

Kyna B. Morgan, *Woke Horror: Sociopolitics, Genre, and Blackness in Get Out*
(Bristol: MacBain and Boyd, 2018)

Jordan Peele's 2017 directorial debut, *Get Out*, has met with wide acclaim and numerous accolades, including the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. As a satirical horror film addressing the pervasive sense of threat felt by Black male bodies in contemporary America, even in supposedly colour-blind white liberal neighbourhoods and contexts, the film struck a chord. Kyna B. Morgan's short study of the film, for The Future Screen Series published by MacBain and Boyd, examines *Get Out* in a larger cinematographic tradition of 'sociopolitical horror'. An independent scholar working on a forthcoming anthology on 'post-recession film and television', Morgan is well suited for examining the nuances of the film from a political perspective. Morgan's analysis situates the film in historical context and within several genre traditions (horror, satire, 'zeitgeist film'), and argues convincingly that *Get Out* contains an ambivalent mix of both progressive and regressive tendencies. In the course of setting up her argument, Morgan offers readers a range of tools and concepts – such as a socio-political film tradition, film syntax and semantics, and the question of control in the production process – that can be useful for political film analysis more generally. Ultimately, Morgan makes a compelling case for the importance of political readings of popular-culture products, the benefits of attention to genre, and the cultural power of contemporary horror's engagement with social reality.

Woke Horror consists of ten short chapters, the first (after the Introduction) offering a brief examination of socio-political horror, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (dir. by George A. Romero, 1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (dir. by Bryan Forbes, 1975), as well as of the term 'postmodern horror', which plays an important role in the study. 'Postmodern' is generally contrasted to 'modern' in Morgan's discussion, and this binary is given a key role to play in the analysis; *Get Out* is characterised as generally postmodern, while its characters are 'modern'. This in turn seems to imply that the overall meaning of the film is ambiguous and complex (and therefore more progressive), while the characters are portrayed in more determined, essentialist, and conservative terms (which Morgan identifies as 'modern' rather than 'postmodern'). In short, Morgan's principal criticism of the film – which appears near the end of her study – is that it focuses almost entirely on its male characters, including the protagonist, and that this protagonist finally extirpates himself from danger through his physical strength (his male body) rather than his wits. Both points are well taken, though Morgan could have gone further and explored the profound misogyny of the portrayal of the

main female character, the white girlfriend who lures the protagonist, and many victims before him, to their demise. Relying on one of the worst deceits imaginable, the romantic con, this seemingly colour-blind white liberal woman turns out to be a ruthless predator helping her parents kidnap, hypnotise, and dispossess her Black lovers of their willpower in order to implant the minds of aging and ailing white people into their bodies. It is an unfortunate tendency in political satire that the claims of one cause are often made at the expense of another. Here, alas, the progressive racial satire depends on a longstanding trope of misogynist cultural tradition – namely, the woman as *femme fatale*.

What Morgan does best is position the film in relation to a set of cultural contexts that explain its genealogy, originality, and impact. For example, an early chapter on *zeitgeist* cinema situates *Get Out* in a history of films reflecting on their socio-cultural moment in a particularly pointed way, such as *Night of the Living Dead, Society* (dir. by Brian Yunza, 1989), and *Candyman* (dir. by Bernard Rose, 1992). A subsequent chapter argues that the ideological work of *Get Out* lies in the subtle background dynamics around the African-American protagonist as he interacts with other characters. Specifically, the main character endures a range of tacit micro-aggressions on account of his race even though he is ostensibly welcomed by the ‘liberal’ parents of his white girlfriend. This helps spectators *see* the racism at play in what purports to be a colour-blind social milieu. Building upon this analysis, Morgan argues that the most progressive aspect of the film is in its presentation of the ‘phenomenological experience’ of being Black in white society, which could also be called, more simply, ‘point of view’. The film allows us to see its white characters through the eyes of its Black protagonist, and to perceive the almost constant lapses into racial thinking by supposedly anti-racist white liberals, as well as the more insidious sense of threat created by their collective privilege and sheer outnumbering of the lone Black body in their midst.

Extending this reading still further, the chapter that analyses the opening scene is excellent and convincing. It shows how the film deftly evokes the sense of danger for Black people in what otherwise appear as peaceful and safe white public spaces, in this case a well-to-do suburb. The unexpected attack on the young Black man taking a walk at night recalls both the recent murder of Trayvon Martin and the long history of lynching in America. Morgan examines how the opening sequence effectively establishes a sense of racially contextualised existential dread and uncanny unease that lingers throughout the early scenes of seeming normality that follow. The analytical skills demonstrated in this successful, albeit brief, chapter make it all the more disappointing that the Introduction promises *three* close

scene analyses in *Woke Horror*, but delivers only one. This is the only shortcoming of an otherwise excellent book, and Morgan's insightful arguments would have been stronger with several more such analyses.

Despite a predominance of meta-commentary over specific analysis, the study does deliver a powerful demonstration of both the potent imbrication of popular culture with socio-political issues and the complexity of political readings, especially the difficulty of extracting an unambiguous 'message' from a fictional narrative. In the case of *Get Out*, the politics of the film are linked to the conditions of its production (as Morgan says, 'the images on screen are Black-controlled images'), its various genre affiliations and intertextual references, as well as its reception (including its release in a historical moment marked by the Black Lives Matter movement). Navigating confidently through these multiple frameworks, Morgan convincingly makes her case for the importance of engaging with *Get Out*, a landmark text for many reasons but most of all for bringing the powerful generic tools of the Gothic to bear on the painful and uncanny reality of race in America today.

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