You'd better look twice!: Annexation and De/Colonisation of the Gaze in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)

///////////

Isabelle Labrouillère
Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, ENSAV

Abstract: In his first two fictions (*Get Out* [2017] and *Us* [2019]) Jordan Peele invites the viewer to question the way in which the new paths of horror reinvest, through the treatment of images and bodies, the articulation and opposition between seen and unseen, seeing and knowing in a narrative economy that thwarts the expectations of the genre. *Get Out* renews the figures and forms of horrific discourse by revealing the internalized horror of our contemporary societies. By proposing to take hold of the representations that surround us by decentring our gaze and replace the horrific aberration with a horror indexed on the real world, *Get Out* manages to revitalize the horrific genre and revisit the history (notably Hollywood) of our representations. This essay will show how *Get Out* displays a whole range of images, in particular stereotypes and clichés—both photographic and stylistic—in order to question our gaze, which is biased by a habitus that is now only governed by unconscious mental operations. In the film, the exposure of the ideology underlying the standard expression of racism in the United States is based not only on a study of the representations of otherness, but also on the colonisation of the gaze resulting from the interdependence between the visible, the seen, vision and the lens through which we view the world.

Keywords: Horror; Representation; Stereotype; Cliché; Colonisation of the Black Body; Colonisation of the Gaze

Résumé : Dans ses deux premières fictions, *Get Out* (2017) et *Us* (2019), Jordan Peele invite le spectateur à interroger la façon dont les nouvelles voies de l'horreur réinvestissent, à travers le traitement des images et des corps, l'articulation et l'opposition entre le vu et le non-vu, le voir et le savoir dans une économie narrative qui déjoue les attentes propres au genre. *Get Out* renouvelle les figures et les formes du discours horrifique en dévoilant l'horreur intériorisée de nos sociétés contemporaines. En proposant de nous

ressaisir des représentations qui nous entourent par le décentrement du regard et de remplacer l'aberration horrifique par une horreur indexée sur le monde réel et ancrée dans un temps mémoriel, *Get Out* parvient non seulement à revitaliser le genre horrifique mais aussi à revisiter l'histoire (notamment hollywoodienne) de nos représentations. Cet essai montrera comment *Get Out* met en scène toute une série d'images, notamment des stéréotypes et clichés (photographiques et stylistiques) afin d'interroger notre regard biaisé par un habitus qui n'est plus régi que par des opérations mentales inconscientes. Dans le film, la mise en lumière de l'idéologie qui sous-tend l'expression ordinaire du racisme états-unien repose non seulement sur l'examen des représentations de l'altérité véhiculées par cette société, mais aussi sur la colonisation du regard qui résulte de l'interdépendance entre le visible, le vu, la vision et l'objectif à travers lequel nous considérons le monde.

Mots-clés : horreur, représentation, stéréotype, cliché, colonisation du corps des Noirs, colonisation du regard

Introduction

In the chapter entitled ""Woke Horror": Social Consciousness in Black Horror", Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark Harris point out that Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is said to have originated the term "Woke Horror", used to describe works related to the struggle of Black minorities against institutional racism in the United States (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 127). The search for a different terminology to define Jordan Peele's first film testifies to the generic renewal inspired by the director's aesthetic and political proposals. This term, which refers to a sub-category of "art" or "elevated horror",[1] is nonetheless proving to be divisive if we are to believe the proponents of an escapist conception of horror that is supposedly incompatible with a politically oriented discourse (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 128). While this escapist apprehension of the genre does not seem relevant to us, these new categories tend to reinject into critical discourse an axiological judgement of little interest for analysis. The debate surrounding them is reminiscent of the Aristotelian opposition between the mind's eye and the eye of the flesh, between elite culture and mass culture, and reiterates the divide between 'hermeneutic fantastic' and 'graphic fantastic' (Mellier, 1999: 95) that has long plagued the study of the genre. To maintain such a hierarchy would also amount to forgetting that this transgressive genre, based on the literalisation of the metaphorical, always questions our relationship with otherness, whether it is entertained or concerned by it. It is the latter that Jordan Peele chooses to explore, making

---

1. As David Church notes in the chapter entitled "Defining a New Wave of Art-Horror Cinema", the terms "slow horror", "smart horror", "indie horror", "prestige horror" are also used by critics to try to define this generic revival (Church, 2021: 2).

the representation of the monstrous the graphic expression of the nightmare of the Black American community.[2]

Hence, whatever the terminology used to describe these new forms of horror, the films that fall into this category all bear witness to a dynamic operation of genericity (Macé, 2001)[3] whose constant metamorphoses seem to reflect the plurality of the figures it portrays. It may be risky to propose a new terminology here, all the more so as it would involve encompassing works distinguished by their singularity. I would argue that the originality of Jordan Peele's films rests on the way they shed social light on post-racial America through the prism of metadiscourse. Unlike the *Scream* franchise and its offshoots, the reflexive (Yacavone, 2021)[4] gesture serves less a playful enterprise than the expression of a societal reflection that questions our view of others and the world.

While the director of *Get Out* does not resort to the graphic horror favoured by many of his contemporaries, he does place at the centre of his film the status of the visible and its corollary, the image, both in its linguistic aspect (figures of speech and other mental representations) and in its iconic reality (filmic, photographic, televisual). Drawing on an outrageous discourse peppered with stereotypes about the Black American community, Peele questions the status of the minority subject in the contemporary imagination. In the film, the African American, long caught in the grip of an iconographic history oscillating between erasure and caricature, remains a prisoner of this aesthetic of disappearance that eclipses the subject in the off-screen or behind the coarseness of the line. While *Nope* reveals the obscenity of the off-stage,[5] *Get Out* chooses to question the discursive mechanisms at play in this representation by revealing the new modalities of racism in the age of "post-Blackness" (Baker, Simmons, 2015).

2. According to Tananarive Due, "Black history is Black horror. A genre that enables viewers to reframe true-life trauma on the screen as imaginary monsters and demons is tailor-made for the Black American experience." (Due, 2019: 8)

3. "It's less a question of genres, however, than of genericity, understood in an active, transformational sense. The presence of genres in the production and reception of contemporary writing is taken into account in a specific way, no doubt dictated by the times: genres as dividing lines, axes of organization and hierarchization of literary space, are replaced by the dynamics of genres, the various forms of interaction between generic categories, canonical or not, in short, a question of 'constant recategorization'."

