

# The Dangers of Whiteness

*An analysis of the representation of whiteness in GET OUT (2017)*

Name: Patricia Diemer  
Student number: 5722667  
Study: Media en Cultuur  
Supervisor: Milica Trakilovic  
Academic year: 2018-2019  
Block: 2  
Date of submitting: 24 January 2019  
Wordcount: 7466 words

## Summary

In this thesis I analyze the representation of whiteness in the film *GET OUT* (2017). Whiteness is often represented in the media as an invisible, neutral non-race or simply the human race. White people are seen as the norm, who are not defined by numerous stereotypes, like people of color, but through diverse and complex representations. I argue that *GET OUT* subverts this by making whiteness visible and portraying white people as a distinct social category. By carrying out a textual film analysis with a critical race theory approach, I examine how whiteness emerges as a social/political category in *GET OUT* and to what extent it is a reflection of a wider critique of whiteness as an invisible norm. The focus of my research is on language, characterization, narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography. Through the use of the concepts *colorblindness*, *racial fetishism*, *white privilege*, *ignorance* and *innocence*, I aim to connect the film and its portrayal of whiteness to a broader debate surrounding whiteness and racism. In my first subquestion I analyze the language and characterization of the white people in the film. I argue that the white people in the film often use linguistic strategies and rhetoric to seem non-racist and uphold a certain innocence and ignorance on racial discourses. The second subquestion involves the textual analysis of the film, in which I examine narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography. I argue that *GET OUT* represents a specific form of whiteness, namely an upper class whiteness, that stands even further away from an urban Blackness that is represented in the film. Moreover, I discuss the ways in which whiteness dominates Blackness in the film through different props. All in all, I argue that *GET OUT* represents an upper class whiteness, that is defined through a privilege and ignorance they acquired through their race as well as their class. One that uses their ignorance and innocence as a shield to appear non-racist, but consequently maintains contemporary racial power relations and therefore their privilege.

**Keywords:** Get Out, film analysis, textual analysis, critical race theory, contemporary racism, post-racial, colorblindness, white ignorance, white innocence, white privilege, racial fetishism

## Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theoretical framework.....	6
3. Methodology.....	8
4. Research analysis.....	10
3.1 Whiteness through dialogue and characterization.....	10
3.2 Whiteness through narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography.....	17
5. Conclusion.....	24
6. Bibliography.....	26
7. Filmography.....	28

## 1. Introduction

We may be on our way to genuine hybridity, multiplicity without (white) hegemony, and it may be where we want to get to – but we aren't there yet, and we won't get there until we see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule. (Dyer 2017, 4)

Race relations is a frequently discussed subject in the contemporary film industry. Films directed and/or produced by Black<sup>1</sup> people are more common than before, even winning multiple awards – including Academy Awards. Recent examples include *12 YEARS A SLAVE* (2013), *HIDDEN FIGURES* (2016) and *BLACK PANTHER* (2018). What these films all have in common is that they present an antiracist message, some more explicitly than others. But also, every film includes at least one white character that is inherently 'good', with which I mean against racism and who eventually helps the Black characters achieve their goal. The films criticize racism, but seem to only address a specific, explicitly racist whiteness as being the villain, in contrast with a 'good' whiteness that is represented as an ally or sometimes even a savior.

However, when I saw the film *GET OUT* (2017), I noticed it represented race relations in the United States differently by highlighting the dangers of a subtle, implicit way of white supremacy. The film tells the story of Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), a rising photographer, and his girlfriend Rose Armitage (Allison Williams), who spend the weekend at the house of Rose's father Richard (Bradley Whitford), her mother Missy (Catherine Keener) and her brother Jeremy Armitage (Caleb Landry Jones). Rose and her family are all white and Chris is wary of meeting them because he is aware of the chance that they will react negatively to him being a Black man. It is later revealed that the whole family kidnaps Black people to sell them in order to transplant older white people in their bodies. Chris has to kill every member of the family in order to escape. The film's portrayal of racism is subtle at first, but gets more extreme when the story progresses.

Jordan Peele, the writer and director of *GET OUT*, points out that the role of the good white characters in the previous films I mentioned is to give the white audience someone they

---

<sup>1</sup> I am aware of the debate going on regarding the capitalization of the racial descriptions Black or black and White or white. I have chosen to use the term Black with a capital letter and the term white without a capital letter in my analysis. More on this debate and the different arguments see: Perlman, Merrill. 2015. "Black and White: Why Capitalization Matters." Accessed January 10, 2019. [https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language\\_corner\\_1.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php). Tharps, Lori L. 2014. "The Case for Black With a Capital B." Accessed January 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>.

can identify with and reassure them that they are not racist (Ramos 2017). *GET OUT* subverts that narrative by depicting every white person in the film as evil – not only through the displaying of explicitly racist practices, but also by representing a more nuanced racism performed by white people. At the time I saw the film, I was reading a chapter from the book *White* by English film scholar Richard Dyer concerning the representation of whiteness in visual media, including film. The quote at the beginning of this page interested me, in that it regards the making *visible* of the dangers of whiteness as necessary to end its domination.

Dyer analyzes representations of whiteness by white makers in Western culture. He argues that race is only applied to people of color<sup>2</sup>, while white people remain racially unseen and unnamed. “Other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer 2017, 1). They tend to be made invisible and are represented as a group that every human being can identify with, they are simply the ‘human race’. Besides, white people are predominantly represented in the media in diverse and complex roles, which leads to the issue that white people “seem not to be represented to themselves *as* whites, but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized and abled” (Dyer 2017, 3). White people are defined through being neutral and a non-race, different from, for instance, Black or Asian people, who are defined through numerous harmful stereotypes. Only when whiteness is made visible or overemphasized can it be seen as a distinct identity, Dyer argues.

