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Get out

Género: Drama, comedia

Dirección: Jordan Peele

Nacionalidad: Estados Unidos

Productora: Blumhouse Productions / QC Entertainment

Duración: 103 minutos

Año: 2017

CONTEXTUALIZING *GET OUT* AS DISABILITY NARRATIVE

Most analyses of Universal's award-winning satirical horror film *Get Out* directed by Jordan Peele center on race, but these analyses overlook the importance of disability to the film's themes. Many of these interpretations identify the persistence of racism covered over by the post-racial fantasy of the Obama era in the United States (Keegan, 2017; Staples, 2017). The film's focus on the Black protagonist Chris Washington visiting his white girlfriend Rose Armitages's family in upstate New York certainly centers race in the film's first act. Rose attempts to soothe his anxieties by proclaiming that her parents «would have voted for Obama a third time» to demonstrate their racial inclusivity (min. 8). But an uncomfortable garden party at the Armitages reveals the racism within America's white community, even if it's left-leaning and liberal. Not only do the white guests fetishize Chris's Blackness, but they actively seek to appropriate Blackness through Peele's sci-fi metaphorization of enslavement. The Armitages procure Black folks then attempt brain tissue transplants so their white friends can control Black bodies. The film is explicitly about race. But Peele explores how antebellum-era binaries of the white able-mind and the Black able-body persist in the postmodern era. This essay's distinction between the Black body versus the Black bodymind is not meant to essentialize able-mindedness as white but rather expose how Black bodyminds are reduced to solely the Black body (or *flesh*) due to the aftermath

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of American slavery (Spillers, 2003; Weheliye, 2014). It is imperative to explore the film using both critical race theory and crip theory. To do so, this essay identifies the roles of aesthetic nervousness, compulsory able-bodiedness, compulsory able-mindedness, and narrative prosthesis in *Get Out*.

AESTHETIC NERVOUSNESS AND POLICE BRUTALITY

Peele utilizes aesthetic nervousness to force the white audience members to confront pervasive racism in the United States. Quayson articulates «aesthetic nervousness» as an inevitable response to experiencing disability in narrative; this particular dimension of the concept occurs «between the reader and the text» (2007: 15). Aesthetic nervousness occurs during *Get Out* not only as audience recognition of their own discomfort in confronting disability but also systemic racism resulting in white privilege. Quayson's concept equates to a sort of «aesthetic disruption» which relies on a «short-circuiting» of expectation based on knowledge of narrative convention (ibid.: 19, 15). Peele invites aesthetic nervousness in his audience through three moments in the film in which Black characters are confronted by images of law enforcement. These interactions allow us to view *Get Out* through Quayson's theoretical framework as it relates to the «aesthetic disruption» of real life narratives of Black folks who experience police brutality.

First, in the film's opening scene, the character Andre walks alone on a suburban street at night (mins. 1-4). In a horror film, a character walking alone at night possesses certain signifiers: characters who walk alone are usually killed. Additionally, the narrative conventions of horror dictate that the Black man usually dies (Bruni, 2017). But the events leading up to Trayvon Martin's 2012 murder linger at the back of the mind of the American viewer: lone Black male, revealed to be unarmed, walks alone at night in a suburban American neighborhood typically coded as white¹. Although this scene lacks a police officer—as did Martin's murder—it still signals to the audience a reason to be concerned when it comes to interactions between figures signifying law and Black folks.

Second, early in the film, Rose accuses a white police officer of racial profiling when he requests to see Chris's driver's license (mins: 12-13). This act marks her as an ally to both Chris and the audience. However, the revelation that Rose is complicit in the abduction of Black bodies indicts the initial instinct to trust her: Chris's license would be included in the officer's accident report and thus create an official record of events leading up to Chris's disappearance. Where Andre calls to mind Trayvon Martin, Chris and Rose at the side of the road with a police officer gestures toward racial profiling and the case of Philando Castile². The audience knows to be nervous.

¹ Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old Black teenager who was shot and murdered by neighborhood watchman George Zimmermann, a white Hispanic man, on the night of February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida. His murder became a lightning rod for discussions about anti-Black racism in the United States and the acquittal of Zimmerman in 2013 prompted the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the U.S.

² Philando Castile was murdered by a cop during what has been argued was a «routine» traffic stop. He was shot in front of his partner and her daughter. His murder was captured by a camera in the police vehicle, which depicts Castile notifying the officer that he has a legally purchased gun, the officer's request to see the permit/license, and then the officer shooting Castile when he reached for the permit/license.

Third, following his bloody escape from the Armitages's hospital/basement, Chris attempts to strangle a mortally wounded Rose. Our anxieties rise when the flashing lights of a cop car reflect off of Chris's face, as Rose waves for help from an institution she knows will help her (min. 98). This is the moment in the film in which aesthetic nervousness is at its most latent. Peele acknowledges that his original ending for the film would have depicted Chris going to jail because «the legal system that values the rich white people... takes their side» (2017). His goal was for the audience to be faced with the reality of how Chris would realistically end up «because of how [the crime scene] looks» when those lights start flashing (ibid.). Peele's explicit goal is to prompt the audience to expect the worst when Chris faces a symbol of the legal system. He controls the audience's response by requiring them to confront the reality faced by those most likely to experience police brutality. The audience's feels aesthetic nervousness upon seeing those police lights. Despite a desire to see a progress narrative in American racial history, we cannot avoid the impact of the narratives surrounding others who have been murdered by police brutality.

