FILM REVIEWS

***Get Out*, dir. by Jordan Peele** (Universal Pictures, 2017)

In many respects, *Get Out*'s central premise is nothing new: the image of the seemingly perfect family concealing an awful secret beneath its suburban façade has become so ubiquitous in the horror genre as to have passed into cliché. Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) is perhaps the best-known incarnation of this trope, following one woman's discovery that the Men's Association in her new hometown is replacing its members' wives with hyper-feminine, subservient, domesticated robots. What has earned *Get Out* such acclaim from audiences and critics alike, however, is not an upending of suburban-gothic conventions, but rather an expanding of them. Although the plot may be familiar, such a prominent tackling of racial issues is rare within a subgenre overwhelmingly concerned with the domestic ennui of wealthy white people.

Get Out follows Chris Washington (Daniel Kalluya) on a trip to meet his girlfriend Rose's (Allison Williams) family, the Armitages. The tensions at play start off small: 'Do they know I'm black?' he asks Rose. 'Should they?' she replies, assuring him that he doesn't need to worry, that her dad 'would have voted for Obama a *third* time if he could'. To talk of microaggressions — that is, small acts of unthinking discrimination against minority-group members, often invisible to the perpetrators — is to invite sneers from certain corners of society these days; the Left, we are told, is too sensitive, overly PC, and looking for antagonism in every small gesture. A major strength of *Get Out* is in Peele's ability to show his audience (at least, those members of his audience for whom these aren't already everyday experiences) exactly how it feels to navigate difference, to be viewed in every moment as a member of the outgroup, even as those around you hastily attempt to correct their prejudice. Although the Armitage family welcomes Chris with open arms, every interaction is in some way racially charged; Rose's father, Dean (Bradley Whitford), explains how proud he is that his own father ran alongside Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics, and her younger brother (Caleb Landry Jones) speculates excruciatingly that Chris's 'genetic makeup' would make him an excellent MMA fighter. Beneath their all-too-earnest exteriors lie constant reminders that they view their guest as 'Other'.

Underpinning Chris's discomfort at this hyper-enthusiastic welcome is a simple, stark fact: all of the Armitages' domestic staff are black. Walter the handyman (Marcus

Henderson) and Georgina the housekeeper (Betty Gabriel) are the only other non-white people around Chris, but they seem just a little *off* to him. Their speech is formal, as though they are much older than their appearances suggest, and when they are not performing household duties, he catches them engaging in odd behaviour: Walter dashes around the ground at alarming speeds during the night, and Georgina stares at herself intently and at great length in the mirror. Rose's parents pay lip-service to the imbalance of power in the household: 'I know what you're thinking ... Come on, I get it. White family, black servants. It's a total cliché ... But boy, I hate how it looks.' Yet the inadequacy of the limp explanation hammers home an obvious truth: actions speak louder than words, and the Armitages are acting *really weirdly*.

Compounding Chris's discomfort is Rose's mother, Missy (Catherine Keener), who insists upon treating him to a therapy session, ostensibly to help him quit smoking. The session is nothing more than a pretext for *hypno*therapy, however, during which Chris finds himself paralysed and trapped in what Missy calls 'the sunken place' — an outer-space-like void with a small window, like a TV screen, acting as the only connection to the real world. On waking the next morning, he chalks it all up to a nightmare, but discovers that Missy has used the session to hypnotise him into giving up cigarettes. Her actions retain a benign veneer, but at the same time deepen the uneasy power dynamic at play in the Armitage household. They not only hold people of colour in economic thrall, but in psychic thrall as well, and the casual way in which Missy can deny Chris agency belies the deep, dark family secret that the film is leading its audience to discover.

Interactions with Rose's family and their friends continue to unsettle Chris, though he has difficulty distinguishing between real danger and the casually hurtful remarks that fuel the background discomfort of his daily life. At an unexpected get-together hosted by the Armitages, Chris must endure ever more cringe-inducing comments from the family's neighbours and friends. They 'know Tiger' (Woods, that is), tell him that '[b]lack is in fashion', and — upon meeting one woman's *much* younger black partner — ask her '[s]o, is it true? Is it better?' 'It's like they haven't met a black person that doesn't work for them', Chris laments. Even the few other black people at the party make him uncomfortable. One man in particular, introduced as Logan (Lakeith Stanfield), baffles Chris; his reaction to Chris telling him that it's '[g]ood to see another brother around here' is stiff and awkward, and he dresses anachronistically in a straw hat and beige jacket. Longing for someone to understand the discomfort, Chris snaps a photo of Logan to send to his friend, but the flash provokes a

reaction — 'Get out!' he screams at Chris, with fear in his eyes. At the same time, although Chris doesn't see it, the audience is privy to a secretive auction in which Dean Armitage accepts bids on a photograph of his daughter's boyfriend.

