

The Politics of Representation

Racism in *Get Out*

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Table of Contents

1. Abstract	3
2. Introduction	4
3. Problem formulation	6
4. Methods	7
4.1 Critical Constructivism	7
4.2 Cultural Studies	8
4.3 Film Analysis	12
4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis	15
5. Theory	17
5.1 Psychosocial and Cultural Theories of Stereotypes	17
5.2 Stereotypes and Media	18
5.3 Genre Theory/Horror Movies	19
5.4 Control & Power Theory	20
5.5 Hall's Interpretation of Race	21
6. Context	24
7. Analysis	27
7.1 The Deer	27
7.2 Fetishisation	30
7.3 Microaggressions and Gaslighting	35
8. Discussion	43
9. Conclusion	45
Bibliography	47

1. Abstract

This project analyses discourse, semiotics, and representation in director Jordan Peele's horror debut *Get Out* (2017). The analysis aims to explore Peele's choice of dialogue, character representation, and references to historical and modern day discrimination of African Americans in The United States. The analysis is grounded in *Critical Constructivism*, *Cultural Studies*, *Film Analysis*, and *Critical Discourse Analysis* while our theories provide a contextual understanding of prejudice, language, and genre. *Get Out* works for all audiences, some viewers identifying with the protagonist, Chris, as he is continually fetishised, is exposed to microaggressions, and continuous silencing. Other viewers will experience this discrimination through Chris, while also being exposed to the scarring effects such behaviors have. Peele's choice of representation and referrals to slavery is an attempt to take control of the narrative and representation of African Americans in media, also known as *the politics of representation*. His choice of representation also opens a discussion within the general public while exposing subtle forms of bigotry to be rooted in racist ideologies.

Keywords: Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, racism, politics, representation, horror, discrimination.

2. Introduction

This project is focused on representation of race in *Get Out* by Jordan Peele. Since the movie is set in The United States (will also be referenced as ‘America’), there will be a focus on racial discourse, historically, currently, and within the film itself. The motivation behind choosing this subject is based on an interest in horror itself, and a curiosity of the importance or impact of media representations. This project concentrates on the historical contexts of racism in America, the fetishisation of African Americans, and current racially charged issues (from microaggressions to police brutality). The Black Lives Matter movement gained significant media coverage as of the film’s release date, opening a space for the discussion of racial inequalities, along with creating awareness of violence and discrimination. To what extent can the media truly have an influence on representation and equality? We are curious about the way Peele represents race in *Get Out* to create a dialogue, and a different form of media representation for African American characters.

To prepare for the analysis of *Get Out* we will draw from methods, including *Critical Constructivism*, *Cultural Studies*, *Film Analysis*, and *Critical Discourse Analysis*. These four methods work together to provide guidance on what areas to focus on. Mainly, our interest when analysing scenes from the film, is to best interpret the purpose and reasoning of Peele's choices of semiotic use. We intend to provide scene analytics which aim to highlight the true importance and possible impact of the representations within the movie. To do so, we will draw from theories and additional readings by Stuart Hall, from *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Theories such as psychosocial and cultural theories, stereotypes and media theories, genre and horror movies, as well as control and power theories will help better explain and understand where damaging interracial discourse may originate. This will be with particular focus on how meanings and representations are formulated mentally, but also how they are learned and persist. The genre, horror, control, and power theories will help in the analysis to best interpret and communicate the importance or meanings of certain semiotic use, as well as the effect those may have on the audience.

This project is structured with focus on the methodology, hence why it follows directly after our problem formulation. Theory will follow methods, and we will prepare the reader for the analysis by providing some foundational understandings. The context section will provide background information of *Get Out*, the history of slavery and slave trades in America, and

current occurrences of police brutality. For the analysis itself, we will provide a description of the scene in question before moving into the analysis. Each scene analysis will focus on the semiotics, character representation, and possible intentions or meanings behind Peele's cinematic choices. Following this, we will also discuss the limitations within the project, while also touching on the subject of race perceptions due to the ethnic backgrounds of the authors. Lastly, we will conclude our analysis and explain the overall message of the movie, while exploring the intentions and importance of Peele's choice of narratives.

3. Problem formulation

For this project, we will examine the ways culture, history, subjectivity, and learning impacts the way negative representations and stereotypes present and persist. The main focus for the project is to define how filmmaker Jordan Peele represents characters within his directorial debut film, *Get Out*. Additionally, we are interested in what specific representations mean, and what impact they have on the overall message of the film. The problem formulation for this project is:

How does Jordan Peele represent characters, use semiotics, and dialogue in 'Get Out', and what is the purpose or impact of such portrayals?

To help answer the problem formulation, we intend to explore other areas within our research. The research questions are:

- How do negative associations or ideologies cultivate?
- What historical references are there within *Get Out*?
- How did Jordan Peele portray black characters in *Get Out*?
- How did Jordan Peele portray white characters in *Get Out*?
- How do the Armitage family objectify Chris?
- Why is Jordan Peele's portrayal of African American characters significant in the effort to change portrayals of racism in the film industry?

4. Methods

4.1 Critical Constructivism

Critical constructivism is the extension of constructivism where nothing asserts a neutral, objective perspective that supports critical thinking within the research sphere. It follows the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed through dialogues of history, society, economy, and political affairs situated by culture to shift our perspectives on self and the world. It proposes that knowledge and power are distributed by certain social groups and institutions. (Tilley & Manning, 2016). Such groups may be educational institutions or political groups, maintaining knowledge above others by continuously weakening the presence of other knowledge, for example, Western knowledge undermining Eastern knowledge. Critical constructivism challenges this and instead aims to implement critical thinking as a skill that questions the structures and legitimacy of dominant methods of knowledge distribution or power, such examples would be feminism or postcolonialism (Tilley & Manning, 2016). It theorised that knowledge develops within minds, forged by the societies around them at that given time, opposing elitist thinking and systems and focusing on non-Western approaches to interfere within mainstream discourses. Meanings are constructed socially between people.

The approach to critical constructivism calls upon epistemological and ontological ‘*response-ability*’ that consists of questioning the three standard ‘*idols of thinking*’ that are included within institutions:

1. *Reification*: presenting forms of knowledge as unchangeable and obligatory that are socially constructed.
2. *Decontextualization*: restructuring knowledge so that there are no difficulties involved in its distribution and concealing the contingency of the knowledge.
3. *Technocratization*: forms of knowledge that are implemented for the service of bureaucratization and scientism to uphold.

– (Bentley, 2003)

By questioning these ways of thinking, critical constructivism allows individuals to develop meanings within society, acknowledging the consequences of who wields power and who is in charge of distributing knowledge. It allows multiplying perspectives that are equal to

fields of knowledge that may turn into a democratic social sphere (Bentley, 2003). By utilising this method, one may extend systems of communications and reveal a broad perspective as to how those systems are affected by societies and their cultures, as well as confronting dominant social structures and institutions.

4.2 Cultural Studies

Cultural studies as a method is rooted in various aspects of language, meaning, and representation. Referring to Stuart Hall's chapter *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* we will examine the factors which create what we commonly understand as 'Culture'. Cultural studies may be understood to be based on elements of critical theory and constructivism. Critical theory focuses on examining subjects or topics through a critical lens, by reading between the lines of our current structures, society, and world. Hall does this by approaching various aspects of the same subjects critically, making sure to point out flaws in referred writings and/or issues within the societal systems. He also draws from constructivist ideas by rooting many of his arguments in discourse and semiotics in order to explain the process in which we learn about the world and apply meanings to subjects. The combination of these two methods, therefore, shape a critical constructivist perspective of cultural studies.

"Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things - novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics - as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings - the 'giving and taking of meaning' - between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways." (Hall, 2013 p. 2)

Representation, meaning, and language

Representation plays an important role in examining culture, as it focuses on the ways in which semiotics produce meaning. According to Hall, there are various ways in which representation may do so. First, representation is used in depicting something through preemptively describing the subject in order to establish its meaning first. Second, the representation may act symbolically for a subject. An example of such may be the cross to symbolise Christianity. Representation therefore broadly encompasses the linguistic methods which create meaning when referring to objects, events, people, or fiction (Hall, 2013).

Within representation, there are two main systems. First, *Mental Representation* is defined as the concepts we correlate with a subject, essentially the mental link between the subject and how our mind interprets it by placing meanings on it. These subjects expand beyond the tangible objects we encounter every day, to entities we may never personally observe or experience, such as war or God. Although we cannot visualise or fully comprehend such subjects, we still place meaning on them by establishing complex relations between the subject and their meanings. Such meanings may also be directly influenced by one's individual relationship with the subjects and the world. Similarities in interpretation are vital when understanding the definition of culture, as culture means similar or shared meanings placed on the same subject or *conceptual maps*. The second system of representation is the language of constructing such meanings. This shared language of correlating concepts and ideas comes through in writings, speech, or visual images (essentially *signs*). Together, these two systems of representation enable us to place meanings on subjects while creating our own conceptual maps, as well as developing language to express such shared ideas and concepts. The link between subjects and concepts therefore produce meaningful language which functions as representation (Hall, 2013).

