

# CINEASTE

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## Review

Reviewed Work(s): *I Am Not Your Negro* by Raoul Peck, Rémi Grellety and Hébert Peck

Review by: Herb Boyd

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The Tavernier family moved to Paris in 1946, where Bertrand soon devoted himself to watching, discussing, and writing about movies. Barely out of his teens, he went to work as an assistant director and press agent for Jean-Pierre Melville, who ran his own independent studio on a shoestring and used the nom de guerre he had adopted as a Resistance operative. Though Melville is best known for his austere, stylish gangster films, Tavernier focuses attention on *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1961), a film set, like the director's first feature, *Le silence de la mer* (1949), during the Occupation.

The portrait of this notoriously ornery and dictatorial filmmaker is funny and affectionate, colored by gratitude—Melville took it upon himself to visit Tavernier's parents and persuade them to let him stay in the film business, and also recommended him to producer Georges de Beauregard, for whom he worked as a press agent, promoting New Wave films such as Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1961). Tavernier doesn't shy away from discussing the less admirable aspects of his heroes, like Melville's habit of humiliating crew members, Marcel Carné's unpopularity with actors and poor judgment in casting, or Renoir's flirtation with the collaborationist Vichy government (he quotes Gabin's assessment: "As a director, a genius. As a person, a whore.") But his stance always exhibits the empathy and "common decency" that he praises in the films of Jacques Becker.

Becker holds pride of place in *My Journey*, and the segment dedicated to him serves as an introduction to the qualities Tavernier most admires: precision of visual construction; attentiveness to the details of daily life and the climate of the times; a "quick, crisp, and lean" pace; and unaffected humanism displayed through complex and fully realized characters. While Becker's reputation in this country has grown with the DVD release and theatrical revivals of his later, dark masterpieces *Casque d'or*, *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), and *Le Trou* (1960), much of his work remains little-known and hard to see, and the clips marshaled here make this neglect register as a crime against cinephilia. The enchanting *Antoine and Antoinette* (1947) combines neorealist focus on the texture of working-class lives with a René Clair-like spirit of liberated fantasy; *Rendez-vous in July* (1949) evokes the lives of restless postwar youth with a kinetic, loose-knit freedom that anticipates the New Wave while throbbing with passion for American jazz. Tavernier calls special attention to Becker's interest in women's experience and his focus on work—from the delicate craft of the fashion world (*Falbalas*) to the hard labor of prisoners digging through concrete in a bid for freedom (*Le Trou*).

It is easy to say that Tavernier is constructing a personal canon, an impression deepened by the way he links films or artists

to his own life. His approach to an established canon of French film is subtler: he never openly challenges or upholds any artist's presence in or absence from the canon. He treats figures like Renoir not with reverence but with scrutiny that refreshes a sense of why they're revered. His delight in recollecting a forgotten, seemingly disposable film like Jean Delannoy's *Macao, l'enfer du jeu* (1942) proves that, for all his years in the thick of the French film world, he has never been distracted by the accretion of criticism, arguments, or reputations: it is the films themselves he sees and cares about.

Venturing even further into noncanonical obscurity, *My Journey* alights on the B-movie series starring American-born Eddie Constantine as secret agent Lemmy Caution; and on director Edmond T. Gréville, who went from acting in Clair's *Under the Roofs of Paris* (1930) and directing Josephine Baker in *Princess Tam Tam* (1935) to making hyperstylish potboilers like *Secret Lives* (1937) and *Noose* (1948) in Britain. In France, on the cusp of the Occupation, he made *Menaces* (1940), a portrait of antifascist refugees living in a Paris hotel on the eve of war; the Nazis attempted to destroy the film, which was later reconstructed. Tavernier, who elsewhere recalls buying film prints from a man who purchased them in order to recycle the celluloid into combs, demonstrates powerfully that to remember forgotten films is, in its own way, to save them from the flames. Neglect is the ultimate destroyer of art, and it can only be countered by an act of ardent memory.

A particularly illuminating segment is devoted to French film composers, and reveals that directors in France had far more control over the music for their films than their Hollywood counterparts. The poetic realist masterpieces of Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert are unimaginable without the scores by Maurice Jaubert, whose music deepens the somber climate of *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le jour se lève* (1939); and Hungarian-born Joseph Kosma, who scored many of Renoir's prewar films and contributed music for *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945) using a front, since he was Jewish and banned from working during the Occupation. A 1936 statement by Jaubert, who composed the score for *L'Atalante*, evokes the philosophy that runs throughout Tavernier's documentary: "Music, like cutting, editing, set design, and direction must help make clear, logical, and true the great story that each film is meant to be. And all the better, if discreetly, it contributes some additional poetry: its own."

