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FS20200 Horror

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Chosen Prompt: Write an essay on the horror genre and the idea of 'cultural value', making reference to two films on the course. (*Get Out* & *It Follows*)

Ever since the horror genre emerged in film, it has offered an insightful commentary on the cultural climate of the time. The concept of horror as an emotion depends on a person having a preconceived notion of the cultural norm, and things or people who do not obey the norm of nature or culture are horrifying. Paul Santilli also comments on this, saying, "although the emotion of Horror is indeed visceral, its presence in a person is contingent upon that person having the requisite sorts of judgment about objective states of affairs" (Santilli). Although many believe that the heart of horror is in jump scares and the biological/physiological reactions to the film, most of the horror comes from one or many cultural conceptions being violated. The majority of horror films work to violate cultural conceptions that are relevant to contentious themes people are dealing with in daily life. Nothing is scarier than showing the horror of ordinary life that everyone experiences. This cultural horror plays on the fears of reality as opposed to fantastical horrors. Even horror films renowned for "cultural value" may also have fantastical fears. Those unreal fears are symbolic of horrors we face in reality, represented more monstrously. The monster may not always be what is "wrong" with society, but it may "subvert the idea of what "villainous" is, allowing us to subtly empathize with the subject we fear while exploring why we fear it" (Gregorio-Fernández). Whether we are meant to fear the monster or empathize with it, Horror Films present the perfect medium to explore cultural fears and themes. This paper will discuss the cultural values of the films *Get Out* and *It Follows* and how they

broach complex societal issues. These films all serve as commentary on concealed societal issues that are relevant throughout time.

The film *It Follows* by David Robert Mitchell depicts how people view promiscuous "teens" and sexuality in general in today's society. Although one may assume the film falls into the standard slasher film trope, where "Women's sex positivity are not grounds for their death but the means through which they may survive." The film begins with the main character Jay Height (Maika Monroe), consenting to have sex with her boyfriend, Hugh (Jake Weary). Hugh proceeds to chloroform and ties up Jay after they finish having sex and tell her there is an "entity" that will now follow her and attempt to kill her. The only way to stop the entity is to have sex with another person to pass it on, which perpetuates the plot for the rest of the film. The plot of this movie highlights two massive cultural issues. The first one is rape culture. Viewers watch Jay's assault of rape by deception in the film's first few scenes. Following the assault, Jay is perpetually vulnerable, literally haunted, and consistently reminded of her assault by the "entity," similar to how many rape victims feel they are targeted by society and potential attackers. One can argue that this is the most literal representation of a female's point of view following an assault represented in a horror film. This is just one way that this film brings cultural values to light. In addition to representing females' feelings around rape culture, the film also reveals how victim blaming occurs following an assault. Throughout the film, bystanders and minor characters comment on how Jay's choices and behavior led to her assault. The mother of Jay's schoolmate, Greg (Daniel Zovatto), says, "Those people are such a mess," implying the assault was the fault of Jay or her parents. Hahner and Varda remark on how Mrs. Hanningan (Leisa Pulido), Greg's mother, represents the "victim blaming that permeates public dialogue about sexual violence" (Hahner & Varda). The police officers also ask about the consensuality of the

assault and cast doubt on the assault itself. Both the police officers and Mrs. Hanningan serve to illustrate how prejudices towards sexually active women serve to excuse sexual misbehaviors from their male partners.

The second cultural phenomenon this film highlights is young people and "hookup culture." One receives immediate satisfaction from a hookup because people naturally enjoy having sex, but there is usually stigma and guilt that *follows* one after casual sex. Therein creates a cycle of wanting to relieve that guilt, and feeling wanted leads to another casual sex encounter, and one is endlessly trapped in the cycle of short-term relief and endless guilt following. Sex can often create a malaise of anxiety, a loss of self that can only be alleviated or reversed by another sexual contact (Bradshaw). These cultural phenomena are also confirmed when Jay has sex with Greg to rid of the "it." The intentions behind why Greg is having sex with Jay are obscure. Women who have experienced assault in the past are vulnerable when it comes to new sexual partners, and Greg takes advantage of this. Jay is under the impression that Greg is doing this for her when in reality, he gloats about having sex with Jay. This shines a light on the cultural values of today's world of men taking advantage of vulnerable women and Jay having sex with someone to get rid of the following "it." This dynamic cycle represents Jay trying to relieve herself of the guilt and shame from the previous hookup, but ultimately, it still haunts her.

