

Hillary Hunt

Get Out: Portraying the Horror of the White Gaze

The horror film *Get Out* achieved popular and critical success after its release because it upended a less-than-conscious expectation of the audience—namely, that the screen historically will serve the white gaze. Writer and director of the movie, Jordan Peele, aptly delivers his social commentary on race in America within the horror genre. His movie made more visible to me as a white woman what is not always readily perceived in *or* outside of a theater: the existence of a white gaze that objectifies and commodifies black people according to white standards, desires, values, and aesthetics. Notable African American scholars such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, George Yancey, and Ta-Nehisi Coates have significantly expanded the conversation regarding the felt presence of a white gaze among African Americans that leads to mitigated voices and the sensation of disembodiment. *Get Out* builds from this conversation, disseminating critical race theory into a visual, popular medium accessible to a broader audience who may not otherwise come to understand these concepts. For the purposes of this essay, I focus on three critical theorists to underscore the nature of the white gaze and its consequences as portrayed in *Get Out*. First, Laura Mulvey speaks to how pleasurable viewing within film is based on traditional and often oppressive structures of power, and how alternative cinema—like *Get Out*—can subvert that oppressive power by altering what we expect to see on screen. The importance of varied perspective is then further underscored by the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, who details the revealing viewpoint of the African American’s position in white society. Finally, Henry Louis Gates Jr. illuminates how the oppressive power structure of race came to exist, and how that moment of inception set a precedent by which black people have had to prove their

humanity according to white standards, perpetually forcing white consciousness onto black bodies—much like what occurs in *Get Out*. These theories work to delineate how *Get Out* provides viewers a heuristic tool, or in other words, a metaphor that generates new ways of seeing. With this new visual metaphor, audiences are enabled to better apprehend the insidious nature of the white gaze and the horror it inflicts. In short, the film gives to the unconscious oppressor the heuristic tool to recognize their own complicity in racism, and thus works to unseat a harmful ideology from the way we see.

The main character in *Get Out* is Chris, a young and successful African American photographer with a white girlfriend named Rose Armitage, whose family he plans on meeting for the first time during a visit to their country home. Though Chris worries that his race might be an issue for Rose’s parents, she assures him that she would not bring him home if her family were racist. However, after arriving at the Armitage home, it doesn’t take long before the awkward, racially-tinged comments wash over Chris. He grins and bears it, saying later to his chagrined girlfriend, “I told you so” (Peele 00:26:56). Over the course of the movie, his sense that something is off about the people he is meeting only grows until he finally learns their diabolical secret: The Armitages operate a white supremacist organization in which they abduct black people in order to sell their bodies as hosts for ailing white customers who want stronger, faster, healthier bodies based on their belief that black people have physical advantages over whites. Wealthy white people bid for black bodies that were abducted by the Armitage children; Rose lures and romances her victims home, while Jeremy, Rose’s brother, violently captures his victims. Rose’s mother is a psychiatrist who then uses hypnosis to guide the victims to “a state of heightened suggestibility” (Peele 00:32:03) so they will be under her control until a buyer is found. Dean Armitage—Rose’s father—developed a neurosurgery called Coagula in which the

white purchaser's consciousness is implanted within the black mind, taking over motor functions of the body while the black person is reduced to a mute passenger. The horror of the movie is the slowly unfolding wrongness Chris perceives in the Armitages, their white, wealthy friends, their paid staff, and eventually in his girlfriend Rose. It is the horror of recognizing that he is only ever his skin color to them before he is human, and thus his body is rendered commodifiable and expendable.

Though based on gender difference, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze serves as a framework whereby we can also understand a white gaze based on racial difference. Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to explain that when it comes to cinema, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (1448). Put another way, the male gaze in cinema positions women in such a way as to give meaning to male identity; they are portrayed as strong heroes who progress the narrative through their actions, motivated by the beauty, purity, vulnerability, and *passivity* of women. The active/male constructing his identity by projecting his fantasies onto women is similar to what happens with racial differences. It should be noted that Mulvey's use of gender is a metaphor for the structure of power between the haves and have-nots; gender is the descriptor she uses, but not the structure itself. Like the male gaze, the white gaze occupies the role of active/male due to the historical, systemic, and institutional power wrapped up in whiteness. From that position of power, white interests determine how the black characters as portrayed on screen are represented or understood, putting them in the position of passive/female. In a manner similar to how the male gaze objectifies the female in order to shore up his own sense of self and satisfy his own desires, the white gaze objectifies black people as commodities within white imagination. Mulvey reminds us that, "Ultimately, the meaning of

woman is sexual difference . . .” (1450), meaning men’s identities and sense of power are based on the negative positioning of women in relation to men. Similarly, the white gaze fulfills its desires for power and mastery by defining itself against a different race that is imagined as inferior in order to stabilize white identity as superior.

