

Jordan Peele: From Comedy to Horror

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Introduction

“Like comedy, horror has an ability to provoke thought and further the conversation on real social issues in a very powerful way.”

-Jordan Peele, *The Daily Show* interview

Cinema has evolved throughout the years and it is bound to continue but never leaves certain techniques behind. Many directors and producers populate the film industry today but few really make an impact on the cinematic audience. Genre film is important to categorize to let the audience know what type of film they will be watching and what to expect in the plot. Genre film has also changed and developed today and I will be discussing one that has resurfaced recently: the social thriller. According to the 2017 Brooklyn Academy of Music series “The Art of the Social Thriller,” the genre has been around since Alfred Hitchcock like *Rear Window* (1954) and *Psycho* (1960), *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967), *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), and *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992) just to name a few. The BAM’s description of this series states: “To mark the release of his directorial debut, Jordan Peele curates an eclectic selection of the films that influenced him, from auteur-driven thrillers to social issue dramas to 1990s new-classics” (BAM). What brings all of these movies together? What do they have in common? The social thriller genre uses horror elements to comment on and call out social inequity and today we see movies like Jordan Peele’s work, *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022) bringing back the genre and impacting audiences. Even if Jordan Peele hadn't invented the genre, he made it gain attention after *Get Out* was released because cinema hadn’t seen this genre in a long time. Many

other directors got the inspiration or were pushed to release their work after Peele made his mark with the genre and followed his path, as we see in *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019), *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019), and *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018). Why was it the right time to make these movies? Did the political tension in the United States lead to these creations? Was Jordan Peele successful at repopularizing the genre? Is eventually depoliticized and subsumed by the racist American entertainment industry? These are questions I will be answering in my chapters starting with Chapter One: “The Political Value of Genre Film,” followed by Chapter Two: “The ‘Post-Racial’ Era and the Resurgence of Fascist Politics,” and finally Chapter Three: “The Horror of Cinema.”

In my first chapter, “The Political Value of Genre Film,” I will be talking about genre film and how Jordan Peele’s appearance in cinema has brought the social thriller back to light in pop culture again. How is the social thriller really defined? In my research, I came across Alison Landsberg’s article “Horror Vérité: Politics and History in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017)” who describes horror vérité as a horror that uses the standard cinematic conventions of the genre to depict reality making humanity the monster. Landsberg connects this idea to Siegfried Kracauer’s concept of how horror and film have had a tight relationship since the beginning of cinema’s history and that it’s been shown in films for a long time which he talks about in his book *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. The book goes over the historical events occurring at the time examining four phases of German film starting from The Archaic Period (1895–1918), The Postwar Period (1918–1924), The Stabilized Period (1924–1929), and finally The Pre-Hitler Period (1930–1933). He makes sure to highlight how *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) reflects Germany’s society at the time and the psychology behind Nazi propaganda films. Kracauer emphasizes, “A politically motivated

filmmaker can exploit the genre for political purposes to make an unimaginable reality imaginable and visible” (Landsberg, 632). In this chapter, I will be analyzing the film *Get Out*, which depicts the story of Chris, a black man that goes to meet his white girlfriend’s parents where he discovers the horrors of the family.

My second chapter, “The ‘Post-Racial’ Era and the Resurgence of Fascist Politics,” will talk about Jordan Peele’s career beginning with comedy before he became a director. What started everything was the comedy sketch show *MADtv* (1995-2016) inspired by *MAD Magazine* which was receiving Primetime Emmy Awards while Peele was on the show. This is where he met Keegan-Michael Key and in 2012 they put together their own show that ran on Comedy Central until 2015, *Key and Peele*. In their sketches, Key and Peele have messages to convey to the audience through humor to call out oppression, pop culture moments, politics in society. This show came out during Barack Obama’s second presidential term which was argued by Lisa Guerrero in “Can I Live? Contemporary Black Satire and the State of Postmodern Double Consciousness” to be “post-racial,” as in a theoretical concept of the United States being free of discrimination and prejudice based on race. Regardless of whether he was liked or not, Obama’s presidency was important for its racial symbolism because it was a turning point for race in America to uncover the truth. People believed that since we finally had a black president racism was over in the United States, however, Guerrero states that this gave racism more power because people thought it would go unnoticed. This gave rise to black creators like Jordan Peele to make satire and I will be analyzing skits like “Obama’s Anger Translator” and “Negrotown” from *Key and Peele*. I will also be discussing *Us*’s impact on social class and race in America as discussed in the podcast “Still Processing” hosted by Wesley Morris and J Wortham. The film depicts a woman visiting her childhood home at the beach with her family only to find out that

they have a doppelganger family. Morris and Wortham analyze *Us* and sparks the question of “would *Us* be the same movie if the main family was white?” and they criticize the movie industry for often making white people the protagonists of scary movies. By putting black people the main characters of a horror film that is typically about white people, Jordan Peele manages to appeal to a black audience and make it personal to them. I think it is refreshing to see a different view of a horror movie, it makes the genre more relatable and enjoyable to every type of audience.

My final chapter, “The Horror of Cinema,” will circle back to my first point about the social thriller and the real horrors of cinema that Peele conveys in his movie *Nope*. The film takes place on a ranch in California where OJ (Daniel Kaluuya) and his father Otis Sr. (Keith David) train their horses to be in Hollywood movies. After Otis Sr. is mysteriously killed by things falling out of the sky, OJ and his sister Emerald (Keke Palmer) see a peculiar saucer in the sky over the ranch. They install better cameras to catch it to have proof to show the world. I will be comparing the surveillance of blackness that Simone Browne discusses in her book *Dark Matters: On the Survival of Blackness* to the alien hovering and watching over the ranch. As in his other films, Jordan Peele experiments with horror and in *Nope*, but this one stands out because it combines a western with traditional Hollywood style. This film tells a bigger story than what we see, it depicts the real horrors of cinema.