Although research on the representation of people of color is much-needed and indeed very important, there is another crucial aspect that tends to be overlooked in research on racial representation: the representation of whiteness. As Dyer argues, white people are not represented as a race and therefore they are not analyzed often as a distinct social category. Indeed, some research has been done on the representation of whiteness in film, but these focus on whiteness portrayed by white makers.<sup>3</sup> Hence, I wish to add to this research by analyzing a more contemporary case study by a Black maker, one that also actively comments on contemporary race relations in the United States. Moreover, it makes visible a specific whiteness that is rarely represented, namely a whiteness that performs a more implicit racism in order to hide its supremacy. My research question aims to connect the representation of

---

<sup>2</sup> Dyer uses in his text, reluctantly, the term ‘non-whites’ instead of ‘people of color’ to refer to people who are not white. He argues that ‘non-whites’ is a negative term, because it reads “as if people who are not white only have identity by virtue of what they are not”. However, ‘people of color’ reiterates the notion that white people are not a color or a race (Dyer 2017, 11). Both terms are not ideal, but I have chosen to use ‘people of color’ because this is used most often by people who are not white.

<sup>3</sup> See: Dyer, Richard. 2017. *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge. Vera, Hernan and Andrew Gordon. 2003. *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. Bernardi, Daniel. 2007. *The Persistence of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge.

whiteness in *GET OUT* and the relation with contemporary research on racism and white supremacy and thus is the following: How does whiteness emerge as a social/political category in *GET OUT*, and to what extent is this a reflection of a wider critique of whiteness as an invisible norm?

Firstly, I will discuss the concepts and theories I will use in my analysis in my theoretical framework, together with an elaboration on my research process in my methodology. Secondly, I will carry out my analysis and answer my subquestions. Lastly, I will summarize my research and put together my findings to form an answer to my research question.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In order to answer my research question, I will provide an overview of the main theoretical concepts and theories I will be using in my analysis and discuss the connections between these theories shortly. After that, I will discuss my methodology and the conceptual framework which are significant for the textual analysis I will be doing of the film.

In his text about contemporary racism, political sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that the United States currently lives in a ‘post-racial’ era. With this he means that white people tend to think that race is not an issue anymore in the lives of Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Bonilla-Silva discusses in his book *Racism Without Racists* the post-racial views of white, liberal people in the West, but more specifically in the United States. He explains that before the civil rights era, white people could say explicitly racist things quite easily in public. However, in our post-civil rights era, white people are cautious of talking in public about race or racism. Because white people claim to be colorblind nowadays, talking about race is deemed unethical. They *do* talk about it, but in a “very careful, indirect, hesitant manner and, occasionally, even through coded language,” which is an important aspect in *GET OUT* (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 107). Bonilla-Silva discusses the ways in which white people express their views when dealing with racial issues, ranging from “some of my best friends are ...” to deflecting the arguments by stating that people of color are the racists ones, when they are obviously putting too much emphasis on race (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 109-121). Self-proclaimed colorblind white people think they moved beyond racism, because they do not *see* race. However, by claiming not to see race they consequently ignore the long history of racism and the struggles people of color still go through today. Moreover, they choose to ignore the ways in which they perform racism and how that affects people of color. Because *GET OUT* displays ways in which

contemporary racism is expressed by white people, these texts about colorblindness provide information on this phenomenon.

Additionally, essential concepts when doing research regarding contemporary racism are white privilege, white ignorance and white innocence. These terms are increasingly being used by scholars and academics when researching race and racism. Sociologist Jennifer C. Mueller explains in her text how colorblind racism relies on white ignorance (Mueller 2017). She defines white ignorance as “*a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing surrounding white privilege, culpability and structural white supremacy*” (Mueller 2017, 220; emphasis in original). She states that ignorance and colorblindness allow white people, even when they are well-meaning, to ignore the consequences of discrimination and white privilege and to stay passive or even participate in everyday racism. In this way, white supremacy hides its domination and rationalizes itself (Mueller 2017, 221).

White ignorance is connected with the concept of white innocence. Afro-Surinamese Dutch anthropologist Gloria Wekker defines white innocence as a way of being in the world, one that “contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know” (Wekker 2016, 31). It entails a certain vision of white people as being racially innocent, that needs to be defended at all costs (Wekker 2016, 32). They are innocent because they are ignorant. “[I]nnocence speaks not only of soft, harmless, childlike qualities (...); it is strongly connected to privilege, entitlement, and violence that are deeply disavowed” (Wekker 2016, 32). White ignorance and innocence are constructed by white privilege and consequently also work to preserve it.

Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh examined and mapped her own privilege as a white person and listed everyday instances in which this privilege is evident (McIntosh 1990). “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible knapsack of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in every day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (McIntosh 1990, 31). The knapsack is supposed to remain invisible to the carrier, who thus remains ignorant. Besides, white people are privileged exactly because they *can* be ignorant. They are not affected by racism, so they do not need to know about racism. White privilege works to systematically empower one group to dominate the other. By maintaining the ignorance about the dominance of one group, that same group upholds its power (McIntosh 1990, 35). Because these last three concepts are of importance for understanding contemporary racism and its structure, they provide necessary information for my analysis of GET OUT.

