



Get Out By Jordan Peele

Universal Pictures Home Entertainment (2017). 104 Minutes, \$14.99 (Blu-Ray)

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Abstract

This review of Jordan Peele's 2017 film Get Out examines Peele's cutting satirical view of the USA where a form of white supremacy is still being practiced. Four facets of the film are explored here: its dystopian view of neo-slavery in the 21st century and several of the elements that complement and complicate this theme, including the black/white color contrast, the modus operandi of the femme fatale, and the song Run Rabbit Run. The film is multi-layered, blending elements of history with several genres: thriller, horror film, and science fiction.

Keywords: *Dystopia; Neo-Slavery; Wave Theory; Femme Fatale; White Supremacy; Double Consciousness.*

Get Out: A Dystopian View of Neo-Slavery in the Fifth Wave¹

Introduction

Jordan Peele and his 2017 film *Get Out* were nominated for Best Actor, Best Director, Best Movie, and Best Screenwriter and won the Oscar in the latter category. It was Peele's first feature film. The film is a complicated multi-layered thriller that can elicit horror in viewers on a personal level, much like that of good science fiction. In this review four facets of the film are examined: the dystopian view of neo-slavery in the Fifth Wave¹ and several of the elements that complement and complicate this theme, including the Black/White color contrast, Rose as a femme fatale, and the song "Run Rabbit Run."

After showing a very efficient nighttime kidnapping of Andre Hayworth, a young Black man walking in an affluent White neighborhood, *Get Out* follows Chris Washington, a successful Black photographer, during his first visit with his White girlfriend's family, the Armitages. Chris slowly becomes aware of the ultimate purpose of the visit: a transformation in which the brain of

1. Futurist Alvin Toffler originated the Wave Theory concept and discussed it in his 1984 book, *The 3rd Wave*, which describes how the Information Revolution superseded the Industrial Revolution which had superseded the Agricultural Revolution. (New York: Bantam Books, 1984). Daniel Pink, in *Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Rule the Future*, revised Toffler's three waves and expanded it to five: hunter-gatherer, agricultural, industrial, informational, and conceptual (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006).

an elderly White supremacist will be implanted in Chris's body and take over his life—replicating Andre Hayworth's reincarnation as Logan King. To save himself, Chris must resist the hypnosis used as part of the transformation and escape the Armitage estate.

Neo-slavery in the 5th Wave

Get Out is an exquisite satire full of astute mockery and warnings of what could become a reality in the 21st century. A treatise on contemporary race relations and White supremacy, Peele's film offers a powerful microscope through which to examine this new slavery in a high-tech scientific age. The traditional slave system needed millions of Black and Brown bodies to fuel the nation's 2nd Wave agricultural system and to fund the 3rd Wave industrial revolution. In the 5th Wave, as Peele depicts it in his dystopian future, neo-slavery demands fewer Black bodies to do what is needed to insure the comfort of the top ten percent of the population, a population that has no interest or regard for the rest of society. Still about exploiting the Black body, this neo-slavery focuses on control in the most intrusive and intimate way possible.

As part of the transformation Chris is subjected to, he is shown several videotapes that continue the hypnosis begun shortly after his arrival. Tapes are also used to explain the rationale for the process he is undergoing. Through them, Chris is officially introduced to this process by Roman Armitage, the patriarch of the Armitage family who has taken over the body of Walter, seen as grounds keeper on the Armitage estate. Roman indicates that it has taken a very long time to perfect the transformation process, which he identifies as the Coagula. Given his references to an Order, the subtle association of a knight's helmet with Jeremy, and the gathering at the Armitage estate of Roman's friends, Peele seems to be suggesting the existence of a secret society composed of powerful, wealthy mostly White members who benefit from the Coagula.