Chapter One: The Political Value of Genre Film

“Each one of my movies is going to be about one of these different social demons. The first one, being ‘Get Out,’ is about race and neglect and marginalization.”

-Jordan Peele, *Insider*

When *Get Out* was released, the Golden Globes categorized it as a comedy. The director expressed that he was not asked for input in the categorization of *Get Out*. Sarcastically, Peele tweeted that the film is a documentary and commented on how racism and black people’s cry for help is never taken seriously (Kohn). So the argument and confusion around what type of movie *Get Out* is has been an issue from the start, which was disappointing but not surprising for Jordan Peele and black people in the United States. In my research to find out what Jordan Peele’s approach to film genre is, I came across the term horror vérité in Alison Landsberg’s essay “Horror vérité: politics and history in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017).” Horror vérité uses horror’s tools to critique society and its problems and she calls attention to the terms endemic and chronic horror which is “a horror that society refuses to see” (Landsberg, 630), accurately representing the reality of racism to this day. *Get Out* has experienced this by being categorized as a comedy at the Golden Globes because what Peel depicts in the film is a truth that is ignored by society and is not usually represented in the cinema industry. Jordan Peele jokingly tweeted that it was a documentary which I think perfectly reflects the situation because in my opinion it was a ridiculous choice and deserves its own category. “The major point to identify here is that we don’t want our truth trivialized. The label of comedy is often a trivial thing. The real question is, what are you laughing at? Are you laughing at the horror, the suffering? Are you disregarding

what's real about this project? That's why I said, yeah — it's a documentary.” () How does Jordan Peele redefine the boundaries between comedy and horror? Why was it the right time to make these movies? Did the political tension like Obama's presidency and eventually Donald Trump's presidency in the United States lead to these creations? Was Jordan Peele successful at bringing the genre back and expressing his concerns about American societal issues?

What is horror vérité?

In this chapter, I will be talking about the definition of horror vérité according to Alison Landsberg and how Jordan Peele's genre connects to it in many ways. What is the social thriller? What makes Jordan Peele's movies part of this genre? I will analyze how Peele is able to incorporate horror conventions and reflect them on the political state of the United States and repopularize the genre.

Alison Landsberg introduces the definition of horror vérité by focusing attention on the work of other scholars like Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Linda Williams. Landsberg coined the term “horror vérité” or truthful horror she connects to theorist and thinker Walter Benjamin. The “optical unconscious” of photography is a phrase that Benjamin dished out in 1935 to describe photography as something that is able to show things that are invisible to the naked eye. The camera shows us revelations other than what we see with our eyes and according to Benjamin, is a “mass medium, can speak directly to the masses” (Landsberg, 630). This is what Landsberg focuses on in her article, the exposure of reality to the masses that is covered up by ideology and *Get Out* is an excellent example of horror vérité.

Most importantly, Alison Landsberg focuses on Siegfried Kracauer's words on film and horror having an important relationship with each other. Kracauer states that cinema has always

displayed “terrifying events” (Landsberg, 630) and makes it clear that horror’s objective is to show the viewer a reality we don’t usually see because it is covered up. He emphasizes, “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” (Landsberg, 632) and that horror can be used as a way to bring to light issues in society that harm groups of people. Kracauer’s book on the analysis of the history of German cinema “From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film” explores the comparison of Dr. Caligari to Adolf Hitler. Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* came out in 1920 and is about Francis and his friend Alan encountering the peculiar Dr. Caligari at a carnival in Germany. The men see Caligari showing off his somnambulist, Cesare, a hypnotized man who the doctor claims can see into the future. Shockingly, Cesare then predicts Alan's death, and by morning it comes true, making Cesare the primary suspect of the mysterious case.

The obvious theme of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is sanity and insanity. The movie starts out with a man who is telling a story of him and his wife’s experience to his friend, and it goes into a flashback. At first you think that Cesare, the somnambulist, is portrayed as the “insane” guy who the audience should be paying attention to. But in fact, there is a major plot twist at the very end of the movie, after the man ends the story about the terrible events that happened to him. We realize that he happens to be the “insane” person.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari “imprisons” its audience in a claustrophobic setting through its use of lighting. The surrounding space of a subject’s face in close-up is often darkened. This is seen with Cesare’s introduction; his gruesome appearance is emphasized because the frame is made up of just his face. The murder of Alan also uses harsh shadows and low-key lighting as a way of highlighting the drama and disorienting the audience. The audience never sees the actual

murder instead, we focus on a nearby wall on the shadows that wrestle for their lives. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* had a big influence on the horror genre by being the first film to define the genre through unique design and expressionist style.

Symbolism in Get Out

Get Out is a great example of horror vérité because it uses the typical horror mechanics to reveal racism. Landsberg describes the racial exploitation that goes on in the movie which occurs in real life. What *Get Out* does by telling a story in the present of white exploitation where white people steal black people's bodies is to remind the audience how much racism is still alive today.

