

Critical Review: *I Am Not Your Negro*

ASSIGNMENT

For the next two days, we will be watching the recent and award-winning documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro*. As you watch, I encourage you to derive your own interpretations and evaluations. One of the highest levels of thinking involves evaluation (it's considered an even higher level of thinking than is analysis), and this assignment requires that you judge the merit of the film. This assignment will also offer you a playground on which to chase and catch your writing style.

You will then compose a critical essay in which you explain how well this film measures up against the established criteria for good films. Your task is not just to analyze, but to critique. Your review may be a mixed bag – that is, there may be some elements of the documentary you find excellent, and others you find lacking. Whatever your judgment, you must provide specific textual examples that support your conclusions.

Your essay will be largely written in class; we will rip out a fast first draft on Monday, followed by a meticulous revision for STYLE on Tuesday. It is not a timed writing, and you are welcome to work on it at home as much as you need to. **The final draft is due Wednesday, February 28.**

FORMAT

Begin with a brief synopsis of the documentary. Don't give a blow-by-blow rehash of the film; rather, describe the dramatic situation and the film's underlying structure and primary elements. Explain if the film fits a particular genre. Tell enough about the film to familiarize your reader. Because this is an academic review, feel free to reveal the ending; your purpose is not to sell the movie, but to completely evaluate it.

Proceed to your evaluation. Three questions to consider are: What is the Raoul Peck's purpose? (Raoul Peck is the director.) How well does Peck achieve this purpose? How significant is this purpose? Address some of the questions below. Decide first how to organize your review. You might start with the negatives, then go on to the positives, or vice versa, depending on which you want to emphasize. Be sure to provide textual evidence for each of your judgments. If appropriate, you could compare the quality of the film to others of the same genre, or others with similar themes.

Wrap up your discussion. Give your overall assessment of the film: How far up the scale of excellence does it rise? Is it mediocre? Good? Great? Can it be considered a fine piece contribution to American culture? A good movie but not profound? Trivial? One for the ages?

STYLE

Good reviews are as entertaining to read as the texts they evaluate. Your enthusiasm or disdain should come through clearly in your style. Your voice should be appropriate for the text's subject and tone. You wouldn't write an ironic, flippant review of a sincerely poignant film of struggle and loss. On the other hand, a hopelessly melodramatic and excessively biased documentary might merit a few barbs. Have some fun finding your critical voice in this essay.

QUESTIONS FOR EVALUATION

Dramatic Situation

- Is the film rooted in stories that you care about?
- Is the struggle of the protagonist(s) one with which the view can identify?
- Is the topic relevant to a contemporary audience?
- Does the dramatic situation sustain interest and rise to a climax that is intellectually and emotionally satisfying?

Characters/People

- Are the characters deep, rounded, and unique, or shallow, superficial, and stereotypical?
- Do you care about the people and how the events affect them?
- Is the characterization consistent? Does it follow some sort of internal logic?
- Are the characters' dynamic changes or realizations believable?
- Are the people well-chosen for this film? Do they complement each other?

Non-Verbal Style

- What visual choices are you noticing (colors, photos, footage, cuts, camera work, etc)?
- What auditory choices are you noticing (music, silence, voices)?
- What larger purposes do these choices contribute to? Are they effective?
- Are there moments that you find particularly beautiful or creative?

Theme

- Does the film give you insight into life, society, human nature?
- Is the theme original or surprising?
- Does Beck put a new twist on a familiar theme?
- Does Beck employ techniques that elevate this book above pedestrian "blockbuster" films?
- Can you identify striking imagery, motifs, symbols, or interesting uses of point of view?

Overall Judgment

- How well did the film achieve its purpose?
- Does this film represent excellence for its genre?
- Is it a complete success, or do one or two factor keep it from being fully satisfying?
- Would you watch another film by this director?