4. " In sum, reflexivity, as ultimately a relation between film and spectator, occupies a figurative location between the cinematic work and the extra-work realities to which it refers. Operating at the intersection of moving-image convention and innovation, meaning and style, empirical fact and narrative fiction, it is a significant part of the cognitive function and value of many films, as well as a major channel for affective and artistic expression." With regard to the opposition between reflexivity and metafiction, I also refer to David Roche, *Meta in Film and Television Series* (2022).

5. *Nope*'s story and characters follow in the footsteps of the forgotten dark horseman in Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotographs. For further information on this subject, see Ben Kenigsberg's article (2022).

Although the film takes place in Upstate New York, a bastion of supposedly "colourblind" (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 79-140) White neoliberals who hide, behind a glaze of stifling paternalism, sectarian ideals of ousting the Black minority by replacing it, it would be a mistake to isolate the scope of the film's political reflection. Despite the apparent renewal of discourse promoted by increasingly modern and high-performance media, *Get Out* exposes the strategies by which White American society renews and updates a system of servitude made literal by the colonisation of the Black body. This is why this work aims at studying the visual devices used by Peele to make representation a catalyst to reveal the fictionalisation of reality, whose latent, forbidden image he brings to light in the same way as a photographic or stylistic cliché is exposed to light. As I shall demonstrate, this exposure of the ideology underlying the standard expression of racism in the United States is based not only on a study of the representations of otherness conveyed by this society, but also on the colonisation of the gaze resulting from the interdependence between the visible, the seen and the lens—both physical and ideological— through which we perceive reality.

The fantasised Black Body and the rhetoric of monstrosity

Ever since his first film, *Get Out*, Jordan Peele has been questioning the status of the mental and cultural representations that populate everyday life in the United States. In this respect, he seems more interested in expressing an inner horror than its graphic representation *per se*. The director thus revisits the conventions of the genre by making the irruption of the monstrous less something to be seen than something to be thought about. Instead of making a brutal breakthrough in the narrative fabric, Peele gradually leads us towards abjection by giving the disruptive event less the features of a horrific figure than by contextualising its arrival through ordinary discourse whose banality conceals its violence.

To do so, the fiction highlights the stereotypes—these fixed formulations resulting from their repeated circulation within a community—to which Black people remain the victims today. While *Get Out* does not repeat what Means Coleman and Harris describe as the stereotypes of the Black man in cinema (such as the Black man with magical powers, or the sacrificial Black man) (Means Coleman, Harris, 2023: 44-89), the viewer is treated to an anthology of racist preconceptions from the film's White community.[6] Besides, the fiction accompanies this rhetoric

---

6. Lisa, one of the guests, says to Rose: "So, is it true? The lovemaking. Is it better?". The conclusive nature of the phrase ("So, is it true?") underlines the deductive nature of

with "neo-stereotypes" (Macé, 2007) such as when a couple invited by the Armitages say that "Black is in fashion these days". *Get Out* thus moves away from the familiarity of horrific figures and places them at the service of other, equally hackneyed representations. As Tananarive Due points out, "*Get Out* redresses decades of erasure, abuse, *clichés*,[7] and damaging *tropes* that have stained horror cinema, Hollywood and American history." (Due, 2019: 8)[8]

By making Chris's Black body a space of fantasmatic projection under the Armitages' gaze, he becomes the object of a whole rhetoric of commonplace and stereotype, which, by singling him out as an individual from another community, monstrifies him. Indeed, while the monstrosity constructed by the words he is the subject of does not trigger fear but lust, these words stage a visible otherness in keeping with the etymology of the word (monster comes from the Latin '*monstrare*' meaning to show). This rhetoric shapes an imagery that turns Chris's body into a space of the unknown, outside what the film's White community imagines to be the norm, in line with the idea that "the monster breaks down categories" (Mellier, 1999: 428).

While Rose initially claims that Chris's belonging to the African American minority is a non-issue for her parents, his exposure to the White community they frequent turns him into a circus freak whose radical otherness is scrutinised and investigated.[9] As the guests keep asking about Chris's sporting and sexual prowess (reminiscent of the market place hucksters extolling the physical qualities of slaves), Rose's brother Jeremy claims that by training Chris could become a real "beast".

Thus, the speeches Chris is subjected to do not, strictly speaking, use the hyperbolic rhetoric that is symptomatic of the representation of monstrous aberration in fantasy and horror cinema. The superlatives and exclamations —not to say aphasia— that ensue any horrific confrontation give way to incessant questioning peppered with higher degree comparatives ("So, is it true? The lovemaking. Is it *better*?"). These aphorisms suggest not only that whiteness remains the yardstick by which other ethnic categories are defined and considered, but also that the construction of

her request. Here, the character seeks confirmation of the paradigmatic construct (Black men are more sexually efficient) that prevails in the White community.

7. It should be noted, however, that unlike the rhetorical figure of the cliché, the stereotype is a worn-out image that manifests the unthinking repetition of a society and, in this respect, has an ideological impact. The discourse of the White community in *Get Out* is of course imbued with this resonance. However, the use of the term cliché has the advantage of highlighting the way images (both rhetorical and iconic) function in the film. On the difference between stereotypes and clichés see Herschberg-Pierrot, 1979: 89.

8. Italics added.

9. This is one of the many paradoxes raised by the film: the guests treat Chris as a "foreign body", by definition unfamiliar, while at the same time imposing on him a constrained, pre-established reading grid.

Chris's monstrosity is made subtle through an imperceptible gap between the White norm and what it excludes. In the bosom of racial America, where institutional racism no longer exists (Thorp, 2020: 208), the affirmation of White domination is expressed through the use of dampened stylistic figures. Far from confronting us with the unthinkable, the insidious monstrosity created by the discourse plays on the sociolectal functioning of the cliché: a space of false recognition is created which, while disturbing the interlocutor, who is made uncomfortable by the use of such hackneyed representations, cannot let him envisage the unspeakable and inconceivable reality that will result.

