

## **Horror Vérité: Politics and History in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)**

### Abstract:

This essay proposes that certain cinematic conventions of the horror film are uniquely suited to bring into visibility everyday, endemic horror—a horror that many in US society refuse to see. I call this use of horror, ‘horror vérité’ or truthful horror. As a form of politically-inflected horror, it has potential to perform the kind of materialist history that Walter Benjamin theorizes, in which the historical materialist ‘appropriate[es] a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger’ in order to recast the present. Jordan Peele’s 2017 film, *Get Out*, is an example of ‘horror vérité,’ because it uses the mechanics of the horror genre to expose actually existing racism, to render newly visible the very real, but often masked, racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America. The film analysis considers: first, the use of the conventions of horror to expose everyday racial violence; second, its reliance on a dialectic of sleeping (hypnosis) and waking up (provoked by photography); and third, its performing of the historical materialism Benjamin describes, in which the jarring confrontation of the past and the present radically alters the landscape of the present.

Keywords: race, *Get Out*, horror, politics of mass culture, Walter Benjamin, historical materialism, Siegfried Kracauer

Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out* was not only a huge box office success, grossing over \$250 million worldwide, but it has been lavished with critical acclaim as well. Even in the course of my writing this paper, *The New York Times Magazine* devoted a cover story to it, written by Wesley Morris and entitled, ‘Jordan Peele’s X-Ray Vision.’ And yet despite this acclaim, the film provoked at times heated debate about what *kind* of film it actually was, generically speaking. In response to learning that it was to be categorized as a comedy or musical for the Golden Globe awards, Peele tweeted back provocatively, ‘It’s a documentary’ (Morris 2017). Later he explained, ‘The reason for the visceral response to this movie being called a comedy is that we are still living in a time in which African-American cries for justice aren’t being taken seriously. It is important to acknowledge that though there are funny moments, the systemic racism that the movie is about is very real’ (Morris 2017). Yet even though its content is very ‘real,’ *Get Out* is also very much a horror film, in its mobilization of a series of narrative and formal conventions. However, the classificatory problems raised by the film are themselves

meaningful. These distinctions, are not just academic, but have important political ramifications and point to the work the film is doing and by what mechanisms it is doing it. What I want to propose here is that certain cinematic conventions of the horror film—a specific set of formal and narrative strategies—are uniquely suited to render everyday, endemic and chronic horror—a horror that many in US society do not, or perhaps more accurately refuse, to see. This is a politically-inflected horror film, and as such has potential to perform the kind of materialist history that Walter Benjamin (2003, p.392) theorizes, in which the historical materialist ‘appropriate[es] a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger’ in order to recast the present. I would like to call this particular type of horror ‘horror vérité’ or truthful horror.

### Technologies of Revelation

What I am describing as ‘horror vérité’ operates on the logic of revelation, in both the literal and figural senses of the word, and is thus in fundamental ways enabled by technologies of the visual, in this case the cinema. Interested in the way visual technologies affected both the act of perception and what exactly was seeable, Walter Benjamin, in 1935, famously described what he called the ‘optical unconscious’ of photography. Photography, as a technology of vision, enables its viewers to see—both literally and metaphorically—those aspects of everyday life that remain invisible to the naked eye. Benjamin (2008a) is drawn to Atget’s 1920s photographs of Paris, which seem to prod the viewer to search for clues to some undisclosed crime. For Benjamin (2008a, p. 294), a committed Marxist, photography might function as a tool to enable people to see the crimes of capitalism, to see the world they inhabit for what it is: ‘isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene?’ he asks. ‘Every passer-by a culprit? Isn’t it the task of the photographer . . . to reveal the guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?’ As Benjamin

(2008b, p. 37) explains, ‘film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieu through the ingenious guidance of the camera.’ The camera performs a revelation; the revelation is *political* because it lends itself to action, to making visible new possible sites of intervention; he continues, ‘it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action’ (Benjamin 2008b, p. 37).

Film, in Benjamin’s account, has radical, even revolutionary potential in its capacity to awaken people to the dominant ideologies that appear invisible, ‘natural,’ normalized, and that nevertheless, govern their lives. He writes, ‘Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended . . . Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye’ (Benjamin 2008b, p. 37). For Benjamin, the potential of the cinema to be a political agent has two dimensions: one has to do with its collective mode of reception and the other with its training of perception. Film, Benjamin believes, as a *mass* medium, can speak directly to the masses: he writes, ‘The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception’ (Benjamin, 2008b, p.24). As I will describe in more detail later, aligning the masses with ‘reality,’ by which he means the fundamental material conditions of society that are generally masked by ideology, is precisely the work done by the film, *Get Out* as an example of ‘horror vérité.’