In the 5th Wave the exploitation of Black bodies is not prompted by their labor in harvesting the wealth gained from tobacco and cotton. The exploitation is the personal possession of these bodies for their physical attributes and beauty. The Black body, as a new kind of hostage, becomes the object of desire for Whites who have the wealth to trade and literally trade-in their bodies for Black ones. This new form of slavery inextricably links slave owner and enslaved in a diabolical iteration of domination/oppression. The Black body becomes a container, a vessel, controlled and animated by a foreign parasite.

To support this neo-slavery, different means of abduction are used. Rose relies on seduction, while her brother Jeremy prefers more physically violent methods, demonstrated by the sleeper hold that renders Andre unconscious when Jeremy kidnaps him and locks him in the trunk of his car. Rose's methods take longer. It appears that she and Chris have been in a relationship for five months before she takes him home. In the tapes used to prepare Chris for the takeover of his body, Jim Hudson, the person who buys Chris's body, remarks that Rose's methods were much kinder than Jeremy's wrangler style. No whips, chains or branding; no withholding of food or drink. The seduction is in some ways similar to that used by the slave hunters in *12 Years a Slave*. Solomon is not forcibly captured but is enticed to accompany his captors with false promises.

The Armitage's victims, while not physically harmed are, however, hypnotized and subjected to a psychologically violent form of torture when they are shown the tapes that explain the process they are going through to prepare their bodies to host affluent, infirm, White seniors. Dean Armitage introduces these older White people at a neo-slavery auction that Missy describes as a gathering of their grandparents' old friends. As the guests file out of their Black limousines and

SUVs, Walter welcomes them with hugs, which seems inconsistent with his role as grounds keeper, but it is consistent with his identity as Roman, the head of the Armitage family.

At this neo-slavery auction, Chris does not have to stand and literally disrobe but he is quickly questioned and inspected by each of the guests competing for his body. The Greene couple is very interested in Chris's athleticism, Mr. Greene being a former professional golfer; Lisa, whose husband Nelson is using a breathing apparatus, is taken by Chris's good looks and makes it clear she is interested in him as a sexual partner when she asks Rose, "Is it true? Is it better?" Another couple likes Chris's dark skin, since darker skin is in vogue, and gallery owner Jim Hudson is interested in Chris's eyes since he knows Chris's work as a photographer and wants to possess Chris's talent.

The auction takes the form of Bingo, a cover for the bidding for Chris's body that is taking place. Rose takes Chris away from the gathering during the bidding, but as Dean directs it, he stands next to a large portrait of Chris holding his camera. Hudson wins the game, i.e. the bid, for what appears to be \$10 million, the apparent cost of an exceptional Black body in the 21st century's 5th Wave.

After the sale the narrative action escalates. Chris's unease increases as do clues to the nature of the Armitage's intentions, most specifically the identification of Andre Hayworth as Logan, a Black partner of one of the Armitage's elderly friends and the discovery of a cache of photos in Rose's closet that shows her as the girlfriend of eight or nine other Black men, including Walter, as well as a photo of a woman who Chris recognizes is Georgina, the housekeeper. Chris, like Solomon in *12 Years a Slave*, recognizes the danger he is in, and turns all of his attention, his intelligence, persistence, and strength, to escape.

The Black/White Contrast

The Black/White contrast, prominent throughout the film, begins with the selection of Daniel Kaluuya to play the protagonist Chris Washington. Kaluuya's dark skin contrasts sharply with that of the central female protagonist, Rose Armitage, whose White skin is lit and shot in a way that underscores her Whiteness. Peele appears to use this juxtaposition not only to define the characters and further the plot but also as a symbol of the dualities he explores in a narrative about good and evil as well as positive and negative social values.

In the film's opening scene, a Black male character searches for an address while on his cell phone expressing his discomfort about walking in a White suburban neighborhood at night. As he walks he is being profiled by somebody in a White 1983 Porsche 944. The Whiteness of the car stands out in contrast to the nighttime setting and, given the mood of foreboding the scene creates this Whiteness suggests malevolence. Almost immediately, a masked individual emerges from the darkness, assaults, and kidnaps Andre Hayworth (aka later as Logan King), locking him in the trunk of the White Porsche. The allusion here to the historical capture of Blacks and how they were forced into the slave trade becomes obvious as the narrative unfolds.

