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Manipulations of Stereotypes and Horror Clichés to Criticize Post-Racial White Liberalism in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*

JILLIAN BOGER

In a similar vein to its zombie movie predecessor *Night of the Living Dead*, Jordan Peele’s 2017 thriller horror *Get Out* takes the opportunity to make a social statement in the context of its body-snatching horror. *Get Out* is a work of satire and parody, which can seem like a conundrum to audiences who associate satire and parody strictly with comedy but works in the context of horror easily. Part of that comes from the dual nature of horror and comedy—they function as two sides of the same coin. Many of the same techniques that work in comedy such as exaggeration and bodily revulsion function similarly and just as well in horror. With that in mind, if comedy can be satirical, there’s no reason for horror not to be. That said, satirical horror presents in its nature a problem for audiences not so different from the problems faced by other

serious “art horror” or comedy: at what point are you supposed to take what you’re watching seriously? This problem is not only an issue because of horror’s history as a medium meant for cheap thrills aimed at children as evidenced in Andrew Monument’s documentary on the genre, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue* (2009), but arises when anyone—filmmaker, critic, or otherwise—wants to critique the genre. And, for some, it can be difficult to make the decision to take horror seriously, considering the frequently campy nature of the genre. However, satirical horror has its place in popular culture studies and tends to survive much longer in the public eye outside of horror aficionados than throw-away B movies.

Get Out’s satire is multi-fold. On the one hand, it functions as a critique of the genre that produced it, that is where we see its parody echoing older horror movies. On the other hand, *Get Out*’s second major target is the white liberalism of “post-racial” America in the years following President Obama’s election and reelection, which is something reviews of the film following its release immediately identified—though referring to white liberalism as a second target may be misleading. Neither target of satire takes priority over the other, and they function in tandem. Part of that is because of horror’s own sordid history regarding race and the portrayals of black bodies, which frequently stretch black men into literal monsters. Horror itself has a long-running association with toxic white masculinity, and even though some filmmakers have allegedly attempted to challenge that masculinity in their works, movies such as *Last House on the Left* (1972) and the most recent

King Kong film, *Kong: Skull Island* (2017), reaffirm the toxicity if not by their content itself, at least because of fan reception of them. For instance, *Last House on the Left* (1972) revels in gender-based violence, including graphic rape scenes, while Kong relives, again, a colonialist fantasy re-visioned again and again in the *King Kong* series. *Get Out* as a satire of the horror genre relies on its satire of white liberalism. The crux of both satires follows in how the protagonist, Chris Washington, is treated by the narrative. While audience members who are less familiar with the horror genre might not be able to pick up on all the various subversions and inversions of typical horror tropes and clichés, the major ones that Peele explores within *Get Out* is Carol Clover's Final Girl (which has been noted, though not as thoroughly as the criticism of white liberalism, by some film reviewers such as Julius Kassarndorf) and the theme of body-snatching. Chris functions as *Get Out's* Final Girl, and this itself is a challenge of not only how black men are expected to act or perform in horror but also wider societal stereotypes and assumptions about black masculinity. Further, *Get Out's* body horror of brain removal and implantation is not only a callback to the old horror fear of body snatching in the '50s through '80s via communist or alien agents, but makes an indictment of ownership and use of black bodies in service of white liberals in post-racial America.

What are those stereotypes about blackness in post-racial America? Many of them, particularly in media representations of blackness, are the same as they've been in the twenty years since Marlon B. Ross described them in "In Search of Black Men's Masculinity". At