This is why it is worth noting that the enunciative strategy used here is not what French critics call a trope, which can be understood as "that which changes meaning", i.e. "both *direction* and *signification*" (Bacry, 1992: 9).[10] The trope, understood as a figure of divergence, opens up a gap in communication, when the formulas invoked here are so outdated that they point more towards the workings of catachresis.[11] To say, for example, that with a little practice Chris could become a "beast" is indeed a metaphor, but no stylistic effect is intended here (Bacry, 1992: 26-27) and no one perceives this statement as the place where the rhetorical figure is expressed. Chris's body is thus captured in a rhetoric that oscillates paradoxically between the spectacular and the trivial. Whereas graphic monstrosity is achieved through the literalisation of a horrific metaphor to create an original representation, here it is the trivialisation of figures of speech that gives rise to the monster through the repetition of fantasised fictions which objectify the Black body.

If the seen is sifted through a system made familiar by its numerous occurrences (the tropes of the genre/the racist caricature), while the ontology of the monster presupposes visual excess, Chris's monstrification is constructed through speech and does not produce the expected narrative scandal. On the contrary, it goes unnoticed within a community which, by dint of iterations, has performativised language to the point of substituting the representation it gives of reality for reality itself.[12] The use these White neoliberals make of language is reminiscent of what Frédéric Joly, following Jean-Michel Rey, tells us about the language of "swindlers" whose aim is "[t]o engender—through the desire they have for it and which they strive to communicate, or through a desire that they are only trying to bring about within the community —these 'imaginary formations', whose whole purpose is to give substance to those things whose consistency they nonetheless assert"(Joly, 2019: 59). Indeed, although, as many

---

10. All translations from the French by the author.
11. This term is used here in the sense of a metaphor whose use is so common that it is no longer felt as such. https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/catachr%C3%A8se. Accessed July 24, 2023.
12. While this is clearly a U.S. problem, I thought it appropriate to mention here Frédéric Joly's work on the denaturing of language by Nazi discourse during the Second World War.

critics have pointed out, *Get Out* denounces the egalitarian deception of today's post-racial America, its message is no less part of a socio-cultural history that has never ceased to oppose categorial fictions to the singularity and diversity of the subjects represented.

The Coagula project: a slave undertaking to annex the Black body

It is in this light that the new representations of the Black body in horror fiction take on their full meaning. By staging the transplant of a 'White' brain onto a Black subject, *Get Out* creates the monster not through a graphic hyperbole with unprecedented contours, but by revealing intermittently the barely perceptible gap between the model (the White individual who now hides behind every Black person) and its copy (the Black body whose envelope it has usurped). Through this annexation of bodily territory, the White community in the film takes to its logical conclusion the "predatory appropriation of the body" (Colin, Quiroz, 2023: 27) once suffered by the slave. Indeed, the Armitages' graft turns the African American corporeality back into terra nullius, "an entirely 'available' space, offered to the 'will of the West and exposed to the deployment of its political and technological apparatus of capture'" (Colin, Quiroz, 2023: 27).[13]

And yet, despite the technological prowess behind this unprecedented monstrosity, beneath the apparent modernity of these new representations, it is in fact a whole age-old iconographic tradition that the guinea pigs in the Coagula project[14] echo. This new appropriation of the Black body is the result of the same process of erasure that consisted, during minstrel shows (Mouëllic, 2002) in Blackening the faces of White actors with shoe polish to represent the 'Black man'[15] in the style of Jim Crow.[16] The idea is to turn the Black man into an effigy, in other words a representation in no particular form whose excess—typical of crude imitation—far from obscuring the real model (whether the White man behind the mask or the outrageously designated Black man), guarantees

---

13. While this book (whose work on decoloniality is not unrelated to the mechanisms of US post-raciality) focuses on the Western colonization of Latin American territories, the population control strategies implemented by the White colonial powers seem comparable in this aspect.
14. The Order of the Coagula is made up of influential and wealthy White members who aim to sell and transfer the consciousness of a White individual to the brain of a carefully selected African American.
15. The aim is not to portray an individual in his or her singularity, but to give an image in line with an archetypal or even stereotypical representation of his or her community.
16. If, through the character of Chris, it is above all the identity of the Black man that is questioned here, we must not forget that the representation we are given of Georgina is also part of a racist tradition, inherited from the role of the mammy, the slave woman who looked after the plantation owners' children.

and restores the interval, the gap, with the referent. The masquerade of Black identity is then a vulgar signage intended to reflect the paradigmatic construction of the ethnic minority prevalent in a given community at a given time. *Get Out* thus joins a history of the performing arts and cinema in which, from minstrel shows to horror films and *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), the exhibition of the Black body is no more than a pantomime, a simulacrum in the service of White ideology.

However, in the film, the transformation of individuals into decerebrate carriers of White consciousness is far more detrimental to the integrity of the individual. Whereas the spectacularisation of the body achieved by the makeup of the minstrel maintained the distance between the subject and their image, the occupation of these new slaves' bodies is virtually undetectable. The ventriloquism that takes over the body here epitomises the systemic strategy of a White society that has for centuries assumed the right to speak for and in place of the Black community. It also reiterates the idea that whiteness places the subject on the side of disembodiment and control, in keeping with Richard Dyer's now famous phrase: "Whiteness is in but not of the body" (Dyer, 1997: 14).[17] The peril represented here by the annexation of the Black body, now a receptacle for White identity, is rooted in the segregationist history of the United States, as Elaine K. Ginsberg, echoing Cheryl Harris, reminds us: "In a society structured on racial subordination, White privilege became an expectation and [...] Whiteness became the quintessential property for personhood" (Ginsberg, 1996: 7).

