I Am Not Your Negro: Raoul Peck's documentary on James Baldwin

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Directed by Raoul Peck; written by Peck, based on an unfinished work, Remember This House, *by James Baldwin*

The American novelist, essayist and intellectual James Baldwin (1924-1987) is the subject of Raoul Peck's stylish, but ultimately superficial and often wrongheaded quasi-documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro.*

The film takes as its point of departure Baldwin's proposal to his editor in 1979 that he write a piece about civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., all of whom Baldwin had met and all of whom were assassinated within five years of each other in the 1960s.

Peck's film weaves together Baldwin's unfinished 30-page manuscript, *Remember This House*, with footage of the writer speaking before various audiences—notably on the Dick Cavett television talk show in 1968 and at Cambridge University in England, where in 1965 he debated the question "Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?" with arch-conservative William Buckley.

It includes documentary footage of Baldwin's trip to the American South in 1957 to witness the explosive struggles of the civil rights movement for school integration and voting rights, photographs of his meetings with Evers, Malcolm X and King, as well as images of lynchings and mob violence.

Peck also includes clips from Hollywood films such as John Wayne westerns and the repugnant depictions of blacks in D.W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, along with brief sequences from *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl, 1934) and *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) among others, by way of illustrating Baldwin's observations on race relations in the US. Excerpts from the latter's essays in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *No Name in the Street* (1972) are narrated by actor Samuel L. Jackson.

The effect is to create a relatively unmediated and intimate picture of Baldwin in much the same way that reading his writing does. At its best, Baldwin's fiction creates a sympathy for humanity and its dilemmas that transcends differences of race, gender and sexuality. His novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Another Country* (1962), as well as the novella *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and "Sonny's Blues" (1957), a short story, in particular are enduring works, with their vivid characters and depiction of New York City's Harlem and Greenwich Village, and Paris in the 1950s and 60s. Baldwin captures a bohemian world of jazz clubs and walk-up apartments where young people fiercely struggle to love and create against strictures of racial prejudice, economic discrimination and the pressure of social mores that drive many of them to desperation, and in some cases tragic self-destruction.

However, Peck's *I am Not Your Negro* focuses on Baldwin's political activism during the burgeoning civil rights movement. In 1957, after having lived almost a decade abroad, Baldwin explains how he was galvanized by a photograph of 15-year old Dorothy Counts being reviled by a white mob for desegregating Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina. "I could simply no longer sit around Paris discussing the Algerian and black American problem. Everyone was paying their dues and it was time I went home and paid mine."

Baldwin made a tour of the American South to see Charlotte and Atlanta for himself for the first time, met with civil rights leaders and other writers and Hollywood actors who were similarly being radicalized by events, and then wrote about these experiences for the *Partisan Review, Esquire* and other magazines.

Baldwin was horrified by racism and racist violence, which he knew too well (and vividly described in his fiction) growing up poor in Harlem as the eldest of nine children in the 1940s—well enough to want to escape when the success of his first novel and early essays in "Notes of a Native Son" made it possible for him to settle in France. Living abroad, he felt himself less vulnerable to attack for being black and, in his case, homosexual.

As an artist, Baldwin is a sensitive and significant figure, although here too the stagnant period left its damaging mark, as it did on his contemporaries, Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow. However, when Baldwin advances himself (seconded here by Peck) as a political figure and thinker, then one has to judge him accordingly.

Baldwin's views, whose delivery bears the stamp of his experience as a boy-preacher in a Harlem Pentecostal church, are often rhetorical breast-beating and little more than appeals to the political establishment, particularly the Democratic Party, and other well-meaning, "relatively conscious whites and

relatively conscious blacks" to come together, "like lovers … to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world." ("Down at the Cross" in *The Fire Next Time*.)

The worst sequence in the film (which is in Baldwin too) is the terribly clichéd presentation of the saccharine world of Doris Day films and 1950s' advertising images of the happy family in the suburban house with the white picket fence as the embodiment of the "American Dream" enjoyed by or accessible to the majority of white Americans, but denied to blacks. But this wasn't "white America's" fantasy, or that of more than a tiny percentage of it, any more than anyone else's.

At the best of times in America, the vast majority, white and black, have struggled to get by. And if gains were made, they were made through enormous struggles. The violence of the KKK and other racist-fascist filth is an element of the violence of the American ruling elite and its agencies, which also expressed itself in the murder of union organizers, socialists and ordinary workers on the picket lines, in the Palmer Raids and the McCarthyite witch-hunts, in vigilante violence during the Depression, as well as its barbarism against various peoples around the world. Racist brutality is an element of class oppression and an expression of the harsh character of social relations in capitalist America.

Baldwin's fulminations against "white America" and its "cruel majority" come across at a certain point as lazy and shallow as much as anything else. Since he was not by nature a lazy or superficial man, something more must lie behind this, above all, his own political history and the nature of the postwar period.

Baldwin describes himself at 13 as "a convinced fellow-traveler" (of the Communist Party) marching in a May Day parade, "carrying banners, shouting, *East Side, West Side, all around the town, We want the landlords to tear the slums down!* I didn't know anything about Communism, but I knew a lot about slums. By the time I was nineteen, I was a Trotskyite, having learned a great deal by then, if not about Communism, at least about Stalinists." ("Take Me to the Water" in *No Name in the Street*.)

Baldwin never explains the character or content of his "Trotskyism," but his brush with the socialist movement was a brief one. Like many of his generation, he moved substantially to the right in the late 1940s and early 1950s during the period of the anti-communist hysteria. While he was too smart and too angry to become a *typical* Cold War liberal, he became a particular variant of that social type.

By 1956, in the *Nation*, he was denouncing as "doctrinaire" and "elementary" those who approached the race question in America from a class-conscious standpoint and heaping scorn on the notion of "black-white solidarity." ("The Crusade of Indignation," July 7, 1956)

Also by 1956, perhaps not coincidentally, Baldwin was covering the First International Conference of Black Writers and Artists for *Encounter* magazine, which he knew to be a front for the CIA.

Peck avoids a good many questions in *I Am Not Your Negro*, including the increasingly snobbish and pessimistic character of Baldwin's outlook, out of an apparent desire to make a case for Baldwin's political and moral orientation today. The director makes use of the writer to amplify and bolster the ahistorical, racialist narrative of American history currently being promoted by layers of the black petty bourgeoisie, academics and intellectuals—very much Baldwin's own milieu, but in a vastly degenerated state.

To this end, Peck splices footage of the recent protests in Ferguson, Baltimore and other American cities against police killings of black youth together with scenes from the 1950s of racist mob violence in Montgomery, Alabama. When Baldwin indignantly responds to the condescending suggestion made by Robert F. Kennedy that in 40 years or so we might even have a black president, the film cuts to footage of Barack and Michelle Obama triumphantly waving to the crowd at his 2008 inauguration.

Perhaps most telling is how little *I Am Not Your Negro* and Baldwin have to say about Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, the ostensible subjects of the writer's *Remember This House* (along with Medgar Evers). Baldwin notes in his unfinished book that King and Malcolm X were "coming together" toward the end of their lives, but he and the film omit to explain over what. In fact, both men were moving in a generally leftward direction.

Malcolm X broke with Elijah Muhammad and repudiated the Nation of Islam's anti-white racism in 1964. King began denouncing the Vietnam War and American imperialism and had taken the decision to launch a "Poor People's Campaign" to bring tens of thousands of demonstrators to Washington in the summer of 1968.

Peck's film has some historically significant footage and Baldwin is an intriguing figure, but *I Am Not Your Negro* is guilty of succumbing to the current and reactionary needs and demands of racial politics.