

American Museum of the

Moving Image

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RAOUL PECK

April 2-4, 2004

Part of the festival *Haiti on Screen*

Saturday, April 3

2:00 p.m.

HAITIAN CORNER

1987-88, 98 mins. 35mm print courtesy Velvet Film.

Written and directed by Raoul Peck. Produced by Christine Choy. Photographed by Michael Chin. Edited by Ailo Auguste-Judith. Original music by Mino Cinelu. Principal cast: Patrick Rameau (Joseph), Ailo Auguste-Judith (Sarah), Georges Wilson (Hegel), Jean-Claude Michel (Jolicoeur), Toto Bissainthe (Mother), Jean-Claude Eugene (Jean), Emile St. Lot (Theodor).

4:30 p.m.

DESOUNEN: DIALOGUE WITH DEATH

1994, 52 mins. Video source: Bullfrog Films.

Directed by Raoul Peck.

PROFIT AND NOTHING BUT!

2001, 57 mins. Video source: First Run/Icarus Films.

Directed by Raoul Peck. Produced by Jacques Bidou, Diana Elbaum, Thierry Garrel, Hugue Le Paige, Yves Swennen. Photographed by Jacques Besse, Jean-Pierre Grasset, Kirsten Johnson. Edited by Raoul Peck and Fabrice Salinié. Principal cast: Serge Latouche, Bernard Maris, Gérald Mathurin, René Passet, Immanuel Wallerstein.

6:30 p.m.

LUMUMBA

2001, 115 mins. 35 mm print source: Zeitgeist Films.

Directed by Raoul Peck. Written by Raoul Peck, Pascal Bonitzer and Dan Edelstein. Produced by Jacques Bidou. Photographed by Bernard Lutic. Edited by Jacques Comets. Original Music by Jean-Claude Petit. Principal Cast: Eriq Ebouaney (Patrice Lumumba), Alex Descas (Joseph Mobutu), Théophile Sowié (Maurice Mpolo), Maka Kotto (Joseph Kasa Vubu).

Haitian Corner

From *EX-ILES. Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, edited by Mbye Chan (Africa World Press, Inc.: New Jersey, 1992):

Raoul Peck's *Haitian Corner* has garnered all manner of acclaim from a broad variety of spectatorship both in Haiti and abroad. In what is perhaps the most meaningful homage for Raoul Peck, Rassoul Labuchin, the filmmaker generally credited with inaugurating a new film discourse in Haiti with *Anita* and a former political prisoner himself under Duvalier, labels *Haitian Corner* "the best ever made by a Haitian," and expresses his gratitude to Peck, "the best Haitian filmmaker for his film *Haitian Corner* which made me relive my season in hell and which brought me to believe that the future will be enchanting." Shot in Brooklyn and featuring a fine performance by newcomer Patrick Rameau and seasoned Toto Bissainthe, *Haitian Corner* is about memory and the immediate past, it deals with power and how the misuse of power can return to haunt abusers; it deals with the human capacity to cope with and transcend feelings of anger and revenge; it is the triumph of humanity over base animal instincts. More significantly, *Haitian Corner*, like Elsie Haas's *La Ronde de Vodou*, casts a jaundiced look at the legacy of Duvalierism and the urgent need to go beyond this sad moment in the history of Haiti.

The film narrates the experience of Joseph Bossuet, a poet from Haiti now living in exile in the Haitian community in Brooklyn, New York. A factory worker who devotes many moments of his free time composing poetry, dealing with a troubled romantic relationship, hanging out at the "Haitian Corner" with fellow Haitian exile-victims of dictatorship and economic hardship, and reflecting on his past experience of torture while a political prisoner for seven years in Haiti, Bossuet lives in a constant flux of alienation and confrontation. The feeling of alienation from his new environment derives from his inability to erase the memory of his past which constantly haunts him in a series of flashbacks that Peck skillfully sneaks in at key moments of the narrative. Unable to blend in with the other exiles who have accepted the realities of their new adopted environment, Bossuet chooses silence and turns inward. [...]

Désounen: Dialogue with Death

From the website of Bullfrog Films (<http://www.bullfrogfilms.com>):

Years of economic and political chaos in Haiti have led to environmental devastation, crushing poverty and a mass exodus of Haitians trying to reach the mecca of the United States. The tragedy is that the islanders who realize this dream are precisely those with the drive, initiative and energy needed to rebuild their homeland's shattered economy.

Raoul Peck's evocative documentary takes the form of a journey through Haiti—a journey with different travelers, along different routes, to different destinations in the Caribbean's poorest country.

Guiding the viewer along the way is the narrator, a fictional, wise old peasant, who draws on his ancestral knowledge of life and death, to provide a running commentary on the plight of the real life Haitians he encounters on his travels.

Profit and Nothing But!

From a review by J. Hoberman for *The Village Voice*, May 8, 2002:

The ideals of liberté, égalité, and fraternité are reprovably embodied in Raoul Peck's Beta SP documentary-essay *Profit and Nothing But!*

"Capital has won... Capital has swept the board," a somber narrator informs us, speaking on behalf of Peck's native Haiti, a country that "theoretically doesn't exist" and whose GNP for the next 30 years might barely equal Bill Gates's current worth. "Triumphant capitalism" means nothing in Haiti, often crosscut with shots of an imperial New York as devoid of human presence as the Caribbean nation teems with it. *Profit and Nothing But!* makes a gloomy postscript to Peck's rousing biopic *Lumumba*. In a tradition begun by D.W. Griffith in *A Corner in Wheat*, Peck creates an elegant 52-minute montage-cum-lecture applying Marxist economic theory to the forces of globalization. His points are interspersed with mordant clips of Ronald Reagan and other

American tele-celebrities. Such juxtapositions make for a sharper argument than the depressed narrator's pronouncements, which unfortunately amount to a droning expression of moral superiority.