The film's tour de force consists in inscribing this abrogation of the subject promoted by a racist tradition in new forms of representation that revisit age-old processes of erasure. The disappearance of the subject's origin, the revocation of identity, is indeed reminiscent of the "passing" strategy widespread at the time of slavery. According to Ginsberg's definition, passing involves taking on a new identity in order to escape the subjugation of one's origins (racial, sexual, etc.) and gain access to the privileges of another (Ginsberg, 1996: 3). Passing is therefore a work of fiction in which race can be performed if the codes that define it in the eyes of society are observed. This reinvention of the self, which by definition calls into question the visibility of race (Ginsberg, 1996: 9) and in this sense constitutes a threat to it, is linked here to another racist fantasy, that of the exploitation of the body of the other.[18] In *Get Out*, it is the senescent White community

---

17. This seems all the more true in the film as no one seems to be concerned about the degeneration of the ageing brain that controls these juvenile bodies.
18. Richard Dyer notes, in reference to *Night of the Living Dead* which particularly inspired Peele's cinema, that the desire to control the racialized body is at the heart of whiteness: "'The fear of one's own body, of how one controls it and relates to it' [...] and the fear of not being able to control other bodies, those bodies whose exploitation is so fundamental to capitalist economy are both at the heart of whiteness." (Dyer, 1993: 160).

that appropriates the advantages of a fantasised Black body endowed with superior physical qualities.

As a matter of fact, the stratagem at the heart of both passing and the Coagula project rests on the mastery and silencing of corporeal signs as the support and expression of the subject's origin. The grafting of the White brain onto the Black body in *Get Out* stages the dislocation of the individual through the conflict produced by the co-existence of the "White essence" and the "Black incarnation". The monstrosity thus created arises, not from appearance, but from the battle between exteriority and interiority behind the scenes, at the origin of this unprecedented "human monstrosity" (Mellier, 1999: 430).[19] Without resorting to the slightest special effect, Jordan Peele invents new figures of monstrosity in which a colonial entity, the White man, spreads, as if by viral contamination,[20] within a body curetted by hypnosis (Thorp: 2020, 206).[21] The entity thus created by this combinatorial game is a living oxymoron, the unexpected result of the "*coincidentia oppositorum*" that underpins this unprecedented figure of contradiction (Mellier, 2000: 39).

In *Get Out*, however, the inner horror is characterised by the concealment of its symptoms. The visibility of monstrosity only comes to the surface when the subject literally syncopes[22] in a barely perceptible expression of the appearance/essence divide so dear to the genre.

This is why Chris (like the viewer) is initially fooled by the appearances of Georgina, Walter and Andre. As the film progresses, however, he is surprised to discover that their way of expressing themselves and evolving in society[23] does not integrate the codes of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1972: 181) which define the Black American community, unlike the individual who has recourse to passing. The homograft practised here does not subject the transplanted organ to the internal logic of the body, but secedes from it in order to domesticate it more effectively.[24] In contrast to passing, the White extraction is not performed but internalised, and the aim is not so much to deny the appearance of the Black man (whose physical qualities

---

19. I borrow this terminology from Denis Mellier and give it an opposite meaning in order to highlight the originality of Peele's elaboration of monstrosity. Mellier, for his part, uses it to demonstrate how, whatever the ontology of the monster (human or supernatural), it is part of a rhetoric of excess and common reading strategies.
20. In this respect, whiteness can be associated with both senescence and disease.
21. "Through hypnosis, she forces Black consciousness out of (or much deeper into) the Black body in order to make room for White consciousness to enter the same body".
22. The two instances of this syncope of the real occur when Chris blinds Andre and then Walter with the flash of his phone, suddenly revealing the caged Black identity.
23. This is particularly striking in the case of Andre who, despite being the same age as Chris and from neighbouring districts, doesn't know any of the codes they used to share, such as the way they express themselves and greet each other.
24. In this sense, it is not surprising that once their brains have been grafted onto Georgina and Walter's bodies, the Armitage grandparents occupy the space reserved for domesticity (the kitchen, the park) as if this change were to involve a downgrading.

are coveted) as to deny his integrity as a subject. In the film, the enslavement of the African American community is part of both a history of American representations and an ahistorical process that rejects the postulate of post-raciality and shows the permanence behind the veneer of decoloniality.

Indeed, the iconography in *Get Out* revisits the tradition of the counterfeit face of the Jazz Singer and the topos of the representation of Black people on screen, where the body, the vector of an identity that it both conveys and designates, disappears. The Black man, captured by the image thus fashioned, still conceals a White man who claims to act, express himself and think in his place. The Black bodies, reduced to their surface, become mere trappings, a term whose polysemy combines the notions of illusion, false adornment and entrapment. The physical envelope is indeed the paradoxical mark of a body that is on display and yet absent. It gives rise to the deletion and division of an individual who has become a projection screen for what the viewer wishes to see: a Black wo/man for some, a White wo/man for others. Yet these two sides of the same coin cannot convey the complexity of the being thus created.

The ectoplasmic body, now a mere surface, is no longer the plastic expression of an interiority with which it would maintain an indexical relationship. These new images of the double are a reminder that fantasy text is mirror writing, a self-representation that "embraces the historical evolution of the media" (Mellier, 1999: 444). Indeed doesn't this body detached from its source, this image without referent, stripped of all anchorage in a genetic reality, evoke in this respect a terrifying version of the computer-generated image?[25]

As Philippe Dubois points out, "[from] the moment that it is this genetic principle of the organic link with the real, that had become the foundation of the medium's supposed identity, its specific 'nature', it is clear that the digital technology directly attacks this link between the image and its 'real referent'" (Dubois, 2021: 233). The comparison with the digital medium is of interest in that it brings to light the paradigmatic shift introduced by representation in the film. The challenge posed by the digital to the genesis of the image as trace and imprint (what has been called its "ontology" (Dubois, 2021: 233)) is here mirrored by the deletion of the victims' origin in *Get Out*.

---

25. The point here is obviously not to pass an axiological judgement on digital technology, but to shed light on the competitive relationship that all images (both digital and analogue, as we shall see later) have with reality in a film that never ceases to question the representations surrounding us. The essay by Philippe Dubois cited in the following note takes a critical look at the study of the analogue 'epiphany' in the light of the digital revolution.

