The Lure of Jordan Peele's *Get Out*!

By Tia Myriani
Edited by Ruby Foster and Amanda Cuthbertson

Editors' note: The process of editing Tia's work was an absolute pleasure. Her topic was relevant and the original manuscript was rife with potential. We asked Tia to consider adding depth in certain areas of her analysis to really garner the attention this piece deserved. Additionally, we critically examined the validity and applicability of certain editing conventions to avoid any sacrifices to the piece's integrity and impact. Maintaining her voice was essential. Being involved in the development of such a powerful piece was truly an honour.

What does it take to make a horror movie a household hit? If we think about the movies that have shaped this genre, *The Shining, A Nightmare on Elm Street, The Exorcist,* and *Scream* all have made their mark in the horror hall of fame and continue to be referenced year after year, Halloween season after Halloween season. In the case of these particular movies, we can find commonality in their cultural impact on audiences. For instance, *The Shining* can be quoted and referenced by people who have never even seen the film. The *Scream* franchise has spawned countless satirized imitations and created a cult following around its masked antagonist, Ghostface. Yet, despite these films' popularity and their devoted audiences, I would argue that they have little to say when it comes to commentary on our world's social structures and how naturally horrifying they can be. Debut film from acclaimed writer-director Jordan Peele, *Get Out* tackles the trauma that black people face within the horror genre and beyond the screen. As someone less familiar with the horror-thriller genre – I am that someone who can spot references from *The Shining* but could not possibly tell you what the rest of the movie is about – I am interested in why *Get Out* gained as much traction as it did. What is it about *Get Out* that shook

the very foundations of the horror genre to its core, and why is this movie still as relevant as it is today more than ever?

Putting *Get Out* into a definable frame is crucial before discussing the intricacies of topics such as racial representations in the film. As mentioned, the film is by Jordan Peele, a comedic actor and writer best known as the co-creator of the sketch show *Key and Peele*. The 2017 cultural behemoth *Get Out* is a psychological horror-thriller about a black man visiting his white girlfriend's family but quickly discovering that something dark and despicable lies beneath the surface. The film won 152 awards, such as Best Screenplay from the Toronto Film Critics Association, and was nominated for 209 awards, including the Oscar for Best Motion Picture of the Year in 2018 ("Get Out Awards"). The Golden Globes also nominated the film for Best Motion Picture; however, they placed the film in the category of "Musical or Comedy" ("Get Out Awards"), a choice that was highly critiqued online not only by viewers but also by the director himself (Heneks 932). Peele noted that the misclassification of the film was further evidence that "African-American cries for justice aren't being taken seriously" (Morris qtd. in Heneks 932).

I find Peele's commentary on the Golden Globe's nomination distinctly separates *Get Out* from regular thriller and horror films. There is nuance and a conversation at the center of the film that invites its viewers to engage with. Grace Heneks speaks about how this film practically *begs* the viewer to see how the notion of "a colourblind utopia, free from the cultural baggage of racism" (933) is an outright lie. Heneks also theorizes that the audience for this film would likely be people on the film's side: well-meaning "progressive whites who 'would have voted for Obama a third time,' [and who] are terrified of being seen as racists" (934). I offer this as the first reason for the film's popularity among reviewers and enthusiasts. *Get Out* does not make

tongue-in-cheek remarks about people who are overtly racist or try to present the plight of black people to those who do not care to understand it. At the heart of this movie, there is a subtle probing of the nature of white allyship. What does it mean to reckon with the fact that there is something about whiteness that feels as though it somehow lacks, and the only way to compensate for that lack is to exert power over others? Peele directly targets those most vocal about their support but who have not tackled this issue and how they, too, can still perpetuate racism and racist ideologies. They, too, can still cause harm.

It might be tempting to say that one type of harm *Get Out* taps into is performative activism, meaning a person might only advocate for social change to increase their social status. Most importantly, performative activism is not real, and it is not meant for the targeted, disadvantaged group. People of colour do not benefit from the performative activism of a white influencer on Instagram or TikTok, but that influencer does. Brands recognize that this person is "in touch" with any pseudo-progressive culture, as demonstrated in the West, that values diversity and can take advantage of that to push products and sell goods or services. The Armitage's certainly have something to sell, but it is not to gain social favour. It is to dominate another group because of their intense fetishization. For instance, at Chris' auction, many of the guests say outrageous things because they genuinely believe that it is a compliment to be asked if sex is better because black men's penises are bigger or to be told that you are "in fashion" (*Get Out* 00:43:30-00:43:49). For black people and people of colour at large, these are things that have been said to our faces. This is our reality. For any reader that may doubt this, in one conversation I had with an acquaintance in high school, a girl said that she wanted to marry a black man so that she would have pretty, mixed-race babies like me. While I understand there is a compliment somewhere, it is entombed beneath layers of skin-crawling intimacy that I had not

invited into the conversation. This real conversation that I could instantly visualize embodies the second reason I argue why this film quickly gained the traction it did within communities of colour both online and offline.