Lastly, I wish to point out that I am aware that whiteness or race never stands alone, but is also influenced by other aspects of social identity such as, gender, age and class. This thought originates from the concept of intersectionality, which critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw

coined in feminist research in 1989. In her text she discusses the experiences of Black women and how their race and sex influence these experiences. She argues that different systems of oppression (f.e. gender, sexuality, race et cetera) should not be analyzed individually, but should be examined in a way that lay bare how they overlap and reinforce each other. Because the whiteness in *GET OUT* is not only constructed through race, but also largely by class and gender, I will take this into account while doing my research. Because this concept also affects my method, I will formulate more explicitly how I will do this in the methodology section.

The way these concepts work together at forming a contemporary racism defined by colorblindness is what lies at the heart of my analysis. So, colorblindness has thrived because in contemporary society racism has become more implicit than explicit (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 1362). This provides white people with the opportunity to claim that the West has entered a post-racial time. By utilizing colorblindness, white ignorance and innocence, they can maintain their supremacy and thus their white privilege. By showing these interconnections and the linkages with *GET OUT*, I can analyze the specific whiteness that is being portrayed in the film. In the next section, I will explain how I will approach this analysis and expand on the methodological process.

### **3. Methodology**

By carrying out a film analysis with a critical race theory approach, I will deconstruct the portrayal of whiteness shown in the film by looking at narrative, aesthetic and technical aspects and connect this to the broader debate surrounding racism in order to understand how the film comments on whiteness and its role in contemporary racism. When analysing *GET OUT*, I want to point out that I am making observations on the specific whiteness that is being portrayed in this film, namely an American/Western, liberal whiteness. Since the performance and representation of whiteness has changed and is constantly changing it is important to include this socio-political dimension (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 51).

My film analysis will be a textual one. To clarify, an image, film or even a song, can be a *text*. This term originates out of English literature studies, where a text is a book, article or poem. One can examine, for example, the physical form or the consumption, but one can also examine the *meaning*, which lies in the interpretation of the words themselves and the relation between these words (Long and Wall 2012, 30). Within a textual analysis, a film's text is the narrative, light, color, perspective, etcetera (Long and Wall 2012, 30-31). Hence, I will examine the content, structure and messages in the film, rather than focus on the production, distribution



and consumption. This is so I can focus on how the film represents whiteness to the viewer. In combination with critical race theory, it allows me to make connections to contemporary theory on race relations. To answer this question, I will first answer two subquestions, namely:

- How is whiteness defined in GET OUT through dialogue and characterization?
- How is whiteness portrayed in GET OUT through narrative, cinematography and mise-en-scene?

In answering the first question, I will examine what the dominant representation of whiteness is in GET OUT by connecting and discussing different theories on whiteness in relation with the film. I focus this question on dialogue and characterization, because language and the depiction of specific white characters plays an important role in the portrayal of whiteness in GET OUT. Moreover, I will discuss in relation with the film how contemporary racism has been defined by a colorblind, post-racial racism and how concepts concerning whiteness such as white privilege fit in these circumstances. It is important to answer this question because it allows me to understand and identify the ways in which the film critiques these aspects. The second question concerns the textual analysis of GET OUT.

I will begin my analysis with dividing the film into three sequences, based on the events in the film. The first sequence is the beginning of the film until the party begins. The next sequence begins with the party and ends when Rose reveals she is part of the plan to capture Chris. The third sequence is Chris' capture until the end of the film. I divide the film in sequences, because it helps me understand the film's overall shape and how the different scenes work together (Bordwell and Thompson 2015, 450). Throughout the analysis, I will look at cinematography and narrative, with which I mean framing, camera work, perspective and duration. This will help me analyze the ways in which whiteness is framed and showed through movement and technique. Furthermore, I will look at mise-en-scene by analyzing setting, lighting, costumes, dialogue and performance. This will allow me to analyze the representation of whiteness through environment, behavior and conversation and the ways in which contemporary racism is performed (Bordwell and Thompson 2015).

In answering my second subquestion, I will use some technical terms regarding shot distances. I will utilize these terms the way Bordwell and Thompson have explained them. They argue shot distances are usually derived from the scale of human bodies in the shot and categorize seven distances: *extreme long shot*, the human figure is "lost or tiny"; *long shot*, the human figures are more noticeable, but the background is still more dominant; *medium long shot*, the human figure is shown from the knees up; *medium shot*, from the waist up; *medium close-up*, from the chest up; *close-up*, traditionally focuses on one subject, such as a head, hand

or small object; and lastly, the *extreme close-up*, which “singles out a portion of the face or isolates and magnifies an object” (Bordwell and Thompson 2015, 190). Although these categories are used often and considered very useful, there are no precise “cutoff points”, therefore, they are to be used approximately (Bordwell and Thompson 2015, 191).

I will base my analysis on the theory I discussed in the first subquestion to show how GET OUT depicts whiteness in a different way than the dominant representation and the way it comments on contemporary race relations. Furthermore, by applying an intersectional approach, as discussed in the theoretical framework, I will examine the ways in which specific social categories are being portrayed through the reinforcement of different axes. By not only looking at how whiteness is depicted in relation to Blackness between the Black and white characters, but also, more specifically, at how whiteness is portrayed through an upper-class family and how white women in the film perform their whiteness, I can form a more complete answer to my research question. I will make selections on which parts of the film are most interesting for my research, because I suspect the thesis length is too limited to discuss every single scene in the film. To answer my research question, I will put together the information I analyzed to form a conclusive argument.

