

Film Title and year of release: I Am Not Your Negro (2016)

Director: Raoul Peck

Subject: Race relations in the United States

### I Am Not Your Negro Worksheet

**Argument:** Using the unfinished writings of James Baldwin coupled with footage from before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement, director Raoul Peck makes the argument that whites in America hold responsibility for the perpetual discrimination of African Americans. In the film, Baldwin says that the future of America depends on whether or not whites are willing to answer why they created the image of the black man as their subordinate. The use of twenty-first century footage from the Black Lives Matter movement and of Ferguson, Missouri shows that the question Baldwin raises has been left unanswered by whites. Peck's ability to weave together the past and the present makes his argument both compelling and effective.

**Scene:** The three scenes I found most interesting were:

1. The voiceover where Baldwin talks about never seeing himself (or his father) represented on screen as clips from 1930s/40s films with clear racist tropes play. He makes the point that movies were a reflection of American society, and these films only ever placed the white man as the hero. I found it interesting because diversity in film is something that is still an issue today, and white men continue to dominate "hero" roles. Thinking about power structures in the United States today, Baldwin's assertion that film reflects society still holds true as well.
2. The cuts between shots featuring white power banners decorated with Nazi swastikas and clips of Martin Luther King, Jr are particularly thought provoking. Peck is unafraid to show the white power movement for what it was, emphasizing its fascist nature. I found it interesting because, when studying Civil Rights, the oppressors are typically not shown. The removal of the oppressors makes them seem otherworldly, terrifying because they're unfamiliar. Here, however, Peck shows that these white supremacists could be anyone because they looked like everyone. A fact that makes them all the more terrifying.
3. The voiceover of Baldwin talking about growing up in New York and about his youth coupled with the onscreen images of black children murdered in recent years, including Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin. I found this scene interesting

because it shows how black children, even in the twenty-first century, are repeatedly denied a childhood due to things like systemic racism and police brutality.

Authority: Peck demonstrates his authority by drawing on a number of sources to build his argument. He uses clips from the 1930s through the 1960s to point out the persistence of racist tropes in film, as well as twenty-first century footage dealing with racial discrimination. The director also uses both interview footage of Baldwin and the author's written work to let Baldwin tell his own story. Peck's ability to combine Baldwin's writings with film from multiple eras into a film with a coherent structure and message shows the high level of understanding Peck has for the sources he draws from.

Technique (1 Detail): Peck utilizes the Ken Burns effect in a way that is not overwhelming, something I would like to include in my own documentary. He will show part of an image on screen, and then use Ken Burns to pan to the most important part of the image. For example, there is an image of a white man's face that appears first on screen. Only after the Ken Burns has been applied does the viewer see the racist sign he holds. This technique creates a greater impact on the scenes in which Peck uses it.