Another Black/White contrast is apparent in the set of Black and White photos Peele uses to establish Chris's profession and to show a bit of his cultural background and interests. The next scene shows Chris looking at his reflection in a bathroom mirror while shaving. The Whiteness of the shaving cream and the darkness of his skin differ markedly. The cut to Rose, though not quite so stark, underscores the contrast.

As the film continues numerous examples of these Black/White contrasts become evident, especially when Rose, the femme fatale, or her mother Missy, a psychiatrist, is present. They are

frequently dressed in White tops and prefigure a sinister action at Chris's expense, as when Missy hypnotizes Chris and when Rose pretends she cannot find the keys to her SUV, thus preventing his escape. Frequently, White suggests not just negativity but straightforward, unmitigated evil in this narrative.

The Black/White motif is evident when Chris is under hypnosis and he senses he is in danger. A close-up of his face shows his eyes literally bulging out of his face, a reminder of the old 1930's and 1940's films when similarly bulging eyes of the few Black actors who were cast in major films were used to show the fear, the naivete and simple-mindedness of Black characters. Stereotypically, their eyes would nearly pop out of their sockets, usually to comic effect. A popular cinematic device in the early 20th century, Peele uses it purposefully, much like Spike Lee did in *Bamboozled*, suggesting the racism so apparent in the earlier films is still in play.

A further juxtaposition of the White/Black and good/evil duality takes place when Missy hypnotizes Chris and she takes him into a dark place, which she refers to as "the sunken place" and verbally commands Chris "to sink through the floor." The command paralyzes him in a place of darkness, where the only light he can see is the face of Missy. Given the clear references to slavery throughout the film one could liken this to the bottom of a slave ship, with the only light coming through one of the crew's hatch ways to the outside, a light that is impossible to reach. The scene contributes to some of the confusion between what is good and what is evil since Missy appears to be concerned and helpful while in reality she is weakening Chris's control.

One of the most dramatic devices in the film related to the Black/White contrast, though with a completely different significance and use, is the camera flash. It represents "good White light" in its ability to bring the dominated, submissive, oppressed victims of the Armitage family back to conscious agency. We see clear examples of this phenomenon when the Logan King and Walter characters are exposed to this light. For a brief moment their Black consciousnesses gain volition over their White intruders.

Logan King experiences this at the social gathering/slave auction of the Order when Chris takes his picture and the camera flash temporarily releases Andre Hayworth's consciousness; he immediately tries to warn Chris by moving quickly toward him and repeatedly yelling "Get Out." In a later scene, having learned from the incident with Logan, Chris uses his cell phone's camera flash to awaken the dominated Black consciousness in Walter's body. Walter regains his agency, protects Chris by shooting Rose, and then takes his own life to avoid a return to slavery.

The Femme Fatale

Rose Armitage, an effective, cold, and cunning femme fatale does not literally kill her victims, though she is ready to if necessary, as we see at the film's final sequence when she shoots at Chris. Rose's usual modus operandi is to lure her prey to their virtual deaths, the state in which their bodies function but their minds/brains have been replaced by those of the White men and women who buy them. Her method is precise: she carefully identifies her victims, makes contact, thoroughly seduces them, and then successfully lures them to the family home for the brainwashing, auction, and the Coagula, the transformation process that will destroy most of their consciousness.

Viewers first encounter Rose as the five-month seduction phase of her relationship with Chris is ending. She is ready to take him home to meet her family. At Chris's apartment we see how effective her skills as a seductress are through the empathy, conversation, and sexuality she adopts to manipulate and control him without any hint that is what she is doing.