### **3. Research analysis**

So far, I have given my theoretical framework and methodology. Now, I am going to do the actual analysis. First, I will answer the first subquestion and connect the larger themes of the film with the theories discussed above. I will dive deeper into the literature and lay bare the connections between the different theories and show how they work together. After that, I will examine how the film portrays these themes and theories through cinematic techniques and aspects.

#### *3.1 Whiteness through dialogue and characterization*

As I pointed out in my theoretical framework, GET OUT portrays the racial structure between Black and white in a contemporary Western setting in the United States. It does this on multiple levels, switching from micro- – everyday, covert discrimination – to macroaggressions – explicit and more extreme forms of discrimination (Pierce 1970, 266). The former is expressed through dialogue and behavior, the latter through (often violent) actions. Colorblindness works

in microaggressions, because it is utilized in language and its goal is to appear passive (Mueller 2017, 220). Bonilla-Silva calls language the ‘style of colorblindness’:

Subscribing to an ideology is like wearing a piece of clothing. When you wear it, you also wear a certain style, a certain fashion, a certain way of presenting yourself to the world. The style of an ideology refers to its peculiar *linguistic manners* and *rhetorical strategies* (or *race talk*), to the technical tools that allow users to articulate its frames and storylines. As such, the style of an ideology is the thread used to join pieces of fabric into garments. The neatness of the garments, however, depends on the context in which they are being stitched. (Bonilla-Silva 2013, 105)

The context, thus, depends on whether the environment allows for (negative) race talk or not. When in public and in the presence of minorities, white people’s language on race will be implicit and subtle. Often they are eager to let it be known that they are not racists and offer “‘raceless’ explanations for all sort of race-related affairs” (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 1364). However, when in the presence of (white) friends, their language gets more explicit and they are less occupied with appearing colorblind.

Mueller argues that contemporary colorblindness has nothing to do with *not* seeing race, rather: “colorblindness is about culturally sustaining an ignorance useful for cloaking and reproducing the contemporary structural mechanisms of a white supremacy that is now centuries old” (Mueller 2017, 234). By performing an ignorance of racial matters and discrimination, the racial mechanisms of society are mystified, consequently defending white power and privilege (Mueller 2017, 234). Moreover, white people feign a certain innocence by refusing to recognize race (Wekker 2016, 33). Colorblindness consists of a performance of white ignorance and innocence, fueled by white privilege. Bonilla-Silva discusses different linguistic and rhetorical strategies white people apply when talking about race, some of which are evident in *GET OUT*. When talking to Georgina, who is controlled by Rose’s (white) grandmother Marianne, alone during the party, Chris receives an interesting answer from her:

Chris: “All I know is sometimes, if there’s too many white people I get nervous, you know.”

Marianne/Georgina: “No. No, no, no, no, no. Aren’t you something? That’s not my experience.

The Armitage’s are so good to us. They treat us like family.”



*Still 1 Marianne/Georgina while talking to Chris. Time code: 00:52:36. GET OUT (2017).*

Chris, thinking he is talking to a Black person, expresses his discomfort when being in the presence of many white people at the same time. Marianne acts shocked when hearing about Chris' observations and tries desperately to deny any negative race talk. Earlier in the film, Walter, who is controlled by Rose's (white) grandfather Roman, responds similarly:

Chris, when he sees Roman/Walter chopping up wood: "They working you good out here, huh?"

Roman/Walter: "[smiling] Nothing I don't want to be doing."



*Still 2 Roman/Walter while talking to Chris. Time code: 00:39:01. GET OUT (2017).*

Again, he tries to dismiss any notion of a power imbalance between white and Black. This strategy is comparable with the rhetorical move Bonilla-Silva calls 'Anything but race.' By denying the presence and therefore the consequences of race relations, white people can "explain away racial fractures" (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 114).

Another one of Bonilla-Silva's observed linguistic tools is noticeable in GET OUT. When Rose's father, Dean, meets Chris he mentions he would have voted for Obama a third term if

he could.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a white retired golfer at the party proudly states to Chris he knows Tiger, referring to the famous Black golfer Tiger Woods. These statements fall in line with the ‘Some of My Best Friends Are...’ rhetoric. By saying they know or like a famous Black person, they want to communicate to the Black person that because of this they cannot be racist (Bonilla-Silva 2013, 109). It acts as a buffer, it absolves the white person of the racist things they said or might say. Additionally, another white person at the party states: “Fairer skin has been in favor for the past, what, couple of hundreds of years, but now the pendulum has swung back! Black, is in fashion!” Seeming oblivious to the struggles and hardships Black people still go through today, he conforms to the idea white people tend to have that race is not an issue anymore in Western society, that it is *post-racial*. Even going so far as stating Black people have the advantage in contemporary society. It indicates his ignorance concerning matters of contemporary racial inequality, but also that he does not wish to know about the disadvantages – he wants to remain innocent and therefore privileged (Wekker 2016, 31-32).

Now, I will analyze the characterization of the white characters in GET OUT. One of the larger themes of GET OUT is racial fetishization. Fetishism is a representational practice and entails objectification. It substitutes “a *part* for the *whole*” (Hall 2013, 266). The white people in the film are obsessed with Black bodies and seem to believe Black people have a superior physique compared to white bodies. This is proven when Chris is shown a video with Roman Armitage explaining why they captured Chris:

Roman: “You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you enjoyed your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination, we could both be part of something greater, something perfect!”

