

## Ernest Cole – Lost and Found [15]

2024 France/USA 105 mins

UK released **7 March 2025**

Director **Raoul Peck**

Screenplay **Raoul Peck**

Cinematography **Moses Tau, Wolfgang Held**

Music **Alexei Aigui**

Cast **LaKeith Stanfield** (narrator)

At the heart of Raoul Peck's latest documentary Ernest Cole, Lost And Found, a stirring lament of the exiled South African photographer, is the devastating image of a life deferred. Living at the debilitating height of apartheid, Ernest Cole quickly shot to fame with his rebellious book of photographs 'House of Bondage' (1967), which captured the unvarnished sights of racism, segregation and the realities of Black life in his home country. To publish the book, Cole had to move to America – and never returned to his homeland again. Peck's film (his previous work includes the Oscar-nominated I Am Not Your Negro and Lamumba) is a rich chronicling of Cole's unique career, peerless artistry, political strength and moving end. Born in 1940 in Eersterust Pretoria, South Africa, Cole spent much of his early years despising the rampant inequality bred by apartheid. In the film, he describes the indignity of Black people forced to work as domestic helpers, nannies, or in service jobs to racist white employers. He also shares the restrictiveness of 'reference books': small identification folders, required by law for Blacks to work and navigate the country, that could be seized by nefarious white policemen without warning. In the face of such practices – and much like African American photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks – Cole made the camera his weapon of choice.

Cole rose fast in the photography world. He was employed by Drum Magazine, gaining the necessary experience to embark on the 'House Of Bondage' project that would bring him fame. Cole spent the better part of a decade photographing the horrifying images of apartheid and its effects on housing, education, and employment. Many of these delicately curated

images—such as the snapshots of ‘Europeans only’ signs—are jaw-dropping.

Cole died in 1990, and Peck has built a working script through his own writing and testimonials offered by friends and family. This allows Cole to speak, through Stanfield’s serious voice, about the entirety of his physical, emotional, and psychological journey following the release of ‘House of Bondage’ (the book was banned in South Africa, as was he). Like many Black thinkers, he was immediately pigeonholed into taking on only Black subject matter. Cole, in fact, recounts the dissolution he felt after arriving in New York City in 1966 and seeing the incredible racial promise and sexual freedom, only to discover, during a failed photojournalistic sojourn through the Southern states, that America wasn’t all that different from South Africa. Black people were still expected to stay in their place.

The film’s greatest treasure is thousands of previously-lost 35mm negatives that were recently turned over to Cole’s nephew Leslie Matlaisane. Cole’s lost work was found in a Swedish Bank vault without any record of who put it there. The concealment of his snapshots mirrors the obliteration of the creative spirit he experienced in his later life. What other creative statements were left underdeveloped, unspoken or erased because systemic racism refused to allow him back home? What great movement could have happened? Ernest Cole, Lost And Found mourns the pictures and the man left unseen.

**Robert Daniels**, *Screen Daily*, 20 May 2024 (abridged)

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