On the way to the Armitage estate Rose strikes and kills a deer, an event that leads to an encounter with the police. In this scene her cunning is again evident when she takes advantage of the policeman's request to see Chris's driver's license. She quickly intervenes, questioning the officer's motives and challenging his authority. After he gets over his initial fear as a Black man in the presence of the police, Rose's forwardness seems to deepen Chris's affection for her, and she reinforces this by saying to him, "Nobody fucks with my man." However, in retrospect, it becomes clear that Rose is not being an ally or protecting Chris from racial profiling as much as she is protecting herself and her family. She is keeping Chris's identity out of the police report of the accident and preventing a paper trail that could connect the Armitages to Chris's disappearance when he comes up missing later.

Rose gives us other examples of her faux-protection skills after several disturbing family interactions. Upstairs in their bedroom she feigns her disappointment at her father's "My Man" comments and her brother's desire to subdue Chris physically. Through these continuous inducements and loyalty strategies she maintains her control over Chris.

In the scene when Chris discovers the box of photos, we understand more fully the extent of Rose's skills and contributions to the family and the Order. Chris is definitely not Rose's first conquest. Even before Chris is in the process of transformation, she is searching the internet for her next conquest. She is a practiced seductress, a femme fatale serving her family and the Order. Even after he discovers the photos, Chris tries to hold onto his relationship with Rose, asking her to leave with him when he tries to escape the house. Her duplicity does not become clear to him until he realizes she is stalling for time as she acts as though she can't find her car keys. Chris's stunned expression when he finally realizes Rose's complicity in the horror of the Armitage enterprise shows just how completely Rose has ensnared him.

In a remarkable contrast to Rose's femme fatale persona, while Chris is being prepared for the Coagula, Rose is shown relaxing in her bedroom listening to music. The scene opens with a close-up of a glass of milk and a bowl of Fruit Loops. Rose, dressed in a White blouse, sips the White milk through a Black straw, and eats the dry Fruit Loops while surfing the internet looking at the photos and profiles of NCAA Division One Black athletes. Juxtaposing milk and Fruit Loops, often identified as snacks children enjoy, with her search for another Black man to seduce is chillingly, painfully ironic. The scene clearly marks the end of Rose's need for or interest in Chris.

Later, when Rod, Chris' best friend, calls because he is concerned about Chris's absence, she feigns her innocence and acts surprised that Chris is missing, but then she quickly and expertly puts Ron on the defensive by turning the call into a sexual dalliance by suggesting that Rod's true interest is to have an affair with her. Her cool, calculating, detached manner underscores how unattached she is from the enormity of the horror she participates in.

Foreshadowing Motifs

Jordan Peele uses several interesting motifs, not only to foreshadow how his narrative is going to unfold, but also to increase the film's cohesiveness and deepen its meaning. These include the *Run, Rabbit, Run* song heard in multiple interpretations on the soundtrack as well as the related and recurring hit-and-run theme. *Run, Rabbit, Run* is introduced in the opening scene when the character, Andre Hayworth, is being kidnapped, while the hit-and-run theme first appears obliquely when Rose hits and kills a doe when she and Chris drive to her parents' house.

In the first scene of the film, the lyrics coming from Jeremy's car radio don't seem to fit the driver of a luxury sports car like a Porsche 944. The original song was written by Noel Gay and Ralph Butler for the 1939 British radio program the "The Little Dog Laughed." The humorous little ditty is aptly called "Run Rabbit, Run." The lyrics merit consideration in light of *Get Out*'s trajectory. They are:

On the farm, every Friday,
 On the farm, it's rabbit pie day.
 So, every Friday that ever comes along,
 I get up early and sing this little song
 Run rabbit, run rabbit run! run! run!
 Run rabbit, run rabbit, run! run! run!
 Bang! bang! bang! bang!
 Goes the farmer's gun.
 Run rabbit, run rabbit, run, run
 rabbit run rabbit, run, run, run
 Don't give the farmer his fun! fun! fun!
 He'll get by
 Without his rabbit pie
 So run rabbit, run rabbit run! run! run!²

