



IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC

Eve's Bayou

Kasi Lemmons began her career as an actor, appearing in films such as *School Daze* (1988), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Candyman* (1992), before moving into directing with the short *Dr. Hugo* (1996), the protagonist of which became the blueprint for the patriarch in her first feature *Eve's Bayou* (1997). This film was a revelation – a highly assured melodrama as well as a deliciously rich and atmospheric Southern gothic tale. Told through the eyes of a woman named Eve reflecting on her childhood in the Louisiana wetlands, it's a story thick with secrets and scandals. Eve recalls the way her wealthy family's world unravelled when she caught her father Louis (Samuel L. Jackson) with another woman. With an outstanding female cast, Lemmons unlocks the mysticism connected to the female experience with a rare glimpse of America's Black upper-middle class. The film has had an under-the-radar influence – its atmosphere can be felt in films such as *Boneshaker* (2013), by Frances Bodomo, a filmmaker with her own unique flare for mesmerising storytelling. *Boneshaker* weaves a tale of cultures blending, as experienced by the young Blessing (Quvenzhané Wallis), whose immigrant parents visit an African Pentecostal healer in the Louisiana Bayous.

Tega Okiti, *Sight & Sound*, June 2017

Despite its heady Southern-gothic mix of infidelity, voodoo and murder, *Eve's Bayou* is not one of Tennessee Williams' hothouse flowers. Its ancestors are the women's film and the coming-of-age story, and actress-turned-director Kasi Lemmons presents distorted memory and a child's-eye view of the adult world with a dispassionate care. The wealthy, black bourgeois Batiste family is elegantly sketched, their story played out in a series of gorgeous Southern-style *Ideal Homes* (circa 1962) interiors which frame, and indeed cool, the heated shenanigans of the grown-up players. But more than this it is ten-year-old Eve's perspective which keeps the adults' passions at arm's length. Beautifully played – and sometimes skilfully underplayed – by Jurnee Smollett (who was ten when she took on the role), her view gives the film a detachment partly born of childish misrecognition.

This directness of view gives *Eve's Bayou* a focus which enables it to carry off a number of complex thematic feats. With Eve as its subjective centre, the film shifts between past, present and future in a manner which is illuminating rather than confusing, making it a generational saga that opens the question of how the past haunts the future. Eve anchors person to property: *Eve's Bayou* (rather like the House of Usher) is both the place she inhabits (after which she was named) and the world she constructs. This, incidentally, is the only moment when the film overtly stakes its racial-political claim: 'The town we lived in was named after a slave,' Eve tells us, and a female slave at that. A female slave who gave not only the town, but Eve herself, a name – Eve being her affluent descendant.

The sympathy we feel for Eve also enables us to accept the film's most difficult issue: its suggestion that incest might not be a locus for blame or simple responsibility, but the result of a melting-pot of unresolved desires emanating from both parent and child. That Eve finally eschews blame means

that the film itself can also do something rather more complex than turn its flawed characters into heroes or villains. In particular, Samuel L. Jackson's seductive but family-loving philanderer manages to be deeply likable, in a performance played beautifully against type.

The theme of passing on and seeing through the past is carried through in the film's double pun on the word sight. As the opening and then the closing voice-over (by the adult Eve) tells us, 'Memory is a selection of images ... Like others before me I have the gift of sight. But the truth changes colour depending on the light.' This 'sight' is the second sight of Mozelle and Eve, itself an instance of the past passed on. It is also the opening for a number of visual plays on the notion that memory has no single truth, position or perspective. Like photographic film itself, memory here changes colour depending on the light. Key epiphanic moments – Louis' initial infidelity; flash-photo shots of family members; the kiss between Louis and his eldest daughter – are frozen, slowed or bleached into grainy black and white to underline their ambiguous significance out of time. Less successful, because less cinematic, is the contrived and stagy device of 'projecting' memories in mirrors. But this is an uncharacteristic off-note, since the precise cinematography and performances evoke in a very cinematic way the question of how memory is rewritten through its reworking through time.

Clairvoyance – literally 'clear vision' – may be Mozelle's gift to Eve, but the hidden past and un-lived future the women see is anything but clear in its significance, and the picture keeps shifting. Here *Eve's Bayou* seems to suggest that the camera (or clairvoyant) which reads and replays another's memories neither lies nor tells the truth: it's not what you see that's important, but how desire filters the way you see it.

While Eve is the film's fulcrum, *Eve's Bayou* demonstrates that no single perspective can possibly account for the complex truths of family life, compromised by secrets and desire. So in the way that it both withholds and rewrites the truths of its own past, *Eve's Bayou* does more than gear up narrative suspense when it shows you what it won't tell as well as what it will. With Cisely's final revelation that Oedipal desire can work in both directions, and that who does what to whom is rarely clearly delineated, the film puts on hold the possibility of accessing the truth plain and simple, demonstrating that the family saga might be the best place to reassess how we understand the deceptions and revelations of memory.

Linda Ruth Williams, *Sight and Sound*, August 1998

EVE'S BAYOU

Director: Kasi Lemmons

Presented by/©: Trimark Pictures, Inc

Production Companies: Chubbco Productions,
Addis/Wechsler and Associate

Producers: Caldecot Chubb, Samuel L. Jackson

Screenplay: Kasi Lemmons

Director of Photography: Amy Vincent

Editor: Terilyn A. Shropshire

Production Designer: Jeff Howard

Sound Mixer: Benjamin A. Patrick

Cast

Samuel L. Jackson (*Louis Batiste*)

Lynn Whitfield (*Roz Batiste*)

Debbi Morgan (*Mozelle Batiste Delacroix*)

Vondie Curtis Hall (*Julian Grayraven*)

Branford Marsalis (*Harry Delacroix*)

Lisa Nicole Carson (*Matty Mereaux*)

Roger Guenveur Smith (*Lenny Mereaux*)

Ethel Ayler (*Gran Mère*)

Meagan Good (*Cisely Batiste*)

Jurnee Smollett (*Eve Batiste*)

Diahann Carroll (*Elzora*)

Jake Smollett (*Poe Batiste*)

Afonda Colbert (*Henrietta*)

Lola Dalferes (*Lynette*)

Marcus Lyle Brown (*Hosea*)

Alverta Perkins Dunigan (*Paige*)

Ron Flagge (*vendor*)

Sharon K. London (*Hilary*)

Carol Sutton (*Madame Renard*)

Victoria Rowell (*Stevie Hobbs*)

Oneal A. Isaac (*bus driver*)

Julian Dalcour (*bartender*)

Leonard Thomas (*Maynard*)

Allen Toussaint (*proprietor*)

Billie Neal (*ghost of original Eve*)

USA 1997©

108 mins

Print courtesy of the Kasi Lemmons Collection at the Academy Film Archive with special thanks to Cotty Chubb

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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