Jordan Peele's "Get Out": Political Horror
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The horror and Gothic genres, especially in the United States, have always been cultural vehicles for articulating and attesting to the political tensions, societal ruptures, and historical anxieties of the nation. As Teresa Goddu explains, the roots of the Gothic and horror are deeply interwoven with America's traumatic and dark past, and hence why the genres always '[need] to be historicised,' as they are a 'distorted, not disengaged, version of reality' (2000: 3). To historicise the Gothic, in other words, is to expose those historical horrors that, far from being consigned to the past, live on to disrupt the present, and which, if truth be told, 'make [US] national identity possible' (Goddu, 2000: 3). Emerging as it did just two months after the inauguration of former president Donald Trump, Jordan Peele's award-winning debut film, *Get Out* (2017), requires a very particular, if not unprecedented, kind of historicisation, however: a historicisation notably predicated on a politically novel and distinctly racialised, horror-laden moment.

Indeed, as Ta-Nehisi Coates saliently outlines in *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017), Trump was 'the first president whose entire political existence [hinged] on the fact of a black president' (344). Unlike 'all the other white men who came before' him, Trump was, is, and always will be, then, 'America's first white president' (Coates, 2017: 344). Amplifying the work of Coates, Christopher Lloyd similarly contends that, if Trump is to be perceived as 'the embodiment of whiteness' – that is, 'its privilege, its power, its history, its blindness' – his candidacy and administration arguably transpire, in a manner eerily evocative of the ontological evacuation embodied by the 'Sunken Place', as a direct 'negation of […] Obama's blackness' (2019: 116). Thus, while it may be ill-advised to employ such a label as 'post-Obama' America, we can clearly posit that *Get Out*'s politics of race are deeply tied to the film's contemporary present, 'straddling two oppositional presidencies' (Lloyd, 2019: 116). Taking this even further, though, Lloyd offers shrewd insights into how the film succeeds to disclose, through the horror genre form, a 'deep continuum of anti-blackness in the contemporary "liberal" US', memorably labelling *Get Out*

'the scariest new film about the oldest of American horrors' (2019: 112, 110). Following the likes of Coates and Lloyd, we therefore cannot but see Peele's film as coagulated in response to an insidious national story of race-relations manifest anew in the purportedly 'post-racial' early twenty-first century: that is, as a political horror film undergirded by the horrors of racial politics in the US which most recently saw Trump's installation in the White House after eight years of Barack Obama's leadership; the Executive 'Muslim Ban' Order; Black Lives Matter; mass incarceration; police brutality; the tearing down of Confederate monuments; and the killing of Ahmed Aubrey, George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, and so many others (Lloyd, 2019: 109).

Utilising the conventions of the horror genre to radical political and historical ends, it is, of course, the way in which this terrifyingly bold and brilliant horror film succeeded to provoke such conversations – generic, historical, and political provocations that skewer and critique race-relations in the US today – that critically informs Dawn Keetley's edited collection, *Jordan Peele's "Get Out": Political Horror*, published by Ohio State University Press in 2020. Comprised of sixteen essays devoted to exploring this 'game-changing film' in new and significant ways (1), Keetley's collection insightfully illuminates how, and why, *Get Out* revolutionised the gothic and horror tradition through dramatising the tentacular reach and immutable 'persistence of slavery-by-other-means' in modern 'progressive' America (7). Indeed, calling specific attention to Peele's directorial desire to 'expose "the lie" of a so-called post-racial America' (7), Keetley begins her introduction by situating *Get Out* in the distinctive terrain of the 'social thriller,' whereby 'the bad guy is society, […] the monster intractably human, [and] the "demon" inextricably part of the very fabric of society' (1). By contextualising the unambiguously human monstrosity of white 'liberalism' in Peele's film in relation to recognisable horror progenitors (in particular, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *The Stepford Wives* (1975)), Keetley furthermore foregrounds *Get Out*'s roots in the genre, to showcase Peele's steady shaping of a narrative of 'racial paranoia' centred around the latent horrors explicitly engendered by those dominant (white) spaces and societal structures through which social minorities move and live, 'even as that same society tries to tell them they are paranoid for doing so' (4-5): a painfully poignant point that resonates in the aftermath of the Buffalo supermarket shooting, wherein over a dozen black men and women could not even finish their grocery shopping without the threat

of mass murder.[1] To this end, the editor succeeds to sketch out a theoretical trajectory for the contributions that follow, intently initiating some of the main dialogues and debates that effectively distinguish this study from the great deal that has already been said about the film, while further allowing for a timely and timeless meaningfulness that exceeds the bounds of the book itself.

The collection is divided into two sections, each marking different emphases in the deeply interwoven relationship between the horror film and the horrors of the real world. The aforementioned generic, historical, and political themes Keetley lays out in her introduction emerge and expand across chapters in both sections, thereby granting the collection a structural cohesion and marked continuity. In the first section, 'The Politics of Horror,' authors Johnathan Bryon and Tony Perrello, Linnie Blake, Robin R. Means Coleman and Novotny Lawrence, Erin Casey-Williams, Bernice Murphy, Robyn Citizen, Adam Lowernstein, and Sarah Ilott consider the influence of the gothic and horror tradition on Peele's film, exploring how *Get Out* employs certain generic conventions to shape its (political) meanings: from Shakespeare's *Othello*, through to the female gothic, to the modern horror film, including zombie, rural, suburban, and body-swap subgenres of horror. In section two, 'The Horror of Politics,' Sarah Juliet Lauro, Mikal Gaines, Robert LaRue, Kyle Brett, Laura Thorp, Cayla McNally, and Alex Svensson take up the political interventions of *Get Out* more directly, critically addressing the film's sustained critique of racist institutions and practices alongside such African American figures as Nat Turner, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin. Taken together, the essays in this collection, in their distinct illumination of the film's generic interventions and political revelations, provide a must-read for scholars and students of American studies, film and media studies, cultural studies, as well as general fans of the film and horror more broadly. To be sure, if, as editor Dawn Keetley explains, *Get Out* became known in 2017 for the particular way in which it 'began conversations' (17), it is in the greatest spirit of the film that *Jordan Peele's "Get Out": Political Horror* should not only continue those conversations, but significantly take them to unfamiliar and unexpected places.

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[1] On May 14th, 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron (a self-proclaimed ethno-nationalist and white supremacist) targeted, shot, and killed ten black people while injuring three more at a Tops Friendly Markets store in Buffalo, New York. Gendron livestreamed the attack on Twitch.

Work Cited

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