Rich with detail yet casual in its erudition, *My Journey Through French Cinema* has the flavor, at once complex and mellow, of long ripening. Satisfying as it is, the main effect is to whet the appetite, rousing a keen hunger to see more of these films, a hunger to sit down in front of a screen and be completely bowled over.—Imogen Sara Smith

## I Am Not Your Negro

Produced by Raoul Peck, Rémi Grellety, and Hébert Peck; directed by Raoul Peck; written by James Baldwin; with the voice of Samuel L. Jackson; cinematography by Henry Adebonojo and Bill and Turner Ross; edited by Alexandra Strauss; archival research by Marie-Hélène Barbéris; music by Alexei Aigui; color and B&W, 93 min. A Magnolia Pictures release, [www.magnoliamovies.com](http://www.magnoliamovies.com).

One of James Baldwin's favorite expressions was "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*" (the more things change, the more they stay the same). *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck's documentary, not only gives that expression fresh resonance, it also provides Baldwin's prophetic voice a narrative and visual format that is at once provocative and imbued with all the writer's "furious passage."

Peck's title is derived in part from Baldwin's admonitions about race and identity, which are themes that occur irrevocably in practically all of his writings and speeches. That title would have been even more percussive if the n-word were substituted for Negro, which Baldwin often did. "In order for me to live," he said in a speech delivered to teachers in 1963, "I decided very early that some mistake had been made somewhere. I was not a 'nigger' even though you called me one. But if I was a 'nigger' in your eyes, there was something about *you*—there was something *you* needed...Because if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that *you're* not what *you* thought you were either! And that is the crisis."

This crisis simmers in *I Am Not Your Negro*, and the extent to which the crisis is contextualized in the civil-rights movement is due in part to Peck's ingenious adaptation of Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, provisionally titled "Remember This House." Baldwin died in 1987 before this homage to Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., interwoven with his personal reflections, was completed. The publisher McGraw-Hill filed a lawsuit against the Baldwin family to recover the \$200,000 advance. It was an unprecedented action by a publisher, and, thanks to media exposure and pressure from the Authors Guild, the company dropped the suit in 1990.

Ten years later, having finished his film on Patrice Lumumba and having acquired the rights to Baldwin's body of work, Peck was ready to treat the writer's life in a similar manner, including a documentary and a feature film. His dilemma on how to proceed, after failing to get the desired Hollywood backing, was solved when Baldwin's sister, Gloria Karefa-Smart, the executor of the estate, gave him a letter and the pages that Baldwin had been working on—and there is some question as to how many. She told Peck, "You'll know what to do with this."

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What Peck did was akin to what scholar Clayborne Carson did with the papers of Dr. King in completing King's autobiography. Peck had the essential core; it was a matter of piecing together a script from the trove of Baldwin's other works—his novels, plays, essays, poems, and speeches. "Baldwin gave me a voice," Peck said, "gave me the words, gave me the rhetoric. All I knew through instinct or through experience, Baldwin gave it a name and shape. I had all the intellectual weapons I needed."

Baldwin also gave him a cinematic template, much of which appears in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), his book-length essay that recounts the impact movies had on him and provides an insightful critique of the demeaning depiction of blacks in film. This book came four years after his screenplay on Malcolm's life was rejected and eventually morphed into the book *One Day When I Was Lost*, some portions of which were used by Spike Lee in his biopic. That failed experience—and here we might emphasize "lost"—lingered for years with Baldwin who later wrote, "I would rather be horse-whipped, or incarcerated in the forthright bedlam of Bellevue, than repeat the adventure" in Hollywood.

From the first frames of the documentary, Peck is true to Baldwin's words: "I am about seven," Baldwin wrote. "I am with my mother or my aunt. The movie is *Dance, Fools, Dance*." The dancer is Joan Crawford, and a clip from the film amplifies Baldwin's memory. Peck, wisely, does not follow Baldwin's deconstruction of Hollywood literally, but deftly selects passages from the essay, mainly when snippets of film are available to underscore a point.