In structuring perception, the cinema can facilitate what Benjamin envisions as a process of coming to consciousness about the material oppressive conditions of society that are shrouded by ideology. He understands this coming to consciousness as a ‘waking up.’ ‘The moment of awakening,’ Benjamin (1999, p. 463-4) writes in the *Arcades Project*, ‘would be identical with the ‘now of recognizability,’ in which things put on their true—surrealist—face.’ His interest in the sort of awakening that is possible in the cultural arena leads him to consider Berthold Brecht’s politically engaged theater. Brecht’s ‘epic theater’ attempts to wake the audience through the principle of the ‘alienation effect’: Brecht (1977, p. 192) writes, ‘A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.’ In this process of defamiliarization, that which is familiar and thus often invisible, is rendered strange, unnatural. At any given historical moment, a society’s dominant ideologies – be they capitalist, or white supremacist, or patriarchal—seem natural, timeless. Brecht’s revolutionary agenda, like Benjamin’s, is to enable the masses to see through the naturalized, reified, familiar configurations of society—and he recognizes the cultural arena to be a privileged site for this project. Brecht (1977, p. 201), also a Marxist, sees the political imperative that falls to a cultural artefact to defamiliarize the present, ‘to speak up decisively for the interests of its own time.’

For Benjamin, it is the *mechanics* of Brecht’s style, coupled with Brecht’s political agenda, that most compels him. Brecht’s style is aimed at revealing social contradictions, rather than covering them over. Brecht tends to do this in obvious, sometimes even exaggerated ways—actors hold signs, recite lines without emotion or affect. There is nothing subtle about Brecht’s methodology. Benjamin in fact describes these methods as relying on ‘crude thinking’ rather than subtlety. Brecht is interested in strategies that *force* the audience to ruminate. Brecht’s

strategies are obvious, they call attention to themselves, they dispel the illusion. ‘Crude thoughts,’ writes Benjamin (2002, p.7), ‘have a special place in dialectical thinking because their sole function is to direct theory toward practice . . . a thought must be crude to find its way into action.’ A politically-engaged, cultural—or mass cultural—form, then, be it a play, or a film, must have mechanisms for defamiliarization that force such crude thoughts, and predispose the audience towards action by ‘aligning the masses with reality.’

### Horror Vérité

Before exploring the political potential of horror vérité, I think it is important to point to cinema’s long-term engagement with horror more generally. In a short piece written in 1940 entitled ‘Das Grauen im Film’ (or ‘Horror in Film’) Siegfried Kracauer (1974), an interlocutor of Walter Benjamin’s, argues that film has a long and privileged relationship with horror, a special ‘affinity’ for it. Film, he says, ‘has been illustrating terrifying events throughout its 45-year history’ (Kracauer 1974, p.25-6). But more than that, horror films, he suggests, force a confrontation; the viewer is brought face to face with the grim and the graphic: ‘Visions of insanity take shape, murderous affairs continuously supersede one another, forms of torture are described in great detail, awfully deformed faces appear in close-up, accounts of war outdo each other when it comes to scenes of horror’ (Kracauer 1974, p.26). The movie camera, like the camera imagined by Benjamin, is here an ‘impartial observer’ in the ‘zone of horror’ (Kracauer 1974, p.26). Horror’s true radical potential derives from its ability to depict the unthinkable, to materialize the immaterial; the horror film, Kracauer (1974, p.26) suggests, ‘makes that which is unimaginable in *reality* an exhibition object.’ This work of representation has a political dimension when what is being made imaginable are the lived social realities that many in society

refuse to see. Much as Benjamin emphasized the political potential of the optical unconscious, Kracauer (1974, p.27) writes: ‘Every representation is also playing with what is represented, and perhaps playing with horror aims *at letting people come to terms with things they are otherwise blindly subject to.*’ A politically motivated filmmaker can exploit the genre for political purposes to make an unimaginable reality imaginable and visible.

