



Manchester University Press

INTERVIEW

“I was a witness”: An Interview with Jack Hazan

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Abstract

John Livesey, a doctoral student at University College London, interviews Jack Hazan about his 1971 film *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*. The interview discusses the frequently difficult production process of the film, Baldwin’s own status in the 1960s, and Hazan’s reflections on the renewed interest in the author.

Keywords: Jack Hazan, *Meeting the Man*, documentary, cinema, Beauford Delaney, Algeria, Black Power movement, Terence Dixon



Figure 1 Still from *Meeting the Man* (1971)

I met Jack Hazan in the foyer of the Lexi Cinema in northwest London in July 2024. He was there for a screening of the short documentary, *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris* (1971), a production on which he worked as cinematographer. While few films better capture Baldwin's tenacity, rhetoric, and charisma, *Meeting the Man* was actually confined to the archive for over thirty years before being made publicly available by the streaming service MUBI in 2021. The documentary is most notable for the attempts made by its subject to override its director, Terence Dixon. While Dixon was intent on making a film about Baldwin as a Black American expatriate, the author appears keen that his life in Paris is not whitewashed or romanticized. To this end, he takes the filmmakers on a detour through the French capital's Algerian quarter, invites a group of Black radical students to join his entourage, and, in the film's most fiery encounter, challenges Dixon to acknowledge the issue of the crew's persistent racial ignorance. All this Hazan follows with his camera, calmly capturing the process of a film falling into disarray.

Of course, *Meeting the Man* is not Hazan's only film. Hazan is a Manchester-born filmmaker who studied Motion Picture Arts at UCLA in the 1950s. Following his return to the UK, he joined the BBC as an assistant cameraman before leaving in 1967 to establish his own partnership, Solus Enterprises, with which he worked on a number of television documentaries including *Meeting the Man*. In 1973 he directed his first full-length feature *A Bigger Splash*, a documentary which focused on the life and work of artist David Hockney. Despite lukewarm reception on release, today the film is viewed as an important chapter in the history of documentary cinema. Hazan's combination of an observational and highly intimate form—drawing on the practices of *cinema vérité*—with multiple staged and sometimes fantastical scenes is credited as pioneering the kind of “staged reality” recognizable in contemporary reality TV. In conversation, Hazan started by telling me

more about his own career and approach to documentary filmmaking before discussing *Meeting the Man*, its fractious production process, and the film's legacy today.

John Livesey: Throughout your career you've made documentaries about visionary artists. Your subjects include The Clash, David Hockney, and, of course, James Baldwin. I wonder what your approach is and how you tackle subjects who are artists themselves?

Jack Hazan: Well, I was trained at the BBC and their approach was sort of a journalistic approach, which I didn't really like. I started off as an assistant cameraman, a trainee assistant cameraman. And we'd be sent out to listen to these people talking. It wasn't a visual approach or a cinematic approach at all. It was all based on the word. I decided to bypass that and do something else. If you look at paintings, for instance, they're just fascinating on film. First I started with black and white. But then in color, they come alive. I was just looking at *A Bigger Splash*, because I'm revisiting it and regrading it, and I was doing the subtitles. There really aren't that many words. It's more or less silent, a silent picture with a few conversations in there that kind of guide you. That is a cinematic approach. The BBC, in those days, they were not cinematic at all. So we rebelled against that.

JL: *Meeting the Man* was produced for London Weekend Television, but it certainly has some of those more cinematic moments: Baldwin on the Seine, Baldwin in the Algerian quarter, Baldwin surrounded by paintings by Beauford Delaney. Was that partly your contribution?

JH: I think that's to do with me, the way it was shot. I always wanted to be elegant and not focus on making a point. The Americans, their approach in the documentaries of the late 1950s and 1960s was not elegant. They were just happy to be able to move around and shoot people with a lightweight camera which didn't make any sound, and use direct sound recording. They were happy to do that, but it wasn't very artistic. Just documenting. My approach was not that.

JL: Tell me: how did you first become involved in the film?

JH: I left the BBC in 1967 and I drew with me the best and the nicest people—technicians, as we call them—into a partnership called Solus Enterprises and we went on for another thirty years. One of our most celebrated luminaries was the cameraman Roger Deakins, who's now Sir Roger Deakins. We had Dick Pope, who used to be my assistant. And we had somebody else called Colin Richards who could do anything, anything. Colin, who was from Oxford, was approached by Terry Dixon to do this film. That's how we got it. The film was for *Aquarius*, an arts program

presented by Humphrey Burton for London Weekend Television. And then Terry and I went to Paris to meet Jimmy Baldwin, just to set it up.

JL: So there were actually two meetings with Baldwin: before you shot the film, and then during the shoot itself?