Throughout the engrossing documentary, Peck judiciously presents footage to illustrate or juxtapose Baldwin's words—a segment on ludicrous performances of black comedians Willie Best and Stepin Fetchit, for instance. A clip from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1937) accompanies Samuel L. Jackson's



James Baldwin (1924–1987) in *I Am Not Your Negro* (photo courtesy National Archives).

narration as he recites Baldwin's words about having read the novel, "the book in one hand, the newest baby on my hipbone" (here Jackson's voice is more subdued than in his "What's in your wallet?" Capital One commercials). Tom Mix, John Wayne, and Gary Cooper are some of the cowboys Baldwin invokes. "It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, and although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you." This quotation is not from *The Devil Finds Work* but from another essay, further evidence of Peck's grasp and research of Baldwin's works.

The films of Sidney Poitier—from *No Way Out*, *The Defiant Ones*, and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* to *In the Heat of the Night* and *A Raisin in the Sun*—provide a singular tableau of the black experience in

Hollywood. Each film is an opportunity for Peck to focus on a social or political issue. As these films chart Poitier's odyssey in movies, they also highlight the unchanging conditions of African-American actors, underscoring the fact that during that era there was room for only one black star at a time in Hollywood's firmament.

*I Am Not Your Negro* includes the expected bravura excerpts from iniquitous films, including *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Imitation of Life*, among others. But, oddly, Bette Davis makes no appearance—and of all Baldwin's commentary about movies, none is more personal and self-deprecating than his childhood response to seeing Davis on the screen. In one way her visage, her bulging eyes—like his—were a comforting affirmation that maybe, since she was a star, he wasn't as ugly as he imagined.

Some of the clips from these various films pop up again, as the documentary distills the lives of Evers, Malcolm X, and Dr. King, and their relationship to Baldwin. Each in chronological order is profiled, with Baldwin recalling when he met each man, his historical importance, and the circumstances of his assassination. Other than their intimate connection to Baldwin, is there anything new about these iconic figures? Their tragedies are deeply embedded in the nation's sorrow, but seen here through Baldwin's recollection and Peck's positioning them against the murders of Trayvon Martin, Darius Simmons, Ayana Jones, Tamir Rice, and others, they remind us again that the past is prologue.

This is Peck at his editorial best: his "emotional syntax" brilliantly showcased as again we witness that unchanging sameness of race relations in America, most disturbingly when white police officers confront unarmed young black men. "Despite any real or perceived 'progress,' we cannot avoid questioning the accuracy of the new symbols of change," Peck has asserted. His documentary not only questions what several social scientists and activists have called the "New Jim Crow," but Peck also presents Baldwin as his chief witness to interrogate the so-called relative gains for black Americans in the socioeconomic realm.

Even if you've heard the speeches, the debates, the interviews, and Baldwin's riveting testimony countless numbers of times, an interesting nugget of wisdom resonates anew in his incomparable ability to speak truth to power. Ample clips from television's *Dick Cavett Show* reveal Baldwin passionately expounding, in words and gestures, on a multitude of issues including housing, employment, and racism. "Now, this is the evidence," he explains to Cavett, the other guests, and the audience. "You want me to make an act of faith risking myself, my life, my woman, my sister, my children, on some idealism which you assure me exists in America which I have never seen?"



James Baldwin with Charlton Heston, Harry Belafonte, and Marlon Brando during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963.



Without overstating it, Peck found a subtle way to reference President Obama when Baldwin quotes Robert Kennedy's prediction that one day, "maybe forty years from now" there can be a black president of the United States. Baldwin's response that when that day arrived, America would be an entirely different country, isn't included in the film. And it would have been rewarding to see at least a moment or two of Baldwin in debate with Malcolm or at the roundtable with Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Marlon Brando, Joseph Mankiewicz, and Charlton Heston during the 1963 March on Washington (available for viewing on YouTube).

Significant inclusions in the film, however, are Peck's portraits of the widows of the fallen heroes—Coretta Scott King, Myrlie Evers-Williams, and Betty Shabazz. So often these women are ignored and stand in the shadows of their famous husbands. Peck devotes some time also to Yolanda and Attallah, the daughters of Dr. King and Malcolm, respectively, noting how at one time they were performing together. Their collaboration signaled the potential unity and promise many hoped to see in their fathers.