Roman refers here to an old, but nevertheless still powerful, racist stereotype of Black and white people: the binary opposition of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’. Black people are perceived to be closer to ‘Nature’ – physicality, instinct and primitivism – and white people are perceived to be closer to ‘Culture’ – intellect, reason and civilization (Hall 2013, 232). Roman believes that by combining Black people’s “physical advantages” and white people’s mentality, they could create a perfect human being. Dean says to Chris before capturing him: “We are divine, we are the gods trapped in cocoons.” They do not see the brutality and inhumanity of the process, but think they are letting them be part of “something perfect”. McIntosh points out that “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, also ideal, so that when

---

<sup>4</sup> Bonilla-Silva argues the election of Obama actually did not signify a change in race relations in the United States, but rather a deepening of the ‘new racism’ and explains that Obama was illustrative of a ‘post-racial’ minority president. See: Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2015. “The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, ‘Post-Racial’ America.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (11): 1358-1376.

we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (McIntosh 1990, 31). By allowing Black people to be “members of the family,” Roman and the others truly believe they are building the future: “You can’t stop the inevitable.” Another conversation in which Chris’ body is discussed is between Chris and Jeremy at the family dinner:

Jeremy: ‘Cause with your frame and genetic makeup? If you really pushed your body, and I mean really train you know, no pussy fooling around, you’d be a fucking beast.”

Jeremy appears almost to be yearning for the ‘possibilities’ of Chris’ body. He implies that his Black body – “genetic makeup” – allows him to train harder and become stronger than other people. Moreover, several white people at the party refer to Chris’ Black body or the Black physique in general in a praising way. They all wish to be, as Jim Hudson put it, “stronger, faster, cooler” by seizing the Black bodies they admire so much. Racial fetishism, then, entails a strong power imbalance. Categorizing a people as *Other* is made to establish white privilege, which holds power over Black people (McIntosh 1990, 35).

White women, on the other hand, are illustrated as having a different fetishization with Black bodies. This is evident in Rose’s characterization. She begins relationships with different Black men and one woman in order to lead them to the estate. This is different than her brother Jeremy’s method, namely abducting lone Black people off the streets at night – which we witness in the first scene of the film – in a much more predatory and violent style. Why would this be her chosen tactic? The answer possibly lies in one of the last scenes of the film, after Chris’ capture. She is sitting on her bed as we see her typing in a search bar: ‘Top NCAA prospects,’ which then shows her pictures of Black basketball players. When the camera zooms out, it reveals that she hung the pictures she took with her victims on the wall behind her. In her case, it seems her obsession with Black bodies manifests itself more in lust and ‘trophy’ hunting. To her, the thrill is in the seducing and conquering of Black people. By performing as a white ally and a racially aware white woman, she can hide her racism under the guise of ignorance and innocence to manipulate Chris and use her white privilege to her own and her families’ advantage. Furthermore, a white woman at the party feels Chris’ arms and asks Rose: “Is it better?” Indicating if sex with a Black man is better than with a white man. All in all, the fixation on the Black physique is rationalized by white people as a form of admiration and the transplantation as a progressive scientific process, instead of a violently racist practice. Like colorblindness, it entails a certain disavowal: their obsession with the Black body is indulged, but at the same time hidden by their ignorance (Hall 2013, 267-268; Mueller 2017, 225).



Still 3 Rose sitting on her bed with pictures of her victims hanging on the wall behind her. Time code: 01:33:04. *GET OUT* (2017).



Still 4 A white woman at the party feels Chris' arms. Time code: 00:43:23. *GET OUT* (2017).

Moreover, Jim Hudson, the blind art dealer, shares this initially trustworthy appearance with Rose. When Chris first meets Jim at the party, Jim is presented as being different than the other partygoers. He is distinguished not only by his location, seated away from the party, and his attire, more casual than the others, but also by his speech. After having seen the numerous racially layered conversations between Chris and the other partygoers, Jim feels like a breath of fresh air – someone who *understands*. Chris appears to be relieved to finally be able to have a normal conversation. Jim seems to recognize the others are privileged by class – something I will expand on in chapter two – as well as by race and therefore they can afford to be ignorant. On top of that, Jim is literally blind, which befits the term colorblindness. He cannot see Chris' race, so we believe he does not know or consider Chris' race. This is emphasized in their conversation that does not revolve around race talk, like with the other partygoers, but rather around Chris' photography and Jim's blindness.



*Still 5 Jim Hudson while talking with Chris at the party. Time code: 00:46:46. GET OUT (2017).*

However, it is revealed in the auction scene that Jim ‘buys’ Chris. When Chris is captured and kept in the basement, he and Jim have one last conversation:

Chris: “Why us, huh? Why Black people?”

Jim: “[laughs and shrugs] Who knows? People want to change. Some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler. But don’t, please, don’t lump me in with that. You know, I could give a shit what-what color you are. No. What I want is... Deeper. I want... Your eye, man. I want those things you see through.”



