

A LESSON IN HORROR

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I perched on the edge of my seat in the theater, rigid from the aching distress that plagued my entire body. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the film despite each dreadful yet familiar scene that would ultimately lead to the black protagonist's anticipated demise. The movie hardly matches the traditional horror genre archetype—even the writer and director, Jordan Peele, tweeted that the film “is a documentary”—but I was horrified nonetheless (@JordanPeele). It was a horror far more acute than any other movie had caused me to experience. I felt the movie, *Get Out*, so deeply because it felt real to me, just as Peele intended it. As the film followed a black male going to visit his white girlfriend's family in the woods, I (a black male) sat almost paralyzed, holding hands with *my* white girlfriend just months before attending her family reunion in rural Oregon. Perhaps what is more scary to black audiences than the unrealistic scenarios and fantastical psycho-killers of orthodox horror movies is precisely the opposite: the equally violent and horrific reality of being black in America.

Writer Zadie Smith frequently examines this intersection between identity (often racial) and fear in her articles and essays. For example, in “Getting In and Out,” she explores the racial dichotomy that is presented by Peele's *Get Out*: what white people fear and what black people fear. “*Get Out* is structured around . . . inversions and reversals, although here ‘funny’ has been replaced . . . with ‘scary,’” she writes. “Instead of the familiar, terrified white man, robbed at gunpoint by a black man on a city street, we meet a black man walking in the leafy white suburbs, stalked by a white man in a slow-moving vehicle” (“Getting In”). When Smith talks about Peele's “inversions and reversals,” she implies that the dominant narrative is one of whiteness. When looking at Hollywood films of any genre, you'd be hard pressed to find many that focus primarily on the lives of black characters, specifically in a positive and empowered light, hence the #OscarsSoWhite controversy of the 2016 Academy Awards.

As Zadie Smith would likely agree, Peele does something new, exciting, and refreshing by centering the perspective of black Americans in his horror movie, a feat that remains almost completely unmatched in the movie industry. Similar to Smith, writer Justin Phillip Reed, in his essay “Killing Like They Do in the Movies,” analyzes popular horror movies through the lens of race and the peculiar role that black bodies specifically seem to play. Reed harkens back to the atrocities of Michael Myers from the *Halloween* movies and his illustrious career of killing: “All the white teenage girls, strangled or bleeding out, and then Tyra Banks: gutted and hanging by the neck from a wire” (Reed). Reed parallels this image of a hanged Banks, who is black, to the lynching of his Uncle Craig that occurred when he was seven. He similarly parallels the death of Rod in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, who is hanged by a bedsheet to appear like a suicide, to the death of Sandra Bland in jail just two years ago. “The story from the Waller County jail has as many holes, cuts, edits, and special effects as [*A Nightmare on Elm Street*],” Reed notes. “Black ghosts dangle in all the corners of my horror flicks lately, even when I am not looking” (Reed). Even the most gruesome deaths of horror movies are easily compared to black death in America. Horror movies are not a distant reality. Horror is an all too present aspect of black experience.

Smith demonstrates some of the nuances of black experience in this country in a speech called “On Optimism and Despair.” Smith, who identifies as a black woman, references a new kind of horror beyond the limitations of the movie genre. She writes that “nearly seven in ten Republicans prefer America as it was in the 1950s, a nostalgia of course entirely unavailable to a person like me, for in that period I could not vote [or] marry my husband,” who is a white man. She continues, “Time travel is a discretionary art: a pleasure trip for some and a horror story for others” (“On Optimism”). Over and over again we are offered the idea of the real world as a setting of horror for black Americans. When Smith points out that the majority of Republicans prefer an America in which black Americans do not fit, in which *she* does not fit, she exposes the very real and constant othering of black Americans. *Get Out* is significant not only because it centers the perspective of black Americans, but also because it gives “white liberals—whom the movie purports to have in its satirical

sights— . . . that queer but illuminating feeling of being suddenly ‘othered,’” which is distinctly rare for white people (“Getting In”). Smith uses the word “illuminating” to suggest that white Americans would benefit from realizing their own role in perpetuating black horror, because she knows the consequences of unchecked whiteness.

The concept of being racially “othered” is so distant from the experience of white people, but it is endlessly common for black people and other people of color. Smith’s “Monsters” illustrates this othering perfectly by examining the response to the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Writing from the context of her home country, England, Smith recalls how “shock waves rippled across Europe. In North West London, a small but significant change: the stereotype of the Muslim boy was transformed from quiet, sexless, studious child sitting in the back of class and destined for an engineering degree to Public Enemy No. 1” (“Monsters”). As Smith implies, ever since 9/11, Muslim people and Arab people who are assumed to be Muslim have become the subject of extreme suspicion. Violence associated with Muslim or Arab people is cause enough in the political and social realms to conclude that Muslims are evil—that they are “monsters” with an increased likelihood of becoming violent extremists. And yet, according to the Center for Investigative Reporting, “Far-right plots and attacks outnumber Islamist incidents by almost 2 to 1” (Neiwert et al.). Smith reminds us that non-white identity is constantly othered, even when that identity has every right or reason to be in that space, just as the aforementioned Muslim boy sitting in the back of class is villainized simply for existing.