Get Out is significant because of how it disrupts traditional practices in cinema that reify and obscure the oppressive power structure enacted by the white gaze. As an ideology, the white gaze is a dominant cultural force existing within cinema, as even a brief survey of American film history will attest. However, Mulvey contends that a dominant ideology can be subverted by an “alternative cinema” that “exist[s] as a counterpoint” (1446). Mulvey describes alternative cinema as being,

radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film. This is not to reject the latter moralistically, but to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it . . . (1446).

Get Out meets Mulvey’s criteria of an alternative cinema because of its portrayal of white supremacy that hides behind the smile of a progressive white family and their seemingly kind, if bumbling, white friends. What Chris took as love and kindness, despite the occasional awkward comments regarding his race, was in fact a performance enacted to lure him into compliance with their deep-seated white supremacy—this is what makes the horror of the movie so keen. The film’s political power was foreseen by the film’s writer and director, Jordan Peele, who worried the racially provocative premise might alienate white *and* black audiences alike, in so far as it portrayed black people as victims and white people as villains (Hollywood Reporter). In anticipating these reactions, Peele seems aware of what Mulvey terms “the psychical obsessions”

of society. In disrupting what the audience has come to expect from its movie-going experience, *Get Out* is “transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations . . .” (Mulvey 1446). As a result, audiences are propelled into alternative ways of seeing by the racial commentary within *Get Out* that subverts traditional cinematic expectations.

Get Out disrupts the white gaze by turning it back on itself, compelling white viewers to see their likeness in the characters on screen who treat Chris as being primarily defined by his skin color. A cinematic device described by Mulvey as “shifting the emphasis of the look” (1452), the audience is placed behind the eyes of a black protagonist so they are compelled to identify with his perspective, and specifically for white audiences, to see themselves through his eyes. Not long after arriving at his girlfriend’s family home, Chris attends the Armitage’s annual party they host for their wealthy friends. The white guests are openly sizing him up as a specimen to be used in their pursuit of further life and fulfillment of desire, though this is not immediately obvious to Chris or the audience who is seeing events through his perspective. He mistakes their interest as the mere awkward maneuverings of people who have rarely interacted with a person of color. One guest casually observes, “Fairer skin has been in favor for the past, what, couple hundreds of years? But now the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion” (Peele 00:43:40). In each of these interactions the white gaze is turned upon Chris, objectifying him as a passive prize—or the latest fashion—to be acquired for their own fulfillment.

The power structure between active and passive as described by Mulvey is most pointedly portrayed in the Coagula procedure the Armitage’s inflict upon captured black people. Once Chris realizes the horrific situation he’s unwittingly stumbled into, the Armitage’s physically constrain him in their basement where he is forced to watch a video designed to

explain what is happening to him. The video is narrated by the Armitage's patriarch, Roman, who since making the recording has taken on the body of a black person. Roman explains to whoever the black viewing victim might be,

You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you've enjoyed your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination, we could both be part of something greater. Something perfect. (Peele 01:14:04)