the same time that black men are seen as "overly masculine", they are still "not masculine enough" because they do not fit in the context of whiteness (601). Black men become threats to the hierarchy of white masculinity in their assumed athleticism, their appeal to white women, militant opposition to the status quo, and their overall possession of qualities which make them "supermen" compared to their white peers (603)—while simultaneously being depicted as lazy criminals. Ross uses the metaphor of Janus to describe black celebrities in the 1980s; black men are at once something to be ridiculed, something to be used for sports or military aims, to be jailed, and to be hated. The question of duality reemerges in terms of performance when Alford A. Young discusses what it means to be black in the age of Obama. Young marks a difference between "street" and "decent", what black men are allowed to be with their peers, and what they must be in order to be taken seriously by their white peers. One of the differences between street and decent presents itself in language and vocabulary. Young argues throughout that just as black men may not dress a certain way when around white people, the same goes for how black men talk with their peers. Peele has noted that difference before in his sketch comedy show with Keegan-Michael Key during their "Luther" shorts where Luther functions as a way to tell the audience what Obama is really thinking. (And it is interesting that Peele, like Young, uses Obama as the example to show the difference between "talking white" and "talking black".)

In *Get Out*, the same difference and codeswitching in language is evident early on with Chris's encoun-

ter with first the police officer responding to the car accident with the deer, but then again when he meets Rose's parents, Dean and Missy Armitage. Dean affects what Rose criticizes after dinner as an attempt to sound hip—his “my mans” especially are target of her criticism—and they function as a white man not attempting to sound hip but rather attempting to sound black. Likewise, Chris codeswitches in his language with Dean and Missy compared to his language with Rod and Walter. His language during his interactions with Dean and Missy are what Young would characterize as “decent”; he is concerned from the start about whether the Armitages know he's black or not and wants to make a good impression as Rose's first black boyfriend, though she tells him “they are not racist”. That said, even between Rose and Rod, his language is different, which indicates that the problem is not with talking to authority figures like policemen. For instance, when he calls Rod in the car on the way to Rose's parents' home and says “Yo”, and even Rod's dialogue compared to Rose's marks a difference between white speech patterns in *Get Out* and black dialogue patterns. Though Rose is not in a position of authority over Chris, she is in a relative position of power as a white woman—and Chris's language adapts to this. Within the intersections of race and gender, white women are still privileged over black men, which has revealed itself in real life cases such as that of Emmett Till, and here, where Rose is one of the biggest threats to Chris's safety.

Language itself becomes an important point for Chris to understand that something is wrong with Georgina, Logan, and Walter. In the exchange between

Logan and Chris when he says it's, “Great to see another brother”, Logan's response—and Chris's assessment that he sounds like how an old white man—shows a different failure in language adaption from Dean's affection. While Dean plays the role of a dad attempting to fit in with his daughter's black boyfriend remarkably well, nailing it and creating the expected discomfort response from an audience watching (whether that audience is Rose and Chris or the film's audience), Logan is still a white man who does not make the effort to act black even after stealing a black body. Logan's language is stuck in Young's decent mode, even when Chris attempts to coax him into *street* lingo.

The language itself might be problematic, too, though, when we consider that it is playing into expected and codified roles of what blackness is. Is it a problem to expect black people to speak differently from whites, and then be surprised at similar language? What does this movie teach us about language—or cultural codeswitching in general—in these moments? In *Get Out*, it's not a problem for Chris to have a language he uses with his friends and other black characters versus white characters, but that doesn't necessarily mean the movie is telling its audience that all black people in real life speak the same. To that end, even expecting Obama to speak differently among his black peers versus to white audiences, whether he does or not is something that can transcend race and function more as a matter of knowing to whom one is speaking. How a southerner talks to other southerners is going to be different in many cases than a southerner talking to a northerner; at least, in theory. Even if language and the problem of

codeswitching is one that Peele targets, it is not to criticize Chris's vocabulary (or Rod's for that matter), but to point out that it happens. In these strange language moments, the film targets the ways black men have to and are expected to maneuver in extremely white spaces. Even with Georgina, who is, like Walter, a white person inhabiting a black body, we hear respectability politics in her language and voice. Even when part of the original "Georgina" is crying, her face is schooled and her language attempts to reassure Chris that nothing is wrong.