JH: Yes, that first meeting was in December, and the following year, late January or February I think, we got our crew together and went over to shoot this thing, which became the film.

JL: What were your first impressions of Baldwin? And was the atmosphere different in that first meeting?

JH: The atmosphere was totally different. Very genial. He was very charming. We had a lovely time. I can't remember what we said or what we did, but it was totally charming. Of course, I was wowed by him before I got there, because he was a hero of mine and he made me understand what it was like to be a Black person in America. I think it was *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), which just bowled me over. It was just an extraordinary opening of the curtain for me, and I never looked back after that. I was into jazz, and the most prominent jazz musicians were Black musicians. And of course, they invented the music in the first place. So I was already interested in Black culture and then with Baldwin thrown in, my God. . .

JL: And did you have a clear plan for how you wanted the film to unfold? What was the story you wanted to tell?

JH: It was Terry's film. I was just the producer and the cameraman. So I had to watch out for the cost of the thing. The film was supposed to be about his writing, James Baldwin's writing as a Black American in Paris. That's why it's called Jimmy Baldwin's Paris. It wasn't supposed to be anything else. Thankfully it became something else.

JL: Like you say, over the course of the film, its subject seems to evolve. Baldwin seems intent on making it about something other than the writer abroad and becomes increasingly resistant to the production crew. Talk me through the process of shooting the movie. Was Baldwin cooperative to start with?

JH: As it says in the movie, we started out and he was genial. We did walk-arounds in the Algerian quarter, and shot him walking along the banks of the Seine: pretty shots, scenic shots which you could use with voiceovers. But on the next day he didn't turn up when he was supposed to turn up.

JL: Do you know why that was?

JH: He just didn't turn up where he was supposed to turn up. So Terry went over to see him in the hotel, and took a long time, came back and he said, there's a problem. He didn't really know what. Jimmy didn't really say what the real problem was.

- JL:* We know that period of Baldwin's life was one of immense difficulty. Baldwin was distressed, often drinking, and potentially even suicidal. Does your impression of him bear witness to any of that?
- JH:* No, I never got the impression he was depressed or suicidal. He had a boyfriend who he was lodged with. We thought he just wants to stay with his boyfriend. The boyfriend was comforting, and you can see him in the shots in the Algerian quarter, he's sitting at a table. I can't remember what his name was, but he was Algerian, that's all I remember. But the day that he didn't turn up, he had actually been captured by these two youths who were escaping the draft in America and had landed in Paris, and they were very fired up with the feelings associated with the Black Power movement of the late 1960s, early 1970s. They were really very stropky. They didn't want him to cooperate with us. We were the enemy.
- JL:* That's fascinating because, as I'm sure you know, Baldwin maintained a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the Black Power movement and many of its main proponents entering the 1970s.
- JH:* Yes, he did have a very, very complex relationship to it. And remember, he was gay. The Black Power movement was not sympathetic to gays. It was all very macho. So he didn't really fit in anymore. The most brilliant of those people did not fit in anymore. He was out of fashion. I don't know even how he even came about these students. I can only tell you that he was in thrall to them. There's no doubt of it. Which was extraordinary, because this is James Baldwin, and he's in thrall to these youths.
- JL:* Do you think they had affected his decision not to show up and, ultimately, to become more resistant to the production crew making the film?
- JH:* There's no doubt. You can see it in the film. They had sort of trapped him. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to offend them. He sympathized with them. And so we were hanging around for two days, I think, and the costs were mounting. It became very tense for us and tense for Terry, because he knew the whole thing would be blown. If he didn't come back with a film, he wouldn't get the money. So it was very pressured. When he's angry [Dixon], when he's talking to Jimmy, I understand why. People these days say he's being disrespectful. But the pressure on him was enormous, and on us.
- JL:* As you say, the most extended sequence of the film features an argument between Dixon and Baldwin. The conversation takes place in mostly one shot, in front of La Place de la Bastille, and there seems to be some confusion why the crew has been brought to this specific monument. Was that Baldwin's idea?