*Still 6 Jim laughs and shrugs when Chris asks him "Why Black people?" Time code: 01:24:52. GET OUT (2017).*

Jim assures Chris that his race has nothing to do with it. While doing so he starts to laugh and stutter. Bonilla-Silva describes in his text the incoherence that occurs when white people discuss race that is “the result of talking about race in a world that insists race does not matter” and is part of the linguistic modalities of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2013, 122). Moreover, white people are occupied with sustaining and balancing a duality: “a moral, ‘idealized white racial self’ on the one hand (...) and the structure, ideology, and privileges of racial domination on



the other” (Mueller 2017, 223). On the one hand, Jim is never going to admit he is racist or is engaging in racist practices, because that means erasing his innocence, his ‘idealized white self’. On the other hand, while his fetishization of Chris does not specifically entail his Blackness, like with the other partygoers, but his photographer’s eyes, Jim does not think twice about ‘cashing in’ his white privilege (McIntosh 1990, 31). He makes use of racist technologies he himself, as a white man, can afford, while ensuring he is not racist. His language acts as a rhetorical shield of ignorance and innocence to make him “look good” as he no longer sounds racist, though he makes full use of his privileges (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 1364).

In my first subquestion, I connected the literature to characters, scenes and themes from the film. In *GET OUT*, colorblindness is expressed through language and behavior. I discussed the ways in which white people bring up race at every opportunity, although they claim to be racially blind. Their language is often coded and layered – they wish to appear innocent, and thus claim ignorance regarding racial matters to deny responsibility and ensure their privileges. Even when a white person seems aware of racial issues – like Jim and Rose seem to be – they can still display racist practices when it is in their own advantage. Moreover, the film describes a racial fetishization which focuses on the Black body and the controlling of the Black body and mind. Next, I will analyze the film through narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography and discuss the themes these aspects communicate to the viewer.

### *3.2 Whiteness through narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography*

In the previous passage, I focused my analysis on the connections between the larger themes and dialogue with the theory. Now, I will analyze the representation of whiteness through technological aspects of the film: narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography.

As mentioned shortly in chapter one, class plays a big role in the film as well concerning the performance of whiteness and the specific privileges that are broached. In the film, Western, upper class whiteness is set in contrast with an urban Blackness. As suggested by one of the taglines of the film: “Do you belong in this neighborhood?”, there are certain expectations and connotations connected to specific areas regarding race. The very first scene is evident in this distinction. The setting is dark and eerie, with the only light coming from the lanterns. The scene begins with a *long shot* of a sidewalk in a suburban neighborhood. The viewer can recognize the white picket fence, neatly arranged gardens and grass verges and Victorian styled lamp posts as belonging to colonial styled homes. Slowly, a Black man, Andre, walks into the frame and the camera follows him. He is centered in the shot, but his surroundings seem to weigh on him. He talks into his phone: “I feel like a sore thumb out here.” By the way he looks

around him he looks lost and even a bit frightened. So, from the very beginning of the film, this distinction between white and Black neighborhoods is emphasized. The scene ends on another *long shot* of the neighborhood, which also shows glimpses of white colonial houses. Andre, as a Black man, does not feel comfortable in an area so dominated by whiteness.



Still 7 The first shot of the first scene: a neighborhood in a suburb. Time code: 00:00:55. GET OUT (2017).



Still 8 The last shot of the first scene: a neighborhood in a suburb. Time code: 00:03:14. GET OUT (2017).

Besides, this is not the only instance where class differences are highlighted. Throughout the film, the most noticeable indicators are setting, appearance and speech. In this way, the characters in the film ‘perform’ a specific upper class whiteness and an urban Blackness, which are juxtaposed in the film. Similar as in the first scene, when Rose and Chris arrive at the house and meet Rose’s parents, the camera centers the front of the house in an *extreme long shot*, rather than focus on the meeting. The house is big and has a colonial style build: white features, columns, and a big front door accessible by a stairway. Moreover, the garden is neatly arranged and there are four rocking chairs on the veranda. Again, like the

neighborhood discussed in the previous paragraph, the house appears looming and ominous, like a warning. The house will be shown through a *long shot* various times throughout the film.



*Still 9 The house of the Armitage's when Chris meets the parents. Time code: 00:14:26. GET OUT (2017).*

There is one character who clearly displays this ‘performance’ of whiteness and Blackness. Logan/Andre is the only person we see before and after the transplantation. His appearance in combination with his behavior lets us see these contrasts between the performances of Black and white. What can be noticed straight away, when we see Logan/Andre at the party, is the contrast between his appearances – his clothing and hair. In the first scene of the film, he wears jeans, a T-shirt, a leather jacket and has a beard. However, at the party, he wears a polo shirt, a blazer, a pair of khakis and is clean-shaven.



*Still 10 Andre walking through a suburb in the first scene. Time code: 00:01:25. GET OUT (2017).*