Black stereotypes in the wider world are not always amplified in horror. There are plenty of monster movies where the monster exemplifies black stereotypes (most notably, any *King Kong* movie). Even when they don't, there are also plenty of movies featuring a "magical negro", where black people are given supernatural attributes. That said, the most familiar black stereotype in horror is not necessarily the aggro-masculine force presented in other mainstream media—that is, a character like those of blaxploitation movies or, to one extreme, Mr. T—but rather (and criticized in the Wayans Brothers' parody *Scary Movie* series) that the black character dies first, such as in *Scream 2*, *Aliens*, *Queen of the Damned*, *Gremlins*, and the 2009 remake of *Day of the Dead*. In *Get Out*, this trope is inverted; not only is our protagonist a black man—who gets rescued, in fact, by another black man—but he manages to survive. If audiences don't consider the alternate ending of the movie as part of the film's canon, he's able to get away from the scene of trauma. This isn't to say that the black person always dies first (the black character in *Hal-*

loween V isn't the first dead character), but it happens enough that audiences notice when it's not the case. There's also the history of black horror that *Get Out* has to contend with; while blaxploitation movies are in a very different genre from *Get Out*, it's still one of the only major significant horror (and wider film) movements during which black men were allowed to take on the role of protagonist. The question then becomes how the protagonists of the blaxploitation compare against Chris.

John Semley, in "Who's Bleeding Whom," takes stock of the protagonists in blaxploitation films and compares them against contemporary white re-interpretations of blaxploitation-type heroes, especially in the works by directors such as Quentin Tarantino. Semley acknowledges the hypermasculinity of the blaxploitation protagonists throughout the movement, but his assessment comes to the conclusion that even if they are hypermasculine in original movies, the purpose behind it was generative. The men are hypermasculine in original blaxploitation movies for the purpose of reaffirming black masculinity and are allowed the same qualities as masculine persons as mainstream media allows for white masculinity. By contrast, in works that follow blaxploitation-kitsch as Semley uses Tarantino to exemplify, hypermasculinity in black men works in a way that only serves the stereotype rather than being as affirmative as it was in original blaxploitation movies. But Chris doesn't fit into this horror movie black protagonist cliché, either. He is neither the stoner black man who dies at the start of the horror movie at the moment of separation from the group, as the Wayans want

to critique, nor is he the hypermasculine protagonist of blaxploitation films.

Rather, Chris fits the function in *Get Out* of Carol Clover's Final Girl. The Final Girl is one of the horror tropes that is parodied in *Get Out*; even if a viewer doesn't know what the Final Girl is by name, she is, according to Clover, one of the horror archetypes that reappears enough that she is recognizable. Various critics reemphasize certain traits of the Final Girl: She is generally understood to be the "survivor" at the end of a slasher flick, the one who is able to kill the monster. While *TV Tropes* is not necessarily a totally academic source of information, I find that it does pare down the Final Girl trope into easily identified traits (namely, by citing other tropes). Fans on *TV Tropes* describe the Final Girl as "the last character left alive to confront the killer," and, "especially in older works, she'll also almost certainly be a virgin, remain fully clothed, avoid 'Death by Sex', and probably won't drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, or take drugs either....The Final Girl is usually but not always brunette, often in contrast to a promiscuous blonde who traditionally gets killed off". In the wide span of feminist horror criticism, the Final Girl can sometimes be read as a conservative figure—but at the same time, she evokes a sense of sympathy from an audience which needs someone to identify with (Clover 8). Jamie Curtis' character in the original *Halloween* movie, Laurie Strode, functions as the codifier for the Final Girl (better perhaps than another frequently cited Final Girl, *A Nightmare on Elm Street's* Nancy Thompson, whose survival at the end of the movie is placed in a precarious position when she gets into

the car in the dreamlike sequence after "killing" Freddy). While a female character, Laurie is not as sexy or sex-driven as her peers, which serves as a de-gendering tool, keeping her comparatively innocent compared to her friends. Because Peele plays around with several different horror themes and clichés that revolve specifically around gender and race, it makes sense that the Final Girl—arguably one of the best-known tropes of the genre—is one of the targets of parody in *Get Out*.