Erasing the referent: from the Black body to the digital image

The analogy between the digital medium and the erasure of the Black identity throws light on one of the film's central questions: the contemporary way in which the issue of race is examined through the prism of the evolution of audiovisual media. Through the figure of the photographer protagonist, *Get Out* questions both what we see (the seen as part of the visible), the medium through which we see the image (which filters our vision of reality) and the ideological prism that conditions our gaze, of which the image bears the trace (the viewpoint we are seen through). The violence of the flash produced by Chris's telephone can be seen as a modernised version of the Platonic myth of the cave. By dazzling Andre and then Walter, he tears them away from an illusory condition and frees himself from a false image by accessing the reality it conceals.[26]

In this sense, the depiction of these 'low-key' monsters allows us to embrace in a single glance an entire iconographic history ranging from the allegory of the cave to the computer-generated image. But at each end of the spectrum, the lesson is the same: you have to be wary of *trompe l'œil representations* that *require you to look twice*.

From the outset, the film invites us to be suspicious of the apparent frontality of the image, whose feint consists in presenting itself openly, head-on, when it should be perceived less as a direct access to reality than a façade. Let's take an example. When Chris arrives at the Armitages' house, a long shot of the front of their home shows us Rose's parents greeting them on the stoop. This image in itself is not very different from the photographs that clutter the walls once inside, except that the latter focus more closely on the uniformly White family posing for the camera. When Chris arrives, however, the still frame widens as the camera dollies back to turn into an over-the-shoulder shot of Walter, who is observing them from a distance. Walter, whom we saw a few shots earlier busy gardening, thus disappears from the frame only to reappear as an observer. At the edge of the frame, halfway between the seen and the unseen, the man's body seems to inscribe him in the traditional representation of the Black subject always on the fringes of the action, either witness to it or part of the scenery, but very rarely the protagonist. As Walter's position in the shot attests,

---

26. "At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision […]" Plato, *The Allegory of the Cave,* https://open.library.okstate.edu/introphilosophy/chapter/on-the-allegory-of-the-cave-plato/. Accessed August 11th, 2024.

the Black characters remain in a satellite position: while the grandparents take pride of place at the centre of the Black and White photographs on the walls, Georgina and Walter, who, according to the couple, are part of the family, are not in any of the pictures. Yet the discovery of this sideways perspective on the image creates tension and, by dilating space in the same way that Hitchcockian suspense dilated time, invites us to reconsider the initial banality of the scene.

Despite the warm welcome Chris receives, he unwittingly gets caught between two converging gazes that turn out to belong to White people: that of the Armitages, at first slightly overhanging, and that of Walter, watching him surreptitiously. However, as the characters' exchanges become less audible (in keeping with the realistic convention that sound level is indexed to our distance from its source), the few notes of music that accompany the scene from the start add to the tension felt by the viewer, especially as they rise to a crescendo in the foreground. This closing shot of the scene leads the viewer to believe that the threat will come from the periphery and that it will be brought to life by an individual belonging to the same ethnic community as Chris. However, despite appearances, this individual on the edge of the frame is the same as the one who, a few minutes later, appears in the photograph showing Dean's father, Roman Armitage, ready to take the start of the qualifying round at the Berlin Olympic Games. The White man, his legs bent over the start line, occupies the centre of the image, the frame so tight that it is impossible to place the action in space or time. It is Dean's commentary that re-establishes the context of the image and dramatises it through the narrative, a narrative that the viewer will later learn is not only partial but also specious, since it consists, under the guise of confession, in deceiving the listener. Contrary to Dean's assertion ("He almost got over it"), Roman never overcame his defeat, which lay at the very root of his undertaking to annex the Black body. The photograph, taken in the flow of family photos lined up on the wall, would in itself be anecdotal if we did not decipher it in the light of what it keeps out of frame, namely Jesse Owens, who beat Roman that day and qualified for the Games he won. In this respect, the exclusion of the Black athlete from the shot is all the more surprising given that Roman's under-performance only makes sense in the light of Owens' presence and his entry into History.

From the outset, therefore, the image in the film maintains a competitive relationship with reality, which it carves up, shapes and parcels out in keeping with the ideology that underpins it. Thus decontextualised, it verges on insignificance and can be manipulated by any commentary claiming to elucidate it. Dean's discourse reconstitutes its *origin* and gives it orientation by anchoring it in a reality that the photographer has chosen to conceal. However, the inclusion of the photograph at this point

in the sequence also invites us to question it, in addition to its relation to the referential context, in its relationship to the reverse shot produced by the filmic device. The photograph of the White sportsman can be read as a counter-shot to Walter's body introduced in the previous sequence. The proximity between Dean's father and the Black gardener he has become is reinforced by the mirror effect produced by the editing, which places the White man facing the camera opposite the Black man filmed from behind.

The resulting shot/counter-shot effect highlights the similarities between these two muscular men in their prime, essentially defined at this stage of the story by their physical activity, despite their differences in age and condition. However, the shot/reverse shot does not place them on an equal footing: while Roman appears in full frame, Walter is framed from behind at shoulder height, with most of his body kept out of frame. This unequal treatment reminds us that in a History written by Whites for Whites, while excluding other ethnic groups from access to representation, the archive (the photograph) can only maintain a counterfeit relationship with reality and truth that is insufficiently questioned.

However, the hermeneutic operation of the image is restored by the device put in place by the film here: the mirroring, by placing Roman and Walter face to face, makes each the double of the other. This face-to-face confrontation between the image of the White man and the "escamotage" (Robert-Houdin, 2011: 42-44) of the Black body foreshadows the transfer effected by the grafting of the image (Roman) into the body (Walter) leading to the dissolution of the body in the image. In this respect, *Get Out* is part of a long horrific tradition in which, from *The Oval Portrait* to *Dorian Gray*,[27] the vampire figure is embodied at the expense of a subject whom it turns into a mere image. Now, the grafting of the White brain into the Black body takes us from the shores of fantasy into the political sphere. In the same way as the racist remarks Chris is subjected to at the garden party, the image maintains a con/fusion between fiction and reality to the point of pretending to replace it. And yet, its mise en abyme in *Get Out* implies, for the discerning eye, a permanent distrust of what is seen, which must now be deciphered. The revelation of racist abjection is thus brought about by the image, even if it remains reserved for those seeking to revive a hermeneutic approach to representation.

