

Get Out: The Horror of Whiteness

[first slide]

Hello, and thank you for coming to my talk! Always a pleasure to be at Nine Worlds. I want to make a few clarifications before I begin so that we all know where we stand. Firstly, I will be taking questions at the end, both verbally and via Twitter.

If you want to ask me something or make a comment but you're not comfortable speaking in front of people, please feel free to tweet me at the account on the screen, which is @Alecto101. I'll then read out your tweet and answer it, or open it up for discussion.

Secondly, this talk does have the words "the horror of whiteness" in the title, so I want to make sure you know what I mean by that and that you know that this is not going to be a comfortable talk.

When I say "whiteness", what I mean is the system of white supremacy that we all live in, you just as much as me. I mean the system that prioritises white people over everyone else, defining them as the norm and everyone else as "other"; I mean the system that celebrates an empire that massacred, raped, and enslaved my ancestors; the system that beggars Africa with debt and steals her resources even as it gloats that we would be nothing without Europe; in short, the system that wants to kill me and mine.

What I do not mean is "hey you, white person in the audience! I blame you for my statistically lower salary!" But even that sentence is an example of white supremacy, in that it forces me to make this very clarification, because I must make it clear that I am not a hater of the race of white people, because I do not want to hurt white feelings, because that can quite literally get me killed.

There is great danger that comes with being non-white in this white world, just as there is great danger in being LGBT in this straight and cis world, or being disabled in this world built for abled people. I am living a horror story, and so are many of you.

This is, in essence, what Get Out addresses: the horror that lies beneath the surface of our society, specifically as it applies to black people.

This leads me to my third clarification: this is a film not just about racism and white supremacy, but about anti-blackness. Anti-blackness specifically, not racism against people of colour in general - and that's an important point that I want to make sure you understand.

Each group of us - black British, black American, south Asian, east Asian, Arab, Roma, Polynesian, Aborigine, Maori, and many more - face racism in different ways, and often from

each other, though that's a different talk. The kind of racism that black people face has been termed anti-blackness, and that's what I'm discussing here.

Now. For those who haven't yet seen this incredible film, here is a quick recap of what happens.

[new slide - Chris and Rose]

Chris, a black man who works as a photographer, is dating Rose, a white woman. He goes with her to visit her parents. When they arrive, he finds that her parents have two black servants - a maid and a gardener - who act very strangely. They speak like they're still on the plantation, and don't seem to react well to Chris being around.

Rose's mother is a therapist, and she hypnotises Chris one night without his consent, putting him into what we learn is called "the sunken place": a tiny corner of his psyche where he cannot control what he does or says. He wakes up in his bed, and decides it must have been a dream.

That day, Rose's parents host a party. It is 99% white, and after a series of increasingly uncomfortable events culminating in the only other black man there screaming at him to get out, Chris tells Rose that he wants and needs to leave. Whilst he's doing this, the audience sees a silent auction going on where the item on sale is Chris.

Rose agrees to go; but while Chris is packing, he finds pictures of her with dozens of black people, some of whom she was clearly dating. One of them is the gardener. Another is the man who told him to get out. Another is the maid.

When he asks Rose for the car keys, she refuses to give them to him, and he is overpowered by her brother and dragged to the basement. It's here that he learns what is really going on.

Rose's family are at the head of a cult of white people who have found a way to basically possess the bodies of black people. They do this by putting them into "the sunken place" and then lobotomising them, replacing the missing parts of their brain with that of whichever white person has bought them.

The white person's brain then controls the voice and body of the black person, whose consciousness is trapped there until they die. Luckily, Chris escapes with the help of his friend Rod (who is the greatest best friend in the world), and kills the whole family on his way out - including the two black servants, who are in fact Rose's grandparents piloting black bodies - and gets to safety.

Now. There is A LOT to unpack here, not just in how race is explored, but also in terms of the typical assumptions of horror movie.

[new slide - nice Rose]

For example, there's quite a lot of discussion in the horror community about the concept of 'the last girl' - you know, the one girl who actually has enough of a personality to fight off the villain until the end, though sometimes this is subverted by the villain inexplicably coming back to life and killing her.

Now, if this were a different type of film, Rose would definitely be this character: she's clever, pretty, and white. But in this case...