Lumumba

From a review by Elvis Mitchell for *The New York Times*, June 27, 2001:

The title figure of the director Raoul Peck's whip-smart *Lumumba* is on the side of the angels, perhaps because he's an archangel, a celestial figure with a mission. Mr. Peck's engrossing, fleet biographical feature shares the driven efficiency of its protagonist, Patrice Lumumba (Eriq Ebouaney), who barreled through his brief tenure as prime minister of Congo with a compulsion to accomplish. His initiative is a terrific motor for a movie, and Lumumba's determination to do what's right, coupled with the horrific end of his life, only adds juice to the engine.

Lumumba starts in 1960 with its hero, his eyes yellowed with exhaustion and resignation, on the way to his fate. It then jumps back a few years to the beginning of his political career. The wholesale change he helped bring about, the insurrections that forced the hand of Belgium's King Leopold II, who then ruled Congo, went beyond anything he might have dreamed and feared.

The film refuses to lay out Lumumba's life in traditional, corny terms by presenting a lengthy and unwieldy history lesson and then groveling for audience sympathy. Instead *Lumumba* vaults through his radicalization and the track that led this former civil servant and beer salesman to leave his angry stamp on the world. Mr. Peck loads the picture with information, but at a breathless pace. (It presumes that those not knowledgeable about the politics can keep up with the breakneck drama and familiarize themselves with the history later.)

When the newly political Lumumba meets the young Joseph Mobutu (Alex Descas), it's a chilling moment: they're two tiger cubs who are about to change places. Lumumba has the bounce of a world-beater in his step; he's a man who can talk anyone into anything. And the opportunism he practices and is about to put behind him seems to infect the aspiring journalist and future military strongman Mobutu, whose hunger for glory will outstrip any good that Lumumba will do. The placid chill in Mr. Descas's well-fed cheeks shows his patience. In this way he is the opposite of Lumumba, his soon to be discarded friend, whose own restiveness will do him harm.

It's in moments like these that Mr. Peck's affinity for the material is most apparent. Lumumba's compulsiveness is pivotal during the handing over of Congo from Belgium to its freshly elected black officials. The new president, Joseph Kasa Vubu (Maka Kotto), is an alleviator; he gently thanks Belgium, taking his lead from paternalistic comments like, "Beware of hasty reforms, and do not replace Belgian institutions unless you are sure you can do better."

When Lumumba hears this, he is unable to contain the wolfish snarl on his face. "Our wounds are too fresh and painful for us to erase them from our memory," he brays. The embarrassed Kasa Vubu is left stone-faced and humiliated, but the rubble of hurt feelings and resentments is of little concern to Lumumba.

Certainly Lumumba's wounds are fresh. He incurred them when he was arrested for subversion and spent six months in jail before he was freed to attend a political summit in Brussels. Inside the prison where the activist Lumumba is beaten and tortured, we see the shine of pride fade from his eyes, replaced by the shock of fear and pain. It's a glimpse of coarse-grained reality, not a portrait of a noble hero who takes his lumps. Lumumba is a man who remembers indignity and wants to ensure that others will never have to suffer.

This conviction is rooted in Mr. Ebouaney's performance, which is a muscular assertion of willfulness. He can't keep his hands still, as if tapping out the to-do list in his head before time runs out; it's a beautiful realization of obsessive behavior. Mr. Ebouaney shows us the preening volatility of Lumumba, a resourceful perfectionist, and dares us to understand him.

It's a flat-out thrill to see a movie about African politics that doesn't condescend to audiences by placing a sympathetic white African at the center. Mr. Peck makes no plea for crocodile tears; his ambitions are as wide and encompassing as those of his subject. He's out to make a film that exposes the ugliness of cold war politics and knee-jerk imperialism. The movie's view is that

Lumumba was sacrificed to stop African independence. His enemies used the hollow, well-meaning guise of stamping out the Communist threat. And *Lumumba* lets neither the United States nor the United Nations off the hook: it implicates both in his assassination. The irony is that Congo remains embroiled in overthrow and turmoil, the bleakest Pandora's box ever to be pried open.

Lumumba brings on new characters and revelations at a whirlwind pace; it's like the onrush of a tropical storm. It's fascinating, too, to watch a filmmaker work out his own complicated feelings about his subject, in this case a hero who was not a particularly likable human being. Mr. Peck, who wrote the screenplay with Pascal Bonitzer, understands the quicksilver mind of Lumumba. (He also directed the acclaimed 1991 documentary *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, which served as a warm-up.)

This director includes scenes that could come out of an agitprop Marx Brothers comedy, like the pre-independence exchange between Lumumba and the Belgian bureaucrat Ganshof Van der Meersch (André Debaar). When Lumumba asks if it's Belgium's intention to form a government or commission a fact-finding mission, Van der Meersch sneers, "It's a fact-finding mission to form a government."

This is a movie about chaos and regret, focusing on the unleashing of forces greater than any one person could hope to handle and the carnage, however necessary, left in their wake. Mr. Peck's gambit works, and the result is a great film and a great performance.

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