Language and Representation

Representation functions as the ways in which we place meanings on subjects, but how does language create such meanings? Images which depict a specific subject, although not tangible, still hold meaning. An image or sign is to be interpreted, which is done through one's conceptual map (Hall, 2013). Images are often straightforward to interpret and conceptualise, however, written or spoken language may be further limited by one's conceptual map. Written or

spoken signs are called *indexical* signs while visual signs are *iconic* signs. Indexical signs require more interpretation as the word does not explicitly indicate what subject it describes, and the conceptualization lies on the individual. Such words are at their basic level a collection of letters or words, which lose meaning if not presented correctly or interpreted by an individual who understands the specific language (Hall, 2013).

Sharing the Codes

The meaning we place on objects or subjects is rooted in the specific *code* set to construct the correlations between language, concepts, and interpretations. Therefore, when speaking of indexical signs it is not the word itself which places meanings, rather we gather the meaning through the codes. Such codes are also shared within a culture and language, and prime the subject with its meaning. The differences in culture also mean a difference in symbols and their meanings. One unconsciously learns the codes and conceptual maps to communicate within their culture through systems of representation. Being a part of a culture means individuals share these conceptual maps and codes with others within the said culture. These conceptual maps may naturally vary within a shared culture, however, they remain very approximate. Most importantly to understand, is that the meanings do not lay within the objects or subjects in the world, but rather are constructed and produced, then interpreted similarly by people within a shared culture (Hall, 2013).

Hall furthers the discussion on the placement of meanings to subjects by referring to Saussure's legacy. Here we examine the semiotic approach to language which correlates with Hall's constructionist approach. Saussure applies semiotics to language as he explains: “-‘Language is a system of signs.’ Sounds, images, written words, paintings, photographs. etc. function as signs within language ‘only when they serve to express or communicate ideas’” (Hall, 2013, p. 31). These signs then develop into meanings through individual interpretation, identifying the *signifier* (the semiotic subject) which then triggers the concept in our minds, the *signified*. Signs do not, in and of themselves, bear meaning, instead our interpretations create meanings. Such meanings are also often developed in relation to other subjects which consist within the same ‘grouping’ as the signifier. For example, the word “red” is interpreted with the opposing “green” in mind. This difference is vital in order to produce meanings, and often a *binary* relation of subjects creates stark differences in perception of either subject. A change in

conceptualising one subject will therefore also change the interpretation of the binary opposite concept (Hall, 2013).

Our cultural codes are also key in creating a link between the signifier and the signified. These relationships are *not* permanently fixed. Although many concepts are rooted in history, subtle shifts in our conceptual maps shift the signified, or associations to the subject. Hall exemplifies the word “black”, which historically and culturally has had negative connotations. This word’s interpretation has been subject to changes throughout time, and has developed into various positive associations (although is subject to a *sliding meaning*, where the connotations may change depending on the context) (Hall, 2013). The constructionist approach to language, therefore, places most importance on conceptual maps and codes as key in placing meaning on subjects. Within a culture, conceptual maps are usually very similar, prompting a similar interpretation of a subject within said culture.

Discourse, Power, and The Subject

While semiotics play an important role in our conceptual map, it moves away from the central concept of language. Instead, representation exists in a broader sense of social knowledge. This means culture encompasses a larger spectrum of narratives, images, discourses, and knowledge, collectively creating meanings. Expanding from representation in examining the production of knowledge, Hall refers to the writings of Foucault on *discourse*. The discussions of discourse are also rooted more in historical aspects in order to better understand how relations of power (rather than meaning) impact our shared meanings. Foucault focuses on the ways rules and practices in historical periods regulate discourse, and exemplifies the historical use of religion to give people ‘truth’ about knowledge. Additionally, the specific area of discourse he focuses on is how language and statements produce such knowledge, as well as the meanings of social practices which guide our behaviour. The constructionist approach to discourse is concerned with where meanings come from, arguing we cannot have knowledge of a subject without constructing meanings first (Hall, 2013).

The historical aspect of discourse, knowledge, and truth lies in the changes of meaning based on historical factors or periods. These changes may not even have any continuity and are based on the collective discourse of said period, for example what meaning is placed on words such as ‘madness’ in relation to mental illness. However, through time our understanding of

disease and mental health has changed the way in which we perceive mental health problems. These meanings also only exist within discourse, and will vary between cultures and time periods (Hall, 2013).

In regard to the correlation between discourse and power/knowledge, Hall outlines Foucault's examination of how discursive practices regulate conduct through the use of knowledge. Certain knowledge will both support and be supported by an established force, such as regulations, morality, institutions, and discourse (essentially a play on power). Hall argues that a significant marker in the development of the constructionist approach of representation is how power itself is based on the application of knowledge to regulate social practices and conduct. Other theorists also joined Foucault's position and shifted focus from class to the form of power known as *hegemony*. This is a non-permanent form of power, which encompasses aspects of struggles placed on a social group, where consent and domination are areas that must be 'won' over other groups. When knowledge is applied in the real world, even if untrue, will in some form become 'truth'. When a concept or ideology, even if untrue, is widely understood as true when applied to the real world, it will in some way command itself true. An example from Foucault is how an untrue statement of "single parenting leads to delinquency and crime" will cause the parent to be punished by others, which eventually may lead to crime and delinquency itself (Hall, 2013).

Foucault's view on power also challenges the top-to-bottom direction and instead sees power as more of a 'net'. Both oppressors and the oppressed are all in circulation within power dynamics. This is because power is not a singular force with only negative connotations, rather everyone experiences different levels of power dynamics, both positive (productive) and negative. He also turns away from focusing on one entity controlling discourse of certain topics and instead views discourse as 'micro-physics' of power. The general public, therefore, plays the major role in discourse and power through behaviour, bodies, and local power relations without being direct projections of central power (Hall, 2013).

4.3 Film Analysis

Film theory presents an academic approach to the essence of the movie and how it holds a mirror to its audience and the world at large. Film analysis is a broad field that covers many different methods of analysis within it. When studying film many different aspects come into

play that can impact the perception or rather the interpretation the watcher makes of the movie and the message. When watching a movie, the consumer forms an opinion and an understanding of the story from many small details, for example, the lighting a scene has, the music choice, the object in focus of the frame, and other cinematic techniques. To study a film means endless possibilities of interpretation, because not only can you interpret the setting of the scene but also the dialogue, the dynamic between actors, wardrobe choices, as well as, set design choices (Villarejo, 2022).

“Cinema’s dynamism, its capacity to arrange and rearrange time and motion, thus reveals its dimensions that are deeply social, historical, industrial, technical, philosophical, political, aesthetic, psychological, personal, and so forth.”
(Villarejo, 2022, p. 11)

Film studies is supported and made up of language in film, history, the production, the reception by audiences and critics and the kind of effect and impact a film has after being released. A film during pre-cinema was essentially motion photography that consisted of different frames creating the illusion that the picture was moving (Villarejo, 2022). As explained in the quote “It animates the world around us. It transports us to worlds we imagine or know only through images - ” (Villarejo, 2022, p. 7), meaning that it is a way to escape and imagine a different world, which is exactly why audiences love the cinema, it provides an escape.

As mentioned before film analysis is a broad field that covers many different methods of analysis within it. The general approach toward films analysis can follow these types of approaches (Malur, Prashanth G, 2021):

1. *Text-based film analysis* (structural approach): Study of the usage of language traits like sounds, morphemes, sentences, vocabulary, etc.
2. *Topic-based analysis* (narrative approach): Narrative approach of the meaning of a person's experiences.
3. *Picture and sound approach* (iconic analysis): Approach to the picture or image of the film, sometimes film sound as well.

4. *Psychoanalytical approach*: Philosophical and psychological approach to the audiences/characters/directors pent-up or repressed emotions and memories and how that may lead to societal, communal, and emotional healing.
5. *Historical approach*: Aesthetic, technological, economic, and social attributes in film that coincide with historical events.

All of these approaches contribute a different aspect and a different understanding of the movie. These approaches will not be used explicitly individually throughout the analysis, but will instead function as a point of reference. They will be points of reference when deciding what aspects of the film and scenes are of importance. The idea is to use the basis of film analysis to study *Get Out* whilst being backed up by the Critical Discourse Analysis method for film interpretation. A strategy to complete this analysis would also be to use semiotic analysis, a branch of study used in film analysis that helps in meaning-making via signs. This would mean that the focus would be looking into the philosophical sense of the movie, investigating the metaphors, symbolism, analogies, and more.

“Beyond entertainment, film acts in the capacity of establishing a relation with a public as well as speaking for or of a certain group(s) of individuals. Film creates an image of society and organizations, presents issues, affects policy-making, and promotes certain practices. At times these functions are obvious, at other times, less so. The persuasive ability of film makes it the hallmark of cultural studies and high on the list of influential media (see Hall, 1997; Monaco, 2000). As a cultural artifact movies sit on the precipice of reality, making statements that can be illusively denied by the medium’s inherent ability to romanticize even the darkest and cruelest of events.” (Clair, Fox & Bezek, 2009, p. 2)

This quote proves for our project that the pervasive ability of film makes it the hallmark of cultural studies and high on the list of influential media which is why we should even be using Film Theory, especially in this project.

