

# Get Out

## (Jordan Peele, 2017)

### Component 1 Section B: American film since 2005

#### Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

#### Core study areas:

- **Ideology**
- **Spectatorship**

**Rationale for study:** *Get Out* is a social horror movie. It addresses the issue of 'post-racial' liberalism in America, whilst also producing a film of steadily escalating terror. *Get Out* was critically acclaimed for its social critiques, but was also a huge commercial success, grossing \$255 million dollars and winning Best Original Screenplay at the 2018 Academy Awards.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings:

"Arrival at the Armitages' house"  
05:18 – 14:50

"Garden Party" 42:17 – 46:23

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

#### Cinematography

- As Chris' anxieties and discomfort at the Armitages grows, he is increasingly framed in the middle of a white suburban crowd. These medium shots show his nervous facial expression as he attempts to maintain his composure, whilst making him seem isolated

and threatened by the crowd at the garden party.



Image by Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

- Cameras are used symbolically in the film's narrative. Chris is a photographer, and his creativity is used as an emblem of his autonomy and free mind. When he watches the crowd at the party through his camera, they seem more sinister. It's also the flash of camera that 'frees' the enslaved Black characters momentarily.

#### Mise-en-scène

- *Get Out*'s production design is littered with symbolic props, many of them with double meanings.
- The teacup and spoon that Missy uses as a hypnosis tool has a dual meaning. It is often seen as a symbol of civility and politeness, but the tea industry was founded on violent colonialism in Southeast Asia.
- The deer could be seen as a symbol of what the community want to turn the protagonist into – a trophy. When Chris uses this as a weapon to escape, he is re-appropriating a symbol of victimhood to defend himself.

#### Editing

- Though Chris remains calm and 'polite' in the

face of the Armitages' and their friends' 'micro-aggressions', the shots are structured using the typical horror movie trope of 'dramatic irony' (i.e. the audience knows more than the protagonist). Shot-reverse-shot is used to show us Chris' responses to casually racist comments, and his attempts to laugh them off. But there are cutaways to behaviours that show he *should* be worried, and that the comments of the guests mask something far darker and more horrific.

## Sound

- The dialogue in *Get Out* drops hints about the conspiracy that threatens Chris. The approval with which the Armitages greet Chris is strained and awkward, like they are *performing* being non-racist.
- The casual comments of the garden party guests are full of 'micro-aggressions' (i.e. casually offensive behaviours that could be dismissed as benevolent or ignorant, but which indicate a far deeper systemic racism). Many of the guests comment on Chris' physical build, or that "Black is in fashion" – one even comments that he'd like Chris' eyes! Only later do we realise how literal these comments are.

## Performance

- Daniel Kaluuya's performance is really a double role: he is playing a 'fish-out-of-water', whose offense at the behaviour around him gradually escalates to a sense of isolation, then danger, then horror; but he is also 'code-switching', suppressing his character's fears in order to conform and not disrupt the social status quo.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

### Representations

- *Get Out* is unusual for a mainstream American film in that the white people are all villains. Peele has stated that he didn't want to add a 'white saviour' character who would help rescue Chris. Very deliberately, the white characters are not Southern rednecks or neo-Nazis. At first, they appear to be liberal, tolerant, 'post-racial' people. Peele said he wrote them as "the kind of people I'd meet at parties who were eager to tell me they voted for Obama," but whose attitudes

can be considered just as patronising and as dehumanising as those of more obvious racists.