[new slide - evil Rose]

...she is the remorseless villain, and Chris takes the role of the final girl. He is the one who uses his cunning and strength to kill the family who has terrorised him, and it is Rose who rises up like a spectre to try and shoot him down. But in this case, it results in a reversal of the trope that the black guy dies first: Chris and Rod, both black men, are the only survivors.

Related to this is a trope which is not confined to horror - that of the helpless, innocent white woman getting hunted down or into some other kind of trouble that she needs rescuing from. Rose is anything but these things; but for a majority of the film, you would be forgiven for thinking that she has just been duped or brainwashed by her family into their horrible machinations.

But she hasn't, and that is made very clear. Right at the climax of the film, we see her marching down the road with murder as her purpose, dressed all in white with a shotgun, like a member of the KKK. That is very, very deliberate: that she is the one who wears all white, which is often interpreted as a depiction of purity, but which is also easily stained and has many racist connotations.

[new slide - keys]

On a similar note, our first real indication of her true nature is when Chris is trying to leave and has been confronted by the whole family. He keeps asking her for the keys to the car, and she is pretending to look for them; and then, finally, it happens:

"You know I can't give you the keys, babe."

And the reason I bring that up is because of the number of times protagonists in horror films are running to a car or running to a door with the keys to their freedom and they drop them. Here, they are being deliberately withheld to prolong the horror. Another film I can think of which does something similar is *The Hole*, which is a 2001 psychological thriller and from memory, it's pretty good. So there's a recommendation for you.

[new slide - house and crowd]

In terms of setting, we have the isolated house in the middle of nowhere, which means that our protagonist has nowhere to run to and no one to call because his phone keeps being unplugged. Not only that, but there is a lot of focus put on him being surrounded by hostile people - but not a kind of hostile that we're used to seeing from humans. The way that the rest of the community acts is more like aliens: they clearly cannot relate to Chris at all or understand what his emotional reactions might be, nor do they care.

I'd like to note here as well that when you're black, and you're in a setting where most people are white strangers, the sense of isolation is just as real as if there were no one around you at all. Even though Chris is there with Rose, he has a sudden and very visual sense of relief when he sees Andre - another black person. Again, I can relate; though sadly for Chris, that relief is quickly dashed.

The thing is, at the back of your mind, you remember all the other times you know about where a black person has been surrounded by white people, and how that ended; and you have to tell yourself, nah, that can't happen to me. And of course 99% of the time you're right. But there is still that 1%, always. So you try to smile and not to provoke anyone. We'll come back to that shortly.

Something that you may or may not have noticed in these scenes as well is that there is one other person of colour present: an east Asian man who is presumably part of the cult. I think that this is an important and deliberate inclusion, because I think it is a quick comment on the way that white supremacy can turn different groups of people of colour against each other.

It may perhaps even go a little further on how east Asian people are held up as an acceptable "model minority" to beat the rest of us with, regardless of how that dehumanises us all. You see people say things like "well, the Chinese are doing well; there's no reason Africa can't!" as if that disproves the legacy of colonialism and negates the vastly different political histories and, as happens so annoyingly often, equates one country with an entire continent. And sometimes, people in that model minority buy into it, and don't see how very dangerous that is for all people of colour.

To expand a little more on this, one of the reasons we have the phrase anti-blackness is because we not only experience racism from other non-white people, but also are aware that there is still a culture across the whole global south of lighter skinned people being seen as better than darker skinned people.

That's why there is, for example, such a huge skin bleaching industry: white supremacy has told us all that the darker you are, the lower down in the hierarchy you should be. I have heard my own cousin say she's staying out of the sun so she doesn't get too dark. This is what anti-blackness is: the belief that black is the worst thing you can be, and that the more like white people you can be, the better.

[new slide - Logan and Dean]

Lastly, there are also two huge tropes here that we get to see in a different way: the walking dead, and mad scientists.

Obviously, the walking dead are the bodies of the black people that have been taken over by this racist white cult. They may as well be dead; in fact, they would probably find it preferable, as demonstrated by the gardener shooting himself in the head. You could even conceive of the white person who has stolen their body as being the kind of parasite we see in films like *28 Days Later* or *Splinter*: white supremacy is the virus here.

The procedure itself is where the mad science comes in: an evil doctor trying a nonconsensual, unnatural practice that is just short of supernatural in terms of the way that consciousness can be shared. It is something that should not be happening; but the madness of this scientist is so calculated that it is even more frightening. It's a whole way of life for them; something they all work towards and take for granted - it's only natural that they get to expand their lives at the expense of others. Just like living with white privilege.

