY THE SHORE

1993, 105 mins. 35 mm print courtesy: Velvet Film.

Directed by Raoul Peck. Written by Peck and Andre Grail. Produced by Pascal Vercust.

Photographed by Armand Marco. Edited by Jacques Comets. Principal cast: Jennifer Zubar (Sarah), Toto Bissainthe (Camille Desrouilliere), Jean-Michel Martial (Janvier), Patrick Rameau (Gracieux Sorel).

Professor Clyde Taylor is on the faculty of the Africana Studies department at New York University, and the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, also at NYU.

Man by the Shore

From an article by Clyde Taylor in *The Village Voice*, May 28, 1996:

In September 1994—with a U.S. aircraft bobbing offshore, paratroopers poised for invasion, and Jimmy Carter and company negotiating the exit of the Haitian junta—one film could have clued U.S. audiences into what the crisis was most importantly about. But without a chance to see Raoul Peck's *Man by the Shore*, Americans had to put up with TV rehashes of dictators, diplomats, and boat people. Peck's film is finally showing theatrically in New York City and is clearly world-class, doubtless the most compelling screen portrait of Haiti so far.

The terror that haunts the small Haitian town of *Man by the Shore* derives not from the zombie meat that Americans like to imagine, but the self-legalized murderers, torturers, and rapists that U.S. policy makers choose to ignore (when not sneakily underwriting them). The gift of Peck's disciplined narrative is in making this terror intimate, palpable, but at the same time, humane. Terror dances around eight-year-old Sarah, movingly portrayed by Jennifer Zubar as a girl exiled within her own country, hidden in the attic of her family house, guarded by her grandmother, awaiting a safe time to join her parents abroad.

This town and its inhabitants occupy a dreamlike primacy, the streets as bare and shadowed as a de Chirico piazza, scantily populated by survivors trying to remember their humanity against the menace of the Tonton Macoute leader arrogantly cruising in his jeep. Sarah's innocence figures as the dream of a nation for peaceful existence, her anxious impatience to move about outdoors and to play a precise yardstick of freedom denied the society as a whole.

Peck wrote *Man by the Shore* during Aristide's first stretch as a president: "And while I was writing it there was the military putsch, just a few weeks before shooting. It was traumatic because it was a film that was supposed to be a monument to a time past. I told everybody, don't worry. This is going to take one week, and then the problem will be solved. That's how naïve we were. And it took three years. Three whole years. Deadly years."

But the notion of an instantaneous deliverance from the nightmare of the putsch is a mistake. After years of artistic success abroad and the all-but suppression of his films in Haiti, Peck had a difficult time in January 1995 getting his work on a screen before his own people. It was clear to all who had seen Peck's films that they would prompt Haitians not only to remember but in many cases to discover raw what older relatives had lived through in recent decades. Like Rwandans, South Africans, Bosnians, and Argentineans, Haitians have had to wrestle with the question of whether it is better to remember and punish, remember and not punish, or just to pretend nothing happened....

Multiple screenings of *Man by the Shore* to high schoolers in Port-au-Prince brought tears, stunned exclamations, and tense exchanges with parents. "It forced people to take positions. It helped me to see who were the enemies and who were the friends. One viewer said, since I saw your film, faces come back to me, and I recognize the guy who arrested my father. I mean, you forget about all those things. He told me the names. One was minister of defense."

Edgy nerves got another jerk from the lead in a major Haitian daily, *Le Nouvelliste*: "Raoul Peck is dead. He has been assassinated." One of Peck's literary friends had overcooked a metaphor that quickly spread through the capital as "news." "Radios were going crazy. I had to spend the afternoon saying that I am alive, I am in New York, I'm back teaching, all that." One radio station was already preparing a demonstration for the evening. "And people believed it quickly, because a lot of people were scared about the whole thing. It shows you how fragile the minds were in Haiti."

The very much alive Peck has since returned to Haiti, where he has been appointed minister of culture. Moving from filmmaker to political appointee, Peck needn't skip a beat. "I never made a distinction between making a film and culture advocacy. It's not a new career. It's just part of my work." Watching other Haitians abroad, Peck decided, "I would never play the game of exile, waiting for the perfect time to go back. I went back continually, even when it was dangerous for me to go back. So I've been very present over the last 10 years."