The film depicts an interracial couple, Chris Washington and Rose Armitage, going to visit Rose's parents for a weekend. Before they go, Chris expresses his concern over the fact that her parents don't know that he is black but she reassures him. On their way there, Rose hits a deer in an accident and the police ask Chris for his ID even though he wasn't driving. This is the first instance in the film where Chris is targeted for his race considering the statistics of cops pulling over black people for no apparent reason. Rose shows her disgust and tells the cop there is no purpose in asking for his ID since he wasn't the one driving. They get to the Armitage residency and Missy and Dean Armitage welcome Chris with open arms. Chris notices that the housekeepers, Georgina and Walter, are both black which Dean points out, saying that he realizes how it may look, but they were hired for Rose's grandparents and they could not let them go. Chris has a few strange encounters with Georgina and Walter but is not sure how to go about it. Missy is a psychiatrist and tricks Chris into hypnotizing him to stop smoking cigarettes. He starts to think that he is noticing weird things because of what she did to him and his impulse to smoke is gone. When the Armitages host a party with wealthy white family and friends, Chris gets

bombarded by unexpected and inappropriate questions on his race and physique that leave him speechless. The moment he sees another black person, Andre, he decides to approach him and expresses his relief but gets a strange and surprising reaction from him. He tries to take a photo of him on his phone to show his friend Rod Williams who is a TSA officer but the flash goes off and this triggers him. He screams at him to “get out!” repeatedly. Chris now understands that there is something sketchy going on in this house and with these people.

Alison Landsberg discusses three aspects of the movie: how the mechanics of the horror genre are used to expose racial violence, the dialectic of sleeping and waking up, and Benjamin’s past and present argument. The film exhibits typical tropes like a haunted house where the protagonist is terrorized and tortured. Additionally, Peele uses jumpscare that call attention to racial hierarchies, for example with the characters of Georgina and Walter. The way they act makes the viewer question what is wrong with them and their creepy behavior ties into the horror genre and racial plot.

The second topic covered by Landsberg is sleeping and waking up, with Missy Armitage’s hypnosis of the main character, Chris, to keep him in the “Sunken Place” which serves as a representation of a place of black paralysis. On the other hand, waking up is symbolized by Chris’s camera and photography since it helps him find out the true intentions of the Armitage family towards him. Thirdly, the historical importance that affects the past and present events that are referenced in *Get Out*. The portrayal of a slave auction in the present day is a surprising and traumatizing event to see. The movie depicts a party at the Armitage’s house which turns out to be an auction to bid for Chris’s body. How I interpret Peele’s inclusion of an auction is that racism is still very much alive and well, even though it may not be as terribly depicted as it once was, as Landsberg states, “By juxtaposing a highly recognizable every day

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” (Landsberg, 641). For us to see something like an auction that used to occur a long time ago today puts us out of place in an uncomfortable way but reminds us that racism and prejudice acts are not ending.

Get Out and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* have a few things in common that go back to the origin of the genre of horror. As I mentioned, Siegfried Kracauer’s idea on horror stems from war and torture depicted in films as he talks about in his article “Hollywood’s Terror Films” on *Commentary* in 1946. Kracauer mentions how films have exposed the brutality that Nazism brought to the world and installed fear in the United States. He emphasizes how at the time movies started to treat horror as entertainment and the genre was developing and progressing. He additionally brings up films like *Gaslight* and *Shock* that deal with psychological horror where the male characters don’t use physical violence or murder towards the women they want to get rid of. Instead, they use their psychological means to make them think they are crazy. Not only does Peele use grotesque visuals in *Get Out* but he is also able to create this mental torture with the Sunken Place.

Get Out vs. Caligari

When Chris meets Rose’s parents and they’re sitting outside at the table chatting, Rose’s mother Missy lightly taps her cup with her spoon and her father Dean asks Chris if he smokes and says that it is a nasty habit. He lets him know that Missy can get rid of it for him through hypnosis claiming she stopped his own habit in the past. That night, Chris goes out to smoke a cigarette and when he comes back into the house Missy is sitting in her office almost like she was waiting

for him. She turns the light on and immediately says: “You realize how dangerous smoking is?” and Chris’s reply is an uncomfortable chuckle with a “yes.” When she tells him to sit down in her office after he smokes she is holding a tea cup and a spoon. She makes small talk at first and then asks him if he is interested in how the hypnosis works. They joke around about the stereotypes of the practice until she begins to ask personal questions like if he smokes in front of Rose. She begins what seems a joke at first by stirring the tea in her cup and making him tell the story of his mom passing away as he clearly expresses that he is not interested but she continues to be persistent. We hear sounds from Chris’s point of view like the spoon hitting the cup, the rain that Chris was hearing when his mom died, and Missy’s voice. We see a vision of young Chris watching TV. “Where was your mom?” “What did you do?” “You didn’t call anyone? Why not?” Missy insists with the questions and Chris begins to cry but doesn’t really seem to notice like he is in shock and reliving that moment again. He scratches his nails on the couch and we see a young Chris doing the same. Chris is now paralyzed and all of a sudden Missy utters: “Now sink into the floor. Sink.” as we see Chris fall down a black hole and Missy becomes a face in a box at the top of the hole. Missy calls this the sunken place. Chris floats down a black void that seems endless but a prison at the same time where black people are alive but powerless. It’s like a vision of what you feel when you’re falling in a dream and never touch the ground. In 2017 when *Get Out* was released, Jordan Peele tweeted: “We’re marginalized. No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us,” describing the Sunken Place. (Lincoln) We get more information on the meaning of the sunken place from the director on the *Los Angeles Times*: “You know when you’re going to sleep and it feels like you’re about to fall, so you wake up? What if you never woke up? Where would you fall? And that was kind of the most harrowing idea to me. And as I’m writing it becomes clear that the sunken place is this metaphor for the

system that is suppressing the freedom of black people, of many outsiders, many minorities. There's lots of different sunken places. But this one specifically became a metaphor for the prison-industrial complex, the lack of representation of black people in film, in genre. The reason Chris in the film is falling into this place, being forced to watch this screen, that no matter how hard he screams at the screen he can't get agency across. He's not represented. And that, to me, was this metaphor for the black horror audience, a very loyal fan base who comes to these movies, and we're the ones that are going to die first. So the movie for me became almost about representation within the genre, within itself, in a weird way" (Howe). As I mentioned earlier, Alison Landsberg analyzes the meaning of the sunken place which is represented as a place of black paralysis. This place is considered as a "post-racial" realm and through hypnosis it traps black people under white liberalism and Chris has to literally try to get out.