So. That's a quick runthrough of the use of typical horror tropes in the film. To move on to explaining how racism is shown and the reasons why it's shown that way, I'm going to start by using each member of this evil white family to represent an archetype of whiteness.

[new slide - Dean and Missy]

Let's start with the Dad, Dean, who is also the surgeon who performs the lobotomies.

He is a white, socially liberal man; the kind of man who feels he needs to reassure Chris that he voted for Obama, because that is certified proof of being Not Racist. The kind of man who would go on holiday to an African country and come back all inspired saying "you know, they're poor, but they're happy". In fact, in this film, Dean says it is "such a privilege" to experience someone else's culture; and clearly has never thought about whether he should be trying to take a holiday in that culture in the first place.

His racism is an infantilising, patronising, ignorant racism that stems from a sense that he knows what's holding black people back and it is definitely not him; in fact, he knows what's best for them. I call this archetype The Middle Manager, and it is gender neutral.

To ground this in reality, let me put it this way - he is not a Donald Trump. He is a Tony Blair.

Then we have the mother, who is the hypnotist. And I feel I have to note the merciless way in which she does it; she has no more regard for Chris than she would a mosquito. Once crushed, her job is done. Perhaps he even deserved it.

She is the kind of white woman who will look down at a black woman out alone with children, assuming that this woman is a) the mother of each child, b) that each child has a different father, and c) that the woman is living on benefits - none of which are inherently bad things that anyone should be judged on, but this white woman will go ahead and do so anyway.

She is the kind of woman who will interview me, and no matter how I act or what I say or what's on my CV, will find a reason why I wouldn't fit in with her team. She is the kind of woman who would go on a racist rant to my mother, and then reassure my Mum that she isn't like all the other blacks. She is the woman who calls us "you people" when she's annoyed with customer service.

Her racism is a judgemental racism that is rooted in her own insecurities which come from old-school sexism and misogyny, leading to a need to feel superior. I call this archetype Mother Knows Best, and it is gendered because it stems from a need to know that she is not at the bottom of the social hierarchy: black people will always be beneath her.

She is Louise Mensch.

[new slide - Jeremy]

Thirdly, the son. His attitude is the one that most people recognise as "real" racism: impulsive, brash, and violent. For the avoidance of doubt, all forms of racism are necessarily violent: restricting where a person can live is violence; denying a person employment is violence; undermining a person's self-confidence is violence; oversexualising a person is violence.

However, the son is physically violent; in his first interactions with Chris, he is verbally aggressive and is clearly looking for a fight. This is the kind of white man who sees every black man as a challenge to his masculinity, and every black woman as a temptation he must resist because we are, to him, so very disgusting. He is the Nazi skinhead of 80s Britain; he is Combo from This Is England; he is Richard Spencer if Richard Spencer was less scared of physical confrontation.

His racism is built on watching an endless list of strong white male role models beating and killing the equally endless list of faceless, nameless, dark-skinned bad guys. It is built on defining himself by how powerful he is compared to others, and proving that power through various abuses - usually physical, but sometimes through social demonstrations of how good he is, such as arguments, shouting, and insults. The name I give this archetype is The Insecure Teenager.

THIS one is Donald Trump.

[new slide - Rose]

And finally, Rose. Rose is two things. For the first half of the film, she is the young white woman who thinks she's so woke, you know? And because she is woke, she doesn't examine her own thoughts or reactions at all, because she couldn't be racist! She has black friends, or a black boyfriend. It is therefore impossible for her to do anything wrong, and if she is ever accused of doing anything wrong, she is the one who gets upset and you have to comfort her.

She is Kendall Jenner in that stupid Pepsi advert.

For the second half of the film, she is like the wife of a slave master or a klansman; she is the one who took the pictures of lynched black bodies; she is Carolyn Bryant, the woman who had Emmett Till killed for looking at her.

There are, of course, many many more ways that racism presents itself; but these are the ones that we see in the family of Get Out.

At this point, I would like to introduce you to an article by a writer called Taylor Steele, called 'The Horror and the Work: What Get Out Teaches Us.'

[new slide - Chris alone]

Honestly, I could just copy and paste the whole thing. But let's focus on just a few key parts, though I highly recommend that you do read the full article.