So, first of all, what exactly is ‘horror vérité’?<sup>1</sup> I am here drawing on the idea of cinema vérité, ‘truthful cinema,’ a style of documentary filmmaking that aimed to reveal the ‘truth’ of a particular situation, a truth that might otherwise remain elusive, masked by ideology, acting, or directorial choices, etc. In the case of horror vérité, I am suggesting that it deploys the standard cinematic conventions of horror – strong sound and visual cues that shock and unsettle the viewer, editing that also creates surprise and shock, a plot that involves either supernatural/science fiction elements, the struggle for survival of a person who is being chased by a psycho-killer, and/or a haunted house—but it does these things in the context of very real material and historical circumstances. In other words, rather than using these techniques to explore the psychology of a serial killer, or to enforce the dominant ideology (take, for instance, the typical slasher films that punish teenage girls for having sex), or to symbolize society’s fears

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<sup>1</sup> My use of ‘horror vérité’ emphasizes the political potential of the horror film, not the documentary mode in horror, and is therefore different from an earlier usage, in which the term designates a subgenre of horror film associated in particular with the *Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999). See, for example, Barry Keith Grant, ‘Digital anxiety and the new vérité horror and sf film,’ *Science Fiction Film and Television* 6:2 (2013), 153-175.

in the form of a monster<sup>2</sup>--the mechanics of horror are here engaged in a project of re-representing the present. In other words, the typical horror film usually offers some kind of terrifying psychological fantasy. But in horror vérité is the terrifying nightmare is everyday reality.

Much like Brechtian 'epic theatre,' the strategy through which 'horror vérité' enacts its politics is defamiliarization, but it achieves this effect through narrative and cinematic techniques that are radically different from those used by Brecht. The stylistic conventions of horror – its shocks and jolts – interrupt the forward movement of the narrative. They have the effect of forcing viewers back into their own bodies, breaking the narrative 'spell.' These moments of interruption can be intellectually productive. Horror is one of what Linda Williams (1991) has famously called the 'body' genres, in that it engages its spectators in a physical, visceral way. I want to emphasize here how in the case of horror, one's body is put on alert, made to feel uncomfortable. And this discomfort is achieved affectively. Williams (1991, p.3) also points out that body genres 'are often defined by their differences from the classical realist style of narrative cinema.' The horror film's deviation from realism, often in the form of exaggeration or excess, the grotesqueness and over-exaggerated quality of the gore, the over-the-top-crazy, implausible plots are, in fact, crude, potentially fostering precisely the sort of 'crude thinking' that Benjamin points to in Brecht's theatrical style. In 'horror vérité,' through artificial means

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film,' in *Movies and Methods*, Vol. 2, edited by Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1985) 195-220; Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990).

(outrageous, unrealistic plots, heavy-handed visual and aural shocks, etc.), the present and everyday is rendered unfamiliar and grotesque in order to bring the real conditions of society into sharp relief. Horror vérité has the capacity to make the audience, or in Benjamin and Kracauer's more Marxist-inflected language, 'the masses' think, and is thus well-suited to the project of consciousness-raising.

### Wake Up and Get Out

Jordan Peele's 2017 film, *Get Out*, is an example of 'horror vérité,' precisely because it uses the clunky and often artificial mechanics of the horror genre in order to expose actually existing racism, to render newly visible the very real but often masked racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America.<sup>3</sup> The film's main characters, Rose (Allison Williams) and Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), are a young, hip, interracial couple, who travel together to her family's home in the country, where her parents will meet Chris for the first time. Despite the fact that from the start Rose seems 'woke,' a social justice warrior, and that she professes to Chris that her parents are super-liberal, racial attitudes at her parents' house seem a bit off. Her father, Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford) is all-too-excited to meet Chris, but then asks the couple, awkwardly, in an outdated black slang, 'How long has this 'thang' been going on?' Despite Rose's claims that they are liberal whites who 'love Obama', Chris is surprised to learn, upon his arrival, that they have black hired help: a groundskeeper named Walter (Marcus

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<sup>3</sup> Robin R. Means Coleman has explored both the way African Americans have been represented in, and the roles they have played in producing, horror films, See *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011).