4.4 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis, also referred to as CDA, is an analytical form that provides theories and methods for both the empirical study of the relations between discourse and the social and cultural developments in different social domains. A well-known person within critical discourse is Norman Fairclough. It is said that there are two different ways critical discourse analysis is used. One way Norman Fairclough looked at critical discourse was to describe the approach that he has developed. The other way he looked at it was as the label for a broader movement within discourse analysis of which several approaches, including his own, are a part of (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The broad movement is a loose entity and there is no one who has the reserved rights for it. This broad approach will not be further explained, as it is not relevant for this project, however our main focus will still be on Fairclough. We have chosen to focus on Fairclough since some of his perspectives from his critical discourse analysis was touched upon during methodology class this semester. We have also chosen to focus on his approach since it is seen as one of the most developed theories and methods for research in communication, culture, and society within the critical discourse movement (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Fairclough sees discourse as not only constitutive but also constituted. This differs from the poststructuralist discourse theory. It is central to Fairclough's approach that discourse is an important form of social practice which both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations. Critical discourse analysis is also affected by other social practices and structures. This means that discourse is in a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions. Discourse contributes to the construction of social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and meaning. This means that discourse has three functions: an identity function, a 'relational' function and an 'ideational' function. Fairclough draws here on Halliday's multifunctional approach to language (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

In any analysis, two dimensions of discourse are important focal points: The communicative event and the order of discourse. *The communicative event* is an instance of language use such as an article, a movie, a video, etc. *The order of discourse* is the arrangement of all the different discourse types which are used within a social establishment/social field. (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The latter definition closely aligns with that of genre. A *genre* is a

particular usage of language which participates in, and constitutes, parts of a particular social practice, for example, an interview genre, a news genre, etc. Within an order of discourse there are specific discursive practices through which text and talk are produced and consumed or interpreted (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Every example of language use is a communicative event that consists of three dimensions:

1. *Text*
2. *Discursive practice*
3. *Social practice.*

Text is what linguistic features are present in the text. *Discursive practice* is the consumption and the production of the text. Lastly *social practice* is the wider social perspective to which the communicative event belongs (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

The communicative event in this case is the movie *Get Out*. In this project the linguistic features will not only be focused on dialogue between the characters, but it will be on all elements of ‘film language’ such as symbols, sound, genre features, etc. that will be relevant for the analysis. The last dimension which is social practice is, as explained above, the influence the novel, news or in this case movie has on the society around it. This means that the last dimension seeks to reflect the movie on society and look at how they view the movie.

The main aim of critical discourse analysis is to explore the links between language use and social practice, which is also what this project seeks to explore and answer by using critical discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). By analysing the semiotic features in the movie and looking at the effect the movie had on society, critical discourse analysis can help explain the significance of Jordan Peele’s choice of narrative within *Get Out*.

5. Theory

A selection of the following theories have been selected as a base to further our understanding of the psychosocial and cultural development/continuance of prejudice and stereotypes. Other theories will function as references focusing on the horror genre itself, as well as explanations of the psychological factors of the enjoyment/impact of horror. Lastly, all theories will have great importance in expanding our-, and the reader-'s vocabulary, which will act as a primer for the following analysis.

5.1 Psychosocial and Cultural Theories of Stereotypes

The purpose of including theories based on psychological and social aspects of stereotypes, is to better understand the origin and weight of stereotype use within media. Additionally, theories with this focus will prepare us for our analysis, giving us a greater ability to recognize and analyse the objective reasoning for stereotype mentions. Along with an objective understanding, these theories will help us in possibly recognizing the origin and impact of stereotypes/portrayals of characters.

Ambivalent prejudice theory aids in conceptualising the underlying or 'hidden' forms of racism in society. Referencing *Measuring Racial Discrimination* by Blank et. al., this theory falls under the category of subtle, unconscious, and automatic discrimination, and is a form of indirect racism. This theory describes the complex form of racism, which especially is found in media, such as exploitative films, often both disrespecting African Americans, while simultaneously 'liking' them in a condescending manner. *Ambivalent prejudice theory* also explains how negative reactions to outgroups may not always be entirely negative to constitute discrimination. According to Blank et. al., ambivalent discrimination takes form in several everyday situations, such as failing to promote black employees as there may be an underlying idea of incompetence. Lastly, this theory presents as the 'barrier' to full equality of treatments. Even small subtle discriminatory behavior has a lasting and significant impact on hindering equality. (Blank et. al., 2004).

Illusory correlation is a theoretical concept described in Chapter 1 of *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. In this chapter, Illusory correlation presents as the descriptor for a psychological finding regarding the adoption of stereotypical perception of minority groups. Essentially, it was found that subjects in a study by Hamilton and Gilford (1976) began perceiving minority groups negatively by creating an imagined, or 'illusory' correlation between ethnic minorities and rare/negative traits (Pratto, & Sidanius, 2001). This theory may be used to further explain *Framing, Priming, and Stereotypic Presentation Theory*.

5.2 Stereotypes and Media

The following three theories will be sourced from the book *The psychology of stereotyping* by David J. Schneider. These theories all discuss the matters in which stereotypes are cultivated and furthered by the media. *Framing Theory* and *Priming Theory* are lumped together in this text. These theories both explain the subtle ways media influences the viewer's perceptions. *Priming Theory* focuses mostly on how media can utilise preexisting beliefs or associations the viewers have to create positive or negative associations (forming an illusory correlation). An illusory correlation is a connection we make between two subjects, for example 'bacon' and 'eggs', which also can be stretched into the development of stereotypes and negative perceptions of others (Schneider, 2005). Certain signs function as the priming or connotation of a subject, causing associations between subject and concept. Priming utilises language in a positive or negative way in order to affect our following perception of a subject, creating innate biases (Schneider, 2005). *Framing Theory* explains the methods in which the media portrays a subject. Framing encompasses the way semiotics is used to guide the viewers' perception of said subject, and can also be used in both positive or negative ways. It is the way something is portrayed, and the reasoning for specific choices when communicating something (Schneider, 2005). These choices have a direct effect on how the subject is interpreted by the recipient. Lastly *Stereotypic Presentation* is how the media portrays a person in a stereotypical way. Schnieder uses the examples of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben when referring to racial stereotype uses. He follows this with other examples of negative portrayals such as relating African Americans to low socioeconomic status or even portraying black men as aggressive or criminal. Another interesting stereotypic presentation Schnieder presents is how, during football games, the commentators

“-are prone to praise black players for their physical abilities, but white players for their smart play” (Schneider, 2005, p. 347). These theories will all be used within our analysis to have a better awareness of these forms of media techniques, as well as providing a ‘toolbox’ to form accurate analyses and descriptions of media portrayals.

5.3 Genre Theory/Horror Movies

“That’s the power of story and genre. You can ask a white person to see the world through the eyes of a black person for an hour and a half.” (Jordan Peele in Zinoman, 2017)

Seeing as Film Theory has been explained broadly in the methodology chapter, in the theory chapter the focus is on the more topical aspect of it in relation to the project. In the theory, there is a focus on genre and an explanation of the horror movie genre which is the most important part of the genre for the project.

Genre theory is a part of Film Analysis and it is used to analyse and understand films. As explained by Bordwell, Thompson and Smith “On the whole, genre is a category best used to describe and analyse films, not to evaluate them.” (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2019, p. 544) meaning that Genre theory can be used mostly only as an explanation of where a movie fits into. *Genre* is a French word which means ‘kind’ or ‘type’. To define a film genre means to classify the type of movie, this is similar to the biological science term *genus* which is used to classify plants and animals into groups. There are so many genres, some are even completely unique to a specific geographic location. Some of the main universal film genres are – action picture, musical, Western, science fiction, comedy, romance and also horror. Unlike with plants and animals, the film genre is more fluid. The groups can be mixed and combined together, a film could, for example, be a horror-comedy. Films have the ability to fuse with any other genre or multiple of them. The mixing of genres defines the modern film industry, as genre-bending purposefully fails to adhere to regular norms of film to be able to express the directors creative concepts (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 2019). It gives space for alternative genres that convey new perspectives. There can also be the case like in *Get Out* that is classified as an entirely horror movie but still, it has comedic and ironic aspects to it, so it is not entirely horror.

The *horror* genre specifically seeks to horrify the watcher, to create an emotional response to the movie through shocking, sometimes disgusting or even repelling scenes. The horror movie genre can be identified with a scary monster that is threatening. This monster can be otherworldly, like a ghost, zombie or some other supernatural being (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith, 2019). Or like in the case of *Get Out* the monster is an individual with ill intentions. What makes movies like that scary is that the monster is someone you could meet in real life. This is one of the many examples of Jordan Peele using character representation to use preexisting connotations of race itself as the underlying motivation of the villain's actions.

The setting a film has is dependent on the genre "Not surprisingly, the iconography of the horror film includes settings where monsters might lurk." (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2019, p. 563) from the quote by Bordwell, Thompson and Smith it can be concluded that horror movies always have a distinct visual look. The colours are muted and often get more dark as the story progresses to convey that the plot is leading to a culmination. The setting can be an abandoned hospital, a haunted house or like in the case of *Get Out* a secluded mansion where a suspicious party is taking place. Horror movies also often have special effects either in the costume and make-up department to make gory and grotesque imagery or special effects to create the monsters in the movies (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2019).