- JH:* I'm not sure it was Baldwin, but Baldwin was told by these kids that we should film at the Place de la Bastille. We didn't know why. There was no reason given. But he agreed that we should film it at the Place de la Bastille.
- JL:* Did you feel that, by interfering, the students themselves were somehow trying to redirect the film and change its message?
- JH:* There's no doubt that's what was happening. Yes, and redirect Jimmy Baldwin. Causing trouble. Fortunately, as it turns out. So we turned up at the Place de la Bastille, and we started filming. And then, as we're filming, something happens to my right. When you've got a camera, your right-hand view is obstructed by the camera. You can't see anything, so I just swivel to the right, doing it as elegantly as I could. And then there I got this tall African American sort of being a bit embarrassed with the camera on him. He says, "Don't go putting the camera on me." But I kept the camera on him. He doesn't really want to be filmed. One of the reasons is he's actually fleeing America. He's a draft dodger. So of course, he didn't want to be filmed, but he was caught, he had to say something.
- JL:* Like you say, Carl, one of the students, refuses to be filmed. And so the camera eventually turns back to Baldwin. By this point, the communication between Baldwin and Dixon has very clearly broken down. There is even an extended moment during which Baldwin refuses to speak. As the cameraman, what were you thinking in this moment? How did you respond, and what did you hope to capture?
- JH:* The cameraman always has to understand what's going on. You have to listen to what's being said, and then you have to react to it in the best way possible. The most elegant way possible, which I try to do. If you don't listen, it's hopeless. The director can't say, "We could go here." You're the director, in a way. When you've got the camera that's running, the subject also can't just walk off. He's got to respond in some way or another. He's trapped. So Baldwin's trapped by the students, call them students, and he's trapped by the camera. He can't just walk off.
- JL:* So by holding that camera, you felt like you were also holding him there?
- JH:* There's no doubt. Yes, yes. I had him trapped. I trapped him with the camera. And then he performed. Exquisitely. And incredibly articulately, and it's never been, it's never been rivaled, in my view. I think there was a bit of a catharsis for him as well, because he had been frustrated, obviously, for the last two days. It was the third day or the fourth day, I can't remember. For him, it was a release, and he released everything that was amazing in him, as far as argument is

concerned. And as I say, I don't think it's been rivaled. You see other films of him, and there's nothing like this. You can dismiss the other films. That last one, it's just wallpaper with some somebody reading in stentorian tones.¹ It's hopeless. This is a film. That is not a film. That's wallpaper. And it wasn't staged, don't forget. It happened. It just happened. It's a fortunate happening. It just happened. We didn't stage it.

JL: And meanwhile, as you are filming Baldwin, Terence seems to have lost all control of the interview. He even says at one point, "We need you to make the movie." Do you think he was giving up?

JH: What he was saying was, "Look, I'm surrendering to you. You must please cooperate with us, and we'll cooperate with you. We'll do whatever you want." I mean, it was a plea from Terry because he didn't know that we could use that footage, that fight on camera. He had no idea. It was only later when the editor, Richard Key, said, look, you've got another film here. We were going to cut out all that stuff, all the arguments at the Place de la Bastille were going to be excised from the movie, because that's not what was required. At the time, Terry was told to make a film on James Baldwin's life in Paris as an expat Black American.

JL: So the film that was eventually produced was, to a large extent, decided in the cutting room?

JH: Yes. In the cutting room the decision was made to include the fiery exchanges at the Place de la Bastille. Terry agreed that it should be done. It was his decision, but not his idea. There's no doubt it's Baldwin at his best. You won't find anything better than that, in my view.

JL: After the exchange by the Place de la Bastille, there is a change of scene and of atmosphere. We cut to Beauford Delaney's flat. Baldwin seems far more peaceful, cooperative, and cordial. What had transpired in between these two scenes to change the state of relations so drastically?

JH: I've never told anyone about this before and it's not as bad as it appears but there was an attempt to satisfy everybody by increasing the fee to Jimmy Baldwin. All the contact had been through his agent, somebody called—as I remember it now—Tria French, appropriately. And so phone calls were flying backwards and forwards. I was calling my office manager in London, and she was phoning back, and I think I said, upgrade his fee to 1500 pounds, which was quite a good amount of money. So she upped it but got it completely wrong. And she offered 15,000 pounds. Obviously Miss French realized it was just silly, it was a mistake. So we abandoned that plan completely. The whole financial settlement just got

abandoned, and it became more friendly after that. But there was a kind of attempt at a financial settlement.

JL: So after you left the Place de la Bastille, there was a sense that the film might not continue?

JH: More or less, yes. We felt it needed to be settled.

JL: And after this failed attempt at a settlement, the relationship between the company and Baldwin became more amicable?

JH: It was amicable. I think David, his brother, was around all the time. He was swanning in and out all the time, giving him support. And he's not mentioned there at all.

JL: Baldwin certainly appears far more comfortable in Delaney's flat. What did you make of his decision to move there, and what were your impressions of the relationship with Delaney?

JH: I think that was Jimmy's idea of cooperating, going to film in Beauford Delaney's flat. It was almost like a father and son. He was much older than Jimmy. Apparently, he had dementia at that point. He was really out of it, and I think he died not long afterwards. We had these two, these other two kids there who were also students in Paris. And they feature and they had a lot of affection for Jimmy. It was so cramped, I couldn't move. I didn't really want to film from higher but I couldn't even squat. But it was much more peaceful. There was no tension there at all.

