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Timely Provocations

'GET OUT' & 'I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO'

Some genre movies linger in the mind more insidiously than so-called "serious" films do. For instance, *Pickup on South Street* (1953), an exciting, hysterical piece of B-movie gutter poetry, had a more vivid feel for the Communist witch-hunting of the Joe McCarthy era than later more respectable and liberal works such as *The Front* and *Guilty by Suspicion*.

There are no more B-movies (since there are no more double bills), but comedian Jordan Peele's debut film, *Get Out*, is the modern equivalent of one. Like *Pickup*, it both embraces its given genre (horror) and pushes against its boundaries. As becomes clear about halfway through its running time, *Get Out* is actually a comic horror story, yet neither a spoof like *Shaun of the Dead* nor something that uses comic bits as relief between frights, in the manner of *Bride of Frankenstein*. Peele has rooted his story not only in the social realities of American race relations but also in the understandable paranoia many black people can't help feeling after four centuries of kidnapping, slavery, rape, murder, political fraud, biased policing, and in recent years a growing sense that history is crawling backward, not marching forward. This paranoia can be summed up by the bewildered question, "Are all white people crazy?" That's not a question that any sane person answers in the affirmative, but neither is it one that can be cheerfully wished away. Try looking at the face of Dylann Roof as he's escorted back and forth between courthouse and jail. Contemplate that youthful Nordic face, so unmarked by remorse, so uninflected by thought, and try to keep yourself from wondering, "Are all white people crazy?"

Jordan Peele's stroke of genius is to reply to that question in the affirmative while making us burst into laughter—good-natured, completely sane laughter—at the answer. He achieves this by making both the provocative question and the outrageous answer benefit from the frivolity of genre entertainment. Several kinds of genre entertainment, in fact.

Daniel Kaluuya in Get Out

At first we find ourselves in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* territory. An interracial couple, Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) and Rose Armitage (Allison Williams) are on the road to see Rose's parents. Chris is uneasy because Rose, who is white, hasn't warned her folks that he is black. She assures him that Dad and Mom are genuine liberals, but Chris wonders if one or both of Rose's parents will show at least a hint of alarm. We're set up for social comedy, but soon there's an odd moment that seems out of place in that genre. A deer runs out in front of the car and is killed. Rose is merely shaken up, but Chris stares at the face of the expiring animal with an expression of stunned grief that signals a turmoil within him having little to do with accidents or animals.

They arrive and we wait for the close-up of a parental face that will reveal either a true or a false liberalism. Instead we are allowed only an extreme long shot of an apparently blithe homecoming. Then, in medium shot, the father (Bradley Whitford) hugs the boy while the mother (Catherine Keener) looks on, beaming. Chris seems to have arrived in an Eden where there is no racial prejudice. But why no close-ups to confirm this? The answer comes later.

The family hosts a garden party at which all the guests appear equally eager to illustrate that liberal trope from the 1950s: *some of my best friends are negroes*. One female guest feels Chris's arm muscles as if she were sizing him up on an auction block, while a senior golfer assures him that "I know Tiger." Have these grotesques bounced us into yet another genre, satire? But then, what is the satirical point of having the African-American servants behave like zombies? Or has the script segued into the science fiction of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*? And when Mrs. Armitage, elegant earth mother and trained therapist, learns that Chris lost his mother in childhood and blames himself for her death (hence that poignant look at the dying deer that reminded him of his loss), she hypnotizes him not into mental health but into a nightmare. Suddenly we seem to be in a psychological thriller about mind control à la *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Finally, when Chris opens a closet door and finds a bag containing revelations, we know for sure we're in a horror movie, but it's one laced with all the ingredients of all the genres the movie has already flirted with. By juggling

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genres, writer-director Peele lets his audience know, consciously or unconsciously, that a game is being played with them—that they are watching a thoroughly artificial, tauntingly irresponsible construction that says outrageous things it would be lunatic to say once the game is over. And let's be clear about what that something is, since many commentators and critics seem to be getting it wrong while trying to bestow on *Get Out* a weightiness at odds with its sly B-movie tactics.

In the *Guardian*, Lanre Bakare wrote, "The thing *Get Out* does so well...is to show how, however unintentionally, these same people [middle-class white liberals] can make life so hard and uncomfortable for black people. It exposes a liberal ignorance and hubris that has been allowed to fester." In fact, that's precisely what *Get Out* does *not* do. There is nothing unintentional about the Armitages; they are ferociously intentional and their intentions are hideous. Their liberalism is a disguise. And now we come back to that strategically missing close-up when Chris meets the parents. Close-ups are psychology. Psychology is for people. The Armitages are monsters. Do these monsters represent all white people? Well, for the hundred terrifying and hilarious minutes of *Get Out*'s running time, yes, they do.

Get Out is funny, insolent, joyous, and liberating. The audience I watched it with—three whites and about thirty-five African Americans—received it in the spirit of carnival, which is exactly the right way to receive it. Playing off the real and still wounding outrages of history, Peel offers us a taunting, subversive fantasy.

I Am Not Your Negro, Raoul Peck's documentary based on the writings of James Baldwin, is riveting. Baldwin was the greatest America essayist of the second half of the twentieth century, as well as one of the better American novelists. Though Peck uses Baldwin's (unfulfilled) intention to write a book dealing with the murders of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King as a starting point for his film, audiences should not expect anything biographical. This is a meditation, a cinematic collage illustrating excerpts from several Baldwin essays, magisterially spoken by Samuel Jackson. Film clips are drawn from news footage and there are several TV appearances, including one on the *Dick Cavett Show* and a Cambridge University debate with William F. Buckley Jr. Baldwin's irony, compassion, and anger coruscate through the visuals and electrify the soundtrack.

I can't help wondering what Baldwin would have made of *Get Out*, for movies were a recurring topic in his work—particularly in his long 1976 essay "The Devil Finds Work," in which he indicts Hollywood movies for practicing the same self-deceptions he found in American society at large, lies perpetrated to keep whites from asking themselves, "Why it was necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him...you've invented him...you've got to find out why." Appropriately, Peck's documentary includes several scenes from those movies devoted to presenting black characters in ways that flatter white audiences. We see the chastened ex-slaves of *Birth of a Nation* laying down their guns to mark the defeat of Reconstruction and trotting off contentedly into D. W. Griffith's Jim Crow utopia. And there's Sydney Poitier jumping off the train at the end of *The Defiant Ones* to share the fate of fellow convict Tony Curtis solely "in order to reassure white people, to make them know they are not hated."

Baldwin, who had been a boy minister, had a streak of puritanism that led him to fulminate against flimsy, diverting movie fluff (Doris Day musicals) that could scarcely bare the weight of his ire. But I like to think he would have enjoyed *Get Out*, if only for the way its mad-scientist finale shows rich white people appropriating black bodies. Surely he would have appreciated this madcap allegory. And would he have drawn hope from the fact that one young black filmmaker now feels secure enough to be madcap? ■