Henderson) and a housekeeper named Georgina (Betty Gabriel). Although Rose's mom, Missy Armitage (Katherine Keener) seems much less weird at first, we soon learn that she is a therapist who uses hypnosis to treat people—and she actually hypnotizes Chris one night without his consent. When Rose's brother (Caleb Landry Jones) returns home, and joins them for dinner, he too, is oddly fascinated by Chris and tries to engage him in a discussion about Chris' athletic prowess, practically salivating over what is possible for him with 'his frame and his genetic make-up.' The true horror of the Armitage house, though, emerges gradually as the veneer of normalcy begins to peel away; Chris slowly realizes that he is a prisoner there, being used by the whites around him. The Armitages, it turns out, sedate African American men with hypnosis, and then sell their bodies to white people who are facing some physical infirmity. Rose's grandfather, we learn, developed a surgical transplantation procedure, called the Coagula procedure, in which a white person's consciousness is transplanted into a 'superior' black body; this of course is why Georgina and Walter are so odd: they are the host bodies for Rose's grandfather's and grandmother's consciousnesses. In this way, the film literalizes an exaggerated version of white exploitation of blacks: the film offers a kind of science-fiction version of slavery where white people steal black bodies and use them for their own purposes. By setting this 'slavery' in the present day, the film points to the violence still perpetrated against African Americans, suggesting that racist exploitation is alive and well even among supposedly liberal white people.

My discussion of the film will focus on three aspects: first, the way it uses the conventions of horror to expose everyday racial violence; second, the way the film relies on a dialectic of sleeping and waking up—a dialectic literalized by the tension between hypnosis on the one hand and the photograph as a tool for vision on the other; and third, the way the film

performs the kind of historical materialism called for by Benjamin, in which the jarring confrontation of the past and the present radically alters the way we read the present.

Despite the debates that I alluded to at the outset over which genre the film belongs to, *Get Out* adheres to many of the well-worn tropes of the horror film. Before the titles, before we are even introduced to the protagonists, Rose and Chris, the film opens with a long shot of a deserted suburban sidewalk at night. The camera slowly pulls back and we hear the voice of an African American man speaking on the phone. He seems to be looking for an address, but is agitated, anxious, saying into the phone, 'I feel like a sore thumb out here.' What might seem an idyllic, peaceful suburb, is for a black man quite the opposite; through his eyes, the street seems creepy, scary. A car slowly approaches and he begins to freak out, realizing that these suburbs are not safe for him. He tells himself to keep walking, but then, in fear, turns around to avoid the white car. Of course, this man is right to be scared – moments later he is abducted by the driver of the white car, who wears an ominous armour helmet. This is of course an inversion of a well-worn trope – the white person alone in the city at night, scared of 'racial others.' What is achieved here is a defamiliarization of the space of the suburbs, much in the sense that Brecht describes. By undermining the viewer's easy confidence in the safety of the suburbs, the film begins by chipping away at a particular, ideologically dominant view of the suburb as the safe alternative to the dangerous city. While this abduction is occurring an upbeat song from 1939 'Run Rabbit, Run Rabbit' performed by Flanagan and Allen and written by Noel Gay and Ralph Butler plays on the soundtrack, creating a kind of jarring frisson – this discordant pairing, in effect, connects this moment in the supposedly modern cosmopolitan present to the past. As if this scene were not enough of a warning to us about the horrors yet to unfold, the lyrics themselves point to the danger, telling the story of a defenceless rabbit killed by a farmer. Over

the titles, which appear next, plays a haunting Swahili song, *Sikiliza*, which redoubles the warning: though the only word in English is ‘Brother’ the Swahili lyrics are ‘Listen to the ancestors. Run! You need to run far! (Listen to the truth) Brother.’ That the film is set up, in these first moments, as a horror film is crucial, as it puts the viewer on edge and also shapes the way he or she attempts to interpret the story of Rose and Chris as it unfolds. It leads the viewer to expect danger, and to ask both what’s causing it and why.

Even as the narrative seems to normalize post-credits, when we meet Chris and Rose who are getting ready for the weekend, the spectre of horror is never fully gone. First, Chris is anxious about the trip, worried what his girlfriend’s parents will say about the fact that he is black. When he asks if she told them, Rose says no, and laughs off the ludicrousness of having to make such a pronouncement, playfully imagining the conversation: ‘Mom and dad, my uh, black boyfriend will be coming up this weekend and I uh just don’t want you to be shocked that he’s a blackman (sic).’ And she laughs. Unconvinced, Chris explains, ‘You know, I don’t want to get chased off the lawn with a shotgun.’ Chris’s concerns are real, and coming as they do only moments after the opening sequence in which a black man is violently abducted in the suburbs, we cannot help but share his trepidation, despite Rose’s cheerful and hip post-racial posture. In fact, the film actively generates a tension between the fear Chris feels—which the film forces us to take seriously—and the easy-going post-racial attitude that Rose and her parents profess. They are *not* racist she tells him. This discourse of the post-racial is seductive to white audiences who wish to deny the existence of racism, and who want to rest comfortably in a belief of their own distance from it.