JL: It strikes me, however, that even in this more peaceful atmosphere Baldwin still seems to be performing for the camera. Compared to *A Bigger Splash*, where we see Hockney in moments that are really very intimate and vulnerable, we never see the more private side of Baldwin.

JH: Yes. Well he's a preacher. He was a preacher as a kid, when he was 10 or 11, extraordinarily enough. He just knows how to perform. His use of silences and his speech patterns are just extraordinary. He says something, then waits, then he says it again. He waits. It's just so wonderful. It's so artistic. And so, as a cameraman, I don't move. If he's giving me a peroration, which is all the time, I don't move. It's him. He's got the audience. And you don't move. It's disrespectful, there's no reason to move. You listen.

JL: And do you think there was another side to Baldwin, when he wasn't performing, that he didn't allow the crew to see?

JH: Of course. I mean there's the homosexuality. In those days, and particularly in Black society, it wasn't acceptable. So obviously he's carrying that all the time. And when you saw him walking around in Paris, the way he walks is in a particular way. It looks quite vulnerable. He doesn't look strong, does he? He looks like he could blow away, blow away into the Seine. And he's walking

in a very . . . feminine way. But then when he opens his mouth, he's got something else. It's a lion.

JL: *Meeting the Man* is not the only film to be made about Baldwin, during his life or afterwards. In 2024 clips and photos were shared all over social media. What do you think it is about Baldwin that makes him such a captivating presence on screen? Is it those qualities you've listed?

JH: I mean he looks amazing. He looks amazing. He just has these huge eyes, which fix you. He's looking at you. You're terrified to glance away from his gaze. But he was also very much loved in Paris at the time. People called him Jimmy. They weren't that constrained, as people are in America, or academic people constrained to call him James. He was just part of Paris at the time. He was terribly nice. He was very sweet. And he would rant about the West and white people, but he loved everybody, including white people. There's no doubt.

JL: *Meeting the Man* wasn't screened between 1970 and 2016. What do you make of the surge of interest in Baldwin, and of the film's second life?

JH: I was very surprised at the interest. For forty or forty-five years, people weren't interested. That film could not be sold. Nobody wants to know. But then suddenly, I got a call from Jake Perlin in New York saying, "I think you got this film. Where is it?" It was in our archive, physically. So I just pulled it out and we had it digitized, very crudely. And there was a showing of it at the Lincoln Center. We didn't have time to grade it properly, it looked awful. But nevertheless they showed it. Some of them said it was staged. Some of them said it was disrespectful to James Baldwin, and then others said it was just nonsense. I was very surprised. This year, which is the centenary, they're showing it all over the place. I hadn't seen it on a big screen ever, until this year. I was really shocked, because it looks incredible. It's very beautiful to look at, something was very beautiful. The latter part where he's sitting in the hotel with his embroidered chair, it's incredible, and the lighting is extraordinary. Brings out the best of him, makes him look very noble, sitting on a throne, an embroidered throne. It's amazing.

JL: Obviously 2024 marked the centenary of Baldwin's birth. But his popularity has skyrocketed in ways that coincidence can't completely explain. Why do you think Baldwin speaks so urgently and powerfully to a new generation today?

JH: The question I would ask is, why wasn't there any interest during these years? Because Baldwin is the most extraordinary artist, the most extraordinary writer of his time. I was educated in America, at

UCLA, and I was shocked at how nobody was really interested in Black culture. They weren't interested in jazz, except in New York City. It was very shocking for me. He showed me. He shone the light for me.

JL: And what does it mean to you, personally, to see your film have a second life and for you to be part of Baldwin's legacy? *Meeting the Man* is now an important text in the field of Baldwin studies, and will likely be watched as long as his books are read. How do you feel about that?

JH: It's amusing, you know, that he's now so revered. It's amusing that I was there. I was a witness. That's all I can say. I never thought I would ever film James Baldwin. And there I was filming him. I was a witness.

You know, I saw him years later, after I finished *A Bigger Splash* and it was shown in France. It must have been at the Cannes Film Festival, because there he was sitting on the terrace of the Carlson Hotel. So I went up to him and greeted him, and I said, "Did you see my film?" and he said, "Yes." And he smiled with those, you know, teeth flashing out. And I said, "Did you like it?" He said, "Yes." But that's all he said.

Notes

- 1 Hazan is presumably referring to *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), directed by Raoul Peck.

Works Cited

Peck, Raoul (dir.), *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016).

Contributor's Biography

John Livesey is a writer and director. He is currently completing a PhD at UCL on James Baldwin's relationship with visual culture, funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership. He is also the recipient of a fellowship at the Deutsches Theater Berlin and is working on his first short film with ICA New Creatives.