Get Out: The horror of racism, and racialist politics

Hiram Lee
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Written and directed by Jordan Peele

The horror film *Get Out* has been popular with both audiences and critics. It is the directorial debut of Jordan Peele, best known for his work as one half of the comedy duo Key & Peele. With *Get Out*, Peele has said he wanted to make a film to "combat the lie that America had become post-racial." The monster at the heart of this horror film is racism itself.

Get Out tells the story of African-American photographer, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), and his white girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams). The couple is planning to visit Rose's parents for the first time. But when Chris discovers Rose hasn't told her parents that he is black, he worries the visit won't go well. Rose reassures him that her parents are anything but racist, and the trip goes ahead as planned.

Rose's father (Bradley Whitford) turns out to be a wealthy surgeon. Her mother (Catherine Keener) is a psychiatrist specializing in hypnosis therapy. They go out of their way to make Chris feel at home. Rose's father makes awkward gestures to Chris, at one point telling him that he would have voted for Obama a third time given the chance. What seem at first like well meaning but misguided attempts to relate to Chris and put him at ease soon turn into something else. There is something even darker than such "micro aggressions" lurking beneath this white liberal family.

Most troubling to Chris are the African-American servants the family employs. They appear brainwashed, too satisfied with the family and their duties. They don't behave as real people would. When the family later throws a party and the white guests appear to be sizing him up for something, it puts him further on edge.

Despite all the warning signs, Chris hesitates, hoping for the best until it is almost too late. The family intends to capture him and force him into a kind of servitude, though not quite the kind he was expecting. His failure to act sooner nearly gets him killed. This complacency in the face of racism is one of the main themes of the film.

Get Out accepts a number of conventions about race relations and begins from there. Racism, for Peele, simply exists—in the same way that evil does, or original sin. Everyone is infected by it. Its historical origins and the social forces which nourish and promote it are beside the point. Accepting this, the film is left to offer pseudo-psychological explanations for the beliefs and activities of its antagonists. This leads it into rather disturbing territory. At one point the film seems to suggest that the white family terrorizing Chris is jealous of the genetically endowed superior physical abilities of its African-American victims. Given Rose's involvement in the conspiracy, one could even be forgiven for interpreting the film as a warning against interracial relationships. Like all such works based on racialist conceptions, one doesn't have to follow the logic very far before one arrives at positions virtually identical to those of the extreme right.

Since its release, Peele's film has generated a great deal of media attention, including its share of hype and controversy. In recent weeks, Peele has been celebrated in the media as the first African-American writer-director to have earned more than $100 million with his debut film. He has cracked a key financial threshold and his success as an artist is thus confirmed for certain layers. There is a lot of talk about what it means for black filmmakers in Hollywood. Opportunity is on the horizon.

But does *Get Out* tell the truth about the world? Several interviews make clear Peele's own outlook.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Peele

affirmed his intention to target the "liberal elite" with the film. "The liberal elite," said Peele, "who communicates that we're not racist in any way is as much of the problem as anything else. This movie is about the lack of acknowledgement that racism exists. In the Trump era, it's way more obvious extreme racism exists. But there are still a lot of people who think: We don't have a racist bone in our bodies. We have to face the racism in ourselves."

In another interview with *GQ* magazine, Peele seeks to explain why there haven't been more horror films dealing with race:

"Black creators have not been given a platform, and the African-American experience can only be dealt with by an African-American. That might be problematic to say. And now that I think about it, [*The Stepford Wives* author] Ira Levin is a man, and he and Roman Polanski wrote *Rosemary's Baby.* Let's say it would be scary for a white writer and director to do something that includes the victimization of black people in this way. Of course, we have this trope where the black guy is the first to die in every horror movie—that's a way for [white filmmakers] to have their cake and eat it, too."

The division of the world along such racial lines has the most reactionary implications. Indeed, we saw only last week how "scary" it could be when a white artist, Dana Schutz, dared to depict the victimization of a black person, Emmett Till, in her work.

Interestingly, the reactionary notion that only an African-American can deal with the so-called "African-American experience" (a racialist term that throws class and history out the window) has also been used to attack Peele's film. In a recent radio interview, actor Samuel L. Jackson complained that the film's star, Daniel Kaluuya, was British, saying that an African *American* actor would have been better suited to the role. He went on to lament the prevalence of black British actors currently employed in Hollywood. "They're cheaper than us," he said. In these bitter, career-motivated comments, Jackson united racialism with its perfect complement, nationalism.

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