This film relies on many standard tropes and conventions of the horror film. Perhaps most obviously, it borrows from the subgenre of the ‘haunted house’ – or at least a house where

the protagonist gets trapped and where terrible things happen to her or him (take for instance classics like *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, *Poltergeist* and *Rosemary's Baby*). In fact, there are several allusions to *Rosemary's Baby*, a film Peele admired: most notably, in both cases the protagonist's body is used against his or her will (and without his or her knowledge) by those around him or her for their gain. Throughout the film, and with great regularity, the audience is jolted with the standard horror technique of the jump scare—sudden jarring, unexpected, noises or images—but unlike the standard horror film, where these shocks are an end in themselves, here the jump scares are racially inflected, calling attention to race and racial hierarchies. The shocks, in other words, are meaningfully connected to the black characters in ways that radically undermine the very idea of the post-racial. When Chris meets Walter and Georgina, the black hired help at the Armitage house, we are reminded of the presence of racial hierarchies, even as the white characters themselves openly dispute them. Images of Walter at work in the yard and Georgina engaged in domestic labour in the kitchen are intentionally interspersed between scenes of Chris and the Armitage family. These juxtapositions—between declarations of tolerance and post-racialism on the one hand, and the servitude of Walter and Georgina that inevitably calls to mind slavery on the other—force the viewer to consider the contradiction. The hired help here are anything but invisible – the film asks us to scrutinize them. From the start, Walter and Georgina are peculiar, their affect off. Georgina appears almost as a Stepford wife, appearing robotic, and at times, as if she is malfunctioning. When she comes out to the patio to pour iced tea for the Armitages and Chris, her face registers distress and she over pours a glass, as if she is glitching, causing Missy Armitage to suggest to her that she go inside and rest. These short scenes with Georgina—and later Walter—in which weird things happen, function as interruptions in the story, akin to the kinds of interruptions for which Brecht called. They

interrupt the scenes with the Armitages and Chris, but also serve as a provocation to us the audience. Their creepiness, a product of the horror genre, is here connected to the racial plot. They lead us to ask what's wrong with these characters and it brings them into heightened visibility. In other words, the blacks whose labour undergirds white liberal society, usually invisibly, are here rendered hyper visible. Later that night, unable to sleep, Chris goes downstairs on his way out for a smoke. Everyone appears to be asleep. He moves slowly through the dark corridors. The soundtrack is silent except for the faint sound of crickets chirping, when suddenly a discordant chime sounds as Georgina scurries past him in the background. The discordant sound and Georgina's robotic presence create a visceral shock for the audience. This occurs again once he is outside. After searching his pockets for cigarettes, he notices a figure in the distance. Again, there is unsettled, metallic discordant noise on the soundtrack as Walter comes running at full speed toward him, veering away only at the last minute. Despite the Armitages' protestations to the contrary, race, as a matter of significance, erupts again and again, always catalysed by black bodies. The film uses the formal mechanics of horror not for cheap thrills, but to advance a point about the invisibility of racial exploitation among 'liberal' whites. In depicting Walter in this way, there is a monstrous, inhuman quality to him—another common trope of the horror film—but here his monstrosity is quite literally a result of what supposedly liberal whites have done to him. Along the same lines, the film uses the standard horror plot device of the person we most trust, in this case Rose, turning out to be the most villainous of all; Rose, the hip, cute, anti-racist, lures black men to her parent's sadistic laboratory. In this film, however, the plot device is once again motivated to advance a political message: that the pose of the post-racial masks liberal whites' active complicity in the oppression of African Americans.