There are a few of Clover's requirements for the Final Girl that Chris Washington shares with another male horror character—Ash Williams, from Sam Raimi's original *Evil Dead*. They both match Clover's loose requirement of a gender ambiguous name for the protagonist, and both turn a weapon used against them into one to use against their tormentors. In Ash's case, the chainsaw which severs his hand becomes an obvious weapon. For Chris, it's a little more complicated: He is made temporarily immobile early on when he hits a deer because of an association between it and his mother's death, and the loss of his mother via an automobile accident is one of the traumas that the Armitages use as a tool for hypnotism to control him. Not only does he use deer antlers as a weapon in his escape, but by using them, he is able to leave. There are also the other requirements of a Final Girl that Chris fits: he is forced to give up his one vice (smoking) but otherwise is vice-less. He is able to keep his own against other characters, not by physical virility but rather by catching them off-guard (using deer antlers as a weapon, ironic against Dean who professes to hating the deer population and fighting Missy who wouldn't expect

him to rally against her because of her hypnotic control over him).

Additionally, Chris is virtuous in the same way as most other Final Girls because he's not shown to be especially sexually promiscuous. While he has a girlfriend, Chris is monogamous in that relationship, and the same moments of sexual voyeurism that occur in many other horror movies are absent in *Get Out*. This is especially interesting to note, considering the way in which white masculinity posits black masculinity as a threat frequently because of the alleged hyper-promiscuity of black people in general, but black men especially. In these terms, perhaps because Chris is not hyper-sexual, perhaps he is somewhat de-sexed by these latent biases against black masculinity—though he is placed on the same level as white female Final Girls in that removed access to (or interest in) sex.

It's not just that Chris survives despite being black that makes him the Final Girl. Though the Final Girl is somewhat de-gendered throughout her process of reclaiming the weapon (phallus) of the villain pursuing her, she still is a fundamentally feminine character—which is what allows audiences to sympathize more readily with her. Chris functions as a subversion of traditional black masculinity, in both terms of wider racial stereotypes of masculine blackness and black masculinity in the function of horror movies. There are specific character traits and habits that separate him from those stereotypes (even if they require an audience knowledge of stereotypes to work). He is shown to care more about intellectual and artistic pursuits

rather than physical—which is associated with blackness in media, when referring to Ross's description of blackness—from the start of the movie, which focuses a shot on his photography, and again when he makes the choice to take some photos during the gathering/pre-auction party. He has permission from the narrative to be emotional over the loss of his mother, and for that trauma to return at several points during the narrative.

Chris should be considered in the context of what horror movies and media in general expect of black men. He works both as the frightening black man: based on the microaggressions committed against him at the Armitages' body-auction by female bidders, it is made clear that he is physically fit, and he is successful enough to have a nice apartment in (presumably) the city, shown at the start of the film, and these traits place him as a threat to the white masculine framework against which he is unwillingly pitted. At the same time, he's a photographer: voyeur, maybe, but a witness to power at the same time he holds it. As much of a threat as he may pose to the white characters in *Get Out*, the relative gentleness in his character and his position as *Get Out's* Final Girl makes him an obvious sympathetic focus point. If Clover argues that the Final Girl's femininity, and therefore, her vulnerability is what makes her someone audiences want to see survive, Chris's vulnerability, too, in a sea of white violence against the body makes him someone audiences should be able to project themselves onto regardless of their own race. He is at once removed from the white liberalism that surrounds him, but at the same time, he is one of its many victims.

There are other ways in which *Get Out* criticizes white liberalism. It's not just about reestablishing what it means to be black, whether it's abiding by stereotypical blackness or not. It's about the way black bodies are literally being used by white characters.