5.4 Control & Power Theory

The *Theory of Control* concerns the control that the audience feels and what it wants to feel. The audience enjoys the movie if they experience the feeling of being in control of their emotions and are able to cope with them. This is especially noticeable in our area of research since we are analysing a horror movie. The audience will enjoy the horror movie which is scary and uncomfortable if they feel like they are in control (Straßburger, 2022). There is a specific dramatic structure that the control theory follows and that can be applied and help us analyse in our project. "-excitement that follows a dramatic structure: The audience starts in a phase of rest, which gradually turns into increased arousal, and finally returns to the resting phase" – (Lena Straßburger, p. 26). When looking at horror movies the audience, as the quote initiates, starts in a resting phase. Throughout horror movies there are different genre features that will make the audience feel rousing, for example, jump scares. As music or imagery begins to amplify or

hyperfixate, the audience is subjected to a build-up that creates an emotional impact upon the viewer. As they await for the optimal moment, e.g. a jump scare, their 'excitement' is exponentially rising, as they then experience it, the viewer may become frightened or shocked. Eventually, the viewer will shift back into the resting phase, emotionally affected by the purposeful implementation of anticipation, but simultaneously becoming relieved.

The *Theory of Power* relates to the previously mentioned Theory of Control. Power mechanisms that make up the Theory of Power mean the overcoming of fears, a factor that attracts people to horror movies. There are two sides that can appeal to a person in horror – one is appealing to the victim's role and the other is appealing to the aggressor, the antagonist of the story that targets the victim. Within *Get Out*, these roles are a bit more complex as the villain of the story is not a stereotypical ghost, but rather a living, breathing person with a mindset that you could encounter in one's everyday life. However, the combination of these two theories will aid the explanation behind the appeal of horror movies, the roles within that genre, how they appeal to the audience, and how it impacts the audience (Straßburger, 2022).

5.5 Hall's Interpretation of Race

The Spectacle of The 'Other' by Stuart Hall focuses on the ideas behind racial 'difference', stereotyping, and representation. Hall notes that the perceptions of differences in culture and race are not permanent or 'fixed'. Rather differences are subject to changes and modification, but those in the position of power and privilege may attempt to secure representations through *naturalisation*: attributing traits to nature. This may be understood to be rooted in the effort to maintain their binary (opposite) representation (Hall, 2013). When speaking of 'difference', in this case the difference of race, there are four main areas which the ideology may stem from. Hall outlines four possible explanations which are not mutually exclusive, and should not be interpreted as definite. No one explanation is certain, nor are they positive or negative when exploring the ideas of difference within race (Hall, 2013).

First, we return to Saussure's linguistic perspectives, where difference is essential to creating meanings. This furthers the idea of the binary differences, where placing meanings on one subject also places an opposite meaning to the opposing binary subject. The specific meaning we place on a subject will also assure a clear separation from 'others', however such separation

may only be perceived, rather than factual. In fact, binary oppositions in differences of meanings are subject to extremes, becoming more black and white while ignoring the grayscale and possibility for fluidity (Hall, 2013).

The second explanation also comes from Saussure, focusing on a linguistic aspect of creating differences in meaning. Here the importance is placed on difference itself, and explains that meanings are constructed through dialogues with the 'other'. This means different perspectives and intentions help us create our own concepts and meanings, by gathering and interpreting subjects through the lens of others (Hall, 2013).

The third example outlines the idea of a classification system when placing meanings on subjects. The differences here are based on the 'symbolic order' within culture. This form of classification positions subjects in specific orders, where we then begin to solidify what is impure, stigmatised, taboo, or threatening. This also applies to our own cultural position, where subjects or groups of cultures similar to our own, are placed in closer proximity in our classification system (Hall, 2013).

Lastly, the fourth explanation is sourced from Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex: the early stages of creating our identity of self and sexuality. In this case, the 'other' is essential to creating our sense of said self and sexual identity. The 'other' functions as a concrete representation of someone different from ourselves. Instead, we begin identifying with the people who are similar to us based on bodies and sexuality. For example a little girl will use the understanding of herself being different from her father to further develop her understanding of her own sexuality (Hall, 2013).

As mentioned previously, these explanations are not grounds for defining differences. They only give an indication of the purpose, importance, and variations of the constructions of meanings based on cultural differences. One certainty Hall does appoint to difference is the historical aspect of interracial relations and discrimination. Hall refers to a quote by Frederickson (1987), which draws from the binary oppositions within differences, explaining the racial discourse between white Americans and Africans in the time of slave trading. Here the meaning of 'black' became synonymous with words such as 'savagery' and 'cannibalism', which directly opposed the meanings placed on 'white', such as 'civilization'. These meanings also spread to physical attributes, where the shape of the skull constituted 'proof' of mental and physical inferiorities (Hall, 2013). These attributes, stemming from naturalisation, were placed on

subjective characteristics, where Africans were said to be subordinate by nature, thriving on serving others, as well as primitive and unable to conduct themselves in ‘civilised manners’. Hall draws from Green (1984) explains “The body itself and its differences were visible for all to see, and thus provided 'the incontrovertible evidence' for a naturalisation of racial difference. The representation of 'difference' through the body became the discursive site through which much of this 'racialized knowledge' was produced and circulated.” This means racially charged stereotypes originate in the effort to reduce people to negative characteristics claimed to be fixed by nature (Hall, 2013).

The efforts to fix meanings are also seen throughout film history in The United States, where representation of black characters ensures the persistence of racist stereotypes. These representations include black characters being overly sexualized, criminals, violent, strong, and angry. These representations have since been subject to change, and around the 1950s, the black character was now intelligent and nearly sexless, in order to pander to the white audience (Hall, 2013). Years later, Hall outlines critical studies of four films between 1973-1991, which all continue the use of stereotypes in representation of black characters. One of such stereotypes relevant for this paper is ‘*The Mammy*’: the female live-in servant who is devoted to serving the household. While these stereotypical characters have not explicitly persisted, there are still traces of them, such as the representation of black characters as muggers, drug dealers, or rappers (Hall, 2013). Around the 1980s and 1990s there was an emergence of black independent filmmakers, which created an opportunity for African Americans to share their experiences of oppression, and take charge of the dialogue and representation of black characters. This struggle to take charge of the meanings of representation and imagery of African American culture is known as *the politics of representation*, which presents itself in the politically charged discourses in *Get Out* (Hall, 2013).

6. Context

Get Out is a 2017 American horror film and the directorial debut of comedian and filmmaker, Jordan Peele. The film surrounds a young African American man named Chris who visits his white girlfriend's family home, which quickly turns into a weekend of horrors as he uncovers shocking truths about the family. The family's welcoming behaviour becomes more and more sinister as the movie proceeds, reflecting a disturbing reality of racism in America today. Peele worked with both themes of comedy and horror for the film, stating in an interview that they come together and overlap, as they both consist of reveals and depend on pacing (Mendelson, 2016). Both genres have the ability to convey real-life social injustices and horrors, such as racism, which is the movie's pivotal subject. The film uses satirical aspects as comedic relief. Peele aimed to express a horrific perspective on racism and fear experienced by African Americans, with the usage of allegorical symbolism linking both the historical and modern oppressions and repressions of black lives. To better grasp the ways in which minorities have been treated historically, as well as in the present day, a few areas will be examined in which this is apparent. The history of the slave trades, the discrimination of African Americans, as well as the present day issue of police brutality will be outlined. These areas are all touched upon within *Get Out*, thus this section will contextualise the references Jordan Peele makes, and the importance of including such discourse.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade occurred between the 16th-18th century where millions of Africans were captured, shackled, and shipped to The United States. Once they arrived they would either be sold directly to a slave owner, or be sold at an auction. Once the slave owners had possession of the slaves, they were forced into extreme manual labor, and were subject to draconian forms of abuse including verbal, sexual, and physical (including but not limited to whipping, beating, and lynching) (Shelley et. al., 2017).

During the time of slavery, slave owners would often deprive male slaves from masculinity, reducing them to children. It was not uncommon for male slaves to be lynched or castrated on basis of alleged rape (Hall, 2013). However the underlying reason was more likely the fragile white male fear and perceived threat of the larger black phallus. It was perceived as a symbol of primal aggression, and "projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself - " (Hall, 2013, p. 262). This emasculation resulted in an effort to adopt

hyper-masculine traits such as aggression. This proved counter-productive as it contributed to the white perception of black slaves being driven by primal instincts and sexual urges, entrapping them in the stereotype (Hall, 2013). This discourse merges into *fetishisation*, where sexual energy is displaced from, for example, the phallus to another area of the body. Furthermore, the person is perceived as an object, reduced to physical attributes that are associated with symbols of sexuality (Hall, 2013). This displacement is also rooted in the fantasy of the forbidden, or taboo, creating a substitute for genitalia to cover an underlying sexual desire by relating another physical attribute as sexual. This also allows for more overt voyeurism which commonly occurs when the subject is viewed as 'different', furthering the idea of the taboo or forbidden. (Hall, 2013)

Police brutality is the unwarranted, illegal use of power by police. Police abuse can consist of both verbal and physical assault. Police officers are supposed to prevent crimes, but in the case of police brutality they are the ones carrying-out the crime, using excessive violent tactics and force against a group or targeted individual. It is an extreme form of police misconduct, as they impede and violate human civil rights. There have been many fatal incidents of police brutality. One case that stands out was the killing of teenager Trayvon Martin. Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, who in 2013 was acquitted in the trial as the shooting was deemed to be an act of "self-defence". This case became well known in America and was well covered by the different news and media platforms. This case sparked a wave of controversy within The United States, which resulted in a network of black activists coming together and creating the movement that is known as "Black Lives Matter". The name for the movement was chosen to protest racially motivated violence and discrimination of African Americans (Lyle, P., & Esmail, A. M., 2016).