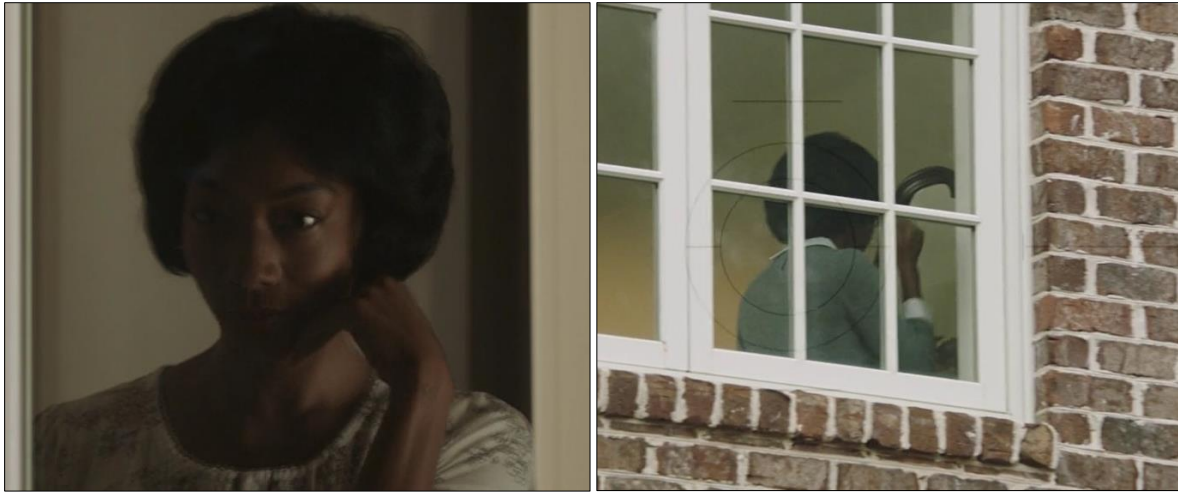


Still 11 Logan/Andre at the party. Time code: 00:45:17. *GET OUT* (2017).

Furthermore, when Chris wants to give Logan/Andre a fist bump, he responds by taking Chris' hand as one would do in a regular handshake, which is emphasized in a *close-up*. He clearly did not understand this expression of solidarity originating out of Black culture (Green 2002, 144). Moreover, his language seems to have changed also. Going from using phrases such as: "You got me out here in this crazy, confusing-ass suburb" to "I'll have to let you all get on the rest of the night without the aid of my marvelous wit, the whole ordeal has made me quite a bit exhausted." When Chris takes a picture of Logan/Andre and Andre's conscious briefly takes over his body again, he screams to Chris: "Get the fuck outta here!" When talking as Andre, he curses and speaks with an urban accent. However, when Logan speaks through him, his speech is old-fashioned and proper. The same applies to Marianne/Georgina. When talking to Chris, she uses words like "cellular phone" and "tattletale". Chris summarizes it when he says: "It's like all of them missed the movement."



Still 12 Logan/Andre shaking Chris' hand instead of fist bumping him. Time code: 00:45:59. *GET OUT* (2017).



*Still 13 Marianne/Georgina looking at her reflection. Time codes: 00:30:37, 00:38:10. GET OUT (2017).*

Moreover, Marianne/Georgina seems to be fixated on the beauty of the Black body she has taken over. She is shown a couple of times looking and smiling at her reflection. However, she is wearing a straight-haired wig, which indicates she does not let the Black woman's natural hair grow, which is often considered ugly or dirty by white women. Even during the times of slavery, hairstyle determined a Black woman's status. Having 'Westernized' hair – straight, untangled and kink-free - signified a higher status among Black slaves or could indicate a free-person status. While having Black hair – kinky and curly – indicated a lower status (Patton 2006, 27-28). Forcibly shaving off the Black person's hair was “an unspeakable crime for Africans, because the people were shorn of their identity” (Patton 2006, 28). Even nowadays, Black women are often rejected for a job or fired for wearing natural hair (Patton 2006, 37-38). For Marianne, wearing a wig not only hides the scar she obtained from the transplant, but also represents a conformance with white beauty standards. It is a cruel way of oppression. Again, they are obsessed with the Black body, but only if they can control it thoroughly.



*Still 14 The teacup and silver spoon used by Missy to hypnotize Black people. Time code: 00:32:50. GET OUT (2017).*

Further, the way in which whiteness dominates and oppresses Black people in the film is also significant of the particular whiteness that is being portrayed. The prop used by Missy for the hypnotization of Chris and other Black people is a porcelain tea cup with a silver spoon. It is especially interesting that this particular object is used as a way to suppress Black people's consciousness, because it symbolizes wealth and a privileged life – 'born with a silver spoon in your mouth'. In the hypnotism scene, Missy invades Chris' mind while stirring her spoon in the teacup to paralyze him and demands him to relive the most traumatic moment of his life: the day his mother died in a hit-and-run and he was too afraid to call the police. She uses the paralysis he felt then to render him powerless now. While she continually asks him questions, the camera draws closer with every shot – going from *medium long shot*, to *medium shot* and *medium close-up*, to eventually a *close-up* when she tells him to "sink into the floor". This



Still 15 The camera comes closer to Missy, from left to right: medium long shot, medium shot, medium close-up and close-up. Time codes, left to right: 00:31:22, 00:31:37, 00:32:49, 00:32:59. GET OUT (2017).

enhances the tension, but also symbolizes the increasing intensity with which she dominates him. She is calculating, detecting weaknesses in her victims, and manipulating, tricking them into a hypnosis. Here, the implicitness of a colorblind language is replaced by a more forceful expression of white supremacy. When she tells Chris to ‘sink’ into the floor, she means that he has to cut his mind from his body. He is floating in a dark void called the Sunken Place, where he has no control over his body and can only watch from afar. W.E.B. DuBois argues that Black people have two consciousnesses. This *double consciousness* means they have to be conscious of themselves on the one hand, and of how the world sees them on the other. They have to adjust themselves and conform to the white norm. They feel like they have to be two persons at the same time (DuBois 1903). This Sunken Place represents this helplessness and suppressed consciousness, where Missy forces him to go.



Still 16 Chris is powerless in the Sunken Place. Time code: 00:36:38. GET OUT (2017).



Still 17 Chris sees Missy through the small 'screen' of his vision. Time code: 00:36:39. GET OUT (2017).