In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* Cesare is hypnotized by Dr. Caligari to commit gruesome acts like murder. He is put on "display" at the carnival in town. In his book, Siegfried Kracauer points out how Dr. Caligari's character embodies the German system. Kracauer goes through the Postwar Period in Europe describing the life of the two authors of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer and how their trauma and experiences during World War I at a young age influenced the film. Hungry for power, Dr. Caligari uses his somnambulist as a soldier: "According to the pacifist-minded Janowitz, they had created Cesare with the dim design of portraying the common man who, under the pressure of compulsory military service, is drilled to kill and to be killed" (Kracauer, 65). Kracauer explains how the character of Cesare was created and how much he represents Germany's violent government. The reason why I think this film and the modern *Get Out* are very similar in their message to the audience is because of their common goal of criticizing systemic oppression regarding white authority and racism in the

United States and old Germany's Nazi world. Chris is hypnotized to be controlled and is forced to succumb to the power of the Armitage family who symbolize systemic racism masked by white liberalism in America. "The revolutionary meaning of the story reveals itself unmistakably at the end, with the disclosure of the psychiatrist as Caligari: reason over-powers unreasonable power, insane authority is symbolically abolished" (Kracauer, 65). Here, I agree with Kracauer's interpretation of Caligari because it goes hand in hand with the movie's intent to shine light on the dynamic of systemic power and the comparison to Hitler and nazism.

The Sunken Place

The way Chris can find out what is truly going on in the Armitage family is through his camera. Something I found very interesting was how Alison Landsberg brings up Walter Benjamin's "optical unconscious" of photography. Photography holds power in showing different outlooks of life and allows us to notice things we usually wouldn't. Landsberg makes this tool a symbol for a way out of the house by comparing Chris's camera to visibility. We are introduced to Chris's photography very early in the film. We see black and white photos on the wall in his modern apartment as we hear the nostalgic and eye opening song "Redbone" by Childish Gambino in the background. We get a sense of what the protagonist's lifestyle as a photographer is like and we see him going through and analyzing pictures on his camera. Chris's camera gets its own up close moment shot which signifies the role it will play for the rest of the film. It's like he is seeing or trying to figure out the truth through his camera lens. For example, when Chris is going around the woods taking photos he comes across one of the windows of the house upstairs and sees Georgina through his camera like he was examining her.

The end of *Get Out* tackles Chris's realization of being trapped in this house or more metaphorically in a mental prison, the Sunken Place. He realizes that Rose and her parents are the masterminds of a twisted procedure. When Chris is trapped in the Sunken Place, he finds himself strapped to a chair in front of a television that's playing a video of Roman Armitage, Rose's grandfather. He is explaining what Chris will endure and the procedure that the Armitage family has been doing to black people that consists of brain transplants into other people's bodies to claim immortality. He is then shown a live video of the person who wants his eyes, Jim Hudson, the blind art dealer that admired Chris for his talent. We soon see Jim on an operating table and Dean preparing for the surgery. We get an explicit visual of a scalpel incising the top of Jim's head and we are shown him removing the skin in the reflection of his glasses. What follows is a close up of Jim's face as Dean cuts his skull open as blood leaks out. Our eyes are then completely exposed to Jim's brain as Jim removes what separates his brain from the top of his head. What Peele created here is probably squeamish sounds of disgust from the audience at the movie theater during this scene.

When Rose's brother comes to get Chris for his surgery, he is able to stop the hypnosis by putting cotton stuffing in his ears and he manages to kill Dean by stabbing him with a deer head which connects back to him commenting on the fact that he doesn't like deers and we should get rid of them. In the process, he knocks over a candle that sets fire to the operating room with Jim inside. He stabs Missy and Jeremy and runs out of the house. He fights off Georgina, who is possessed by Rose's grandmother Mariannne, and Walter who is possessed by her grandfather, Roman. He flashes the light in Walter's face to get back into himself again who shoots Rose with her rifle, as we see a police car approaching the scene we think it's over for Chris. However, Rod is in the driver's seat and Chris runs to the car and they drive off. We feel a sense of relief now

that we know that Chris is free and out of the house and additionally he is not in trouble for escaping. For a second in our head Chris has two possible ways out but we don't know what is coming next. Jordan Peele has commented on the fact that there were two alternate endings to *Get Out* that depicted Chris going to prison which was filmed and is available on YouTube. (YouTube) We see Rose on the ground after Chris stabs her grabbing him for help uttering "I love you's." He chokes her as she smiles through the pain and stops breathing while red and blue lights flash towards the scene. Two cops come out of the car pointing guns at Chris and the shot fades to black. The next scene depicts Rod visiting Chris in jail to ask him to remember names to get as much evidence against the Armitage family. However, Chris interrupts him to state that he stopped it and that's what matters. He walks away as the gates close behind him. There is another ending that shows Rod getting into the Armitage house and finding Chris stuck in the Sunken Place forever but it is too late to save him. Both of these bleak alternate endings would have changed the message of the movie by leaving a hopeless taste in the viewer's mouth. By allowing Chris to walk away alive and free from the law, Jordan Peele chose to give him freedom after succumbing to a house of horrors. Don't get me wrong, Chris will still have to deal with racism for the rest of his life. However, Peele creates a hopeful outcome and leaves the audience with hope for the future. Hope for the future is part of Peele's message in his works but also he doesn't hesitate to not sugarcoat the reality of racism. Since *Key and Peele*, him and Keegan-Michael Key criticized the ideology that produced the "post-racial" era that began because of Obama's presidency. Why is it called the "post-racial" era? What makes it "post-racial"? What did Jordan Peele do to create this term and movies that take place in this era? These are all questions I will discuss in my second chapter "The 'Post-Racial' Era and the Resurgence of Fascist Politics."