This is just one case of police brutality. Research done by ProPublica (2014) has shown that young African Americans are at a far greater risk of dying from an encounter with the police than white people in America. Between 2010-2012 there were 1,217 recorded deadly police shootings. These shootings are captured in the federal data and the data show that African Americans between the age of 15 and 19, were killed at a rate of 31.17 per million whereas young white men were killed at a rate of 1.47 per million by police (Gabrielson et al., 2014). This case and this data show how African Americans are targeted and violated in The United States.

There is a long standing history of racially charged discrimination, still present and persistent in The United States. The history of slavery and progressive changes in forms of prejudice and discrimination is extensive and complex. For the purpose of maintaining focus on particular aspects of *Get Out*, slavery and police brutality have been highlighted to provide historical and cultural context.

7. Analysis

7.1 The Deer

Introduction of The Deer

[00.10.21-00.12.08]

The viewer is first introduced to the deer during the scene where Rose and Chris are driving to her parents' house. As they are driving on a long, empty, country road, a deer suddenly jumps in front of and gets hit by the car, as an unexpected jump scare. It is flung into the woods and lays in between the trees dying and yelping. When Chris gets out of the passenger side, we see blood splatter on the fender, only appearing on his side. This could be a subtle way Peele foreshadows that Chris is in danger. The sounds of insects from the woods grow louder as Chris slowly approaches the dead deer, becoming disturbingly loud while accompanied by eerie plucking strings. The insects paired with the strings creates a feeling of unease in the audience, indicating an inevitable jump scare which never occurs. Building up to a non-existent scare with the slow increase in unnerving music and sound, while cutting between Chris' face and the dead deer, robs the viewer of the relief of unease. Perhaps mirroring the feelings Chris experiences of being on edge throughout the majority of the movie, always feeling uneasy but not experiencing relief or validation of those emotions. The deer being introduced through a sudden jump scare with no buildup is Peele's way to throw the audience into the feeling of unease, and to be wary of something being 'off'. Jump scares are a classic feature in horror, and will make an impression or create an emotional reaction on the viewer. This scene, including such an early scare without grinding the audience any preparation, ensures it will be present in the viewer's mind for a while. By using fear, Peele allows the symbol of the deer to cement itself into the audience's consciousness, priming the audience to create an illusory correlation between the signifier (the deer) and the signified (vulnerability, death, and caution). This prepares the audience to create further mental associations when presented with other references, to the deer, within the film. (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

Through a conversation between Chris, Rose, Dean Armitage, and Missy Armitage (The latter two being Rose's parents), it is established that Chris' mother died on the side of the street after a hit and run. This links directly to when Chris decided to approach the deer in the woods. It

appears that Chris sees a connection to the killing of the deer and his mother, and he therefore felt the need to check on the deer. It will later be revealed that he did not look for his mother the night she died. Chris felt a sense of responsibility to investigate the state of the deer, perhaps as he wished a passerby had done to his mother. When we see Chris' face looking down at the deer, he appears nearly defeated, mournful, and pitiful. However, it is obvious he is having a moment of emotional attachment or connection to the deer, or what it symbolises to him, the vulnerability of his mother in her last moment. (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

According to Hall's theory of representation and language, we understand the deer to be an 'iconic' sign, functioning as an indication that someone or something is becoming a target. Deer are well known to be a major choice for many people in rural communities to hunt and display in their homes. Since African Americans have also been 'hunted' throughout history, and even today, it seems Jordan Peele made this connection to underline the targeting of this 'hunt'. It could be related to both the capturing of slaves, but perhaps also the way African Americans are much more likely to be targeted by police brutality, or other forms of violence and injustices. This indicates early on, that there is a symbolic connection between the deer and black lives within the movie.

"You know what I say? I say one down, a couple hundred thousand to go. I don't mean to get on my high horse, but I'm telling you, I do not like the deer. I'm sick of it; they're taking over. They're like rats. They're destroying the ecosystem. I see a dead deer on the side of the road and I think, "That's a start."" -

Dean Armitage

[00.15.10-00.00.15.26]

After Chris and Rose arrive at the Armitage home, Rose's father Dean Armitage utters an unsettling monologue about his sheer disdain for deer after Rose explains how they hit one on the way there. The language is reminiscent of an eugenicist, with the juxtaposing genocidal tones expressing the bettering of the world, willing to wipe out an entire race or species. He perceives deer as pests and as objects to hunt, celebrating their deaths as an improvement for the ecosystem. The way Dean speaks about the deer in this scene establishes a negative connotation. The brutality and immorality of the monologue carries racist undertones, mirroring language

used by white supremacists to convey their mission to dominate and/or exterminate other races, boasting of their power and privilege that they hold above people of colour.

This scene is a good example of priming theory. As mentioned, the deer could be interpreted as a symbol for African Americans and their vulnerability, symbolising how both deer and black lives are targeted. Dean's dialogue on how deer must be hunted and killed can be interpreted as framing the historical hunting and lynching of black people carried out by the lynch mobs of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), imparting their own atrocious form of justice upon black lives by horrific extrajudicial killings. His colonial, micro-aggressive opinion that he expresses to Chris on deer frames the ominous foreshadowing of helplessness at the hands of a hunter. Dean's meaning for deer comes in stark contrast to Chris', creating a parallel of meanings; for Chris, it's vulnerability, innocence and fear while for Dean, it's to hunt and exploit that vulnerability. Early on within the movie, audiences are conditioned to connect Chris and the deer, or the symbol of deer, their behaviours overlapping in some sense. It represents vulnerability, innocence and fear. Within this scene, the dialogue primes and frames an ominous atmosphere and general uncomfortability between Chris and Rose's parents, specifically Dean. It leaves the audience with an unsettling feeling of hostility. (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures)

Chris killing Dean with buck head

[01.29.08-01.29.31]

Towards the end of the film, Chris is strapped to a chair in the basement, moments away from catastrophe. He manages to free himself from the chair and as Rose's brother, Jeremy Armitage, kneels down in front of Chris, he is hit in the head with a ball. Jeremy is seen struggling on the floor, contrasting the representation of him having some form of upper hand until now. Chris' wincing facial expressions show his difficulty internally to hit Jeremy again, but does so. Chris pulls out two balls of cotton from his ears, gazing at them, and tossing them at Jeremy's body. This is a moment where Chris begins to regain his power, and throws symbols of ancestral suffering on Jeremy as waste. The significance of the cotton will be discussed in the section of the analysis titled 'Behold The Coagula'.

Chris gazes at the wall, noticing the mounted buck head, before the camera cuts back to Dean who is realising Jeremy is not responding to him. Dean steps into the dark hallway, illuminated by a few warm lights, the silence is broken up only by a mechanical rhythmic beeping. Dean looks to the left, to the right, and back to the left, when the silence is broken by Chris straining as he charges at him, buck head in his arms with the antlers piercing Dean's body. This is both a jump scare, shocking the audience, which is quickly replaced with a feeling of relief and excitement for the protagonist. Another horror element here is the gore, both through the sound of the antlers stabbing Dean, and the bright red blood appearing as a stark contrast on his light blue paper robe. The symbolic purpose of the buck is to signify the shift from vulnerability and innocence to control and surviving against the hunter. The hunter becomes the hunted in this scene, turning the tide of the distribution of power. The power is now in Chris' hands. Throughout the movie, the audience feel helpless as they witness Chris progressively more violated and trapped within the Armitage's house. When Chris then regains power the audience feel relieved which relates to the Theory of Power. As the audience, we have been on the side with the victim and go through this moment of regaining power with Chris (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

7.2 Fetishisation

Georgina Admiring Her Reflection

[00.30.27-00.30.43]

Chris goes outside for a smoke, however he witnesses Walter running straight at him, spooking him. As he turns around, he witnesses Georgina admiring her reflection within a glass window from inside the house. The scene is unsettling, as in the movie it is later revealed that her body is in fact possessed by the grandmother of the family, Marianne Armitage (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures). The scene highlights the fetishisation of black bodies as they are exploited to continue white lives through their beauty, youth and strength of black lives. Marianne admiring Georgina's features both indicates the enjoyment of looking youthful, but also refers to the ongoing fetishisation of black women. Furthermore, this relates to Hall's argument of the black physique being fetishised through the intrigue of the 'other'. Essentially

Marianne is enjoying being youthful, and enjoying the possibility of being perceived as ‘different’ or ‘interesting’, which likely contrasts her previous appearance.

The purpose of Peele highlighting this momentarily is for the audience to notice a change in Georgina’s behaviour, who prior to this had been represented as a ‘mammy’ character. While Georgina has been shown to be devoted to serving the family, we are introduced to some personality, reminding the viewer that there is more to her, even if she does not show it. One interpretation of the reasoning behind this, beyond the purpose of the plot, could be that Peele is commenting on the representation of black women. He first portrays Georgina as a passive, helpful, and gentle employee of the Armatiges who enjoys serving the family. This fully aligns with the stereotypical ‘mammy’ character, and racist ideologies of natural servitude presented by Hall. The contrast to this would be the full fetishisation of her appearance, which he directly avoids. Instead, he finds a gentle medium to show the viewer that there is no extreme binary of such a character, and shows just enough of an indication of sexuality. This could be a commentary on the overall representation of black women, either subservant or as sexual objects. While he uses one of the stereotypes in the beginning, he subtly drives home a reminder that representations are not always accurate, and all characters have traits beyond their outward expressions.