She notes, correctly, that the horror starts at the invitation to Rose's home.

"The first thing Chris asks upon hearing this request is whether or not her parents know that he's Black. To which she replies, no. Because, it doesn't matter. Because, of course, her parents aren't racist. Because, if they were, she wouldn't ask him to meet them. All of which insinuates he was crazy for questioning her, her family, and her intentions. She reassures him, and he nods in faux-agreement. And this is what kills me. Chris, like most Black people, is a pro at the nod and "you're right" when we have an absolute right to our distrust and fear."

This - Rose's dismissal of Chris's concerns - is what is known as a microaggression. For those of you who don't know what these are, they are subtle but hurtful comments and actions that affect marginalised people and which are extremely hard to call out precisely because of that subtlety.

These happen all the time, all the fucking time, in interracial relationships and friendships. Can you imagine how hard it is to tell your partner, the person you love and who loves you, that they're racist? It is relationship-ending. And sometimes, it should be. What Rose does here is a classic illustration of this.

For another example of microaggressions, we read on - the writer notes that Rose's father greets Chris by saying "my man". She explains:

"This assumption that the only way Chris will understand this white man is through a dialect of English (African-American Vernacular English) that does not belong to him is subtly racist."

To people who operate with privilege in this world, it is easy to say "well, just call it out"; however, in many cases, we can't. I myself once had a manager walk up behind me and put her white hands straight into my hair and play with it, as if it was a comfort blanket and not attached to my head; but if I called her out on that racist action, I would have suffered the consequences.

So I did what Chris does throughout the film, and what Taylor Steele acknowledges that she does too: I ignored it or swiftly moved on. Right now, this is absolutely necessary to continued survival in this world. Every day, for millions of black people in the world, we have no mouths and yet we must scream.

However, the most potent part of this article is in the discussion of Missy, Rose's mother, and what the Sunken Place is. Taylor Steele compares it to having to stifle her own real feelings in the moment of a microaggression:

"When the time comes for me to walk away from a microaggression or to smile it away, I am putting the realest part of me in that moment — the hurt, frustration, and confusion — on the back burner so that a counterfeit me can control the situation. I put on my brave face, pretend I didn't hear the insult or that it wasn't an insult at all..."

This is what we see in Georgina's face, when her eyes begin crying but her mouth is denying that anything is wrong. This is also exactly what Chris is doing throughout the film. More than that, he is constantly encouraged to do so by Rose, because every time he brings up his worries she dismisses them and makes him feel like he's overreacting. Even when it's something that OBVIOUSLY should not be overlooked - like being hypnotised against your consent.

And then there is this line in the article:

"Chris' body was set up to be consumed."

By constantly being forced to apologise and retract his statements of hurt and anger, not just in his relationship with Rose but throughout his entire life as a black man, Chris has become vulnerable. Living in a white supremacist society has forced him to cut off pieces of himself to fit in, to become more palatable to the white people who could fire him, arrest him, kill him. He is consumable.

In exactly the same way, black culture - and particularly African American culture - has been made consumable. Their slang words are taken from them and disseminated through the

mainstream, often losing their true meaning along the way or becoming overused to the point that no one in the black community can even bear to use them any more.

For all black people, our physical and cultural features are sought after and consumed, not only when they are actually attached to us - by which I mean the rampant sexualisation of black women's figures and black men's penises - but also when white and non-black people take these features from us and stick them onto themselves.

This is how "boxer braids" become a trend, when we have been wearing cornrows and braids for centuries. This is how twerking becomes first a thing that white people can laugh at and demonise us for as an example of our too-sexual, too-bestial communities, second a thing that white celebrities - particularly white women - can imitate and be applauded for their daring, and third, become something disregarded and thrown away like so much trash once the dominant white culture is bored of it.

This is how our own treatments for our skin and hair - think shea butter, coconut oil - enter the mainstream retail market and suddenly rocket in price, so the people who used them regularly before they were a trend can no longer afford them because white people have decided they are cool and so they must have them.

We are cannibalised. Body and spirit and voice and soul and culture. This is also part of the horror of being black right now: nothing is ours. Nothing belongs to us. Not even our own lives.

Finally, Taylor Steele delivers an excellent summary of how the mainstream understanding of horror has been turned on its head by this film, explaining the motivations behind why Chris doesn't just run away despite his friend Rod's warnings and his own discomfort.