When archival clips and vintage stills are not used to embellish the scenario, music from nearly every mode of expression permeates the documentary. Poignant moments occur when Bob Dylan sings his "Only a Pawn in the Game," referring to the death of Medgar Evers, and the scenes of civil-rights marchers are musically enhanced by Ray Charles's blistering blues.

In the end, the documentary is saturated with sorrow, and I can hear my students complaining about another depressing trip down memory lane strewn with dead black people. Yes, there is a kind of unrelieved sadness—not unlike the PBS *Eyes on the Prize* series, toward which my students first expressed exasperation at seeing tragedy after tragedy. But listening to and looking at Baldwin (and there could have been much more of him), there are glimmers of hope and optimism, slivers of bright moments that arise from the marches, rallies, and demonstrations—particularly those in the Sixties that brought about relative change in civil and human rights, temporarily neutralizing Jim Crow.

Whether or not Baldwin actually said, "I am not your Negro" is inconsequential. What he meant and what Peck has thoughtfully illuminated is the history of race relations in America, the menace of racism that has wreaked violence on black Americans for centuries and looms even more ominous today. "Violence is American as cherry pie," H. Rap Brown says in the film, and this fact is unavoidable and something I try to teach my students each semester. This is a horror they must face in order to transcend it. They, and especially white Americans, must struggle to answer the question Baldwin poses at the end of the documentary—"Why was a nigger necessary in the first place?"—**Herb Boyd**

## I, Daniel Blake

**Produced by Rebecca O'Brien; directed by Ken Loach; screenplay by Paul Laverty; cinematography by Robbie Ryan; production design by Fergus Clegg and Linda Wilson; music by George Fenton; edited by Jonathan Morris; starring Dave Johns, Hayley Squires, Briana Shann and Dylan McKiernan. Color, 100 min. A Sundance Selects release, [www.ifcfilms.com](http://www.ifcfilms.com).**

*I, Daniel Blake*, Ken Loach's thirteenth feature collaboration with screenwriter Paul Laverty, makes you wonder if Christ got things badly wrong. Perhaps we will not always have the poor with us after all. Not if enough of them can be banished from collective sight and mind: shamed into low-paid work for which they are not physically fit; stripped of humanity through welfare-junkie stereotyping; shipped far away from communities of birth or long-term residence. Or, if all else fails, starved into submission and silence. Welcome to Loach and Laverty's vision of post-2008-crash Britain. In this increasingly neoliberal polity, right-wing governments cynically invoke the specter of austerity in order to tear away the post-1945 welfare state's protective provision from large swaths of a population deemed neither to be trying hard nor dying fast enough to balance the nation's books. Yet *I, Daniel Blake* somehow makes this the stuff of defiance and dignity as well as of despair. Using its head in order to speak to the heart, Loach's latest deploys sentiment and sophistication in broadly equal measure. The result, in Britain at least, has been the veteran director's most talked about, topically resonant film in years.

Daniel Blake (Dave Johns) does not have far to seek for his troubles. Recently bereaved in middle age, he has potentially lost profession as well as partner after a heart attack forces him to temporarily relinquish his job as a skilled carpenter. The film opens with his fruitless attempt to claim financial support from the state while recuperating under doctor's orders. Daniel is bafflingly rejected for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), a welfare benefit introduced by the then Labour government in 2008 and designed to support those whose ability to work is compromised by disease or disability. While attempting to navigate the deliberately drawn-out appeal process against rejected ESA claims, necessity compels Daniel to apply instead for another benefit, Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). The problem, however, is that the latter is paid out only to those whom the state deems to be actively looking for paid work. Welfare officers use Daniel's digital illiteracy (a skilled traditional craftsman of a certain age, he has no experience with computers or online culture) and physical infirmity (current doctor's advice precludes him from accepting any work he might secure) to reject his JSA claim, as well. Much of *I, Daniel Blake*'s remainder therefore follows its titular protagonist's increasingly angry and disbelieving struggles against and within a contemporary welfare system that seems designed to withhold help rather than provide it.

Indeed, Loach and Laverty's central point is that Daniel's misfortune is increasingly common and deliberately cultivated, rather than being a one-off tale of individual woe. Instead of simply containing a couple of Kafkaesque corners in need of urgent reform, the post-crash British benefit system is presented as wholly compromised by the



Daniel (Dave Johns) befriends single mother Katie (Hayley Squires), another victim of Britain's stringent welfare system in Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (photo by Joss Barratt).