The second aspect I want to focus on is the very explicit dialectic the film sets up between sleeping, as signified by hypnosis and the ‘sunken place,’ and waking up and coming to consciousness, a process largely enabled by the camera and photography more generally. At the beginning of the film, as a bridge from the abduction scene to the one in Chris’s apartment, a series of still photographs appear on the screen, images of everyday life, all black and white, and populated with African Americans images which we are later to understand as Chris’s photos. The acoustic backdrop for this slide show is the Childish Gambino song ‘Redbone.’ The song carries us into an urban, chic apartment, with more, large black and white photos on the walls. Chris is a photographer. In this first scene in his apartment, we see his hands holding the camera, (**image**) clicking through images that he -- and we -- see on the camera’s digital screen. Even in the film’s first few moments photography is foregrounded as crucial to vision, and to the act of seeing. The significance of this kind of seeing—and of the work of the camera—only becomes clear later in the film, when Chris is attempting to make sense of the goings-on at the Armitage house: the camera becomes the tool that breaks the ‘coagulated’ African Americans out of their trances and thus helps Chris to uncover the truth.

But the political imperative of waking up, becoming ‘woke’ — for whites, even liberal whites, to see their own complicity in black exploitation, and for blacks to recognize the need for their own active resistance—is dramatized in the film through the act of hypnosis and by extension, white control of black minds. It is through hypnosis that the African Americans in the film—Georgina, Walter and Chris—are first subdued before the Coagula procedure takes place. The Armitages broach the topic of hypnosis first in response to Chris’s smoking; Dean suggests that Missy ‘take care of that’ ‘nasty habit’ offering hypnosis up as ‘a service we provide.’ Chris is not at all interested, and a bit freaked out, and Rose defends him saying ‘Some people don’t

want strangers messing around in their heads, guys.’ Later that night, after Chris’s encounter with Walter running towards him, Missy summons him into her office, beseeching him to ‘come and sit with me.’ He goes in and sits down opposite her. She takes the teacup in her hand, and slowly, rhythmically, begins to stir the tea with a spoon, gently clinking the edges. Missy skillfully steers the conversation to his point of weakness, asking him, ‘where were you when your mother died?’ He says he doesn’t want to think about that and then there’s a close-up of the spoon stirring the tea in the cup. She interrogates him about the night his mother died, a night about which he feels tremendous guilt because he was watching television and didn’t call anyone to let them know she had not come home. Tears fall from his eyes. Missy asks him, ‘How do you feel now?’ ‘I can’t move,’ he replies. ‘You can’t move,’ she confirms. ‘Why can’t I move?’ ‘You’re paralyzed. Just like that day when you did nothing. You did nothing.’ Panicked, Chris scratches at the arms of the armchair. ‘Now, sink into the floor.’ Chris is now in his bedroom as a child, falling back into his bed, and then he is himself, falling into a black void in slow motion (**Image**), his arms moving helplessly as he tries to come back to the surface. Missy looks at him, his body is still in the chair with wide-opened teary eyes. He looks back at her, as if through a long tunnel. ‘Now you’re in the sunken place,’ she tells him. The point here is that the sunken place is a place of black paralysis, a place of imprisonment that exists within white liberalism under the banner of the post-racial. In order to escape this sunken place, Chris literally, and we the viewers metaphorically, will need to acknowledge how whites, and the discourse of the post-racial itself, which denies the existence of systemic racism in contemporary American society, traps African Americans in the ‘sunken place.’

Chris’s camera, a technology that produces visibility, becomes the instrument that will break the trance and make visible to Chris and to us the audience, the reality of what is

happening at the Armitage house, and by extension, metaphorically, in liberal, 'postracial' American society. For much of the second part of the film Chris has his camera in hand. After taking some photos in the woods, Chris spots Georgina in an upstairs window, standing before a mirror. We see him look up at her quizzically, trying to make sense of her strangeness. Importantly, he raises the camera and studies her through the viewfinder. It is as if looking at her through the camera lens will afford him insight into what has happened to her, will yield up useful information or knowledge that he is unable to see with his naked eye. Once again, there is a jarring, discordant noise when she feels the camera on her, as if the camera poses some kind of threat to the Coagula procedure and the postracial charade. When he looks back at the window she is gone. The camera will ultimately be a tool for exposing the way things really are, and as such a tool for waking up.