"[Chris] stays much the way a white, blonde woman would walk down into the darkest basement or run through a forest during a full moon. No one wants to believe that the scream they heard wasn't a friend playing a joke on them. We want to believe the rustling is the wind. Instead, it's white supremacy."

This is why, whenever something racist happens, you will find a few people saying "well, I'm a person of colour and I'm not offended". They are not offended because they don't want to know, because if this thing is real and bad, then they have to confront all of the other things in their lives, and that is too difficult and scary. So they tell the rest of us that we are overreacting.

In conclusion, the horror of *Get Out* is three-fold.

[new slide - Georgina]

One, this is happening everywhere: white supremacy forces black people to become prisoners within our own minds, unable to speak our true thoughts, our misery often only truly visible to

each other. It is not done in so obvious a manner as in this film, of course; but it is there nonetheless. If you have ever thought that people don't need safe spaces, think again.

Two, there was likely very little that Chris could have done differently in this scenario once he arrived. I have no doubt that had he vocally and unreservedly expressed his unease, they would have knocked him out for the rest of his stay. We know they have a gun and that they're not afraid to use it. He was trapped the moment he set foot on the drive of that house. There is such a sense of claustrophobia here; not because the house is small, but because he cannot leave and has no allies.

Thirdly, the fact that this has clearly been going on for a very, very long time, and nobody really noticed or cared. Chris even asks the man who has bought him, "Why us? Why black people?" The art dealer replies "Who knows?"; but we, the black audience, do know. We are a people who can vanish from the face of the earth and others will shrug their shoulders. We are the perpetual disposable people.

[new slide - Chris crying]

Look at what is still happening in the Mediterranean Sea, at the black and brown bodies still washing up on the white shores of Europe but the refugee crisis barely mentioned any more.

Look at what is happening to so many of my black brothers and sisters in the US, shot in the street by citizens and police alike and nobody brought to justice. In fact, that justice is actively fought against by people who prioritise the rule of unfair, unequal law over a black person's right to life.

Look at what is happening right here, right now, with Rashan Charles murdered by the police in Dalston, and when the inevitable backlash occurred, demonised as a drug dealer who deserved and caused his own death even though we can see from the video that he was being choked. And the police have now admitted that the item he swallowed had no drugs in it; so basically he was killed for eating something.

Look at what is happening to the Grenfell survivors, so many of them people of colour, so many of them black, two of them literally related to me - and though I never knew them, now they are gone forever, taken by the same archetype that I outlined earlier: a carelessly vicious white man's box-ticking. And already the media has moved on.

As black people, we are worth less than the rest of the world, left to escape the house of white supremacy by ourselves, left to help each other limp down the drive, bloodied and traumatised, because help so rarely comes from anywhere else.

That is what Get Out exposes. A raw, bleeding truth at the heart of our society. And that is why it's frightening, because we all work day and night to avoid looking at it because it is too much.

But here it is on the big screen, looking at us with eyes streaming with tears, and it feels like all we can do is look back.

However, there is something we can do. We need to rescue ourselves and each other from white supremacy; my giving this talk and telling you my truth is one way I'm doing it, to see if I can help you open your eyes to what's in front of you. Now it's your turn. Unlearn the things that society has taught you, and show solidarity to us.

Grab those keys and run away from a place and a way of thinking that is dangerous to you. Go and take that deer head off the wall and slam it into the chest of those who want to steal your mind and use it for themselves. And when you can tell someone's in trouble, steal that police car, go get them out, and let them know that they can consider this shit fucking handled.

Thank you.

[last slide - Rod/questions]

Further reading

'The Horror and the Work: What Get Out Teaches Us', by Taylor Steele on Black Nerd Problems.

<http://blacknerdproblems.com/the-horror-and-the-work-what-get-out-teaches-us/>

'The Most Overlooked & Underrated Characters in 'Get Out' Are Black Women', by Brittany Willis on Huffington Post.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-most-overlooked-underrated-characters-in-get_out_us_58c3049de4b0a797c1d39c5b

'What Becky gotta do to get murked? White womanhood in Jordan Peele's Get Out', by Kinitra Brooks on Very Smart Brothas

<http://verysmartbrothas.com/what-becky-gotta-do-to-get-murked-white-womanhood-in-jordan-peeles-get-out/>