



FILM: **I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO**

FDG RATING: 2.8



Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Raul Peck: *Director, (Documentary)*
James Baldwin

DATE: October 22, 2017

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO**

Many of us know of James Baldwin (a prominent intellectual, recognized as one of the 20th century's greatest writers) from reading his many essays, short stories, plays, and novels. He broke new literary ground with the exploration of racial and social issues, especially the black experience in America but, disgusted with the prejudice surrounding the Negro race, and wanting to write about issues outside of the African American context, he left the US for Paris at the age of 24.

This film allows us to hear Baldwin's eloquent voice through the narration of Samuel Jackson who, reading from Baldwin's letters, writings, and unfinished manuscript, mimics Baldwin's distinctive speaking style. Definitely not a conventional documentary, the film was educational and enlightening, providing both powerful visuals documenting racial tension and violence in the 60s, as well Baldwin's eloquent descriptions and prophetic visions. Director, Raul Peck, interjected historical footage of actual violence during the racially charged 60s combined with recent clips of racial violence, occurring after Baldwin's 1987 death, (such as the news video of Trayvon Martin), pounding home the message that not much has changed.

But the story was disconnected, leaving us to wonder about the meaning of the title, and noting that if Peck's purpose was to bring Baldwin's unfinished novel (only 30 pages were written) to fruition, *I am Not Your Negro* missed the mark. In 1979, James Baldwin wrote a letter to his literary agent describing his next project, "Remember This House" a revolutionary, personal account of the lives and assassinations of three of his close friends: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. We really don't learn very much more than we already know about these 3 activists.

But what we did see was a rich cinematic portrait of a man whose was one of the leading voices in the Civil Rights Movement. An especially memorable and favorite segment was the historic, acerbic debate between Baldwin and Yale philosophy professor, Paul Weiss, facilitated by William Buckley.

Perhaps the title is a resolute statement that no one has the right to define or label a human being and admonishing the Negro stereotype as well as the term. James Baldwin was a literary activist who remained hopeful about possible improvements. "If we...do not falter in our duty now, we may be able...to end the racial nightmare." After a decade in Paris, it was a photograph of 15-year-old Dorothy Counts and the violent white mob that surrounded her as she entered and desegregated Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina that prodded him to return to the US in 1957. He died in 1987 at the age of 63.

Some of us thought the film was a bit heavy handed especially at the end. Others felt it didn't hold together and seemed as if Peck had his own agenda rather than stay true to Baldwin's concept for *Remember This House*.

While an interesting effort, *I am Not Your Negro*, fell short in our ratings, mustering a weak 2.8 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best)



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See you at the movies!

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[Film Discussion Group](#) (FDG) organizer