JORDAN PEELE’S BLACK HORROR, RESISTANCE, AND SPECTATORSHIP

RESEARCH

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From Dracula and Dr. Frankenstein to serial killers and demonic poltergeists, frightening figures have been established as staples of the horror genre. Some of the first audio and visual productions of horror originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were based on tales of “the bizarre and curious,” of monsters and shapeshifters, with origins in classic folk stories and classic pieces of literature (Dixon 5). Over the years, the horror genre has moved away from the tropes of curious creatures and has expanded to almost anything conceivable to the depths of the human imagination. By the 1950s to 70s, monstrous creatures evolved into monstrous people, showing “that the real horror of life is everywhere” (Dixon 121-122). In the late twentieth century, the graphic nature of the horror genre escalated, and scenes of torture and bodily mutilation became normalized in film (Dixon 169-171). Yet, as these evolutions were happening in the film industry, there is no denying that what has been defined as horror and what is normally popularized in film has been dominated by White directors and storytellers.

In 2018, Jordan Peele made history when he became the first Black director to win an Oscar for an original screenplay with Get Out. Jordan Peele is also the only Black director to have been awarded an Oscar for a horror film, a genre that rarely receives nominations from the Academy (Agarwal; Desta). Over the last 5 years, there has been a wave of blockbuster horror films created by Black writers, produced by Black directors, and enacted by Black actors. These films often earn critical acclaim and achievement in artistic spaces. They cover topics ranging from racism experienced in elite institutions to neo-western alien takeover, and even an additional
instalment of the popular Purge franchise (*Master, Nope, The First Purge*). The films of Jordan Peele, such as *Get Out* and *Us*, subvert the naturalized conventions of horror films but also create new ways of storytelling through new spectatorship and new narratives that subvert the naturalized conventions governing horror films. This essay will explore the common tropes of non-Black horror films and the ways in which Jordan Peele’s films highlight the trauma of the Black community, rewriting the expectations of horror and centering the White gaze. Peele additionally normalizes a new kind of Black spectatorship and gaze in his films that in ways may seem completely alien to a larger, White audience.

Over the years, the horror film genre has curated harmful representations of Black people and naturalized structures of White supremacy and hegemony. Blaxploitation Horror refers to a genre that originated in the 70s intended to attract “Black audiences by exploiting their fantasies of resistance against systems of White dominance” (Wester 32). Black figures are embodied as monsters, such as the villain in *Blacula*, that fight oppressive systems or take revenge on racists (Wester 32). While this may seem like a positive narrative to screen, the intention of these films was merely for the capitalist exploitation of Black audiences at the time. Additionally, Maisha Wester notes that:

The problem with such films was that they were ‘Horror’ films, and therefore unambiguous in their moral articulations. Their horror assumed physical terms, leaving explorations of psychological torment and oppression under-explored. Though the monsters were sympathetic, there was no question about their monstrosity; the brutality and extensiveness of their violence only reinforced their coding as destructive, aberrant force, even if they were the creation of a heinous social system. (Wester 33)

Though the protagonists may elicit feelings of sympathy, in the end, they still reproduce negative stereotypes about Black individuals. In Blaxploitation films, Black women are presented as overtly sexual and, at times, hypermasculine. The Black monsters, such as *Blacula*, become even more distorted and monstrous simply because they are Black. The conflicts in the films were not even particularly empowering, as the protagonists fought oppressive and racist *individuals* as opposed to racist and oppressive *systems* (Wester 33). This history of Black representation in Blaxploitation horror films is just one of the ways that Whiteness and White supremacy have become naturalized in the film industry. Black creators and actors are often unable to get roles in films, and when they do get roles, it is for the purpose of creating harmful and negative portrayals of their own people.
Even infrequent moviegoers are usually aware of the trope of the Black character being killed off in the horror film. In the classic horror film, *The Shining*, for example, Dick (Scatman Crothers) is killed by Jack (Jack Nicholson) with an ax. His death, the only death in the film, serves as a narrative twist where the audience perhaps expects to see Dick triumph as a protagonist but ultimately has to watch him die instead (*The Shining*). His death, like the death of many Black characters in horror films, serves simply as a plot point to drive the story forward. Crothers, like many other Black actors, serves as a supporting character to drive forward the plot of the film but does not experience any substantial character development of his own. The Black body is not only disposable to the killer but also disposable to the narrative of the story and, in turn, the audience present. The Black body in classic horror films is simply that, a body, lacking the humanity awarded to non-Black characters. It is a tool. It is monstrous. It is an object to be used.