So, in my second subquestion, I discussed the particular whiteness that is being portrayed through narrative, mise-en-scene and cinematography. I argued that GET OUT forms specific ‘performances’ of an upper class whiteness and an urban Blackness. Drawing on connotations with certain neighborhoods and characteristics and personality traits of the different social categories, it lays bare the power structure between them. Through the juxtaposition of appearance and speech, the viewer can clearly see the differences between them. Here, upper class whiteness is a villain who violently suppresses Black people’s minds and bodies, to make them powerless. This whiteness is not only dangerous because of its privileged race, but also its wealth. It represents a form of mental slavery, where Blackness has to conform to and make way for whiteness. In the next chapter, I will conclude my research.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I aimed to give an analysis on the representation of whiteness in GET OUT. My analysis shows that language plays an important role in the production of a colorblind racism. In my first subquestion, I examined this colorblind language and behavior and found that it is closely connected to and even defines itself through a white ignorance and innocence. The white people in the film frequently utilized linguistic strategies to present themselves as broad-minded, liberal and non-racist persons. Some even believe Black people have the advantage in contemporary society, seemingly oblivious to the racist practices that still occur today. They think current Western society is post-racial, that race is not an issue anymore in the United States. Moreover, even when white people seem genuinely aware of racial discourses, some will still exploit their privilege, regardless of the consequences for Black people, as shown by the characters Jim Hudson and Rose Armitage. The fetishization of the Black body in the film also shows they are ignorant of their own racism. They tell themselves their feelings originate out of admiration and they only wish to pursue scientific enlightenment which will benefit both races, but in reality it is a means to actively sustain their ignorance, innocence and thus their privilege. Although the racism portrayed in the film seems subtle and almost harmless at first, it progresses into an explicit and highly dangerous form of racism – one that is hidden by white ignorance and innocence, but, as the film shows, will inevitably come to the surface one day.

Their ignorance not only originates out of belonging to a culturally, socio-politically and economically advantaged race, but also an advantageous position regarding class. In my second subquestion I examined how whiteness is portrayed through narrative, mise-en-scene



and cinematography. The film emphasizes that the whiteness that it represents is an upper class whiteness by repeatedly showing (*extreme*) *long shots* of a neighborhood and a particular house that contain these connotations with an affluent whiteness. Moreover, it does this by selecting a silver spoon as a ways to control Black people. Moreover, the contrasts between appearance, behavior and speech are also significant in portraying a wealthy, old-fashioned and elite whiteness. The film tells its audience that a whiteness privileged by race as well as class is perhaps the most dangerous of all.

As I mentioned in my introduction, GET OUT subverts the narrative of previous films, which include a *good* white person to essentially sustain the ignorance and colorblindness of the white audience. Different than the films and other visual media Dyer analyzed, whiteness is represented in GET OUT as one race, not just the human race. It makes whiteness visible, in all its horror. This way, we can start seeing white people as a distinct social category, one that is not neutral and should not be seen as the norm. Dyer argues there “is something at stake in looking at, or continuing to ignore, white racial imagery” (Dyer 2017, 1). Therefore, I would call for a continuation and hopefully an expansion of research on the representation of whiteness. Further research on GET OUT could include an analysis more concentrated on the visual – *mise-en-scene* and cinematography, which could provide even more observations I did not have time and space for in my analysis. Besides GET OUT, there are and I am sure will be more films on this subject worth examining. However, one should keep in mind that analyzing whiteness is not meant to reinstate it, but rather to “dislodge it from its centrality and authority” (Dyer 2017, 10). Exposing the dangers of whiteness is part of the means to end white supremacy.

## Bibliography

- Bernardi, Daniel. 2007. *The Persistence of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2013. "The Style of Color Blindness." In *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 88-102. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2015. "The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, 'Post-Racial' America." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (11): 1358-1376.
- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. 2013. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1).
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1903. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." In *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.
- Dyer, Richard. 2017. *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge.
- Green, Lisa J. 2002. *African American English*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 2013. *Representation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Long, Paul and Tim Wall. 2012. *Media Studies; Texts, Production, Context*. New York: Routledge.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1990. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *Independent School* (4): 31-36.

- Mueller, Jennifer C. 2017. "Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance." *Social Problems* 64 (2): 219-238.
- Patton, Tracy Owens. 2006. "Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair." *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (Summer): 24-51.
- Perlman, Merrill. 2015. "Black and White: Why Capitalization Matters." Accessed January 10, 2019. [https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language\\_corner\\_1.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php).
- Pierce, Chester. 1970. "Offensive Mechanisms." In *The Black Seventies*, edited by Floyd B. Barbour, 265-282. New York: Porter Sargent Publisher.
- Ramos, Dino-Ray. 2017. "'Get Out' Director Jordan Peele on Divisiveness, Black Identity and the 'White Savior.'" Accessed January 11, 2019. <https://deadline.com/2017/10/jordan-peeel-get-out-film-independent-forum-keynote-speaker-diversity-inclusion-1202192699/>.
- Tharps, Lori L. 2014. "The Case for Black With a Capital B." Accessed January 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html>.
- Vera, Hernan and Andrew Gordon. 2003. *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wekker, Gloria. 2016. *White Innocence*. New York: Duke University Press.

## **Filmography**

Coogler, Ryan. 2018. *Black Panther*. Georgia: Marvel Studios.

Melfi, Theodore. 2016. *Hidden Figures*. Atlanta: Fox 2000 Pictures.

Peele, Jordan. 2017. *Get Out*. Alabama: Universal Pictures.

McQueen, Steve. 2013. *12 Years a Slave*. New Orleans: Regency Enterprises.