The film *Get Out* follows Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) on his trip to meet his girlfriend, Rose's (Allison Williams) parents. The film's focus is primarily on how the family will deal with their interracial relationship and accurately represents the anxieties of black people in the current cultural atmosphere. The Armitage family attempts to rid of Chris's racial anxieties by trying to show they are unnoticing of skin color, a term Bonilla-Silva refers to as "color-blind." When Chris asks if Rose's family knows he is black, Rose assures him their

interracial relationship is no problem at all, "my dad would legit vote for Obama a third time" to prove that her family is not racist. Being color-blind is a way of proving that they are not racist because they do not see a difference between themselves and people of color. Miller says, "However, from a black person's perspective, it is a way for whites to ignore the fact that racial inequality still exists." The film highlights this color blindness throughout the film primarily because it was seen as a cultural revolution in America. Many white people believed that if they could not see the difference between white and black, they must not be racist when they chose to ignore the differences that still hurt the black community today. This film continuously shows examples of this color blindness in juxtaposition with Chris and his friend Rod Williams' (Lil Ray Howery) reaction to highlight how color blindness is not a real solution to the current racial inequality. This film not only unveils wrongdoings in current cultural values regarding color blindness but also the issue of white-washing the black community.

In this film, the Armitages create "inwardly whitened black people" (Brody). This film shows the most literal example of the cultural phenomenon of white-washing, where black people are cut off from their history and culture, usually from the encouragement of a primarily white society. Self-consciousness is commonly linked to one's history and culture; therefore, in this film, the black community is deprived of the power to rebel and free themselves when those things are erased. In the garden scene, Chris is cleverly juxtaposed with white-washed black people, where he meets Logan King (Lakeith Stanfield), a black guest in his twenties at the Armitages' garden party, who seems jarringly white and elderly. The "inward whiteness" also manifests in his body language, wardrobe, and way of talking. This is different from the cultural expectations one might associate with any young African American male. Following his

encounters with other men in the black community at the Armitage's house, Chris comments to his friend Rod on the telephone, "It's like all of them missed the movement."

Another symbolic element of this film that holds its weight in cultural value is the sunken place. Said best by Tarja Laine,

The Sunken Place represents a symbolic entrapment in the social system that suppresses the agency of black people, but it also epitomizes how profoundly trauma is buried in the somatic memory of the traumatized person so that one indeed feels as if entrapped within one's own body.

The sunken place offers a metaphor for the marginalization of the black community, as the creator of the film, Jordan Peele, says, "No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us."

The sunken place speaks to many prevalent issues, especially in the United States, such as assimilation, incarceration, slavery, and silencing. This picture of the struggle the black community faces daily can help viewers recognize the injustice in their cultural values or offer a representation of their own experiences. Not only does the sunken place exist for the black community but for any group of people whose experiences are silenced for the benefit of another's. This film adds cultural value by showing those marginalized groups how they are being silenced, through the metaphor of the sunken place, to help them climb out of it.

The horror genre, since its beginnings, has offered commentary on social/cultural issues and continues to do so even in the modern age. It is an art that allows audiences to face their fears or place themselves in the minds of the target audience to examine cultural values and change for the better. This essay demonstrated the power horror movies have on offering perspective on social issues through the films *It Follows* and *Get Out*. *It Follows* broaches the topics of rape, sexual assault, and victim blaming in a way that allows audiences to be critical of the cultural

values that may have led to this type of horror film. It also addresses hookup culture, which has become a significant point of discussion in recent years. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is a powerful metaphor for the issues that marginalized groups, especially the black community, face. The film examines the topics of "color-blindness," white-washing, silencing, and repressed traumas. Through its powerful horror symbols, it helps viewers understand the point of view of marginalized groups and offers solace to those experiencing it as though they are not alone. Overall, the horror genre continues to push boundaries to challenge what society fears and question why they fear it. This type of examination creates an art form in film that has endless opportunities to show cultural value and change cultural values.

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