Meeting the Guests

[00.42.40–00.43.49]

As the guests arrive in formal fashion, Chris is introduced to them alongside Rose Armitage. The guests’ language is strange, analytical and observant as if Rose is parading around a prize pony to be admired, analysed by potential buyers for its certain characteristics and if he reaches their preferences. Rose introduces Chris to the Greenes, Nelson and Lisa Deets, as well as April and Parker Dray. The conversations Chris has with them are very blatant and shameless. In the conversations, it is clear that the guests are interested in Chris’ looks and physique. What the viewer does not know at this point is the guests are judging Chris to see if he is worth betting on in the silent auction that ends the gathering with the guests. After the sequence, Chris is seen excusing himself seeing as the chain of interactions one after another have left him feeling very uncomfortable. Most of the guests are wearing black, which makes the gathering seem like a funeral (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures). Even though all of the conversations have a

different topic, the following three interactions all encompass different elements of fetishisation which will be discussed and analysed separately.

"Gordon loves Tiger"

[00.43.03]

When Chris and Rose meet the guests Emily- and Gordon Greene, they all shake hands, with Gordon being especially excited to meet Chris, even commenting on his firm grip. Gordon asks if Chris has played golf, and explains he no longer is able to, due to some physical problems. Immediately after, he points at Chris while saying "I do know Tiger", in a way that indicates he is expecting a positive reaction. His wife, Emily, proudly declares that "Gordon loves Tiger", followed by Gordon praising Tiger's golf abilities, before asking Chris to show his form/stance (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

The mention of Tiger Woods ties back to previous mentions of Barack Obama, where Dean Armitage praises the president, stating he would vote him in for a third term if possible. While it may outwardly appear that the characters are attempting to prove to Chris that they are not racist, it comes across much differently. The priming theory and results from stereotypic presentation has created an illusory correlation between negative traits and African Americans. One major association, which Hall explains to originate in the historical justifications for slavery, is the lack of intelligence and sophistication. Dean and Gordon praise these public figures, as they may present differently than what their conceptual maps view as black men. The effort to praise them when speaking to Chris shows they are attempting to relate to him, while still showing the lack of awareness of the black culture. Peele has chosen these two public figures carefully, as they are both associated with jobs that indicate great success, and commenting on the strange effort of white Americans to praise the figures which most black Americans can not fully relate to.

"So, is it true? Is it better?"

[00.43.32]

Chris and Rose are introduced to Lisa- and Nelson Deets, a couple of a middle aged woman and an older wheelchair bound man. Chris asks how they are doing, and without

answering, Lisa asks: “So, how handsome is he?” before grabbing his biceps. She completely violates his personal space, bypassing any inquiry of consent. She asks the question: “So, is it true? Is it better?” to Rose. Throughout this exchange she has not spoken to Chris, and has treated him like an object or sexual commodity. She appears fascinated by his body, explicitly fetishising him (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

As Hall explained, there is already a historical context and meaning placed on black men’s phallus, which was associated with sexual aggression due to the size. Lisa is treating this interaction as a purchase, asking questions, and feeling Chris, to examine his sexual capabilities. Hall also mentioned fetishisation being the displacement of sexual energy from the phallus to other areas of the body. Here it is clear Peele is highlighting Lisa’s disregard for Chris as a human, and placing her own sexual fantasy on parts of his body, which she feels entitled to. Peele is not only foreshadowing the upcoming reveal of the family and guests’ purpose at the party, but he also makes a point to show that this ‘appreciation’ of his body is extremely damaging, objectifying, and counterproductive to progression. He is commenting on the way in which the white characters could be representative of the complex and ongoing American discourse of subliminal racism. Additionally, this interaction underlines the fetishisation and displacement of sexual energy of his body, where the ‘difference’ of his physicality is seen as the symbol of sexuality, and his intelligence and personality is disregarded.

“Black is in fashion”

[00.43.47]

Lastly, they talk to a couple, April and Parker Dray. April does not speak in the scene. This is the only couple who is not directly introduced. The scene cuts to the conversation with the Drays much more abruptly than the other two, creating a momentum of continuous uncomfortable moments, taking away the audience’s ability to recover from the previous comment. Indicating these comments are within every interaction Chris has with the guests. Parker Dray starts the scene by saying “Fairer skin has been in favour for the past, what, a couple of hundreds of years?” where he could be, not only, referencing how the media throughout the decades tailored to the conceptual maps encompassing the white perspective, but also that black individuals are narrowed down to ‘fashion’. This change in perceptions and meanings of subjects is what Hall explained to be sliding meanings. The guests perceive African Americans to have

changed their representation to positive, effectively disrupting their opposing binary position within meanings. (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures). Makeup and fashion were aimed at the white person. There was almost no representation of other races. However, Parker continues by saying “- but now the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion.” (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures). By saying this he is solidifying the idea that black bodies are nothing more than a commodity, an article of clothing, especially through the use of the word ‘fashion’. The pendulum swinging back also explains the awareness of the white privilege within society, and a new change in what the guests perceive to be interesting or ‘in’, while still associating Chris with an object that can be used to their advantage. All of the guests want Chris for some quality he has, something that stereotypically black people have been believed to have for one reason or another. All of the guests present are shopping, searching for the traits and characteristics that pique their preferences; they are there solely for him. The claim made by Parker Dray makes Chris visibly uncomfortable. So much so that he excuses himself from the conversation.

Ambivalent prejudice theory can be linked to this, seeing as it concerns the underlying forms of racism in society. It might convey the privilege the Drays have, by saying that “Black is in fashion” it could be said that they are trying to put themselves in a victim's position. Seeing as the Drays compared to the Greenes and Deets do not have one specific quality in mind that they want to buy Chris for. They just want him because it is in ‘fashion’. The vagueness of this interaction makes the viewer wonder what exactly the Deets are planning; it arouses suspicion within Chris and the audience simultaneously. It could be argued that Parker just wants to be cool and is following a ‘trend’, and that this exchange would also be beneficial for his wife, again foregrounding the exploitation of black lives and bodies for the benefit of those middle-class white people.

Silent Auction

[00.59.25-01.00.09]

The silent auction acts as a pivotal catalyst of the film, where the audience is exposed to the truth. Until now, all strange behaviours and actions have been excused or explained, while still holding onto some uncertainty. While Chris and Rose are by the lake, Chris begins opening up to Rose about his uncomfortability, and feels that he knows one of the guests who has been

acting strangely. The camera cuts to Dean Armatige who is standing in the black painted gazebo. The camera is pointed up at him, portraying him as a person of power in this situation. He holds up one finger, before showing the party guests holding up bingo cards marked with different colours and lines. The guests are seated to mimic a funeral, all wearing black. We return to Rose and Chris discussing where he tells her “I just need to go”. The camera turns back to Dean at the gazebo. He is still shown from below as he holds up two fingers. The string music intensifies as the camera pulls further back, revealing a large picture of Chris behind Dean. The way the photo is placed along with the camera angle shows Dean in a position of power, with Chris behind him, signifying his power over Chris as well. In terms of horror, this evokes powerful emotions in the audience of shock and disgust. The music aids in these emotions, playing in a minor tone and creating the sense of discomfort and unease. The sound of a ticking clock can be heard throughout the scene, signifying the time limit Chris has in order to save himself from the situation (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

This is a direct referral to the slave trade and auctions from the 16th-18th century, and we finally understand that Chris has been right to be on edge. Dean has decided he has the right to Chris’ body, and feels that he can treat him as an object or commodity. It is apparent that the other guests also felt this way, and weren’t socialising with him, but rather assessing their possible “purchase”. All the strange remarks and events which had been excused are now proven to have been significant all along. This collapse of excuses is significant, as Peele is showing the black audience that they are right to be wary of their surroundings. Additionally, this applies to the white audience, as throughout the movie Rose has denied and disregarded Chris’ suspicions. Rather Peele is reminding the audience that dismissals are dangerous, and one should not disregard others’ when expressing discomfort. He is making a point that it is a difficult and dangerous task for black men to navigate the world, and real danger can be identified in microaggressions and other areas which may seem insignificant from an outside perspective.