This simple little song is very appropriate given that the song's subject is about a hunter wanting his rabbit meat pie, wanting to satisfy his taste for a certain dish, while in the film the Armitages want another Black body to host another member of their Order. The rabbit needs to run to escape the farmer and both Andre and Chris need to run to escape the Coagula. The lyric in the song, "Bang! bang! bang! bang! Goes the farmer's gun," foreshadows Rose firing at Chris as he tries to escape at the end of the film.

The song is heard in several other scenes. For example, while Walter is chopping wood, and in every other scene he is in, he is humming the song, subtly connecting him to Andre and Chris and warning the audience of the danger Chris is in. After the auction we hear Jeremy playing the ukulele on the porch; he is picking out parts of the "Run, Rabbit, Run" melody in a very abstract manner that fits his strange and malevolent character, links him again to Andre's kidnapping, and foreshadows his role in the attempt to subdue Chris.

The last time the song is used is during the climactic ending of the film as Chris is making his escape after thwarting Dean's, Missy's, and Jeremy's attempts to kill him. He takes Jeremy's Porsche and as soon as he turns on the engine he hears "Run, Rabbit, Run." Now the lyrics are literally telling Chris what he needs to do: run, run, run away from the insanity that defines the Armitage family. Peele has skillfully used the lyrics to link characters, foreshadow danger, and prime the audience for the action needed if Chris is to save himself.

Another recurring motif that provides narrative cohesion is the hit-and-run story of Chris's Mother's death, a death that haunts him and for which he feels guilty though he was a child at the time. He chose to continue watching television rather than look for his Mother even when he realized his Mother should have been home hours before. Chris tells the story the first night he is with

2. Retro Radio. <https://youtu.be/LoLchtG8vTk>.

the Armitages, Missy brings it up later that night when she hypnotizes Chris, and he talks to Rose about it later.

The initial variation on the hit-and-run motif occurs when Rose hits and kills a doe with her SUV when she and Chris are on the way to her parents' house. Chris's reaction to the suffering cries of the doe can be tied in retrospect to how his Mother died alone on the side of the road after being fatally injured by a hit-and-run driver. The final connection takes place when Georgina tries to stop Chris and he runs into her; instead of continuing his escape, the feelings of guilt associated with his Mother's death surface and force him to stop and help her.

Peele's focus on deer, their suffering and the prominence of shots of the head of a trophy stag in the basement room where Chris is held prompt further speculation. When Chris and Rose share the deer incident with Rose's parents, Dean, Rose's father, sounds off with great emotion about how deer are ruining the world, particularly the United States. He goes on to exclaim that when he sees a dead deer on the side of the road he almost cheers, saying "One less deer!" Given Dean's role in the enslavement of Blacks, one can easily make the connection between deer and the Black people whose lives he so easily destroys. The harangue makes Chris's use of the trophy as a weapon against Dean later appears to be poetic justice.

***Get Out*: Conclusion**

Get Out is an unusually dense film with many more motifs and historical allusions than analyzed above. The film rewards repeated viewings and discussions with deeper insights and a greater appreciation of Peele's remarkable achievement in fashioning a cohesive critique through satire and history.

Peele has crafted an American dystopian work that captures the still pervasive and evil presence of White supremacy within the U.S. More than a cautionary tale it foreshadows the dangers of a high-tech society in which science serves the needs of aging aristocrats by turning Black people into hosts for their racist consciousnesses. The process creates within the Black body a far greater nightmarish double consciousness than W. E. B. Dubois imagined. This film narrative is also a warning about who one can trust in this new era. Through Rod and Rose, Peele challenges us with the Black/White, good/evil dichotomy that has been so difficult for oppressed people to navigate since the onset of colonialism and the resulting domination societies we still live in.

References

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