Keeping in line with the parody of the Final Girl via subverting it with Chris, Peele targets another trope in horror cinema. In horror, there is a tradition of bodies being re-inhabited by new brains. Even if *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) was not the first instance of body repurposing, it has reoccurred often enough that it's become familiar: we see it in *Soylent Green*, and most recently in Stephenie Meyer's book *The Host*. The concept of body-snatching is familiar and always alarming; it makes us feel unsafe and uncomfortable where we should be comfortable. While Peele cites in various interviews *Stepford Wives* as one of the major influences on *Get Out*, the fear of assimilation goes back at least a little further in American culture. Patrick Gonder expresses this specific fear in "Like a Monstrous Jigsaw Puzzle". During the 1950's, westerners had finally discovered the DNA molecule, had realized what it was that made an individual different from everyone else in the world, but, at the same time, they were so afraid of their enemies that they were loath to see that difference come home into their own backyards. Horror provided—and still provides—the opportunity to address these cultural fears by turning them into monsters that can be physically fought, even if the protagonists are unable to conquer them. Frequently, the horror of the Cold War had to do with the Other invading domestic spaces and using that covert invasion to overtake and

become one with the host, as if the Other were a parasitic organism. Gonder uses the film *The Fly* (1958) to represent the horror at becoming one with the Other, but also goes into the wider ideas represented by the eugenics movements in post-World War II. According to Gonder, most of the undesirable genes uncovered became associated with people of color; he brings up Henrietta Lacks as an example of nonconsensual medicine practiced on and against black bodies, and discusses the problem of genetics and race. Blackness in the 1950s through '80s was (and, to some extent, still is) seen as deviation from the norm, with that norm being defined by upper-to-middle class suburban whiteness.

Gonder uses *The Fly*, which is a sci-fi horror film focusing on the transformation of a scientist into a fly-monster-man, as a way to talk about the relationship between white suburbanism and blackness, communist sympathies, and anything else that threatened the Cold War. We may need to adequately identify the fear of black people (and men specifically) that white America still has in order to dig deep at what Peele is addressing, which is only difficult because of post-racial America's adamant denial of its inherent racism. *Get Out* sees a desire to get away from the need to identify the problems within our culture: Rose makes mention of how her father would have voted for Obama for a third term, and Dean echoes the point while giving Chris the tour of the family property, and this is supposed to function as an excuse to Chris about the family's "employment" of black servants. Rose's brother, Jeremy, isn't physically assaulting Chris at the dinner table; he's practicing karate.

The problem is not with whiteness; it's with anyone who brings up a problem with whiteness. Rod stands as comic relief throughout most of *Get Out*, which is something necessary in a film dealing with content that has the capability of being overwhelmingly despairing. As much as he's the required tension breaker, allowing an audience the opportunity to laugh despite how much trouble Chris faces—particularly during his phone call with Rose, whose expressive voice contrasts with a face devoid of emotion—he's also a conspiracy theorist. The narrative of the film establishes Rod as a character capable of detective work, though he's also inherently suspicious. It's supposed to be funny that he frisks an old woman and notes that the next 9-11 is going to be a geriatric job, but, at the same time, that it sets Rod up to suspect the unexpected, it also poises him the position of, if not The TSA Agent Who Cried Wolf, but at least Chicken Little. Rod's credibility in his own world is questioned because he suspects people who the universe of the film suggests would not be suspected by others. This is first clear with his suspicion of old people, but made more obvious when he visits the police department with his well-founded worry about Rose's family. The audience, because of the dramatic irony employed during this scene against the police officers, knows that the Armitages are doing exactly what Rod accuses them. But he doesn't have the evidence and can only provide a hunch. He questions the white narrative, and even the black officer does not believe him. Perhaps if Rod was white, he would have provided a more credible narrative to other law enforcement officers despite being a TSA agent. His blackness does not help him.

