



IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC

Sankofa

The career of the Ethiopian-born, American-based writer-director Haile Gerima is a fascinating case study of the challenges faced by left-leaning, formally experimental black filmmakers. Consider the fate of his 1993 film *Sankofa*, a visceral, tonally poetic and visually seductive study of an American fashion model who is magically transported back in time from Ghana's Cape Coast Castle to the antebellum American South and transformed into a house slave. Here, she falls in love with a rebellious field slave who implores her to poison her white owners.

Like a more esoteric forebear of *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Sankofa* offers a stark immersion into the plantation experience for both central character and viewer. Through a complex, detailed portrait of intra-slave relations, it offers sharp commentary on the power of self-knowledge, the fruits of activism and, metaphorically, the continued sublimation of slave mentality and practice within contemporary American society. As Gerima told the journalist Assata Wright, 'If you view America as a plantation, then you can codify the different classes and interest groups within the society. You find overseers, head slaves, you find plantation owners in a very advanced, sophisticated way.'

Despite Gerima's serious pedigree – in the 1970s he was a leading light of UCLA's feted 'LA Rebellion' movement alongside Charles Burnett and Larry Clark (not the one who made *Kids*) – raising the funds for *Sankofa* took nine gruelling years. And despite the film's evident artistic qualities and positive reception at international festivals, major American distributors, sceptical of its earning potential and perhaps cowed by its revolutionary thrust, wouldn't touch it. Unbowed, Gerima opted for the exhausting self-distribution route. He wasn't starting from scratch, though: in 1982 he made *Ashes & Embers*, a bracing, elliptical psychodrama about the slow spiritual awakening of a troubled black Vietnam vet-turned-actor. To enable its release, the director, alongside his filmmaker wife Shirikiana Aina and sister Selome, set up the company Mypheduh Films in the basement of his home in Washington, DC.

So, in the days before lightweight digital, Gerima took *Sankofa* to 35 different cities, and it finally grossed nearly \$3 million. It was especially successful with black audiences; as Gerima has written, 'I witnessed theatres across America turn into night schools, as intense discourse was sparked among audience members, and as the black image was re-framed on-screen.' With the profits from *Sankofa*, in 1997 Gerima and his family moved their operations to a large property unit in Washington, a stone's throw from the prestigious all-black Howard University, where Gerima has taught film since 1975, converting it into Sankofa Video and Books.

Ashley Clark, *Sight & Sound*, January 2016

'Sankofa' is a word from the African Akan language which means 'returning to your roots, recuperating what you've lost and moving forward.' That sounds like a straightforward process, but in deciding to confront the issue of slavery, *Sankofa*'s Ethiopian-born producer-writer-director Haile Gerima was setting out on a rocky path.

From its impressive opening sequence onwards, *Sankofa* strives for, and by and large achieves, a cinematic language worthy of the importance of its subject matter. The mesmeric drumming and hollering of Khofi Ghanaba underpins our introduction to powerful visual images of birds and the African coastline that will recur throughout the film (Ghanaba's past as respected American jazz musician Guy Warren, and adviser to Ghana's President Nkrumah renders him doubly qualified for the role). An urgent voice sounds a lengthy clarion call: 'Stolen Africans ... from Alabama to Surinam ... step out and claim your story.' The film's titles also benefit from a snappy ripple effect. The dice seem to be loaded from the off against Mona. With her tacky swimsuit and dyed orange hair, she is meant to be a grotesque figure, and there is a hint of spite in the way the camera first lingers over her branding, then celebrates the unsmiling humility with which she finally takes her place among the Africans at the water's edge. This slant is hardly surprising, as Gerima's intentions are avowedly didactic – to address 'the continuing problem of those persons in the Africa diaspora who neglect their own history.'

Once the action has switched to the plantation, this didacticism is never awkward. *Sankofa's* treatment of its painful subject matter is commendably unexploitative. It is not by any means unrelentingly grim, resisting the temptation to wallow in the horrors it depicts. The white people in the film – photographer, tourists and slave masters alike – are not exactly sympathetic, but then why should they be?