[...] Peck is almost hopeful about the prospects for Haiti: "I feel, not that it is the last chance, but that it is important to be involved. It's going to be a long fight and there will be a lot of drawbacks, you know, a lot of very sad and dark periods. But something has changed, and now let's see what we can do with it."

From a review by Yosha Goldstein for *The Independent*, May, 1996:

"All sea animals eat up men, but only the shark has a bad reputation," recites eight-year-old Sarah, skipping playfully through her grandmother's attic. As she opens the door to the attic's balcony, the serene daylight is abruptly offset by a scream from the neighboring yard. The girl sees her father standing below with several men over a slumped and brutalized figure; he frantically motions her away.

This primal scene of agony and betrayal repeatedly punctuates the narrative of *Man by the Shore*, Raoul Peck's third feature, which is set in Haiti during the early sixties, when Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier's regime was consolidating its brutal control. Peck, who is galvanizing Haitian cinema's international presence, has been instrumental in developing an independent film... community in Haiti by organizing screenings and creating opportunities for technical training.

The Man by the Shore is an eloquent account of the ways in which political oppression can saturate one's consciousness and infiltrate the details of everyday life. Sarah's father is an ineffectual local military officer whose weaknesses are exploited by Janvier, the town's ruthless Tontons Macoute (government-supported militia) leader. After Sarah's parents are forced to leave the country, she and her sisters refuge in a nearby convent, then in her grandmother's attic. The story is recalled by an adult Sarah thirty years later, and the resonance with Haiti's recent history is

pronounced. Produced shortly after Jean-Bertrand Aristide's brief presidency was obstructed by a military coup in 1991, Sarah's story underscores the intimate and recurring effects of Duvalier's regime.

"If you analyze the relationships between the different characters, there is always a fine line [between power and fear]," remarks Peck, seated in his downtown Manhattan apartment. "The grandmother plays a game with Janvier where she is sometimes very aggressive with him and where she sometimes stands back. This is one of the rules of the game, because power also needs a response to it, and you have to know where the line is. For me, the thing to remember is that all Haitians are playing this game."

Originally scheduled to film *Man by the Shore* in Haiti, the 1991 coup d'état forced Peck to look elsewhere for locations. He settled on the Dominican Republic, working there with the Haitian Embassy and Haitian workers' organizations to scout locations, cast extras, and hire crew. The project was a French Canadian co-production for which percentages of French and Canadians in the crew matched each country's contribution to the budget. Concerned with the local consequences of the 45-day shoot, however, Peck insisted on including a significant number of Dominicans and Haitians in the crew.

The film garnered critical acclaim at Cannes in 1993, won awards at the Prized Pieces Festival, the Milan African Film Festival, and the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, and has had extensive European distribution....

From a review by John Anderson for *Newsday*, May 17, 1996:

The Man on the Shore is a visually poetic, conscience-rattling film about 1960s Haiti and fear, set among the poor and powerless who somehow maintain some insane notion that there's justice in the universe. And although Peck's pastiche of flashbacks and present-tense action occasionally takes on a crazy-quilt quality, the overall effect is pure elegy and anger.

From a review by Michael Wilmington for *The Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1996:

Peck uses the visual beauty of the Caribbean settings—the stark, blazing streets and buildings, the warm blue of the sea—to counterpoint the sense of danger and utterly arbitrary violence. This is a world, Peck shows us, where brutality erupts at any moment, without reason. By the film's end, that web of violence has extended over all.

Haiti is a country whose cinematic output—except for Peck's—is little known or discussed. But there's nothing awkward about *The Man by the Shore*. It's a highly sophisticated and visually assured work, with powerful acting and a stunning climax. An effective portrayal of a government's brutalization of its people, a child's brutalization by her world, it's a work of real stature, quality and interest.

The American Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historical Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor, Helen Marshall, Queens Borough President, City Council member Eric Gioia, and the entire New York City Council under the leadership of Speaker Gifford Miller.

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