Dick Hebdige describes how particular ideologies become dominant in a way that appears “natural” and unconscious (Hebdige 366). Hegemony can be maintained because those in power can control both the material and mental means of production, subjecting those not in power to their ideologies. In other words, they have the means of “defining, ordering, and classifying out the social world” (Hebdige 365). Hebdige also calls attention to the ways that signs and signifiers have the power to naturalize systems of oppression as if they are what comes naturally and are accepted for what is the natural order of things. Taking Roland Barthes’s famous example of the *Paris Match* image of a West African child saluting the French flag, there is the connotation that suggests France is a benevolent empire that has produced an obeisance to the French imperial flag even from the most oppressed in the colonial system (Hebdige 361). Hegemony has the power to run draconian systems of violence and oppression as what seems to be the prescribed normative order of things. The *Paris Match* photo demonstrates the influence those in power have in maintaining hegemonic narratives.

The portrayal of Blackness as monstrous and the killing of Black characters to advance the plot are additional examples of hegemonic anti-Blackness getting normalized through the horror film industry. Because the White elite are those in power in these industries, they have the sole capacity to produce meanings and ideologies that benefit their statuses. It is always the White characters that prevail in the end and it is always the White woman who gets to be the ‘final girl.’ Classic horror films are just another tool for White hegemony. Cinema can be a dreamlike space for White audiences, where they can explore fantastical realities and untapped imaginations of romance or action. Yet, for Black audiences, it is “a form of racial
entalpment, a lure by which blackness is conjured up as a negative or void” (Marriott 186). Those same dreamlike spaces and fantasies are unattainable to the Black viewer who may never see themselves on the big screen, or at the least, a version of themselves that is not degrading.

Modern Black horror films, in turn, provide a subculture that subverts the hegemony of films that came before it. Hebdige notes that in order for subcultures to oppose hegemony, they must dislodge the ‘signs’ of hegemony—by which Hebdige means those aesthetics that hold a certain value in society—creating an unnatural break in the natural order. The naturalized ideology is opposed by the subcultures that exist to denaturalize it and no longer reproduce its norms. The power of a subculture comes with the refusal with terms of inclusion to instead produce trouble for the dominance and dominant culture. Such, that the very methods used by the dominant culture feel unrecognizable to itself (Hebdige 367). Black horror takes the naturalized expectations of the horror genre and makes a complete reversal. The genre not only subverts the naturalized symbols (Black as monstrous, Black as disposable, Black as nonexistent) but also creates new narratives and new ways of storytelling that do not adhere to the structures of White supremacy before it.

The popular films of Jordan Peele warrant, perhaps the most interest or exploration simply because they are so popular. Countless other Black horror films have been produced over the last few decades, but not nearly as culturally pervasive as a Jordan Peele original blockbuster. Mass media, or the film and television programming that is reached to a large audience, despite its reputation as being only a tool for profit and capitalism, can also be a means to empower the lives of everyday people (Inglis 56, 59). Mass media can allow for “an expansion of people’s horizons, opening up to a large number of people to ideas and things they had never had exposure to before” (Inglis 59). The fact that Peele’s works have become popular staples of film only reveals the ways his own films have empowered and enriched the lives of not only Black public but also the non-Black public that consumes and enjoys them. The popularity of Peele’s films represents the way that the exploration and celebration of Black people’s stories have been opened up to the masses. As such, I will discuss two popular films directed by Jordan Peele, Get Out and Us. They subvert the naturalized canons of horror films by creating new narratives and new ways of storytelling that do not adhere to the structures of White supremacy before them.

Get Out follows the story of Chris as he visits his White girlfriend Rose’s family, and their house, for the first time for a weekend holiday. While there, Chris observes that the only other Black folk he has met at the estate—
the housekeeper Georgina and the groundskeeper Walter—act just a little bit odd. Chris calls his friend to describe his encounters, and, throughout the movie, his friend urges Chris to “get out” of the house. The family hosts a get-together, where wealthy White guests of Rose’s parents gather for what seems to be a typical soiree. Chris notices that the single Black guest, Logan, is accompanied by a much older White woman, and Logan too behaves strangely. When Chris attempts to take a picture of him, Logan acts erratically, screaming, “get out!” Chris eventually finds out that the family uses Rose to lure Black men and women onto the property to be auctioned and sold to guests of their party. They then transport the consciousness of the wealthy White community members into the bodies of the Black men and women. Georgina and Walter were victims of the family and their bodies now possess the consciousnesses of Rose’s grandparents. Chris manages to kill the family members, free Walter’s mind with the same camera flash used on Logan, and escape. At the end, what we first believe to be police lights are the lights of Chris’ friend coming to rescue him.