THE BLACK ABLE-BODY AND THE WHITE ABLE-MIND

With both disability and race foregrounded in the film through aesthetic nervousness, the film introduces the binaries of Black able-bodiedness and white able-mindedness into its narrative. There are moments in the film when the white characters demonstrate a belief that Black folks are physically superior but white folks are intellectually superior. These moments include when Rose's brother Jeremy comments on Chris's «genetic makeup» predisposing him for excellence at certain sports (min. 24). At the film's climax, Rose's father Dean reveals his worldview when Chris is captured by the entire Armitage family; he states: «we are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons» (mins. 78-79). The Armitages believe in black skin and white minds creating a eugenic ideal. Chris views an old video recording of the grandfather and founder Roman Armitage that affirms this ideology: «You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you've enjoyed your entire lifetime. With *your* natural gifts and *our* determination we can both be part of something greater, something perfect» (min. 74; emphasis mine). The Armitages demonstrate their view that they are the intellectual elite and that they have not only the right but the duty to oversee the supposed well-being of Black bodies.

The characterization of Dean as a neurosurgeon and his wife Missy as a psychiatrist (son Jeremy is also studying medicine) establishes the Armitages as belonging to a profession with a challenging history with both disability and race. But their professional focus on the mind and the advanced degrees necessary for such professional status can be read as indicators of a belief in their superior intellectual ability. Peele reveals how both compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory able-mindedness serve as the bedrock of the idealized American citizen-subject.

McRuer argues that the aspiration to normalcy means «compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice» (2002: 90). Kafer (2013) adds able-mindedness to this formulation of compulsory ability, claiming that being able-minded—which can be read as the absence of mental illness, learning disability, and indecisiveness, among others—is also a facet of able-passing. *Get Out*

uses both able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as a way for the Armitages and their social circle to exert their cultural biopower over Black bodyminds.

Cultural biopower, inspired from Foucault's «biopower» (1976), is a technology of discipline that empowers white citizen-subjects through anti-Black racism; it validates whiteness and invalidates Black lives. This cultural biopower can result in significant, unchecked power over the lives, deaths, and bodies of Black folks, a notable example being George Zimmermann's murder of Trayvon Martin. The film portrays cultural biopower first when Rose appears to defend Chris from the cop who racially profiles him, in which she exerts the privileges of white femininity (mins. 12-13).

The white characters frequently fetishize Chris's Blackness. This fetishization takes the form of the majority white guests' —only one guest is a non-Black person of color— fawning over Chris's body. The party demonstrates to the audience the frequent microaggressions Chris faces as a Black man. One heterosexual couple he meets ask him about his golf skills and form, as the husband was once a professional golfer and presumably hopes to become one once again after he enslaves Chris's bodymind (mins. 42-43). Another heterosexual couple fetishize Chris in asking Rose about his physique and sexual prowess (mins. 43-44). Another pair of guests discuss how they view Blackness to be cool, claiming «Black is in fashion» (min. 44). These moments function not only to exemplify systemic violence within American racial and socio-economic cultural norms, but also as means of evaluating Chris as a product up for auction.

Upon Chris's initial meeting with Rose's father Dean, the audience learns of Dean's father's failure to make the US Olympic team for the 1936 Berlin games when he lost a qualifying heat to Jesse Owens. Dean makes a pointed statement about those games, famous for Owens's medal-earning performance and perceived challenge to the Nazi Party's ableist idealization of Aryan Nordicism (min. 17). This scene is not only an example of Peele inviting aesthetic nervousness through Dean's performance of white liberal open-mindedness but also functions as a foreshadowing of the Armitages's biopolitical business through reference to Nazi eugenic ideals. The film implies that Roman founded this business to transplant the brains of white people into Black bodies —thus reinforcing a white/able-minded and Black/able-bodied binary— precisely so he could live his dream of having a superior body, which he believed Owens possessed. «He almost got over it», Dean states quietly (min. 17) and later the Armitages' supposed groundskeeper Walter, who has been enslaved by Roman through the procedure, is seen sprinting around the property (min. 30), enjoying what he believes to be the physical ability of an appropriated and enslaved Black body.

The Armitages initially demonstrate concern for Chris when they reveal their dismay at his smoking habit. Throughout the first half of the film, the Armitages benevolently admonish Chris for smoking cigarettes, indicating a policing of both his body and his health. In other words, they enforce compulsory able-bodiedness. Dean condemns the behavior as a «nasty habit» and suggests that his wife Missy use hypnotherapy to help Chris quit (min. 20). The hypnosis scene begins when Missy calls out to Chris from her office, asking, «Do you realize how dangerous smoking is?» (min. 31). While Chris's smoking is a useful plot device to set-up a hypnotherapy session, which is the first phase of the Armitage's process of enslavement, it also doubles as paternalistic body policing. For the Armitages, able-bodiedness is a necessity for the Black individuals Rose procures in order to sell the best product.