---

27. For an analysis of the vampiric relationship between the painted portrait and Madeleine Usher in Jean Epstein's film, see Isabelle Labrouillère's article "The Fall of the House of Usher" (2020: 119-142).

Chris as photographer: from the annexation of the gaze to its emancipation

The film is not content to simply stage the failure of our vision of the world; it also shows that "there can be no domination without the dispossession of the gaze" (Lebrun, Armanda, 2021: 121). The spectator's reappropriation of the seen is then achieved through its protagonist in what will prove to be a shared initiation. While much has been made of the fact that the main character, Chris, is a photographer, less thought seems to have been given to the nature of his photographic productions, which we see against the backdrop of the opening credits.

The first one shows a man dressed entirely in Black carrying white inflatable balloons of various sizes at arm's length. The second one shows the rounded belly of a pregnant Black woman in the left foreground, while a Black man with his back to the camera walks away to the right off-screen area. The third one shows a white dog standing on its hind legs, pulling on a leash held by a man whose face remains out of frame. These three photographs are of particular interest to us because they open the sequence and are displayed in a row, the montage inviting us to read them in syntagmatic continuity.[28] Unlike the images that follow them (a lamppost standing out against a tangle of electric wires, a bird in flight filmed from a low angle), these photographs are taken in a fixed shot, on a tight scale, and all depict individuals.[29] Chris's photographic work follows in the tradition of street photographers who succeed in capturing the strange, the comic or simply the beautiful through composition (Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment) in the ordinariness of everyday life. The Black-and-White prints contribute to the aestheticisation of bodies and scenery, and the works on display would be rather conventional if they did not all depict Black individuals.[30]

At first glance, these images might seem to suggest that the Black subject has finally re-entered the world of representation (if we take Muybridge's photograph of the horseman as the point of origin), and that to do so it will have been necessary to wait for non-White minorities to seize the means of reproducing reality. And yet, on closer inspection, none of these people are treated as the subject of a work in which they occupy the centre and foreground. Whether they are relegated to the background as a simple silhouette with undefined features (the man with the balloons),

---

28. Each new photo includes, in the way it is framed, a fragment of the previous or following one.
29. I'll return later to the photo of the White girl hidden behind a black mask, which, like the previous two, is revealed by a wide shot of one of the walls of the flat.
30. The hand that stands out in the third photograph suggests that it belongs to an African American.

kept at the edge of the frame (the pregnant woman), seen from behind (the man walking away), or literally decapitated (the pregnant woman, the man with the dog), the photograph is not organised around their bodies. The traditionally centripetal principle of portraiture shatters, dispersing the human figure to the edges of the image, to the limits of the unrepresentable.[31] Like Chris's father, whose absence Chris reminds us of through a metaphorical *image* ("My dad wasn't really *in the picture*"),[32] the silhouetted bodies (the man with the balloons) or those atomised by the framing are already disembodied. Behind the aestheticisation of reality lies an imperfect grasp of subjects marked by incompleteness, while the repetition of headless bodies seems the proleptic sign of the horror to come. The individuals literally decerebrated by the operation of transplanting the White brain into the Black body will become subjects devoid of identity, a disappearance that the dis/figured subjects photographed here seems to herald.

Ironically, these photographs seem to bear witness to the dispossession of the Black gaze at precisely the moment when it seemed to be emancipating itself. It would indeed be erroneous to think that mastery of the camera is necessarily synonymous with a grip on reality[33] and the restoration of an authorial vision. Surprisingly, in his urban photographs, the protagonist recaptures the modes of representation that populate United States iconography and pepper racist discourse. Chris's photographs can thus be considered paradoxical in that it is through the exposure of Black people that their disappearance takes place, which in this sense makes them tragically part of the lineage of minstrel shows and other racist representations. Chris's eye is a "confiscated" gaze,[34] the invisible vector of the enslavement that his works bear witness to. The segregationist ideology that has always permeated representations of the Black subject thus infects the mental and artistic constructs of Black people themselves. Chris's colonised gaze is evidence of the enduring nature of a racist system whose representations invade social space to the point that they become the yardstick by which a given society thinks of itself. The image here is reminiscent of the language usurped by the Nazi discourse, which permeates every social sphere to such an extent that "the most noxious words of the new phraseology are often taken up without any thought whatsoever, with disconcerting ease, by people who not only abhor and despise the regime, but also have everything to fear from it" (Joly, 2019: 45). A similar

---

31. It is in this sense that I think it is possible to read the full-frame image of the White girl hidden behind a black mask that hangs on one of the walls of the flat. It can be seen as a metaphor for the feint of representing Black subjects only as promoters and supports of the dominant White ideology.
32. Italics added.
33. In this way, I do not share Kyle Brett's analysis that when Chris points the lens of his camera at Georgina and Walter, he exerts on them a violence similar to that of the White gaze on the Black body.
34. I am here adapting the title of Frédéric Joly's book.

mechanism seems to be at play in the internalisation of White ideology by African Americans. As Ryan Poll points out after W.E.B. Du Bois: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Poll, 2018: 88). Indeed, it seems more relevant to see in these photographs the double-consciousness effect referred to by Du Bois, which finds its counterpart in the colonisation of Black bodies by the Armitages, than to consider them as a critical commentary on the invisibilisation and decentring of Black people. Besides, this interpretation allows us to take the measure of the initiatory journey undertaken by Chris in *Get Out*.

At this point in the film, Chris is not very different from the child he was, hypnotised by a TV screen distracting him from the violence of reality. At the time, however, the child, although rendered inactive by the seduction of the image, was well aware of the ontological difference between television fiction and reality. Glued to the screen, he refused to take action (in this case, call for help) for fear that it would bring about the misfortune he feared,[35] as if he understood the performative power (Austin, 1975) of a language capable of shaping and informing the world according to its objective. As an adult photographer, Chris continues to withdraw from the world, not only because photography, as Susan Sontag pointed out, "is essentially an act of non-intervention" (Sontag, 2005: 8), but also because he has internalised the objective, the dominant ideology, unconsciously reproducing it in his own work. So it is by reviving the performative operation of the camera, eclipsed by his artistic practice, that Chris untangles himself from the unconscious alienation of his gaze through an unprecedented photographic gesture. This gesture, as mentioned above, consists of inverting the dazzling power of the flash to restore Andre and Walter's sight. In this particular case, however, he is mainly an auxiliary in this sudden awareness, his own revelation coming through the discovery of a series of photographs showing Rose with numerous Black partners.