The Armitages, however, use blackness, as do all of their friends. During their family/friendly get-together, where Chris is paraded around to showcase his body and attributes to the white visitors to Rose's family, he is subjected to microaggressions. He is compared to Tiger Woods (who now is notorious for cheating on his white wife under the diagnosis of sex addiction—which serves to reinforce Ross's black stereotypes); white characters ask about Chris's virility compared to white men; Chris is described as being more attractive physically than any white man. It's not immediately about blackness, but it comes down to black masculinity. White women, mostly, comment on his physicality. Paradoxically, black masculinity is seen as a threat to white masculinity, while, at the same time, it is made an objective to be obtained—which Peele hammers out in *Get Out*.

It goes beyond the physicality of blackness in *Get Out*, though. We should—and must—consider the implications of Dean Armitage, who “Would have voted for Obama for a third term” by both his and his daughter's admission, and what he does to black people. It goes somewhat beyond Gonder's merging of Other and White-Suburbia in movies like *The Fly* and *The Thing*. Dean literally scoops out the brains of black people except the most integral parts of their personalities: the parts of the personality which allow characters like Logan and Walter to act in Chris's better interests, the parts that allow Logan to tell Chris to “GET OUT” repeatedly while he can, the parts that allow Walter to shoot Rose and then himself with the hope of getting Chris out of the clutches of these white characters. He

scoops out the brains of black people to place the brains of white people in the bodies, effecting the parodied *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

And while many horror films are satirical in nature, the question becomes at which point the satire of horror is more salient than the “horror” aspects. The salience of that satire comes in the whiteness of the villain. Dean’s affection for black language versus Walter’s and Logan’s inability to follow the black vocabulary that their original brains would have been able to supply naturally shows an overpowering of blackness by whiteness. Dean’s willingness to appear savvy with his daughter’s black boyfriend compared to his wife’s immediate inclination to brainwash Chris of his desire to smoke cigarettes is an insidious attempt to get on Chris’s side. Dean is the perfect white villain because he is unassuming: he went to Bali. He travels. He’s intelligent, and unlike Jeremy or Missy, he almost pretends that he wants to fit in with Chris. He’s not like any of those conservatives who openly believe that the last time America was great was when there was chattel slavery. He criticizes his father, who was so bent out of shape over losing to a black man at the Olympics that he could never, ever get over it (to the extent, in fact, that he co-opted a black body when his own failed him). Dean represents post-racial America. He is the system that criticizes traditional racism and moves towards a progressivist future—one that still makes use of black bodies as objects, which uses them in conjunction with black minds because black bodies are worthless without good (white) minds to pilot them. The post-racial America uses black bodies the same way Dean does:

there is no point in discussing racism because we acknowledge that black bodies are better than white bodies, at the same time, white minds are better than black minds. The post-racial America is not racist, wants to bend to the culture of the people it uses, but still participates in microaggressions against black Americans. Rose is willing to defend Chris against a white police officer—but it should be noted that she does so to prevent leaving a paper trail. She does not defend him against the racial aggressions of her family—and in fact, like the biblical Salome, delivers him on a platter for the consumption of other white characters.

As tempting as it might be to dismiss the generic horror elements of *Get Out* as only being a vehicle for the satire, it is important to remember that in *Get Out* the satirical arguments Peele makes are unable to be made via comedic satire. The use of black bodies in service of white liberalism is a reality, unlike the imagined fear of communist covert invasion in movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. If *Get Out* is a comedy, it is only a comedy in that Chris survives. The horror of the content—coopting actual black bodies and leaving only the a small part of their original brains—cannot be divorced from the real-life target Peele attacks, and for that reason, *Get Out*’s satire relies on its genre specification as a horror movie. And because horror is just as guilty—if not guiltier—than other genres of perpetuating racism against black bodies, and the abuse of black bodies in service of elevating white ones, it must be made as much of a target of *Get Out*’s satire as white liberalism.

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