The overall narrative of Get Out is important because it does not follow the typical story of a horror film. As discussed, the earlier renditions of horror films, and even the classics, usually cover topics and antagonists relating to monsters, shapeshifters, serial killers, and hauntings (Dixon). Get Out does follow a narrative about a haunted house but the horror and haunting come from real-world issues and characters, as opposed to fantastical demons or ghosts. Black horror, as seen in Get Out, “centers Black American lives and, by doing so, horror inescapably—unavoidably—slips in because that is the inevitable fate of life in a racist world. Black horror, therefore, seeks to capture the all-too-real fear of walking through America in a Black body” (Bellot). Get Out features fears and experiences present in the Black psyche, as well as collective history and memory relating to racism.

Even beginning with the terrifying opening scene, we are presented with real-life Black horror. Logan King, that same man who acted strangely at the soiree, is seen walking lost in the suburbs, feeling like a “sore thumb out here.” A white car drives by to follow him, loudly playing “Run Rabbit Run.” Logan, noticing the vehicle, responds out loud to himself, “Not today, not me. You know how they like to do motherfuckers out here, man.” When Logan notices that the car door is open, a masked man subdues him and drags him towards the trunk of the car. This opening scene evokes just one of the everyday horrors that Black people might face. Just walking down the street can be a dangerous activity, and one cannot help but think of murders like that of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown and other Black men simply walking, existing, and being profiled for their race. It also evokes the same
examples of Black men and women lynched for being in White suburbs or present in sundown towns. Logan’s line in the film also draws attention to this phenomenon—both he and the Black audience are painfully aware of how White people and White neighborhoods continuously enact violence onto Black bodies.

The opening scene is not the only example of the horror of racist experiences in *Get Out*; various other scenes and visuals represent similar types of horror. At the plot twist of the film, the auction scene is most striking. A large portrait of Chris is seen on the gazebo; the White guests silently put up bingo cards, acting as bet paddles, to bid different amounts on Chris as Rose’s father negotiates the bids. While their voices are muted, an eerie symphonic piece plays. This, of course, is reminiscent of slave auctions held during colonial America. During the party, many of the family’s guests come up to Chris to speak to him, but only about his body and the physical stereotypes of Black people, while Chris forcibly and uncomfortably smiles or chuckles at the inappropriate guests. “Being Black is in fashion” or “Black people are more athletic” are only some of the common racist microaggressions heard daily by Black men and women and repeated by these characters in the film.

Chris is held captive by Rose’s family to be dissected and used for his body as another’s consciousness is placed within him. This violence and disposability of Chris relates to Afropessimism as described by Calvin Warren. In Afropessimism, Blackness is viewed as outside the human ontological scale; “the human capacities of individuality, uniqueness, self-reflection, and self-possession are denied to black being, such that black being is rendered an object” (Warren 397). The Black body, as demonstrated by Chris’ body, is useful only as an object for the manipulation of White people, and he is not allowed to be human, the same way that White slave owners only valued the bodies of those slaves as a means of production, a commodity to be sold, bought, and reproduced for profit. This denial of humanity in seeing Blackness as an exchangeable good is something which we see time and time again with slavery, with the school-to-prison pipeline, with sexual objectification of Black bodies, with Blackfishing, with tokenism, etc. The microaggressions said to Chris in the film also reflect the way non-Black folk perceive Black people only for their physical and athletic usefulness, as opposed to their intellect, emotion, or intrinsic humanness because they cannot perceive them as human on the same ontological level. As such, Allison’s family only uses black bodies, since they are not even worthy enough to be considered human, instead only tools for White individuals, in this case, for the preservation of White people’s
consciousness. It is, therefore, Black bodies exclusively, that are useful to the White characters for the life elongation project in *Get Out*. By speaking of the traumas and experiences that exist for Black people, *Get Out* denaturalizes the way Black death and Black suffering naturally exist in other horror films and in the psyche of White, middle-class America. Directly addressing the fungibility of Black bodies and the symbolic violence inflicted upon them breaks away at the “natural order” of Blackness in classic horror films. *Get Out* and Peele refuse to adhere to the same ideologies of violence of its predecessors.