Chapter 2: The “Post-Racial” Era and the Resurgence of Fascist Politics

“The movie [*Get Out*] was written in the Obama era, which I’ve been calling the post-racial lie.”

-Jordan Peele, *Vanity Fair*

What started Jordan Peele’s career was the comedy sketch show *MADtv* inspired by *MAD Magazine* which was receiving Primetime Emmy Awards while he was on the show. But before that, he would perform Boom Chicago in Amsterdam and The Second City in Chicago. When Peele met Keegan-Michael Key, they bonded over comedy and starred together on *MADtv*. The show was created by David Salzman, Fax Bahr, and Adam Small and it ran on Fox from 1995 to 2009 for 14 seasons. Today it is considered a bolder version of *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present) with a lower budget which fell behind it in ratings and was eventually canceled due to budgetary concerns. Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key’s careers and friendship stemmed right there with sketches like “Man up! Man up!” In this sketch, Peele plays a groom who is worried about bad luck on his wedding day. Key plays his best man who tries to calm him down as they start chanting “Man up! Man up!” followed by a rain dance to stop the storm outside. They continue with different hex dances after every bad luck incident that occurs like the wedding planner entering the room with an open umbrella. Their characters represent hyper masculine men which creates a funny contrast with their good luck dances. Their choice of acting and chanting definitely comments on society’s need to label men as macho and to never be scared of anything. Another sketch “The Los Angeles Lakers welcome their first gay basketball

player” depicts Jordan Peele playing a gay basketball player on the famous Los Angeles Lakers team. He over exaggeratedly uses a high pitched voice and hand gestures while talking about himself sitting on the table in front of journalists and interviewers. When asked about his stats he claimed to have a 29 inch waist. The coach explains how getting a gay player would help Kobe Bryant’s rape accusations because “the gay guy will not have a problem with the ladies.” Peele and Key have been criticizing society’s stereotypes regarding race, gender, and class on a less popular and on a lower budget in the shadows of *Saturday Night Live*. However, they did not have as much creative control as they wanted to have. What followed was the birth of *Key and Peele* that ran on Comedy Central from 2012 until 2015 and won five Emmys and received 54 nominations. The format of the show is a mix between on stage dialogue and that introduces a concept that they later show more in detail in a short funny sketch. Alternating with sketch scenes in cars, clubs, streets, houses etc. Key and Peele create a visual representation of their ideas and comment on them like a talk show. In most of the sketches there is a message that Key and Peele want to convey to the audience through humor using racial and gender stereotypes to call out oppression in society. In this chapter, I will be analyzing the type of humor that was born during a time of political tension in the United States, the “post-racial” era with the presidency of Barack Obama followed by Donald Trump. How did Jordan Peele start with satire in *Key and Peele* and end up with horror today? Did he feel a need to make this TV show and movies to show the world the resurgence of fascist politics?

Black Satire

Key and Peele came out during Barack Obama’s second presidential term which was argued by many to be “post-racial.” I put “post-racial” in quotes because it is a theoretical concept of the

United States being free of discrimination and prejudice based on race. In November 2009, conservative radio host Lou Dobbs said: “We are now in a 21st-century post-partisan, post-racial society.” Two months later, Chris Matthews, an MSNBC host, said of President Obama, “He is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour.” I did not learn about this term until I started my research on this project. To really comprehend what the “post-racial” era represents it’s important to acknowledge systemic racism in America. In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander talks about the criminal justice system in the United States: “What this book is intended to do—the only thing it is intended to do—is to stimulate a much-needed conversation about the role of the criminal justice system in creating and perpetuating racial hierarchy in the United States. The fate of millions of people—indeed the future of the black community itself—may depend on the willingness of those who care about racial justice to re-examine their basic assumptions about the role of the criminal justice system in our society. The fact that more than half of the young black men in any large American city are currently under the control of the criminal justice system (or saddled with criminal records) is not—as many argue—just a symptom of poverty or poor choices, but rather evidence of a new racial caste system at work.” (Alexander, 16)

The term “post-racial” is not that common and is claimed to not exist considering the events regarding black people’s discrimination that continue to occur. It is criticized by many authors that write about racial issues in the United States, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates states it perfectly in his article on *The Atlantic* “There Is No Post-Racial America.” He expresses: “The Obama-era qualifier is also inherently flawed, because it assumes that the long struggle that commenced when the first enslaved African arrived on American soil centuries ago could somehow be resolved in an instant, by the mere presence of a man who is not a king.” (Coates)

He questions how Barack Obama becoming the first black president in this country was supposed to end racism basically. I believe that it is superficial to think that the simple election of a black man as president leads to the end of racism in America.