A teacher once told me that the titles of stories should never be overlooked. In the title “Monsters,” Smith evokes an image commonly associated with horror. Exploration further into the implications of monsters as a concept reveals to us that her title is right in line with her other revelations. In his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, a leading writer in a subfield of English called monster studies, writes, “The monster is difference made flesh,” a representation of something to be othered (459). Cohen shows that he would likely find Smith’s association between horror and identity spot-on when he extrapolates that “From the classical period into the

twentieth century, race has been almost as powerful a catalyst to the creation of monsters as culture, gender, and sexuality” (460). Through this analysis we can see that monster culture as well as the horror culture that Smith speaks to are manifestations of humanity’s tendency to other identities that are different from their own.

Smith recognizes that it is precisely because of this constant othering that people of color have come to fear white settings, which, in a country like America that is so dominated by whiteness, are nearly everywhere. It is because of this othering that the realities of certain identities become purposeful in horror films. Smith’s observations of the connection between fear and identity and the disparate effects that they have on certain minority populations can create a sense of hopelessness and defeat. It is inevitable that people will fear what is different, or fear situations in which they may be othered. It is natural. What makes the fear that exists in America, with its movie-like horror, so *unnatural* is its deeply ingrained history of violence against black bodies. Black ghosts dangle in all the corners of America’s past, just as they do in our horror films.

In “Getting In and Out,” Smith takes a look at the complexities of the violence and horror black people face by confronting a widely controversial painting of Emmett Till’s dead body by white artist Dana Schutz. Many black Americans were upset about the painting, claiming that because Schutz was white, her depiction of the pain inflicted on black bodies was a form of theft. It was not her pain to claim. Not her horror to capture. But Smith challenges this logic, claiming that race is far too complex an issue to draw lines in the sand about which races can and which races cannot do something. “The ‘us’ and ‘them’? That’s a cheaper gag. Whether they like it or not, Americans are one people,” she writes, adding that “the binary of black and white is only one part of this nation’s infinitely variegated racial composition” (“Getting In”). We see here that Smith does not always paint a picture of bleak horror in regards to identity. She sees in this country the potential for unity through the power of shared American identity. In her essay “Under the Banner of New York,” she tells a story of how a city like New York is a shining example of diversity gone right. In the story, a woman’s baby stroller falls apart as she tries to lift it from street to sidewalk. Smith describes the troupe of

people who walk up and try to help as “white, black, Asian, tall, short, male, female, young, very young, and old,” going on to describe further differences in dress, job, and assumed lifestyle (“Under the Banner”). They were all united in that moment by the common effort of trying to help a woman with her stroller. There were no monsters. No one was othered.

Unfortunately, these narratives by Smith cannot go unchallenged. While New York City is a beautiful example of a functioning multicultural society, there are likely as many instances of fear and othering of identity as there are blindness to identity. At the same time that a diverse group of strangers were united in a moment of solidarity, an Asian American student uptown was being asked by her classmates where she’s *really* from, a black man in the Bronx was being pulled over for ‘matching the description’ by someone with a warrant out for their arrest. Black people and white people in this country may be connected by the fact that they are American, but it is not white people who are constantly othered by their race. It is not white people whose differences are represented, as Cohen writes, as “monstrous” in order to “[justify] [their] displacement or extermination” (460).

Smith should not be convinced that the racial symbiosis of New York City shows promise of the prospect of equality in this country. She should not be convinced that the happy ending of *Get Out* marks an end to the era of black horror in this country. She’s too smart for that. Smith knows, as she said in a speech, that “in this world there is only incremental progress. Only the willfully blind can ignore that the history of human existence is simultaneously the history of pain: of brutality, murder, mass extinction, every form of venality and cyclical horror” (“On Optimism”).

I ended up attending the family reunion with my girlfriend despite the plethora of reservations I had. I was the only black person in attendance, and I would have been the only person of color had there not been a distant cousin of Middle Eastern descent named Wahlid, who made a point to call me “brother” every time he saw me. At the end of the day, I made it through the event unscathed, save for a few expected microaggressions, like the aunt who told me she made tee shirts for the reunion because she noticed “black people are always making tee shirts for things,” and she wanted to be more like us. I

laughed it off knowing that her words came not from a place of hatred, but of ignorance. But in my head I imagined what it would be like if she actually knew what it was like to be black. She'd probably scream, just like people do when they watch horror movies.

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