Notice that “determination” is essentialized to white people in this paradigm, or in other words, assumed to be a trait inherent to the caucasian race. Furthermore, the use of passive voice obscures the agent of action in this scenario while rendering the black viewer a passive participant who does not choose, but rather is chosen. Using Mulvey's framework, to be the determining race and to speak in an assuming passive voice is to occupy the position of the active male who sets the terms and establishes meaning. Similarly, the Coagula procedure hands over all motor function to white consciousness while black consciousness is made passive and denied agency. The Armitage's justify this action by believing that they have created something perfect—fusing two into one complete union. Of course, the psychoanalysis undergirding Mulvey's theory holds that such a union of identities is always impossible. What happens instead, and what happens in *Get Out*, is that black people are made to occupy a silent, subordinate place referred to in the movie as “the sunken place” (Peele). It is not a union that is created in the Coagula procedure, but rather a hierarchy, with the sunken place representing the subordination of black identity and humanity according to white “determination.” The determining scope of the white gaze allows the white viewer to “live out his fantasies . . . by imposing them on the silent image of woman [black people] still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey 1445). In other words, the white gaze can be understood as

determining meaning to the benefit of whiteness at the cost of rendering mute and passive the expression and self-determination of black people. Much like a nightmare in which you cannot move when you most need to escape danger, *Get Out* conveys the terrifying helplessness experienced by those subjected to the white gaze.

W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness in African Americans helps to elucidate how the white gaze silences and objectifies black people as portrayed in *Get Out*. Written in 1903, Du Bois begins in *The Souls of Black Folk* by describing the sensation of being viewed as a problem by "the other world" (4) who he states "eye me curiously or compassionately . . ." (4). Either way he is viewed, he is a question, a problem to be solved under the white gaze of that other world. In response to this question Du Bois writes, "I answer seldom a word" (4). He contends that this reticence to answer, or to take action, may be mistaken for weakness, but it is more accurately attributed to "the contradiction of double aims" or what he also terms "double-consciousness" (5). As an example, he speaks of the "black artisan" who is pulled between two goals: the desire to "escape white contempt" (5) and the need to take care of his own in the only manner available to him, which may also elicit white contempt. The result of this pull is that black voices struggle to express themselves without fear of judgment from a white point of view, and in this fear, their voices are mitigated—compelled to respond to white standards and white desires. An awareness of that "other world" of whiteness is observable in Chris, when at the beginning of the movie he is worried that Rose's parents may not react well to him being a black man—he's conscious of the white gaze. Later, when Jeremy Armitage challenges his fighting abilities over dinner, Chris responds with measured and wary patience because he is at that point trying to impress his girlfriend's family and evade the racial assumptions underlying Jeremy's provocations. Chris's consciousness of the white gaze is most

strikingly evidenced in his final confrontation with Rose. After she and her family have tried to steal Chris's body and murder him, and after he realizes that he is but one of many of Rose's victims, he stares into her eyes while choking her. Rose's expression turns from frightened to almost gleefully vindicated as his actions confirm what her white gaze believes of him: that he is a brutish and violent black man, only good for his physical strength. Recognizing the shift in her gaze, he releases her, unwilling to satisfy her racist ideas. Throughout the film the consciousness of a white gaze causes him to be guarded, careful, and patient even when he may not want to be, and even when his discretion is not deserved. Chris is, as Du Bois describes, attempting to "escape white contempt" (5). The white contempt Du Bois speaks of is a product of the white gaze under which black people are made to feel that they can't be fully complex human beings with flaws of their own lest they confirm a racist ideology that positions them as a problem.

However, it is from the position of "double-consciousness" as described by Du Bois that African Americans come to have "second-sight in this American world . . ." (5). The second sight comes, according to Du Bois, from the African Americans' realization that they are viewed as different and so "shut out from their world by a vast veil" (4). The veil bisects their perception, allowing them to discern two realities: what white people imagine of them, and what they know of themselves. "One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . ." (5) is how Du Bois describes the sensation of double-consciousness. Because the white perception occupies the position of power, or of Mulvey's active/male, it is the white gaze's perception that constructs reality. And yet, the African American, "gifted with second-sight" (Du Bois 5) knows that this version of reality isn't quite right.

A “second-sight” that can trouble reality and see past veils is symbolized in Chris’s success as a photographer. At the beginning of the movie, we are shown his apartment lined with his photographs depicting mundane, everyday scenes: a dog pulling on a chain, a masked child, a black pregnant belly. The audience intuitively understands that Chris sees more through his lens, and that’s why his work is successful. Chris’s artistic eye is such that his talent becomes desirable to one of the white patrons, Jim Hudson, who attends the Armitage’s party. Jim is a blind art dealer and is the only person at the party who speaks to Chris without making his race part of the conversation. Being that Jim is blind, he is also quite literally color blind, and so representative of those who claim they do not see race. As such, it is not Chris’s race that interests Jim, but rather his artistic talent, and Chris, in response, seems to relax in his presence. However, it is Jim who wins the auction for Chris’s body in a scene that chillingly echoes a slave auction. Later, when Chris is detained in the basement, Jim communicates with him over a telecom system as part of the “pre-op” procedure for the Coagula. When Chris asks him why they are doing this to black people specifically, Jim’s reply is telling:

Who knows? 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. No. What I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through. (Peele 01:24:50)

From the party till this moment on the telecom, Jim has sought to distance himself from the others who wish to use the Armitage’s service, even calling them “ignorants.” Blind to color and indifferent to the essentialist traits ascribed to black people by the Armitages, Jim represents the white person who assures people of color that they are definitely not racist even while they bask in the privilege afforded to them by systemic racism. Certainly, one could argue that Jim would

take the same opportunity to steal the body of a talented young white photographer—but that is not the opportunity he is presented with. The system that made it possible to appropriate someone else’s talent is racist, and Jim’s color blindness does not erase his complicity in that racism. Though this system I am referring to is a fictional operation within a movie, it parallels how white people can think of themselves as “not racist” and yet benefit from systemic racism that enables them to appropriate the creative and cultural capital of black artists.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. contends that western culture used literacy as the authority by which they could measure the humanity of non-white and non-European peoples, effectively forcing African Americans to adhere to standards not of their own making. His theory helps us understand the process by which white standards attempt to force white consciousness into black bodies as allegorically portrayed in *Get Out*. According to Gates Jr., since the Enlightenment, white, European culture has privileged reason as the greatest of human characteristics—writing, or literacy, was the visible sign of reason, particularly after the invention of the printing press (1581). Gates Jr. argues that because the civilizations Europeans “discovered” were preliterate, white people reasoned they must be less civilized, inferior races. Gates Jr. demonstrates the enactment of this prejudice in Enlightenment thinkers from “Vico to Hegel” (1585), a veritable “‘Who’s Who’ of the French, English, and American Enlightenment” (1581). He elaborates that,

The urge toward the systematization of all human knowledge, by which we characterize the Enlightenment, . . . led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower rung on the Greater Chain of Being, an eighteenth-century construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from animals and plants and insects through humans to the angels and God himself. (1581)

To identify themselves as people higher on the Greater Chain of Being, white European people—including their American descendants—defined themselves against people of color in such a way as to place themselves closer to power and, in effect, closer to God. We see this God-like aspiration enacted by Rose's father in *Get Out*: in the scene where Chris tries to flee the Armitage's home, Dean delivers his chilling, villainous monologue. While staring into the temporal flames of a fire, he muses out loud, "We are born, we breathe and then we die. Even the sun will die someday. But we are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons" (Peele 01:08:23). By this, we see that the ideology underpinning the Armitage's order of white supremacy is a concentrated version of western, white values. It is a comforting ideology for white people, as it offers them certainty, prosperity, and perceived, god-like powers over life and over others. However, in their ascent to divinity, they inevitably step on others, and this is what makes them terrifying and dangerous in *Get Out*, and to any non-white people. Gates Jr. compellingly asserts that in order to fight for their very lives, black people had to live up to arbitrary white standards, and in the process, white consciousness—white perspective—was forced upon black bodies.

A closer reading of a specific scene in *Get Out* serves to demonstrate how white consciousness assumes a position of power, or authority, and in the process subordinates black consciousness to white desires. If we understand literacy—or reason—as the justification for white authority, we can see in this scene how rationality is wielded to self-aggrandize and assume power over the other. Not long after Chris's arrival at the Armitage home, Missy Armitage—Rose's mother—lures Chris into a state of "heightened suggestibility" (Peele 00:32:03) through hypnosis. We learn later from Jim Hudson that this hypnotism is "phase one" of the process of stealing Chris's body and is meant to "sedate" him into compliance (Peele 01:23:11). This sedation made Chris biddable to white desires, in the same way black people