“Can I Live? Contemporary Black Satire and the State of Postmodern Double Consciousness” by Lisa Guerrero, highlights exactly this. Regardless of whether he was liked or not, Obama’s presidency was important for its racial symbolism because it was a turning point for America to uncover the truth. Guerrero calls attention to black humanity in the US. Guerrero’s main argument is examining the relationship between the postmodern condition and the post-racial myth and how it formed the work of black satire in the twenty-first century. The author brings up the Black Lives Matter movement and how much of a shock it is for black people to still be fighting to be considered human beings, “The breathtaking aspect of this campaign is that the humanity of black people isn’t considered a logical conclusion to draw in American society; in contemporary America, black humanity is a hypothesis.” (Guerrero, 267) She highlights the impact that capitalism has on African Americans as she states that capitalism happened to African Americans. Therefore, satire by black artists is made to assess society and justify and validate black rage. Guerrero uses an example as a turning point for the “post-racial” period that led to black satire. Barack Obama winning the presidential election in 2008 was a moment of truth for racial progress in America and the racial symbolism made an impact. (Guerrero, 268) Now, it was thought that racism wasn’t as bad as it used to be and the country’s problematic past was forgotten while it allowed discrimination to flourish even more. Lisa Guerrero highlights how blind America was to racist acts after Obama, “Our belief as a nation in our own goodness and obvious racial enlightenment has, ironically, laid the groundwork for racism to grow unfettered, reaching shocking heights that recall Jim Crow-era America.”

(Guerrero, 269) The moment this belief arose, black satire took a step forward with shows like *Key and Peele* on Comedy Central which began during Obama's second term. Racism in America has made it normal to view Obama's ideas as "too radical" or "too conservative" (Matthews, 140).

The impact of *Key and Peele*

The way *Key and Peele* depicted black rage through satire was through skits like "Obama's Anger Translator, Luther." Jordan Peele plays a great President Obama and in the first sketch, he clarifies the rumors about him not getting angry saying that his anger isn't exhibited like most black men. He then introduces his anger translator, Luther, portraying a stereotype of an angry black man and imagined blackness. Luther is a symbol for the anger toward the injustices that black people face in America and Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele created this character to call out systemic racism as Luther also calls out world leaders like Kim Jong-un and members of the Tea Party. The bottom line is that in the United States black anger is funny when it's joked about but the real one is unacceptable and threatening. Another sketch from *Key and Peele* that emphasizes black rage and post-racial America is "Negrotown" which depicts a utopian place that is safe for black people. Watching it is almost hilarious because of the impossibility of this place being real.

Key and Peele did something that was very new at the time and was needed in America to initiate a discourse that people were hiding from. Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key as two black men in the US had to deal with their own experiences with systemic racism and identity. In "Brother From Another Mother" Zadie Smith tells us the story about Peele and Key's careers as comedians and calls attention to how much hard work they went through to create a

good comedy duo to make people laugh. She goes through their personal lives and how they shaped their career. For example, on *Fresh Air*, Jordan Peele expresses his childhood anxiety about speaking like his mother as in “white” which is one of the reasons why he is passionate at acting like so many different people and constantly changing the way he speaks (Smith, 9). Key and Peele’s comedy boldness came from when they met in 2003 “when they ‘fell in comedy love’” while performing (Smith, 10). They both auditioned for the satirical sketch show *MADtv* that presented a different type of humor and was easy for Key and Peele to be themselves also because sketch ideas didn’t have to go through a number of producers.

Peele’s objective with comedy has always been to start a racial discourse and expose social realities that society chooses to ignore. He continued this legacy now with horror as we see in *Get Out* and an interesting point about him redefining the boundaries between comedy and horror is found in Thai-Catherine Matthews’ “Screaming with Laughter: How Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* Rereads Obama by Rewriting the Black Messiah.” The author emphasizes how *Get Out* is a symbol of the post-racialism myth and the Black Messiah trustworthy to black people. Released after Trump replacing Obama’s place, Peele proves the point highlighted in Guerrero’s essay about America’s blindness to racism because we had a black president. Donald Trump was the outcome of that, a person that bluntly supports white supremacy. The United States made racist acts even more acceptable which made it okay for a person like Trump with fascist ideas to be in power. Matthews says that “the black experience is a place between laughter and screaming” (Matthews, 158) and that it is either not taken seriously or greatly threatening. The protagonist in *Get Out* is stuck between two identities, his own and whiteness around him. As Matthews states, “This stripping of mind from will recalls Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* construct” which gives meaning to the sunken place that Chris is forced into by Missy through hypnosis.

To connect to this argument about how race is treated in the United States, I will also be discussing Peele's movie *Us* and its impact on social class and race in America as Wesley Morris and J Wortham talk about in the podcast "Still Processing". *Us* opens with a quote that states "There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States... Abandoned subway systems, unused routes, and deserted mine shafts... Many have no known purpose at all." This definitely creeped me out because Jordan Peele really got in my head by making me imagine the countless abandoned empty tunnels under us. I wonder if there was one under me in that moment. The film depicts a woman, Adelaide Wilson, visiting her childhood home at Santa Cruz Beach with her family only to find out that they have a doppelganger family. The film starts with a young Adelaide going to a funhouse on the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk with her parents where she sees a girl identical to her in the house of mirrors, following this she stops talking and is distant from her family. We skip to an adult Adelaide with a husband, Gabe, and two kids, Jason and Zora going back to her childhood home at the Santa Cruz beach on vacation. She starts noticing little coincidences that make her think something bad is about to happen. Like a frisbee landing perfectly on a circle design on a towel. One night the Wilsons see a family that looks exactly like them standing outside of the house. They fight them off until they watch the news and realize everyone in the country has a Tethered, as they are called, now and wants to kill them. Their white friends, the Tylers, a couple with twin girls, are murdered by their doppelgangers and as the mother is gasping for air she asks Ophelia (a version of Alexa) to call the police. This is personally my favorite scene because, instead, Ophelia plays "Fuck Tha Police" by NWA and the reaction that it got from the audience at the movie theater I was in was priceless. The end of the film reveals a big plot twist that I did not expect when it arrived. Adelaide and her Tethered, Red, were switched when Red went to the boardwalk with her family