When Chris uncovers this collection of private photos showing Rose in the company of various African American male and female partners, it is the passage from the unique (her relationship with Chris)[36] to the multiple that takes place through the inclusion of each shot into a series. This insertion into a continuity invalidates the meaning conveyed by each shot. While at first the photos of Rose show her alone and appear to be taken by a third party, the shots gradually become first group photos and then selfies, recognisable by the insertion of the mobile phone in the shot and/or the position of the subjects photographed. While the first photos that open the series seem to confer a sacred character on specific moments in

---

35. Missy: "You didn't call anyone?" […] Chris: "I thought if I did it would make it *real*". Italics added.
36. Rose had led Chris to believe that he was her first African American partner.

Rose's past life, the other images only derive their value from the series in which each one is included. From now on, the photos are all taken from the same angle and distance, and repeat the same poses, their value residing essentially in "the singular adventure of the person who has shot them" (Bourdieu in Gunthert, 2015). If the statement whereby "the selfie is the first image in history that carries no secret, no hidden image and, in so doing, no perspective"[37] seems open to criticism, it appears that the viral proliferation of these ready-to-use images on social networks is dragging these new self-portrait practices down to the derisory and the insignificant. Here, however, unlike digital images that are scrolled across the screen, the fact these photographs were printed on paper means that one has to stop and consider them. While the contextual and aesthetic content of each photo remains poor in itself, the enlargement and resolution enable the spectator to identify without a doubt the faces of Andre, Walter and Georgina among Rose's previous conquests. What's more, the printing of the developed shot gives the image a new value that invalidates its anecdotal nature: the manipulation of the paper format —unlike scrolling, which implies that each new image eclipses the previous one— allows the creation of a photographic ribbon suddenly rendered talkative or "garrulous", as Roland Barthes put it (Barthes, 2020: 57). All at once, the insignificance of the photo, thus contextualised and duplicated, reconnects with a hermeneutic function. Once inserted into a chronology that inscribes it in time, the once silent space/time of the photograph turns into a narrative.

The film then shifts into the logic of investigation, the digital image becoming in context the trace of a "ça-a-été" (Barthes, 1980: 120-121) restoring the truth about the existence of Andre, Walter and Georgina. The photographic image thus restores the characters' past, re-establishing an anchorage in reality that has been damaged by the fictionalisation of the present. In retrospect, the reconstitution of the overall picture denounces the not only partial but also arbitrary capture of the visible that had been carried out up to that point.

Indeed, the history that is being written in counterpoint to the post-racial deception here takes the form of thanatography, in line with an iconographic tradition in which the White figure (in this case Rose) always occupies the axial point opposite Black bodies that the accumulation of photographs renders satellite-like and supernumerary. While each shot, taken separately, maintains the illusion of a rhizomic relationship in which the two figures, side by side, occupy the space of the frame on an equal footing, their succession reveals the commodification of the Black

---

37. Annie Lebrun and Juri Armanda's book is a scathing indictment of "the ridiculous practice of the selfie" (Lebrun, Armanda: 2021, 96). The point here is not to pass value judgement on what Gunthert describes as "participatory autophotography", but to show how the proliferation of this type of image contributes to its insignificance.

subject, who has become disposable. The photographic ribbon thus formed makes the story of each couple part of the US history of Black/White relations while freezing each pair in the eternity of a fixed representation. The modes of reproducing reality may have changed, but their denomination has never been so well-founded: the aim is to re/produce in identical fashion an endogamous positioning that exposes the false proximity between the subjects photographed and perpetuates the subservience of one to the other.

So, as in Roman's photograph, it is essential to restore the integrity of the image when so many representations maintain a competitive or even duplicitous relationship with reality. It is in fact possible to reconnect with reality, on the one hand, by questioning the image in its context, and on the other, by discerning in it, beyond the banality of the instantaneous, an image of time. By reconstructing the photographic jigsaw, Chris succeeds in giving new meaning to the visible by reconnecting with a memory in the light of which we must now decipher the increasingly diffuse signs of White domination. In a world of pretence manufactured by White America, the truth revealed by the image highlights, in a single gesture, the fusion and dislocation of reality (these photographs attest to the existence of past relationships) and fiction (orchestrated by Rose). But in order to flush out the chimera, we need to reconnect with the memorability of the photograph (Sontag, 2005: 13)[38] and halt the flow of images, whether by means of a flash that edifies by stupefying or through photos that careful examination snatches from the digital scroll.

Conclusion

It would seem, then, that while *Get Out* shares many of the concerns of Afro-pessimism,[39] Jordan Peele's film is less about promoting a separatist conception of society than it is about inviting the Black American minority to develop modes of resistance, while at the same time encouraging every citizen to question the ways in which ideas are circulated in a society at a given time. The director thus invites us to reconsider our fiduciary relationship with all forms of representation. By exposing the iconic and linguistic devices that govern usage within the same community, the director denounces the disembodiment of subjects by language and image, responsible for the ideological reshaping of individuals. A paradigm shift is therefore needed to understand this "profound structure, rooted in institutions, social practices and collective patterns of thought", which "violently

---

38. "Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow."
39. On this question, see the above-mentioned article by Ryan Poll.

appropriates reality, produces its own reality and, in so doing, imposes its own conditions of visibility and intelligibility" (Colin, Quiroz,2023: 38). Faced with the proliferation of mental, linguistic and media images whose indexing to reality is less than guaranteed, it is now up to us all to flush out the invisible behind the visible (Kuhn, 1994: 71), the objective behind the vision, with an eye that is ever vigilant and worried.

Works Cited

Amossy, Ruth, *Les Idées reçues. Sémiologie du stéréotype,* Paris, Nathan, 1991.

Austin, J.L., *How to do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1975.

Bacry, Patrick, *Les Figures de style*, Paris, Belin, 1992.