### Aesthetics

- Most of *Get Out* appears to be naturalistic. However, Jordan Peele is renowned for his deeply textured, symbolic approach, where every shot and design decision has a deeper meaning. The opening sequence shots are Chris' photos, establishing his autonomy of vision in contrast to the definitions of 'Blackness' imposed on him by the Armitages and their community. The Armitages' house resembles a plantation-style manor, complete with a Black groundsman and housekeeper. The 'Bingo Game' is actually a slave auction.
- This article explains the use of visual symbolism in the film: <https://the-take.com/watch/get-out-explained-symbols-satire-social-horror>.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

### Social

- In the early 2010s, the phrase 'Stay Woke' became associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and indicates a consciousness of racial prejudice and discrimination. In 2014, it was specifically used to raise awareness of police shootings of unarmed African Americans. *Get Out* opens with a music track (by Childish Gambino) that uses the phrase and – like many elements of the film – it has a dual meaning: one political; the other imploring the hero, Chris, to be conscious of the hidden dangers he will face in the ensuing narrative.

### Cultural

- Peele has said he was inspired by social horror films like *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975) which commented on women's issues using the genre of horror/thriller. In *The Stepford Wives*, an independent female photographer discovers her husband wants to replace her with a domestic sex robot. Consider the similarities between this plot and Peele's film.

### Political

- In 2004, Barack Obama was elected America's

first Black president. Some commentators have said that, for white liberal Americans, this seemed to signal the end of racial prejudice and discrimination. Peele said one of the inspirations for *Get Out* was “the sentiment that... there was now an advantage to being Black in this culture”. He felt this sentiment was dismissive of the systemic racism suffered by many African Americans and wanted to draw attention to this in the film.

## Institutional

- *Get Out* is the highest-grossing debut film with an original screenplay, and the second highest by an African American director.
- The production budget was \$4.5 million, yet it grossed \$176 million in the USA, and \$79.4 million outside the US. This made it the 10<sup>th</sup> most commercially successful film of 2017.

## SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: STARTING POINTS

### Spectatorship

- Initially, Peele was concerned that the social critiques in the film would make audiences uncomfortable. “What if white people don’t want to come to see the movie because they’re afraid of being villainized with Black people in the crowd? What if Black people don’t want to see the movie because they don’t want to sit next to a white person while a Black person is being victimised on-screen?”
- The commercial and critical success contradicts this worry. One reason may be the way the audience is encouraged to empathise with Chris throughout – beginning with personal anxiety, then social awkwardness, then a creeping realisation that something horrific is happening.
- This article explains how *Get Out* “deconstructs racism for white people”. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/3/7/14759756/get-out-benevolent-racism-white-feminism>

### Ideology

- One of the unique narrative and ideological features of *Get Out* is its positive portrayal of violent Black defiance. Throughout the

history of the civil rights and other anti-racist movements in the USA, any notion that protests should be violent has been condemned and punished by the authorities. In cinema, Black characters are only permitted to use violence if it is to restore the status quo – you may wish to consider the action films of Will Smith to explore this further.

- Some critics have pointed out that Chris’ violent escape from the Armitages’ is acceptable, even for white audiences, because of how much he has endured in silence. Despite being the butt of a series of racial comments, he opts for a kind of grudging silence that is strategic: he has previously learnt that to push back would be socially disruptive, and that he would be labelled an ‘angry Black man’. The spectator, however, knows Chris is in extreme danger, and we want him to be disruptive. When he finally does resort to violence, it is empowering and cathartic because it is vital for his survival.

## KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

### “Garden Party” 42:17 – 46:23

- The first shot of the guests is a procession of rich white people arriving in black cars. Consider how this could be seen as symbolic for what happens later in the film.
- Rose urges Chris to “smile” – a seemingly innocuous piece of social advice. How could this be seen as more sinister as the guests’ assumptions about Chris and his racial identity escalate?
- Consider the many comments the guests make about Chris’ strength and other physical attributes. One woman even inappropriately feels Chris’ bicep and asks Rose about his sexual prowess. How could these behaviours be demonstrations of dehumanising racial stereotypes?
- When Chris meets Logan, he is struck by how an apparently young man is behaving and dressed like an elderly gentleman. What clues are there that this is closer to the truth than he dares to believe? How could this be a reference to ‘code-switching’?