were compelled to answer the condemning challenge of white authority according to Gates Jr.'s theory. The hypnotism begins casually enough when Missy catches Chris coming in from having a late-night smoke. She gently challenges him from a rational position: "Do you realize how dangerous smoking is?" (Peele 00:31:00). She invites him to sit and asks another question, "Do you smoke in front of my daughter?" (Peele 00:32:13). Chris's guilt is immediately evoked, as he can't argue with Missy's reasonable concern for her daughter. In just two questions, Missy has established herself on the moral high ground as a concerned mother and has invited him into the setting where she works as a psychiatrist—further denoting her authority. From this perch of power, she continues to question him, prompting him to recount the night his mother died in a hit and run accident. When she locates his shame about not acting sooner to alert someone to his mother's absence, she uses it to push him further into feeling vulnerable and guilty, asking "What did you do?" (Peele 00:34:03). She reacts with mild surprise when he replies that he did nothing, later turning this answer into a condemnation when she reiterates, "You did nothing" (Peele 00:35:06). As the audience, we understand that her condemnation ignores context, such as the fact that Chris was a child at the time and couldn't possibly be responsible for his mother's death. Ignoring this context is to ignore Chris's very humanity, which serves Missy's ulterior motives to gain advantage over him for the benefit of white interests. This move is parallel to what Gates Jr. describes of white Europeans justifying their self-appointed authority by condemning the lack of written history or text from African people to likewise say, "You did nothing" therefore, you are nothing, or rather, less than human. At this point in the exchange, Chris is paralyzed, terrified at the realization that he cannot move—he's been trapped by responding to Missy's challenges. Gates Jr. verifies this outcome for a black person put in this defensive position by white authority: "But if blacks accepted this challenge, we also accepted its

premises, premises in which perhaps lay concealed a trap” (1586). By accepting Missy’s seemingly rational premises, Chris has walked into a trap in which whiteness is the perpetual standard he must meet, and yet in trying to answer that challenge, he affirms the centrality of white authority. This paradox constitutes “a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage” (Gates Jr. 1586). *Get Out* powerfully depicts this profound bondage as Missy tells Chris to sink into the floor. He plummets into the sunken place: a vacuous, dark space, where he is weightless, mute, and hopelessly grappling for purchase. Floating above him in the distance is the scene he just left—a small screen through which he can still see Missy watching him. Throughout the hypnotism, Missy used the seemingly innocuous scrape of a spoon in her tea cup as the device that lulls him into compliance—tapping the tea cup is what sends Chris to the sunken place. Tea serves as a metonym for the legacy of colonization, or more precisely, a legacy of white, European colonizers who believed they had the right to rule, to take, and to exploit in their quest for progress. Missy’s white gaze draws upon this legacy and its systemic power imbalances that serve white interests, as symbolized in the tap of her tea cup.

Significantly, *Get Out* doesn’t give us one white ally who wishes to help Chris. Not one. Not because they are an impossibility, but because the movie refuses to give its white audience that mental escape hatch of “not all white people.” Any acquiescence to white comfort is denied in a movie that seeks to unsettle the white gaze by turning it back on itself. We are meant to squirm, to sit with our discomfort and stay there. Trying to escape it, trying to comfort ourselves that we would never objectify people of color, functionally protects the primacy of the white gaze within ourselves, and within society. In owning this discomfort, it is important to remember there is no purely redemptive recourse for Chris in this metaphorical situation. Yes, he escapes his captors and ends their reign of terror, but in the process, he is forced to match their violence.

He is compelled to compromise his own sense of self, and possibly his claim to freedom in the future should there be legal consequences to his actions. The point being that it should not be for any person of color to figure out how to conquer or evade the white gaze, because in either scenario, they are forced to respond, affirming the power of the white gaze to impact their lives. Rather, the burden of dismantling the white gaze must fall on those occupying positions of power, and they must accept this weight if they wish to mitigate the horror inflicted by the white gaze.

Works Cited

Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Souls of Black Folk." 1903. Millennium Publications, 2014.

Gates Jr., Henry Louis. "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes." *The Critical Tradition*, edited by David H. Richter, Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998, pp. 1576-1588.

Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2017.

"Jordan Peele, 'Get Out' Was 'Meant to be a More Direct, Brutal Wake-Up.'" *YouTube*, uploaded by The Hollywood Reporter, 28 November 2017.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDJKtoj_HCk.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *The Critical Tradition*, edited by David H. Richter, Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998, pp. 1444-1453.