Most of *Sankofa's* occasional lighter moments are supplied by the Ghanaian actress Alexandra Duah, who is superb in the potentially irritating fount-of-all-wisdom role of Nunu. But all the performances are good. Oyafunmike Ogunlano succeeds in carrying the part of Mona/Shola through what might have been an 'it was only a dream' ending. The Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka makes a persuasive screen debut as the rebellious Shango, and Nick Medley is effectively tormented as the benighted Joe.

The real star of the film, though, is the man behind the camera. The cinematography is outstanding: from the peaceful bustle of the Ghanaian coast to the swishing canes of the American plantation, Gerima creates an extraordinary sense of motion. David White's score, blending chants and jazz, drums and blues, makes a vital contribution to this, and the dual symbolism of the vulture, as harbinger of both death and escape, is more powerful than anyone raised on Bird's Eye being the bird of freedom has any right to expect. But it is the stately progress of the camera across a living landscape that leaves *Sankofa's* most abiding impression. Other filmmakers have struggled to make such a grand and historical impact on 30 times this budget.

Ben Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, July 1994

SANKOFA

Director: Haile Gerima

Production Company: Ngod Gward Productions

In co-production with: Ghana National Commission On Culture, DiProCi, NDR – Norddeutscher Rundfunk, WDR – Westdeutscher Rundfunk

In association with: Channel Four Television

Producer: Haile Gerima

Co-producer: Shirikiana Aina

Line Producer: Ada Marie Babino

Production Manager: Charles Nuckolls

Production Co-ordinator: Carmen Franczyk

Screenplay: Haile Gerima

Director of Photography: Augustin Cubano

Editor: Haile Gerima

Production Designer: Kerry Marshall

Costume Designer: Tracey White

Make-up Artist: Henry Brown

Music: David J. White

Sound Re-recording Mixer: Don White

Cast

Kofi Ghanaba (*Sankofa, the Divine Drummer*)

Oyafunmike Ogunlano (*Mona/Shola*)

Alexandra Duah (*Nunu*)

Nick Medley (*Joe*)

Mutabaruka (*Shango*)

Reginald Carter (*Father Raphael*)

Mzuri (*Lucy*)

Jimmy Lee Savage (*Mussa*)

Jim Faircloth (*James*)

Afemo Omilami (*Noble Ali*)

USA/Germany/Ghana/Burkina Faso 1993

125 mins

Contains scenes of violence and rape which some viewers will find distressing

The screening on Sat 2 Jul will be introduced by June Givanni, June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive

IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC

The Brother from Another Planet

Fri 1 Jul 18:05; Wed 6 Jul 20:45

Sankofa

Sat 2 Jul 14:00 (+ intro by June Givanni, June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive); Wed 20 Jul 20:35

Daughters of the Dust

Sat 2 Jul 20:30; Wed 13 Jul 20:40

Yeelen Brightness

Sun 3 Jul 15:50; Thu 14 Jul 20:40

Top of the Heap

Mon 4 Jul 18:10; Sat 30 Jul 20:45

In the Afrofuture

Tue 5 Jul 18:20; Sun 17 Jul 16:00

Atlantics (Atlantique)

Thu 7 Jul 20:50; Sun 31 Jul 15:40

Kuso

Sat 9 Jul 20:50; Fri 22 Jul 18:10

Touki Bouki

Wed 13 Jul 17:50 (+ season introduction); Wed 27 Jul 20:50

The Burial of Kojo

Fri 15 Jul 18:30; Thu 28 Jul 20:40

The Black Atlantic

Mon 18 Jul 18:15 (+ Q&A); Sat 30 Jul 12:00

Eve's Bayou

Tue 19 Jul 20:45; Thu 28 Jul 18:00

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Presented in cultural partnership with Hayward Gallery and Southbank Centre

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

In the Black Fantastic is an exhibition, curated by Ekow Eshun, of contemporary artists from the African diaspora who draw on science fiction, myth and Afrofuturism.

Runs **29 Jun to 18 Sep at Hayward Gallery.**