The camera performs precisely this kind of important work at the Armitage party, an event that lies at the heart of the film. The guests to this party are middle-aged and elderly white people, all of whom are curious about Chris, and who make inappropriate, racially-tinged comments both to and about him—even in his presence. At first, the camera enables his escape from the awkwardness of the affair; he declares to Rose – 'Pardon me, I'm going to take some pictures.' After wandering off, he meets a well-known, blind, gallery owner, who tells Chris that he admires his work: 'The images you capture, so brutal, so melancholic.' What the gallery owner is suggesting here is that Chris' photographs lay bare the brutality of the world around him. It is also first through the camera lens, that Chris sees the only other black man at this party. Chris approaches him, and pats him on the back, saying, 'Good to see another brother around here.' The man, adorned in a straw hat and tan sport jacket slowly turns around. With a vacant look in his eye, he responds slowly, 'Yes, of course it is.' Chris stares at him, perplexed, and the



man continues, 'Is something wrong?' A white, middle-aged woman, at least twice his age approaches him saying, 'There you are,' and she gives him something to hold for her. She introduces herself to Chris and asks who he is; when he explains, she replies, 'Fantastic. You two make a lovely couple.' The African American man then adds, 'Where are my manners? Logan, Logan King' he says, introducing himself. Chris continues to stare at him, perplexed by his affect and speech pattern. Logan leans into Philomena and says, 'Chris was just telling me how he felt much more comfortable with my being here.' At this, Philomena grows anxious and steers Logan away. Not only is Logan oddly paired with an older white woman, his affect, like those of Georgina and Walter, is peculiar—and Chris notices.

Later, when one of the guests singles out Chris to ask, "Do you find that being African American has more advantages or disadvantages in the modern world?" Chris calls Logan over, asking him to take the question. Logan smiles, and says, "Oh, well . . . I find that the African American experience for me has been for the most part very good, although I find it difficult to go into detail as I haven't had much desire to leave the house in a while," he says laughing, looking at Philomena. Chris, meanwhile, is covertly pulling his phone from his pocket to get a picture of Logan. Logan continues to talk about his lack of interest in going out, as Chris manages to aim and shoot. With the click of the photo, Logan freezes, and silence descends on the group. Logan's eyes open wide; they look glassy, scared. A trickle of blood streams down from his nose. A pulsating noise on the soundtrack sounds like a heartbeat. Chris and Logan stare at each other, and Logan says, frantically, "Get out." It is only when Chris snaps a *photo* of Logan that the African American man, whose body Logan's white consciousness was transplanted into, wakes up. In other words, taking a photo of Logan causes a cataclysmic event, breaking his 'trance;' although the Armitages dismiss the episode as a seizure brought on by the

flash, Chris believes otherwise. Both on the level of form and content, the photograph of Logan interrupts the party, ruptures the façade. All sound ceases. While it at first seems that Logan is angry at Chris for the photograph, throwing himself at Chris and yelling ‘get out’ again and again, we subsequently understand those words to be a warning *from* the rightful owner of the black body *to* Chris to get out, to escape from the Armitage house. Chris later explains to Rose that he recognized that guy—not Logan, but someone that he once knew. And indeed, later, when he manages to send the photo off to his best friend Rod, who is an agent for the Transportation Safety Administration, Rod confirms that the man now called Logan was a guy named Andre Hayworth who they used to play basketball with, and who, it turns out, had gone missing. On the basis of the photograph, Rod raises the alarm, ‘Oh Chris, you gotta get the fuck up out of there, man!’ Finally, it is photographs that convince Chris that Rose too is in on the scheme; he has gone up to her room to pack his bag when he finds a box of photos of Rose with other black boyfriends, after she had told Chris that he was her first. They confirm that Rose is a liar and not the anti-racist she seemed to be, that she too is involved in the scheme of professed liberal whites to exploit black people and their bodies for their own gain.

Perhaps the most symbolically significant event in the film is actually the main event of the Armitage party. What on the surface was a bourgeois garden party, is in reality, a slave auction (**image**). This is an astounding moment, a moment in which a pervasive post-racial discourse *coexists* with whites stripping African Americans of their civil rights and humanity. In a ‘bingo game,’ led by auctioneer Dean Armitage, the party guests, seated in rows, raise their cards as he calls out prices. At first, we don’t know what they are bidding on, but eventually the camera pulls back far enough to reveal a portrait of Chris on the dais beside Dean. In this scene,