7.3 Microaggressions and Gaslighting

Rose Armitage’s Gaslighting and Microaggressions

From the beginning, it is established that Rose is Chris’ girlfriend, who he trusts most as they have an intimate relationship. She is his presumed ally throughout the movie, however as

the movie continues, it is revealed that she is gaslighting him, undermining and ignoring his needs, feelings and instincts. As he confides in her that he feels uncomfortable or that he feels something is wrong, she brushes it aside and rather tells him that it is all in his head. She rationalises his decisions to stay, attempting to convince him that he is safe; he has no reason not to trust her. As the truth is revealed, it shows that she was in on the plan the entire time, betraying his trust and life for the sake of her family's cult. It is revealed that she is the bait to exploit unaware black individuals to bring into her family, to be auctioned off and used for transplants. Throughout the movie, even before Chris is aware of her betrayal, Rose's behaviour highlights the undermining of black experiences and white ignorance. This theme of gaslighting from her is also supported by the "white saviour complex" that she repeatedly conveys throughout the movie. She hides her true intentions behind protective, saviour-like behaviour that she uses to simultaneously strengthen and fool Chris' trust, as well as disorienting the trust of the audience. (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures)

Rose is portrayed as the white saviour throughout the movie, but in the end it is revealed as a facade. Rose represents the dismissal of black voices, continually bypassing Chris' suspicions and expressions of discomfort. The purpose of this is for Peele to further the discussion of the silencing of black voices, and that while some white allies attempt to 'help', it is time they listen instead. She is the stereotypical white hero in a movie about racism, however, as established, it is all an act she can safely hide behind without arousing suspicion. By creating a character that is so involved in all of Chris' emotions and thoughts it creates a shocking betrayal that neither Chris or the audience saw coming. It also leaves the audience feeling unease and out of control, which conveys from the Theory of Control. It is said in this theory that the audience will enjoy the movie if they are in control of their feelings. When Rose reveals her true self the audience is no longer in control, and the rest of the movie is watched whilst being paranoid that Chris will not make it out alive. Rose has functioned as our anchor when going through the story with Chris. The audience has been primed to trust her, and with Chris' position of vulnerability, we are forced into a trusting dynamic with Rose's character. Peele is again showing that some perceived good intentions from white allies may hide sinister truths, and the interracial trust goes much deeper than initially portrayed.

"I didn't ask who was driving, I asked to see his ID"

- Police Officer 1

[00.12.33-00.12.36]

After Rose hits the deer with her car, she and Chris call the police to report it. The police arrive on the scene and the first police officer immediately asks Chris for his licence/ID. Rose establishes that he was not driving, it was her, and that he has nothing to do with the incident. The police officer firmly and strictly states that he did not ask who was driving, he asked for Chris' ID, brokenly explaining that after an incident, he has every right to ask for identification. Rose, stepping into her "white saviour" persona, intervenes firmly and confronts the interrogative police officer. Her tone is aggressive and accusatory, standing up for Chris, suggesting that the police officer is racially profiling him. The demand to see Chris' ID in itself is also aggressive, especially after it is established that he was not the driver, therefore had no hand within the incident. Regardless of whether or not he had any right to demand Chris' licence, his tone is antagonistic and autocratic, entirely ignoring the real problem at hand, which was the deer they had accidentally hit. It reflects the reality of interactions between the police and African Americans, where unnecessary interrogations and racial profiling are imposed upon them by the ones that are supposed to protect and help; this expresses another theme of betrayal. It is also a reference to police brutality. This exhibits ambivalent prejudice theory, as Peele uses the short interaction between Chris, Rose and the police officer to highlight the reality of automatic racism constituted by police in the United States. Chris is compliant to the police officers' demands, foregrounding the fear that African Americans feel while in the presence of law enforcement; forced to comply as to not wanting to become a victim of police brutality.

However, as Rose's true intentions are revealed, one may interpret Rose's behaviour as the problematic one, rather than vice-versa. As she interferes with Chris' interrogative identification process by the police, a dark, underlying purpose hides behind it that foreshadows her betrayal. While indulging in her saviour behaviour, Rose is in fact fighting to keep Chris' identity hidden from the police, as when he would ultimately go missing, the police would not be able to track his location. By erasing a paper-trail that would lead the police to the Armitage home, Rose is protecting her family's disturbing ploy, all whilst hiding behind a supportive,

trustful persona. As Chris' friend Rod Williams briefly mentions prior to this, black individuals have gone missing within that area, meaning that the police officer could have simply been on the lookout for potential missing persons.

"Now you're in The Sunken Place" - Missy Armitage

[00.32.24-00.36.47]

As Chris retreats from being outside, he is greeted by Missy Armitage, a psychiatrist and hypnotist, as well as Rose's mother. He sits down in a chair across from her. She begins to ask him questions, regarding smoking and Chris smoking around her daughter. The conversation begins to turn interrogative, asking intrusive questions about his mother's death. Chris begins to become uncomfortable, and says he does not want to think about that situation. Missy continues stirring her cup of tea in silence, the sound of the spoon scraping against the porcelain being the auditory focus. He quickly falls into her hypnosis, or heightened suggestibility, and begins answering questions of the night his mother passed. He was at home, watching TV, and it was raining. Missy asks if he can hear the rain, and he becomes visibly uncomfortable as the sound of rain appears. He wiggles in his seat and moans shakily. Missy continues pressing him to find the rain, and Chris becomes visibly more uncomfortable just before we see what appears to be young Chris on the bed, watching tv. He is moving slightly in the chair, appearing to be wanting to speak but can not, and his eyes are now full of tears. She continues asking questions about that night, where Chris answers but still looks uncomfortable, yet unable to resist. Once he reveals he did not look for his missing mother, Missy stays on that subject: "you just sat there", "you didn't call anyone?", "why not?". The camera is slowly closing in on Chris' face, as he becomes more restless and uncomfortable. The scene quickly snaps back to young Chris, anxiously scratching at the wood on his bed frame, before cutting back to current day Chris doing the same on the chair's armrests. Missy now has forced him into her hypnotic control, and is pushing him further saying "You're so scared", and, "You think it was your fault", as Chris' breathing intensifies and tears roll down his face. "How do you feel now?" Missy asks, "I can't move" Chris answers. Her spoon has not yet stopped stirring the cup. She explains that he is paralyzed, "Just like that day when you did nothing, you did *nothing*", we see Chris wince in painful emotions, but unable to move other than his fingers scratching the leather chair. "Now... sink into the floor" Missy

demands with a smile with Chris panicking: “Wait, wait, wait!”, interrupted by her firm “Sink.” (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

The second she says this, Chris’ fingers stand out straight, we see young Chris fall back onto the bed, and finally Chris floating. He is surrounded by darkness, only able to see the room and Missy through a small square above him. He is falling in slow motion, light only illuminating him from above, accompanied by unnerving cadenced string music. We see him trying to reach up, or swim, from different angles, illustrating the vast amount of dark space around him. He reaches the bottom, still floating but upright, and looking up at the small square above him, similar to a small tv screen. He is cemented in his deepest, darkest moment, looking up at what looks like the screen he watched while he waited for his mother. We then see Chris sitting in the chair, mouth open, eyes bloodshot, with tears falling down his cheeks. Missy leans into his face, we see him in the sunken place, looking back up in disbelief. She says “Now you’re in the sunken place”, and he begins attempting to swim upwards and yell, with no sound coming out. The scene ends with Missy holding his face with one hand and using her thumb to close his eye, shutting out the light in the sunken place (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

‘The sunken place’ becomes a significant part of the film’s plot and message. In the following analysis of the scene “Behold The Coagula”, the true purpose of hypnosis and the sunken place will be introduced. However, in this scene the audience is only told that the hypnosis was to help Chris to quit smoking cigarettes. Missy’s method of hypnosis does hold some symbols which, in retrospect, illuminates the true nature of the Armatige family’s racist ideologies. Peele revealed in an interview that his choice of using a tea cup and a silver spoon were intentional and meaningful. The silver spoon refers to the privilege of the family. This also comes from the saying someone is “born with a silver spoon in their mouth” to signify generational wealth. Furthermore, the tea cup refers to the control over slaves. Peele explains that Missy’s stirring of the cup is a recreation of a tactic slave owners used to call slaves, like a bell (Williams, 2017). This verifies the symbolism of this scene, showing Missy’s disregard for Chris’ right to his own body and mind, taking full control of him. The entirety of the film is veiled with this interracial power establishment, where the white characters continually and blatantly treat Chris as an object. She is then, not only forcing her power and perceived ownership of his body, but Peele confirms this to be rooted in the history of slavery. Later in the film, this tea cup is broken in a fight between Chris and Missy, where she suddenly is nearly defenceless against him.

This shows the destruction of her power over him, and more importantly how fragile white superiority truly is.

This scene pulls the film into a new area of fantasy for a short moment. The sunken place is shown to be a part of Chris' mind, or subconscious, where he no longer has control and can only observe his surroundings sparingly. He was forced into this state by Missy, and appears to have no way to escape. Peele revealed the true meaning behind the sunken place, in the special features of the film. While much of the film is intended for all audiences, even with different perceptions, the sunken place is meant for the black audience itself. It is the metaphor for marginalisation in the prison industrial system complex, the lack of representation of black characters in horror, as well as the overall silencing of black voices when fighting injustice (Bibbani, 2017).

Behold The Coagula

[01.13.31-01.15.15]

Chris wakes up confused and afraid as he is strapped to a chair in a room he does not recognise. In front of Chris is an old television with a taxidermy buck head hanging above it. As he looks around to find an explanation for why he is bound to the chair the television turns on. In the tape that is played, the viewer meets Rose's grandfather, Roman Armitage. Roman explains the procedure that Chris is about to go through in the video. Roman says;

“You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you’ve enjoyed your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination, we could both be part of something greater. Something perfect. The Coagula procedure is a man-made miracle. Our order has been developing it for many, many years, and it was not until recently it was perfected by my own flesh and blood. My family and I are honoured to offer it as a service to members of our group. Don’t waste your strength, don’t try to fight it. You can’t stop the inevitable. And who knows? Maybe one day, you’ll enjoy being members of the family. Behold, The Coagula.” (Peele, J., 2017. *Get Out*. Universal Pictures).