The notion of the White gaze and the power of looking is vital to understanding Chris’ notion of Blackness. There are many scenes of ‘looking’ in the film, where Chris is being observed by others, being visually dissected for his value. The guests are constantly looking at Chris and attempting to see how much he is physically worth if they were to ‘win him’ in the auction. As Chris walks up the stairs, the guests become eerily silent and stare at where Chris moves on the second floor. After the auction for his body, there is a prolonged scene where Rose’s parents, Georgina, and Walter, all stare at Chris as he walks by. Chris is constantly regarded by the gaze of White people, with Georgina and Walter being White people in Black bodies. The White gaze has a privileged position of spectatorship; it is always “the Black body [that] is looked at. The Black body does not return the gaze. The white body is the looker” (Yancy 228). The White gaze imposes its own meaning and distortions of Blackness, also becoming internalized by Black men (Yancy 217).

This idea is important to Peele’s reversal of the conventions and ideologies of classic horror films. Both previous and current horror films are curated through the lens of the White gaze, created by White people for White people, reproducing meanings and ideologies to create their own world order and, in turn, negate the experiences and gazes of Black folk. Peele reverses the naturalization and power of White spectatorship by directly addressing and referencing it. The flash of Chris’ camera is able to snap Logan and Walter back to their previous selves and literally frees them – a representation of the power and reciprocity of the Black gaze. While the White gaze is pervasive in the film, Chris’s camera is a means to break that White gaze and the White consciousness from the Black body.

*Get Out* subverts the naturalized semiotics and ideologies of previous horror films and repurposes them. It is not the story of the White protagonist with his fungible, disposable Black side characters, but the triumph of the Black hero. It is not ghosts or imaginary serial killers that produce violence, but physical and symbolic manifestations of racism. It is not the Black man
or woman who becomes distorted and monstrous; monsters are present in our everyday lives, and look like typical, ordinary White folk. The White gaze from the audience and the White characters is not unconsciously penetrating the Black body but instead recognized for its fetishizing nature and, in turn, disrupted by the Black protagonist.

While most Black horror films emphasize the everyday horror of racism, *Us* by Jordan Peele is unique in the genre of Black horror because it does not address Black trauma or racist experiences. But, it still opposes the hegemony of previous horror films with its intrinsic values of Blackness, creating new stories and new ways of meaning. *Us* follows the story of Adelaide Wilson as she returns to Santa Cruz for a family summer vacation. This is the first time she has visited the area since a traumatic experience that happened to her as a child in the 80s, where she met her own doppelganger. As the present-day Wilson family is settled in their beach house, a family of doppelgangers parallel to Adelaide’s own family comes to their beach house and attacks them, though their goal is not clear. Though the family resembles the Wilson family, they behave in ways that seem odd and uncanny. We find out that there are doppelgangers of nearly everyone who exists in the town as well as across the nation. Another family the Wilsons know, who are staying in Santa Cruz for vacation, are killed by their doppelgangers. The doppelgangers, who live deep under the cities, are called the “tethered” and were created as a government experiment to control people on the surface. The Wilson family doppelgangers are killed off one-by-one until Adelaide fights her own double. Adelaide eventually kills her “tethered” while underground and returns to her family on the surface. As a final twist in the story, it is revealed that when Adelaide had her traumatic childhood experience at the Santa Cruz boardwalk, it was actually the doppelganger who subdued Adelaide, trapped her below, and lived out the rest of her life being Adelaide. The doppelganger we see throughout the film is actually the original Adelaide, perhaps seeking out revenge on her original “tethered.”

One way that *Us* creates new meanings and storylines that resist the natural hegemony of White horror is with the way it weaves in elements of Black culture while also challenging notions of stereotypical Black culture. Throughout the film, there are references to Black cultural moments and figures. At the boardwalk carnival, young Adelaide’s father wins a Michael Jackson thriller shirt that Adelaide sports for the majority of the scenes taking place on the beach. The classic hip hop song “I got 5 on it” becomes an important motif for the film as well as part of a scene where the Wilson family bonds together in the car by humming along. In a moment of humor, instead of the Alexa-like robot calling the police to assist the White friends of the
Wilson, she plays “Fuck the Police” by NWA. Yet, the Wilson family also participates in activities that do not subscribe to stereotypical notions of Black culture. They are obviously a wealthier family, having the funds to vacation at a beach house in Santa Cruz, and owning their own boat. Young Adelaide was able to take up ballet which is a detail that de/reconnects her to her tethered, but again not something ‘typical’ of Black American life. These visuals of ballet and a vacation home also challenge stereotypes of Black culture and communities. In a visually striking scene, Adelaide and her tethered face off with montage shots of them in solo ballet performances, set to an instrumental rendition of “I got 5 on it.” This classic hip hop reference happens synchronously with the non-traditional notion of Black culture – western ballet. Peele both represents what is to be expected of Black culture, but also subverts and challenges those notions, creating unique visuals and a unique soundscape. Previous horror films only contained misrepresentations of Black individuals, filled with stereotypes. Us contains genuine portions of Black culture while also subverting the stereotypes that do exist.