Chris is sold to the blind gallery owner who later, once Chris is a prisoner in the basement of the Armitage house, explains it all to Chris on video: ‘part of your brain stays put. So, you won’t be gone completely. A sliver of you will still be in there somewhere, limited consciousness. You’ll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger. An audience, you’ll live in the Sunken Place.’ While Jim speaks, Chris thinks of—and we see represented—the images he captured on his camera – Logan with the bloody nose, Georgina—and he understands what has been done to them. Jim, the gallery owner, wants Chris’s eyes. Chris manages to elude this fate, but to leave the house he must escape Dean, Missy and Jeremy first. Rose comes out after him with a shotgun – ironically it is the image he anticipated in that first conversation with Rose. She sends Walter after him, who tackles him, but Chris manages to pull his phone from his pocket and take a photo of Walter, and just as when he took a photo of Logan, the soundtrack goes silent and Walter reels back. The camera, in this penultimate moment, breaks Walter from his trance, waking him up to the horror that has been done to him. He takes the gun from Rose, shoots her, and then shoots himself. Here, the camera literally saves Chris. At the very end, Rod, Chris’s friend arrives and they drive away together.

But let us return to what are by far the most startling and horrifying images of the film—the slave auction. In this scene, there is cross cutting between Rose and Chris, out by the lake, talking about Chris’s plan to return to the city, but in a very normal way, and the unthinkable, *abnormal*, live auctioning of a human being. The cross cutting here emphasizes the *coexistence* of these two events—this auction is literally happening within, and is perhaps a central facet of, liberal white society. By depicting a slave auction – white people in a seemingly civilized fashion bidding on a black body—the film performs a radical form of history-writing, bringing the present into contact with an unexpected past precisely to *interrupt* the present, to serve as a

wake-up call. In his posthumous *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin (1999) attempts to articulate his ideas about history as activated by what he calls a constellation, which itself has an important visual dimension. He writes, ‘It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather . . . what has been comes together in a clash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of the what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not only temporal in nature but figural *bildlich*’ (Benjamin, 1999, p. 463). History is only ever a product of the present, a dialectic between what was with what is, and as such possesses the capacity to expose the crisis of the present. This dialectical image of Chris, an African American human being for sale in 2017 New York, is in Benjamin’s (1999, p. 463) words, ‘genuinely historical’ in that it is an image that becomes legible ‘in the now of its recognizability.’ The slave auction in the present forces us to re-read the present in a radically different way. ‘Articulating the past historically’ writes Benjamin (2003, p.391), ‘does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.’ The slave auction in the present is just such an image. It calls attention to the emergency that *is* the present. By imaging—quite literally figuring on screen the slave auction in contemporary, ostensibly ‘post-racial’ American society, the film brings the present to crisis through a historical materialist gesture.

For Benjamin, history thus bears a kind of utopian potential in its capacity to reframe the present in order to change course. And in this sense, the project of redemptive history is on a fundamental level political. It is history aimed at changing the course of the present, at rupturing

the status quo by awakening people to the reality in which they live by bringing the past into a dialectical relationship with the present. The task of history as here imagined is to render visible the material conditions and the social relations that are masked by ideology. I have suggested here that one such strategy is to defamiliarize the present, to render it strange. In the film *Get Out*, Chris's camera performs a radical role. It is by means of his camera the true conditions of racial exploitation in contemporary America become legible. Even before the camera breaks Logan and Walter out of their trances, his photographs, which attempt to freeze a moment in order to scrutinize it, function much like the 'crime scenes' of Atget's early images. Again and again, Chris trains his camera on Georgina, then on Logan, as if anticipating that the camera will yield up information about what has been done to them to render them so odd. Like Chris, Jordan Peele, here uses film, a mass cultural audio-visual technology, to bring scrutiny to the present and achieve this kind of awakening. What I am further suggesting is that the film engages in a particular kind of history writing toward this end – Peele uses this technology to constellate the past and the present in order to radically reframe the present. I am describing this process in generic terms, as 'horror vérité', a style of filmmaking which relies on visual and aural strategies to defamiliarize the everyday with a goal of, in Kracauer's words, '*letting people come to terms with things they are otherwise blindly subject to.*' By juxtaposing a highly recognizable everyday with those elements that seem unimaginable—we are seeing what we cannot be seeing, a slave auction in 2017 America—the film forces the kind of crude thinking that is tied to action. Furthermore, in this instance, this radical form of history writing is not relegated to the ivory tower, but is disseminated through mass culture and to the masses, in Brecht's words, 'speak[ing] up decisively for the interests of its own time.'

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