Still, some viewers might see this and continue to separate their actions from the film, as they might not be able to relate to the Armitage family: a gaggle of wealthy white socialites who can afford to have other people do their housework for them. The horror element of it all might draw people in and keep them captivated. As the film is entirely from the main protagonist Chris' point of view, the audience witnesses what Susan Scott Parrish expertly calls a "newfangled house of slavery" (112). One of the first servants Chris meets in the house is a black woman, Georgina, who behaves in strange ways, stalking around corners and crying mid-conversation that turns into gentle falsetto laughter. The viewer will learn that there is a woman who first inhabited this body, the original black woman, but she has been rendered speechless due to a procedure the Armitage family has performed on her (Parrish 111). Parrish compares this metaphorical muzzle to actual muzzles used on slaves and is simply a modern reimagining of the device (111). I think this is an astute observation, but I would take it one step further than that. Having to watch yourself perform routines and execute tasks without any control over any of it, as though you were a passenger in your own head, is chilling and depicts slavery in a way that completely dominates the person in an all-consuming way rather than only lording over the black body through means of violence. There is no chance of escape with no "you" at the helm. An excellent point made by Heneks is that this film is different from the day-to-day horror of black people being brutalized by law enforcement; there is often a degree of separation for white people due to the perspective being from the police, i.e. there is no challenge to the power dynamics of white violence inflicted on non-white people, both the police and white people

remain as the perpetrators of the violence as opposed to the victims (935). Through Chris interacting with Georgina, though, the audience sees what it might be like to experience being black and the nightmare it can often be.

This perspective change speaks to the earlier argument that *Get Out* mirrors the reality of many black and brown people, which ultimately helped define the movie as the cultural hit it became. One striking review from Alissa Wilkinson at Vox proudly lauds the film. She is amazed that Peele tackles the kind of "racist behavior that tries to be aggressively unscary" and how that "is just as horrifying." As horrifying as, say, cross burnings and police brutality. However, this review confuses me as none of this information is new. Black people have been telling white folks for a long time that the effects of slavery are no longer just calling someone the n-word and wearing white hoods to Sunday mass. While Wilkinson, a white woman, found the film enlightening, I worry that she did not walk away with anything more meaningful than "a great, funny, well-made horror movie like *Get Out* can…help us understand each other a little better." To this, I ask, what were you doing before *Get Out* to better understand the plight of black people? This movie was served on a silver platter to white people to help them look at themselves, but if the review boils down to 'I'm glad I get you more, now,' where will you go from there?

There is an aspect of this film that I have yet to dive into, and I saved it for last as it is almost more important than what has been discussed up to this point: Chris survives the movie. He is able to walk away from the Armitage house as the sole survivor, and he drives off into the night to live another day. While, at first, this may not seem as though it is all that impressive, anyone who is even remotely familiar with the horror-thriller genre knows that if a black person is in the movie, they always die. In a dissertation from master student Brooke Dianne-Mae

Hughes, the writer reflects upon how characters like Chris are often "forced to submit to the trajectory of death that has been normalized for black males within horror cinema" (28). But *Get Out* refuses to accept that there is only one path out for characters like Chris and, instead, gives them a chance at becoming the hero of the narrative.

Though seemingly innocuous, I want to argue that Chris' survival is one of the strongest reasons why *Get Out* performed as well as it did and completely dominated conversations around social commentary and its place in the horror genre. The stories we tell each other as human beings shape the way we interact with one another and how we come to understand ourselves and our place within the world. For film and television to deem black and brown bodies as inconsequential, as so unimportant that we cannot even make it to the second act, impacts the way black and brown people engage with that media and the broader culture around it. For *Get Out* to have contradicted this, to have "counteract[ed] what has been assumed to be the naturalized racial order within the horror genre" (Hughes 28), is powerful. It sends a message that black bodies are worth more than their stereotypes or their offensive reductions. Black bodies are worthy of surviving the night.

So, why *Get Out*? What about this movie, in particular, caused people to take to the internet to proclaim their love for Peele? Though there are many reasons for individuals to form connections with this film, *Get Out* reveals an ugly part of modern society that many believe has moved beyond the bounds of racism. It asks its white allies to look at themselves and the people they associate with and ask the more challenging, necessary questions. How do you participate in the structures of power that continue to oppress black and brown people to this day? What will you do about it now that you are more aware? *Get Out* also reflects how black people walk throughout the world in a state of heightened fear. The reality may be more mundane, but the

likelihood of someone telling us that we might be "pretty for a black girl" and thinking it is a compliment is high. Finally, this movie provides hope that the stories we tell from this point on can have different endings. It is possible to rewrite our narratives because black people are worthy of making it to the credits, and our stories deserve happy endings.

The last point I want to make is that I am amazed at how one movie can so profoundly affect many people. *Get Out* stuck with them in a way other movies have not. In a conversation with my white mother, I asked what she had thought of the movie when she had watched it with her mixed-race black partner. She said she left the movie feeling "disturbed" and summed up her entire thoughts of the movie as "I was like, 'no'" (Bourque). In fairness, she does not watch many horror films but is very attuned to issues surrounding black people, especially considering her children are biracial. As much as I am skeptical of the long-term change *Get Out* inspired in its white viewers, I cannot deny that there are visceral feelings attached to watching people who look, sound, and speak like one of their friends or family members torturing black people. For black people, this film can be referenced repeatedly to show how slavery, ignorance, and well-meaning sympathies are not enough to consider this or any other society beyond racism.

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