What makes Black horror so valuable to the lives of Black folk is its ability to center the real-life horror of oppression that Black people experience in their day-to-day lives (Bellot). Us is an example of Black horror, but it does not touch upon the oppressive elements of Black life. Yet, it still represents a sort of new resistance to hegemonic ideologies and White supremacy. It maintains traditional conventions and narratives of horror; perhaps at its core, it is a serial killer, psychological thriller, but with doppelgangers. But, it evokes powerful images of a Black family surviving together. Because it centers Black actors, we are led with the expectation that it might touch on elements of oppression or racism, and perhaps we squint and wait throughout the entirety of the film, waiting for this storyline. Peele changes our expectations of what a Black horror film might look like even further; those same conventions he uses with other Black horror films are no longer present. Black actors, a Black family, and a Black female protagonist are seen at the center of a blockbuster film. It is a film not about slavery or racism or oppression. Us defies the ontological death or erasure proposed by Calvin Warren. These Black characters are appreciated for the humanity they bring to the film. It is a Black horror film, simply for the intrinsic value that Black characters can bring to their own stories, and that also means having the powerful image of a young Black girl dance ballet as instrumental hip-hop plays in the background.

The gaze of the Black female lead also creates meanings outside of the White hegemony. The film centers the Wilson family, but more
specifically, Adelaide Wilson herself. Her past memories and present conflicts are the main plot points for the narrative of the film. Conversely, the White characters, and their deaths, are tools to move the plot forward and create character development for Adelaide and the Wilson family. Horror’s filmic conventions have been quite literally reversed. It is not the Black body that is disposable and fungible to the narrative of the story, but the White body instead. The White hero does not prevail in the end, but the presence of an entire Black family is the resonating last image, with Adelaide being the ‘final girl’ of the film.

Adelaide also opposes what bell hooks calls the “white phallocentric gaze.” According to hooks, White films and the White phallocentric gaze deny Black women the ability to create their own narratives, either curating harmful representations of Black women, representing them only to highlight female Whiteness, or erasing them completely from the narrative (hooks 210-217). But, there is power in the “oppositional gaze” of the Black woman where Black female protagonists are “inverting the ‘real-life’ power structure...to undermine those cinematic practices that deny black women a place in this structure” and to “resist dominant ways of knowing and looking” (hooks 218). hooks describes films with Black women who look upon each other in ways that allow other Black women to “define their own reality, apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination” (hooks 219). In Us, multiple visuals and symbolism of doubling occur throughout the film, especially with the reflecting and refracting that occur in the Santa Cruz funhouse where Adelaide and her tethered meet; a constant stream of doubling and reciprocation of looking. When Adelaide and the tethered (or assumed fake Adelaide and fake tethered) face off at the climax of the film, the doppelganger starts off with her back to Adelaide, but then they continue to gaze at each other for the duration of the fight in close hand-to-hand combat. Their spectatorship frames ways of looking that create their own stories, the story of one/two Black woman/women. The narrative embodies the subjectivity of Black women and Black looking that do not attempt to subscribe to White ways of looking. The only White spectatorship that happens is brief with the interactions between the Wilson family and their acquaintances in Santa Cruz. Most of the internal spectatorship happens among the Wilson family or between the Wilson family and their tethered. Peele does not perpetuate White supremacy; he, as hooks advocates, creates new ways of looking to curate agency for the Black woman (218, 220). In a way, the film as a whole, may be completely unnatural to the White spectator. They might question why Adelaide is dancing ballet to hip hop, why the White family has to die so gruesomely in the film, and why the Black women are constantly interacting and looking at
each other. But the de/un-naturalization is part of the beauty as new Black narratives become (re)naturalized.

Jordan Peele’s horror as a whole represents a microcosm of the Black experience. The horrors he curates are prevalent in our own lives, and the imaginative narratives further curate subjective chronicles for Black folk, separate from that of White supremacy and hegemony. So, what is the future of Black horror and Jordan Peele’s films? His first major motion picture, *Get Out*, features the story and many stories of Black oppression and racism. But from *Us* to *Nope*, Peele moves away from narratives that exclusively explore this oppression, making a statement that our stories do not always have to touch on these dark periods of American life and history. *Nope*, which came out in the summer of 2022, continues to bend and warp the conventions and narratives of horror as a Sci-fi western film about aliens and horses. Jordan Peele, unafraid to push the boundaries of “Black film” and “Horror,” embodies the Black imagination and creativity in the works, making new stories by us, for us, and about “us.”
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