as a child. Red was the original girl and was confined to a life of misery in the underground tunnels living the life she was forced to live. The podcast analyzes *Us* and sparks the question of “would *Us* be the same movie if the main family was white?” They criticize the movie industry for often making white people the protagonists of scary movies and that it is refreshing to see a different view of a horror movie like this. “With *Us*, Peele takes the opposite approach: His latest horror movie features a predominantly black cast, but race doesn’t influence the plot. As a result, Peele delivers a more complex assessment of black identity by ignoring it altogether.” When Wesley Morris brings up the fact that the film would be the same if race was taken out of it, compared to *Get Out* that is solely based on race and there wouldn’t be a movie if it was removed from the film. However, J Wortham points out that because the protagonists in *Us* is a black family, race does make the movie different. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman, 1978) *The Strangers* (Bryan Bertino, 2008) are all films that exist already that tell the same story as *Us* if race was taken out of the equation. I agree with J Wortham, *Us* is self-aware of its blackness and Jordan Peele’s point is to make it personal and relatable. Those films show a story with a white family but *Us* is the first movie in this genre with a black family which inherently creates a different story because it reaches a different audience. J Wortham emphasizes this point: “It is different when you add in the element of self aware black people” which makes Jordan Peele’s work unique and necessary to comment on a racial America. I do indeed agree with J Wortham’s point about *Us* having its own category and not to throw it in the mix of “films that already exist.” A movie like this was not made before because having a black family as the protagonists changes the course and meaning of the experience. It connects to a black audience as well which is new in this genre because most horror/thriller/psychological thrillers are with white people that depict only one type of reaction. Jordan Peele wanted to

purposefully show black people in a horror situation to be engaging and sympathetic to a black audience. This is something he was able to do in *Key and Peele* as well.

All in all, the impact of *Key and Peele* reached a wide range of audience and opened up a different type of comedy, black satire created by black people's rage in the United States. What Jordan Peele is exposing with comedy to show social realities, he is doing now with horror. Peele created films that matched the current state and tension of the country. It is indeed a lie considering the racist history of the United States which continues today and it occurs so often that we've adapted to it and oftentimes accepted. "We've done this for so long that we're now almost on autopilot. Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray keep happening because they have to keep happening. Our long history of viewing African Americans through the lens of criminal justice is a kind of programming that demands Freddie Gray keep happening. The programming does not require a critical mass of evil racists in order to be carried out. And we will need a lot more than a good president—than a great president—to terminate it." (Coates) Coates shines light on this important issue in the country, something that Peele has been making us laugh about throughout the years. Starting with crude lower budget comedy TV to *Key and Peele* to high budget horror films about race and rooted in black experience with *Get Out* and *Us* and now currently criticizing cinema as a whole with *Nope*. (Jordan Peele, 2022)

Chapter 3: The Horror of Cinema

“This dream you’re chasing, the one where you end up at the top of the mountain, all eyes on you, it’s the dream you never wake up from.”

-Antlers Holst

When I went to see *Nope* (2022) at the movies for the first time, by the middle of it I knew I had to come back a second time, which was then followed by a third. The film presented me plot twist after plot twist and I fell for every single one. Nothing was predictable in *Nope*. It left the audience confused and full of questions, uneasy. I went to see it with my friend Hope the first time and we spent a good few hours talking, researching, and watching videos after. It’s like the film had a hold on us and we just needed to understand every single detail and hidden meaning behind Jordan Peele’s end goal. *Nope* is a story about Otis “OJ” Haywood Jr. and his family’s horse ranch in California. OJ’s father Otis Haywood Sr. had been training horses for a long time for film and television productions, operating Haywood Hollywood Horses. One day, Otis and OJ are on the ranch and metal objects start falling from the sky. Otis is hit in the eye by a nickel and dies. Otis and his sister Emerald are in charge of the ranch and bring one of the horses, Lucky, to a commercial shoot. However, they are fired because the horse kicks a person on set by getting triggered by a mirror too close to his face. OJ sells Lucky to Ricky “Jupe” Park who owns Jupiter’s Claim, a western theme park. Jupe also went through a traumatic experience where on the set of a TV show as a child actor his co-stars were injured and killed by a chimpanzee. Emerald goes back to the ranch with OJ and one night they notice that the electricity is having issues and their horses are disappearing. They start seeing something in the sky that looks like a UFO so they go to an electronics store and buy cameras to set up around the

ranch with the help of the employee Angel Torres. The siblings are ready to get the perfect shot of the mysterious creature that hides behind a cloud that doesn't move, to show the entire world. They call the cinematographer that was shooting the commercial, Antlers Holst, to help them record but he declines. Jupe has a live show using Lucky as an attraction for the alien to come so the audience can see. Something he thought was going to be groundbreaking turns into a tragedy when the alien ingests the entire audience including Jupe. When OJ, Emerald, and Angel find out, they get Antlers Holst to help them with a plan to lure the alien to the ranch and take the perfect shot of it. Holst gets carried away and ends up getting eaten by it. Emerald is able to attract the alien back to Jupiter's Claim and take a photo of it with a camera device installed at the bottom of a fake well for tourists to take photos of themselves at the amusement park and kill it with an enormous inflatable balloon.