The obsession with Chris's smoking habit clearly connects to Chris's marketability, as does their concern with not damaging him. The biopolitical and necropolitical dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade and its significance to transatlantic cultures and economies have already been discussed at length, both on its own and as it relates to *Get Out* (Gilroy, 1993; Mbembe, 2003; Nduaguba, 2017; Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 2003; Thrasher, 2017). Building off of these analyses, the white/able-minded and Black/able-bodied binaries evoke American history. In particular, the scene in which Dean auctions Chris (mins. 59-60); not only does this auction resemble a slave market, but many pop culture writers note the similarities to the drafting of Black male athletes into the various professional sports organizations in the United States (Staples, 2017; Thrasher, 2017; Witherow & Alston, 2017). The Armitages and their guests view Chris as a product to market, which is why his health and his able-bodiedness are policed.

NARRATIVE PROSTHESIS, COLORBLINDNESS, AND COMPLICITY

The winning bidder on Chris is the blind art dealer Jim, whose introduction marks the film's use of what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) term «narrative prosthesis». Described as the dependency of narrative on disability, «narrative prosthesis» is the means by which a story makes meaning through the deployment of disability as symbol, as character trait, and/or as plot point. Disability becomes a prosthesis to the narrative. As the only partygoer who does not overtly fetishize Chris, Jim is positioned as an ally to Chris. The presence of compulsory able-bodied Blackness permeates much of the interest in Chris, that is until Jim enters the narrative. Since, as Mitchell and Snyder (2000) note, disability saturates narrative as feature, metaphor, and social critique, Jim's character belies any notions from the white audience that there will be a white savior in the film.

When asked by Chris, «Why Black people?», after learning of Armitages's plans for him, Jim responds with «Who knows? Some people want a change. Some people wanna be stronger, faster, cooler. But please don't lump me in with that. I could give a shit what color you are» (min. 85). Jim is literally blind in the film but his self-professed colorblindness metaphorizes his embodied disability. He does not value Chris's Blackness the way the other guests do, and Jim's confession is intercut with flashbacks to the white guests' microaggressions, revealed to be appraisals of Chris as a product. But Jim nevertheless participates in enslaving Chris, therefore he is complicit in objectification.

Many articles on the film have also explored Jim's confessed colorblindness in relation to cultural appropriation (Abrams, 2017; Benjamin, 2017; Dickerson, 2017). More specifically, Jim's colorblindness accuses the white audience of complacency through Jim's complicity. Jim is initially portrayed as an ally who acknowledges Chris's artistic skill rather than fetishizing his body. This lulls the audience into a sense of safety: Peele initially positions Jim as an example of «good white people» (Sullivan, 2014). Jim acknowledges dimensions of Chris that other partygoers fail to recognize, and after Peele makes fetishization explicit to the viewer through aesthetic nervousness, the absence of fetishization in Chris's interaction with Jim makes him seem like a natural ally to Chris. The revelation of Jim as the highest bidder on Chris proves that none of the white characters can or will fulfill the trope of the white savior.

To return to Quayson, one of the dimensions of aesthetic nervousness can be a short-circuiting of audience expectation of how they believe narrative should go (2007: 15). The film subverts the trope of the white savior as it makes Chris the hero of his own story in a genre known for dispensing with Black male characters early and often (Bruni, 2017). Likewise, much of the pop cultural discussion of the film has centered on the film's subversion of the white savior trope as it pertains to Rose and her representation of white feminism (Bruni, 2017; McCarthy, 2017; Tensley, 2017; Ngangura, 2017). However, these analyses overlook that the two white characters with whom Chris seems to connect are Rose *and* Jim. Rose's white womanhood, as a body with an identity that is oppressed through misogyny and sexism but will never experience racism, soothes the white audience into trusting her. Similarly, Jim's disability marks yet another oppressed identity with whom Chris could find some common ground. However, *Get Out* makes clear that the shared precarity of belonging to *any* marginalized identity does not establish natural alliances, especially where whiteness is concerned. The audience must accept that the trope of the white savior has no place among an elite group of people who actively participate in the fetishization of Black bodies. Jim's colorblindness is not a virtue, and his complicity further develops the aesthetic nervousness which Peele nurtures from the film's opening scene.

CONCLUSION

Disability studies and crip theory are essential frameworks through which critical race analyses of *Get Out* can be enhanced. Through aesthetic nervousness, Peele trains the audience to feel anxiety at the policing and biopower exhibited over Black bodies to be compulsorily able. But it is this very training that manipulates the white audience into realizing that the privileges of whiteness also apply to white minorities. Furthermore, Peele trains the viewer to root for the survival of a Black male character in a horror film while cheering for the destruction of the normative white family whose thriving relies on the enslavement of Black bodyminds. Just as importantly, Peele manipulates the viewer into feeling disgust and horror at the eugenic ideology of the Armitages. Through disability and race, the film is revealed to not only be a subversion of the fantasy of a post-racial United States but to also be a disability narrative in its critique of white eugenic values.

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