This is the climax of the movie where the true nature and intention of the Armitage family is revealed. The missing pieces to the puzzle begin to fall into place, and it is understood

that the black characters' strange behaviour stems from the white characters who have undergone the procedure to overtake the body. Prior to this scene, Chris also flips through over a dozen pictures showing Rose with other victims of The Coagula. This shows us that the characters, who we know as Georgina, Walter, and Logan King, were victims of the procedure, and also lets us know there are many more. At some points the camera shifts away from Chris while looking through the pictures, perhaps symbolising the large amount of victims of racially charged discrimination and violence who are never heard or brought justice.

The clip presenting The Coagula is framed by Roman in an intentionally optimistic way. The manner in which he presents the procedure is focused mainly on his perception of this 'movement' to be aiming for a better life for his family. He also justifies the use of his body as something Chris should be proud of, claiming he has been selected for the physical advantages that he has "enjoyed [his] entire life". While the purpose of highlighting this furthers the narrative of the racist ideologies of the Armitage family, it also shows the referrals to slavery and their forceful ownership of Chris. By saying he has 'enjoyed' his physicality for his whole life, Roman is essentially justifying taking Chris' body, since he has had the chance to enjoy it thus far. Furthermore, the entirety of the procedure directly linking to slavery. Chris is no longer in a position to give or revoke consent, is no longer in control, and Roman makes it clear that Chris' body is at the family's disposal. Only his physical abilities are mentioned as reasoning to 'use' his body, while Roman highlights the family's determination, as in intellectual capabilities. This is yet another reference to the historical justifications of slavery, where naturalisation was put into place to confine slaves to be represented as lacking intellect. These stark differences in description of physical and intellectual gifts, Roman is establishing the binary meanings between the two races. Interestingly, he still does not find this binary difference adequate, and believes the family's perceived intellectual superiority entitled them to also take the lives and bodies of the 'inferior' yet 'physically capable' black characters. This, in some way, relates back to the "-but now, the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion." comment, where there has been a failed attempt at fixing meanings on those oppressed, they instead want to become them. In all ways possible, attempting to secure a position 'on top'.

When the tea cup appears on the screen, Chris panics and quickly slouches in the seat. However, as explained earlier in the analysis, Chris uses the cotton from the chair as earplugs and therefore prevents himself from being hypnotised by Missy's hypnotising teacup. This is an

iconic comeback, and is a moment where Peele dismantles the ideologies presented in The Coagula clip. The cotton saving his life is a powerful statement, where picking cotton has long been a symbol of slavery and oppression, Chris picking the cotton from the chair flips the script and he takes back his power and life. More importantly it is a statement of his intelligence, which has been overseen by the Armitage family, who clearly carry preconceived notions of mental inferiority of African Americans.

8. Discussion

During the beginning of the project work, we discussed the use of many methods and theories. It was decided within the group to focus on repres and critical discourse analysis. However, it was brought to our attention that the two things do not work together, as they discredit each other. It was therefore decided to leave hermeneutics, and instead focus on critical discourse analysis in combination with cultural studies by Stuart Hall.

In the first couple of months of project work, we wanted to look at how racist stereotypes in horror movies have changed over time and how the typical racist stereotypes in horror movies were changed in Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out*. Due to issues with time, this was not possible in the end. Instead of watching specific movies and comparing the racist stereotypes from these movies to *Get Out*, it was decided solely to focus on *Get Out* and only mention how the representations are used in this movie.

As mentioned above racist stereotypes were something that we knew would be a big focus point in this project. However in the beginning we only called it stereotypes and not racist stereotypes. This was brought to our attention that we unknowingly minimised the racism in the stereotypes. Stereotypes can be many things, but what was our focus point was racist stereotypes, which eventually turned into a focus of representations of race. These representations were then linked to historical contexts of racially charged harm, and cultural aspects of discrimination.

Being four white women writing a project about racism in horror movies, we may ourselves have unknowingly, and unintentionally, contributed to the white washing of these small details. As well as when choosing academic sources we did not take into consideration that some of the information retrieved could be white washed. The analysis of this project is focused on specific scenes from the movie that were chosen by the group. Undeniably that makes the analysis biased, as we can only analyse semiotics from our perspective. Our background has therefore caused a direct limitation in our ability to analyse and interpret scenes from the black perspective. To overcome this obstacle, we should have sourced African American viewers' interpretations, however it would have been challenging due to the time and character limit. We had a realistic approach where we were subjective with choosing what was interesting and what stood out to us. If different scenes would have been chosen the analysis would have had a different view. The issues in regard to racism would have been the same, but different aspects of it would have been shown.

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* highlights the marginalisation of black people within America. While racism has been an issue for a long time, lately the issue has become an especially common topic in the media. One of the causes for this is the mass media coverage of police brutality in America and the Black Lives Matter movement. In that context it would make sense that someone might claim that Jordan Peel was part of a general trend when making the movie. However, seeing as the movie gained so much popularity it is safe to say that the movie was an important part of the Black Lives Movement and still is. It is a monumental catalyst to the deconstruction of white prioritisation within film, brilliantly skewering America's injustices and insecurities to every audience, regardless of race.

A lot of questions were raised while writing this project, and even more will be raised when researching to prepare for the oral exam. When working with such a serious topic as racism it is hard to give concrete answers to issues or questions that are brought up during the work process. As students our purpose of writing this project is not to change inequality or discrimination, instead we aimed to answer the question of the destructive nature of stereotypes, and how Jordan Peele changed this narrative. While our focus shifted from our initial problem formulation, we were still guided to conclude that change is possible. Artists such as Peele are fighting to take back the power of controlling the representation of African Americans in the media, providing hope for a more tolerant and equal future.

9. Conclusion

Get Out by Jordan Peele represents the various ways the African American characters are subject to microaggressions, fetishisation, objectification, and silencing. Peele approaches this discourse through the use of horror and satire. The horror elements pull the audience into Chris' overall feeling of uncomfortability and unease. The satirical aspect works to ridicule microaggressions by the white characters through humour, allowing the white audience to view these behaviours from a different perspective. In Hall's text regarding 'differences', it is mentioned that the 'other' perspective is vital in formulating meanings. Peele providing this different perspective to the white audience can be understood as an effort to direct a change in concepts and meanings, highlighting the microaggressions as uncomfortable, disturbing, and absurd. These aspects of the discourse of race are represented for all audiences to identify with or learn from. The movie is not prioritising the white gaze, it is instead prioritising and placing the black character as the focal point. It revolves around Chris and his horrifying experience, rather than prioritising the comfort of white audiences. Peele therefore meticulously created a story that both functions as a representation of the black experience in America, one that much of the audience may relate to, while also opening the dialogue for the white audience to reflect on their actions or potential innate biases.

Throughout the film the way the white characters increase their microaggressions towards Chris crescendos into the undeniable explicit referral to slavery. The white characters do not see Chris as an intelligent person, they rather perceive him as a body that they can exploit and possess for their own benefit. This is not only explicitly racist, but also a form of blatant fetishisation that is introduced when the party guests are shopping for his characteristics by touching him without his consent, asking Rose about his genitalia and analysing his overall physical form. This objectification echoes out on the historical exploitation of black lives, highlighting the flagrant absurdity of racial social constructs in The United States. Peele uses historical links to slavery to create a horrifying narrative where modern slavery consists of white conceptual maps hyperfixating on the literal possession of black bodies. This reiterates the historical aspect of the revokal of human rights and bodily autonomy of slaves, but also functions as a reminder that exploitation comes in various forms, acting as a warning and threat that it may become so normalised and cemented within human social relations that it is brushed off. This is seen as within the movie, all hints of the Coagula have persistently been excused and framed as

ignorance, opening the dialogue for where ignorance and biases end and where discrimination begins.

Get Out is much more than just a horror film, aimed to entertain and scare the audience. Rather Peele's choice of discourse and representation was quite meticulous. He intended to change the narrative by focusing on Chris' feelings and uncomfortability being valid, extreme, but also rooted in some real-life experiences. He also does not shy away from exposing or discussing the veiled societal prejudices and discrimination, hidden behind the exploitation of African Americans. These changes in narrative work alongside previously mentioned modifications of meanings and media representation of black characters. As Hall explained, this struggle to take back charge of media representation and meanings of African American culture is known as 'the politics of representation'. Peele engaging in a politically charged discourse is an effort to direct the narrative to more accurately represent black characters, highlight societal issues, and shows a push forward in the dialogue of improving said representation. According to Foucault's view on power, Peele may have a genuine ability to accomplish such changes, even without being in a position of power. Foucault explains that power is not linear, and the general public has major input in discourse and power. Jordan Peele offered the public a story representing systematic oppression, betrayal, horror, and the regaining of power. He pulled the viewers into the discourse of discrimination, opened the door for a conversation, and took back control of his character representations. This effort hopefully promotes self reflection and critical thinking by the white audience, while also leading to awareness of mistreatment and misrepresentation of African Americans in the media. Taking back the power and improving representation.

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