From here, Chris must begin to confront malice of a much more active sort; after sending the photo to his friend Rod (Lil Rel Howrey), who works as a security officer for the TSA, he learns that 'Logan' is actually Andre Hayworth, the subject of a missing persons case, who disappeared from an affluent suburb six months previously (and whose abduction, we realise, was depicted in the film's opening scenes). He also finds a secret stash of photographs of Rose with old partners — all of them black, contrary to a previous conversation in which she told him he was the first black man she had dated, and amongst them Andre, Walter, and Georgia. It transpires that Rose's grandfather pioneered a means of immortality in which the brains of older people are transplanted into the bodies of much younger people, while the original person maintains a sliver of consciousness in the 'sunken place' for eternity (Peele mercifully does not dwell too much on the specifics of the science behind this, sparing his audience from *Star Trek* levels of technobabble). The Armitages, it becomes clear, have designated Chris as the next vessel for one of their old, wealthy, white friends, who see black people not as people, but as something to appropriate.

The remainder of the film charts Chris's escape from his would-be corporeal colonisers, culminating in the film's most powerfully empathy-inducing moment: the arrival of a police car. Where film audiences are used to flashing lights and sirens signalling relief and delivery from trauma, Peele instead induces sinking dread; Chris is a black man surrounded by countless white bodies, and Rose takes the opportunity to cry out for help, knowing that in the eyes of the American police force, blackness is all too often immediately equated with guilt. Luckily, the driver is actually his friend Rod in a car borrowed from work — an ending that Peele didn't originally envision for the film, but included due to a perceived shift in societal attitudes to his film's subject. Speaking on a *Buzzfeed* podcast, he explained that when he began making the film, '[p]eople were saying, like, "We've got Obama so racism is over, let's not talk about it". It's a wrap. That's what the movie was meant to address.'[1] In that context, Peele envisioned a much bleaker ending that would shock audiences into a new perspective on 'post-racial' America. Recent political upheavals, however, prompted him to rethink this approach: 'It was very clear that the ending needed to

[1] *Another Round*, 'Episode 83: Incognero (with Jordan Peele)', 1 March 2017 <https://www.acast.com/anotherround/episode-83-incognegro-with-jordan-peele> [accessed 27 October 2017].

transform into something that gives us a hero, that gives us an escape, gives us a positive feeling when we leave this movie.'[2]

In a *Variety* review of the film, Peter Debruge astutely observes that 'Peele hasn't gone after the easy target (assumed-racist Trump voters)' in his depiction of modern-day racial tensions, but that doesn't mean the film isn't potentially heralding a new wave of Trump-era horror.[3] In satirising liberal attempts to divest themselves of complicity in racial injustice, it sounds a strong warning about the dangers of inaction and the refusal to confront ingrained attitudes about race held by self-proclaimed 'allies'. Well-meaning white people may not, in real life, be literally inhabiting the bodies of black people — or fastidiously keeping whites and colours apart whenever possible, as Rose does when she eats her milk and her fruit cereal separately — but *Get Out* forces us to confront our willingness to simultaneously fetishise black culture and also insist that we bear no responsibility for society's racial divide. The film is set to become a staple in horror studies over the coming years, with a collection of dedicated essays already in progress with the University of Texas Press, and with good reason — the best horror tells us more about the context that produces it than it does about imaginary monsters, and Peele has expertly captured what, sadly, far too many people already know: being black in the twenty-first century can still be really scary.

Emily Bourke

[2] *Another Round*, 'Episode 83'.
[3] Peter Debruge, 'Film Review: "Get Out"', *Variety*, 24 January 2017 <http://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/get-out-review-jordan-peele-1201968635/> [accessed 27 October 2017].