FILM REVIEWS

***Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, dir. by Xavier Burgin** (Shudder, 2019)

Observing how Black protagonists have finally begun to feature in mainstream horror cinema, Jordan Peele claims in Xavier Burgin's documentary, *Horror Noire*, that 'white people will see movies about non-white people. They will. They'll see. You just have to make them.' Indeed, while this assertion is self-evident today due to the success of Peele's own filmography, *Horror Noire* hints, if it never outright states, that white film audiences have always watched Black horror, just not in the guise they might have expected. Throughout this innovative and highly informative exploration of the history of Black horror in cinema, Black directors, actors, and film scholars discuss their own experiences as both participants and purveyors of the genre, discussing the shift in the representation of Black characters from spectacles of fear to hero protagonists. It will probably come as little surprise to either horror aficionados or academics that Peele's own *Get Out* (2017) forms the backbone of this exploration of Black horror on film: still, it is pleasantly surprising to see just how much of his debut feature does appear to be the culmination of a hundred years of Black cinema. As Peele himself explains here, the 'Sunken Place' – the space to which *Get Out*'s protagonist, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), is banished after being hypnotised – represents the frustration of Black cinema-goers, who have been left feeling voiceless and ignored, with little choice but to watch white protagonists onscreen.[1] *Get Out* voices this anger: Chris rejects this status quo by surviving the film's onslaught and reuniting with his best friend, Rod (Lil Rel Howery), whose running commentary establishes him as a proxy for the film's audience.

Based on research from Robin R. Means Coleman's book of the same name (Coleman is also one of the experts who appears within the documentary), and written by Ashlee Blackwell and Danielle Burrows, *Horror Noire* looks beyond the typical bounds of the horror genre to find the beginnings of Black horror cinema. Starting with D. W. Griffith's notoriously racist *The Birth of a Nation* from 1915, the talking heads, comprised of scholars, actors, and directors, highlight the extent to which early horror in Hollywood was concerned with white fears of Blackness, a trend that marked much of the first half of the century, as

[1] See Zack Sharf, '*Get Out*: Jordan Peele Reveals the Real Meaning Behind the Sunken Place', *Indie Wire*, 30 November 2017 <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/11/get-out-jordan-peele-explains-sunken-place-meaning-1201902567/> [accessed 11 September 2020].

seen in blockbusters such as *King Kong* (dir. by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933). Toni Morrison's academic work *Playing in the Dark* (1993) springs to mind here. The film offers what is effectively a reversal of her argument that white authors project their own subconscious desires and fears onto Black bodies in American literature; *Horror Noire* argues that white filmmakers project their fears of Blackness onto cinematic monsters and, indeed, quite literally, onto white actors in blackface. By drawing attention to this trend, the talking heads in *Horror Noire* make a cogent argument for the existence of a white establishment whose works continued and reinforced the racist world-building projects of the West.

In presenting this argument, *Horror Noire* pivots on particular milestones of the genre, including the casting of Duane Jones as the first Black horror protagonist in George A. Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968); the rise of Black female characters, particularly Pam Grier's Lisa Fortier in the *Blacula* blaxploitation films (dir. by William Crain and Bob Kelljan,1972-73), and their association with voodoo; and Jada Pinkett Smith's turn as the first Black Final Girl in *Demon Knight* (dir. by Ernest Dickerson, 1995), from the horror-comedy anthology *Tales from the Crypt*. In doing so, as film historian *Tananarive Du* observes here, the film highlights the century-long shift that Black representation has undergone, as African-American characters evolve from being the focus of fear to the hero.

With input from actors such as Tony Todd (*Candyman*, dir. by Bernard Rose, 1982) and Ken Foree (*Dawn of the Dead*, dir. by Romero, 1978), the documentary also highlights the paucity of opportunities and the restrictive roles offered to Black actors in the genre, as well as the creative manoeuvres made by actors and directors to challenge such stereotypes. It is particularly interesting to hear about films in which the casting of Black actors was coincidental: in the case of both *Night of the Living Dead* and the recent British zombie film *The Girl with All The Gifts* (dir. Colm McCarthy, 2016), the scripts did not specify that the leads were to be Black before the casting took place (indeed, *Gifts* was based on a novel with a white protagonist). Both casting choices lead to a nuanced portrayal of marginalised voices that undoubtedly could not be achieved with white actors. In something of a contrast, actress Rachel True discusses the process of being cast in one of the main roles (as Rochelle) in the supernatural horror *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 1996). When auditioning, the character's racial identity was initially unspecified and Rochelle was supposed to be suffering from anorexia. When True was cast, however, this 'character issue' was replaced with that of

racism. While True observes that there were positives to be taken from addressing the issue, she also highlights how Black characters are rarely seen as distinct from their race.

If *Horror Noire* did little more than offer a useful overview of an ever-expanding genre, it would be a very satisfying venture. Burgin's feature goes above and beyond that, placing Black horror in a wider cultural context, providing crucial detail about racism and white ignorance in the twentieth century. In exploring the horror that Black characters experience, the contributing voices here discuss the real-life inhuman treatment of Black bodies by an unfeeling white governance, focusing in particular on the notorious forty-year-long 'Tuskegee experiment'. Rather than attempt to cure almost four hundred Black men of syphilis as it promised, the US government conducted covert unethical experiments on them, leading to the deaths of a third of them. Suggesting that Black horror functions to unearth the violent racist history of America, *Horror Noire* had me ruminating on the likelihood that *all* US horror unearths the violent history of America. The extent to which so much of the fictional horror experienced by white characters in horror films is in fact a reality for Black individuals suggests that the entire American horror genre may just have sprung from a displaced unconscious sense of white guilt.

Horror Noire is an extremely timely and illuminating examination of horror cinema. As a result, one way to understand it is as a celebration of *Get Out* as a cinematic event that marks both a culmination and a turning point in its history. *Horror Noire* highlights how Peele's feature explores the frustration of Black filmmakers and audiences who have rarely had the opportunity to see their own stories on screen. In this way, Burgin's documentary is part of an ongoing discussion on the representation of Black experiences in cinema. Indeed, despite *Get Out*'s undisputed success, recent discussion of the current 'golden age' of Black horror has had a surprisingly small amount of mainstream Black films to draw on.[2] Moreover, beyond Peele's *Get Out* and *Us* (2019), and Deon Taylor's psychological horror *The Intruder* (2019), other recent mainstream horror films starring Black actors, *Ma* (dir. Tate Taylor, 2019) and *Little Monsters* (dir. Abe Forsythe, 2019), have had white directors. A golden age it may be, yet far more support for Black cinema is needed.

This, I strongly hope, will not be taken in any way as a criticism in regard to the enthusiasm rightly levelled at the phenomenon of *Get Out* and the milestone it represents: rather, I bring it up as an admonishment against any back-patting that white viewers may

[2] See Robin R. Means Coleman, 'We're in a Golden Age of Black Horror Films', *The Conversation*, 29 May 2019 <https://theconversation.com/were-in-a-golden-age-of-black-horror-films-116648> [accessed 11 May 2020].

believe they are now due. Mainstream celebration of a single Black property signifies little more than a claim that one 'would have voted for Obama for a third term', as liberal villain Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford) tells Chris. It is to be hoped that *Horror Noire* will soon require a sequel, demonstrating that *Get Out* was the beginning of something even bigger.

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