Baker, Houston A. & Simmons, Merinda K. (Eds), *The Trouble with Post-Blackness*, New York, Columbia UP, 2015.

Barthes, Roland, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Paris, Éditions de l'Étoile/Gallimard, Le Seuil, 1980.

Barthes, Roland, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Richard Howard trans., London, Vintage Classics, 2020.

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique.* Précédé de *Trois études d'ethnologie Kabyle*, Paris, Librairie Droz, 1972.

Brett, Kyle, "The Horror of the Photographic Eye", in Dawn Keetley (Ed.), *Critical Approaches to Jordan Peele's Get Out (2017),* Columbus, Ohio State UP, 2020, 187-199.

Church, David, *Post-horror: Art, Genre and Cultural Elevation*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2021.

Colin, Philippe, Quiroz, Lissel, *Pensées décoloniales. Une introduction aux théories critiques d'Amérique Latine*, Paris, Éditions de la Découverte, 2023.

Dubois, Philippe, *Photographie et cinéma. De la différence à l'indistinction*, San Giovanni, Mimesis 2021.

Due, Tananarive, "*Get Out* and the Black Horror Aesthetic", *Jordan Peele's* "Get Out", Los Angeles, Inventory Press, 2019.

Dyer, Richard, *White*, London & New York, Routledge, 1997.

Dyer, Richard, "White", *The Matters of Representation. Essays on Representations*, London & New York, Routledge, 1993.

Elliott, Nicholas, "*Get Out* et l'Amérique « post-raciale »", *Cahiers du cinéma*, No.° 738, Nov. 2017, 8-12.

Ginsberg, Elaine K. (Ed.), *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Durham & London, Duke UP, 1996.

Gunthert, André, "The consecration of the selfie. A cultural history", Fatima Aziz trans. *Études photographiques*, No. 32, Spring 2015, http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3537 (last accessed July 5, 2023).

Herschberg-Pierrot, Anne, "Clichés, stéréotypie et stratégie discursive dans le discours de Lieuvain : *Madame Bovary*, II, 8", *Littérature* No. 1979, 36, 1979, 88-103, doi: 10.3406/litt.1979.1185.

Joly, Frédéric, *La langue confisquée. Lire Victor Klemperer aujourd'hui*, Paris, Premier Parallèle, 2019.

Keetley, Dawn (Ed.), *Jordan Peele's* Get Out: *Political Horror*, Columbus, Ohio State UP, 2020.

Kenigsberg, Ben, "'Nope,' Eadweard Muybridge and the Story of 'The Horse in Motion'", *The New York Times*, July 22, 2022. Revised July 27, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/22/movies/nope-horse-in-motion-eadweard-muybridge.html (last accessed September 28, 2023).

Kuhn, Annette, *Women's Pictures, Feminism and Cinema*, London, Verso, 1994.

Labrouillere, Isabelle, "*La Chute de la maison Usher* de Jean Epstein comme laboratoire esthétique : de la mise au tombeau pictural au trouble de l'image filmique", in Jocelyn Dupont & Gilles Menegaldo (Ed.), *Spectres de Poe dans la littérature et dans les arts*, Cadillon, Le visage vert, 2020, 119-142.

Lebrun, Annie, Armanda, Juri, *Ceci tuera cela. Image, regard et capital*, Paris, Stock, 2021.

Macé, Éric, "Des « minorités visibles » aux néostéréotypes", *Journal des anthropologues*, hors-série, 2007, doi: 10.4000/jda.2967.

Macé, Marielle, "La généricité restreinte", *Acta fabula*, vol. 2, n° 2, 2001, doi: 10.58282/acta.10985.

Manoukian, André, "Aux origines du Blackface : "Jim Crow», une chanson et des lois racistes ", *Sur les routes de la musique.* Radio France, 22 août 2022. https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/sur-les-routes-de-la-musique/sur-les-routes-de-la-musique-du-lundi-22-aout-2022-1051762 (last accessed July 4, 2023).

Means, Coleman Robin R., HARRIS, Mark H., *The Black Guy Dies First. Black Horror Cinema from Fodder to Oscar*, New York, Gallery/Saga Press, 2023.

MELLIER, Denis, *La Littérature fantastique*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

MELLIER, Denis, *L'Écriture de l'excès. Fiction fantastique et poétique de la terreur*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1999.

MOUELLIC, Gilles, "*The Jazz Singer* et l'héritage des minstrel shows. Entre musique et images", *Africultures. Les mondes en relation*, Published October 31, 2002. https://africultures.com/the-jazz-singer-et-lheritage-des-minstrel-shows-2617/ (last accessed May 30, 2023).

PEELE, Jordan, *Get Out. The complete annotated screenplay by Jordan Peele*, Los Angeles, Inventory Press, 2019.

PLATON, « Le récit de l'allégorie de la caverne ». *La République Livre VII*, Robert Baccou trad., Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1987, 273-276..

PLATO, *The Allegory of the Cave*, https://open.library.okstate.edu/introphilosophy/chapter/on-the-allegory-of-the-cave-plato/ (last accessed August 11th, 2024).

POLL, Ryan, "Can One *Get Out*? The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism", *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 51, No. 2, Fall 2018, 69-102.

ROBERT-HOUDIN, Jean-Eugène, *Secrets of Conjuring and Magic: Or How to Become a Wizard*, Hoffmann L. ed. trans, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2011.

ROCHE, David, *Meta in Film and Television Series,* Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2022.

SONTAG, Susan, *On Photography*, (1973), London, Penguin books, 2002.

THORP, Laura, "The fantasy of Immortality and Black Male Corporeality in James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" and *Get Out*", *Jordan Peele's* Get out. *Political Horror,* ed. Dawn Keetley, Columbus, Ohio State UP, 2020, 200-211.

WALLACE-SANDERS, Kimberley, *Mammy. A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, Ann Harbor, University of Michigan Press, 2008.

YACAVONE, Daniel, "The Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Cinematic Reflexivity", *La Furia umana* 41, https://www.lafuriaumana.com/daniel-yacavone-the-cognitive-and-affective-dimensions-of-cinematic-reflexivity/ (last accessed February 28, 2024).