The Surveillance of Blackness

Nope forces a confrontation with a reality that is usually not portrayed in cinema, the unavoidable imagery of black cowboys. Jordan Peele combines different genres with horror, comedy, and the Western, adding a little bit of history into the mix. The film starts with Eadweard Muybridge's "Animal Locomotion" picture of 1887 after we see the scene of the chimpanzee. Muybridge published the film as six cabinet cards titled *The Horse in Motion* commissioned by the industrialist Leland Stanford who wanted to analyze horse gaits. Eadweard Muybridge's film was arguably one of the key innovations that contributed to cinema's development. Jordan Peele's choice of opening the film with "Animal Locomotion" gives space to the audience to imagine the imaginable since we later find out that the Bahamian black jockey on the horse was OJ and Emerald's great-great-great grandfather. Of course, in real life, the

identity of the jockey on the horse is unknown, some historians believe the man was black, which if it is true it pretty much proves Peele's point. Jacob Walters puts this perfectly in his essay: "The jockey's real-life identity is unknown today, and Peele anoints himself as a filmmaker by cinematically naming him: 'Alistair Haywood.' For OJ and Emerald, photographic proof of the alien isn't just money in the bank; it's an attempt to turn the camera back on a history that has been erased" (Walters, *Weird Wild West*). I will be honest, after watching the movie, I wasn't sure if I believed this narrative or not but I think Jordan Peele did a great job at making it seem realistic. I asked myself, who would just make up information like this for a movie? It's like rearranging history in a sense, however, after rewatching it and reading about it a lot I understood that what Peele did was to empower the unknown and use his own privilege as a filmmaker to recognize the man on the horse. Jordan Peele uses the tools of cinematic imagination for liberatory rather than oppressive means, to reveal instead of erase.

On *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah has Jordan Peele as a guest to talk about *Nope's* release and he explains how "there are some things in this world that are bad miracles and they are so entertaining that we are blinded to the danger of them." Peele criticizes the entertainment world and people's response to these things like the cinema industry and the United States as a country. The alien is a mysterious creature that creeps up on you with no warning and hovers in the clouds in the sky. Jordan Peele inserts out of place things into normal spaces not caring about the time period or history. He will create what makes you uncomfortable.

Peele is able to give the surveilled power to flip the script and take it into their own hands. OJ and Emerald get the chance to use photography/cinema to validate and document their experience with the surveillance cameras making this imagery more clear. While doing research on the symbolism of the alien I came across Simone Browne's book *Dark Matters: On the*

Surveillance of Blackness. The author talks about the surveillance and branding of blackness by relating it to real-life events and institutions. In chapter 1, “Notes on Surveillance Studies,” she compares slave ships to a panopticon jail. The panopticon jail was invented by Jeremy Bentham in 1786 and produced in 1791. The name derives from the Greek word “paion” which means pasture referring to pastoral power. The structure is made like a tower where cells don’t face each other and the guards cannot be seen by the inmates. The idea of guards always having eyes on the inmates without them knowing if and when they are surveilling them is torture. My comparison to the film is that the alien uses the ranch as a panopticon by representing the prison guard and the characters of the film like OJ, Emerald, Angel, Holst, and Jupe are its prisoners. Jordan Peele suggests the alien represents cinema itself, it watches and after ingesting all of its prey it spits them back out with no remorse. Is Jordan Peele expressing that cinema is the bad miracle?

A Black Western Film

What I left with after the first time I saw the film was an increased love for cinematography and appreciation of Jordan Peele’s work. Out of all of his films, *Nope* was made for the big screen with its beautiful wide visuals of the ranch and the graphic scenes inside and of the alien flying in the sky. The mixed genres of the film are also what made it interesting and different to me. The Western style with the Haywood horses, the vast landscape of the ranch, Jupiter’s Claim amusement park, a typically all-white genre is made into a black Western film adventure. The movie creates a sense of confusion for the audience, in a good way in my opinion. Jacob Walters, author of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* article “Weird Wild West: On Jordan Peele’s ‘Nope’” explores the “weird” Western film and how Peele creates a different dimension almost that gives

space for the representation of black people in typical white film. He says, “If *Get Out* figures photography as illuminating and *Us* treats the mirror as transforming, *Nope* turns the lens back on itself.” (Walters, *Weird Wild West*) The film is a critique of itself and cinema, especially Hollywood considering they are in California. A good point Jacob Walters brings up is that OJ and Emerald really truly see the alien hiding in the cloud when they get it on film. Why is the proof of the alien so important for OJ and Emerald? Remember, their priority is not to kill it but to capture it in a picture. We live in a time where, as a society, we are expected to document any event that is out of the ordinary, you need evidence for everything and it’s easy to lie and create a story on social media like TikTok and Instagram. Their “money shot” or how Emerald calls it “the Oprah shot” would prove their experience. While they watch it on a screen is when they realize that they can profit off of showing it to the world to save their business. In part it is because of money however I think Peele’s point was to emphasize history that was wiped out and ignored. I personally was reminded of how the plot emotionally reflected the tension in the United States: “I wrote it in a time when we were a little bit worried about the future of cinema,” Jordan Peele states, referring to the country’s dynamic after Donald Trump’s presidency. (Chow and Zornosa) We think Holst is the answer to saving the day, the white savior, but it doesn’t work because he gets too involved in his own obsession with getting the perfect shot as a director and is sucked into the alien’s mouth. Holst’s character represents the white savior complex, we think this man is part of the group and has the same intention as OJ, Emerald, and Angel. When he gets up we think he is escaping with the evidence but he just gets closer to the monster and is killed by his own ecstasy dream. As a filmmaker, Jordan Peele is always doing the opposite of what you think, what we believed would be a white savior ends up getting killed off and as you watch it happen you almost question why you even thought Peele would introduce a white

savior. It would completely go against what he continuously proves to believe in. In Wesley Morris and J Wortham's podcast "Still Processing" the episode *Alien Superstar* they mention "the great American UFO" which is brought together with the IMAX cameras that make it more real and scary for the audience, this movie is a condemnation towards the United States. The hosts both agree that, "living in America is scarier than alien superstar times 1,000. A real horror," jokingly nicknaming it the "alien superstar." What Jordan Peele creates in *Nope* and the rest of his work is the reclaiming of black cinema, especially horror, by giving the power to the unknown to be seen and represented in a cinematically brilliant and beautiful way.

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