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Living in the Sunken Place: Notes on Jordan Peele's *Get Out* as Gothic Fiction

ABSTRACT

The gothic imagination often expresses a sense of the instability and/or vulnerability of human identity, bearing either on specific individuals or on the species as a whole. The present article examines the 2017 film *Get Out*, written and directed by Jordan Peele, in order to highlight the ways in which its exploration of the abovementioned topic relates to the tradition of the gothic as it is recognisable in literary texts dating from as far back as the eighteenth century. Relevant titles include Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, as well as examples from film. The argument of the article therefore focuses on a gamut of thematic concerns that link different works across different ages and media.

Keywords: gothic, identity, human nature, animal, possession

It is possible to argue that a recurring, if not altogether defining, characteristic of the gothic imagination is that it explores the porous borderline between the natural and the supernatural, just as it explores the porous borderline between the human and the non-human. Such porousness involves a sense of instability and indeterminacy, productive of either what H. P. Lovecraft (2008) termed "cosmic fear" (p. 18 *et passim*) or of a more localized atmosphere of horror, and it is often expressed in narrative through devices associated with metamorphosis. The two strands mentioned above come together, for instance, in the thematics of ghosts or apparitions, which more often than not are predicated to be human individuals who are no longer there (because they have died) but who are somehow still around – who more or less mysteriously remain undead. One example among myriads is the White Lady in Walter Scott's *The Monastery*. Allegorical apparitions such as the ghosts of Christmas in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* are fairly rare exceptions. Those two strands also come together in the intersection between man, animal and the preternatural, as in the many tales involving werewolves, the villain Dracula

(who is notoriously capable of transforming himself into a bat), and the vigilante hero of a city aptly named Gotham, Batman.

Needless to say, hybrid and mutating beings as well as mysterious individuals are not exclusive hallmarks of gothic fiction (they hark back to the tradition of medieval romance and further back still to works like the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid), but they are nonetheless staple features in the long line that stretches from the late eighteenth century to the present day, and which has in fact become a thread that connects literature to film, comics and graphic novels. The wide array of manifestations of the gothic – a variety which is discernible chronologically, thematically and technically – has entailed intersections with other cultural formations, amongst which science fiction stands foremost. Science fiction has arguably become central to modernity and postmodernity, obsessed as our (Western, and indeed global) civilization has become with the promises and the threats of technology. It is worth noticing, however, that the intersection between the gothic imagination and SF is not a recent development, as it has been in place since Mary Shelley's groundbreaking *Frankenstein* of 1818. This reminder is important for the present article, which proposes to focus on the 2017 film *Get Out*, written and directed by Jordan Peele, in order to highlight some of the ways in which the film partakes of the tradition of the gothic as it is recognisable in a range of texts dating from as far back as the late eighteenth century. In his study *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noël Carroll (1990) submits that “[w]hat presumably happens in certain historical circumstances is that the horror genre is capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into its iconography of fear and distress” (p. 207). It may be objected that horror can hardly be reduced to the status of a “genre”, as it translates across the borders not only of genres but of media as well. But the point is, as shall be seen, that if texts in the gothic mode are symptomatic of their own times (and why should they be assumed to be otherwise, if all works of culture are potentially so?), a portion of what is revealed in *Get Out* bears testimony to the persistence of themes and motifs with a very long history within the tradition of the gothic.

It is useful briefly to rehearse the plot of the film by means of a qualified synopsis. *Get Out* tells the story of a young African American photographer called Chris Washington who is visiting his white girlfriend's parents for the weekend at their house in the woods. Rose's parents are called Dean (a neurosurgeon) and Missy (a psychiatrist). Rose's brother Jeremy, who is studying Medicine, also shows up for the weekend. Intimations that the film is about racism pile up from the start, and they include the fact that the Armitages have a black groundsweeper, Walter, and a black cook, Georgina, in their employment. “We hired Georgina and Walter to help care for my parents. When they died, I couldn't bear to let them go”, Dean explains, as he gives Chris a tour of the house. Other bits of information given at this stage in the most ostensibly benevolent tone include a reference to

the basement (“We had to seal it up. Got some black mould down there”) and a comment about the kitchen that is made as Georgina is shown standing there: “My mother loved her kitchen, so we keep a piece of her in here” (minutes 17-18).

A friendly atmosphere prevails until Jeremy becomes intoxicated over dinner that evening and expresses an ambivalent preoccupation with Chris’s health and “genetic makeup” (minute 24). The events of the night, however, are the real (first) turning point. Having left Rose alone in bed and come outside for a cigarette, Chris is faced with Walter, who almost knocks him down in a seemingly demented run across the grounds. Chris also spots Georgina acting in a weird manner, as if sleepwalking. He is then lured into Missy’s study, where he is hypnotized into utter subjection. “I can’t move”, he says. Missy’s words are stark and imperative: “You’re paralyzed.” “Now, sink into the floor.” “Now you’re in the Sunken Place” (minutes 34-35). Chris feels himself falling into a dark abyss, struggling in vain to grab at something, suspended in a sort of inner cosmic vacuum that looks like outer space – only to wake up in bed, after sunrise already, unsure of what happened.

Later that day there is a garden party attended by a large group of friends who prove to be obsessed with the issue of race, making a series of awkward remarks about black people, some admiring, some condescending. Chris eventually takes a picture of the only other black man at the get-together, Logan, who all of a sudden changes his behaviour completely. The flash wrings him from his dormancy and causes him to yell in evident panic: “Get out! Get outta here!” (minute 53). We will learn afterwards he had been kidnapped, and Logan is not his real name.

The atmosphere of horror intensifies when, in stark contrast to Logan’s cry of warning, we witness a silent auction conducted through the use of bingo cards. The rich, white people are bidding for the protagonist. Sensing something is wrong, Chris tries to leave but is made to fall into hypnotic stupor and caught. He wakes up in the basement, bound hands and feet onto an armchair, facing an old TV set – with the stuffed head of a deer hanging from the wall above. More than the exclamation from which the film derives its title, this may be considered the key episode of the story. It betokens the culmination of the suspense mounting since the beginning, and at the same time it dispels the mystery by providing an explanation. Chris is first shown an old video in which Roman Armitage, Dean’s father, explains the “Coagula procedure”, which has been developed by “our order” for many years; and, once more striking the very ambiguous note of inverted racism that pervades the film, he further spells out: “You have been chosen because of the physical advantages you’ve enjoyed your entire lifetime” (minutes 71-72). Chris is then shown another video, in which the procedure is described in more detail. This time, the speaker is Jim Hudson, a failed photographer turned art dealer who is blind. Hudson, who longs for Chris’s eyes, made the highest bid at the auction, and he is speaking from a room nearby, during the pre-op. It is here that the most thorough description of the partial “transplantation” is given (minutes 80-81):

JIM: The piece of your brain connected to your nervous system needs to stay put, keeping those intricate connections intact. So you won't be gone, not completely. A sliver of you will still be in there, somewhere, limited consciousness. You'll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger. An audience. You'll live in –

CHRIS: The Sunken Place.

At the prospect of being doomed to the depths of his own private inferno, Chris realizes it is not only deprivation of the will that is at stake, it is also deprivation of one's identity, expropriation of the self:

JIM: Now, I'll control the motor functions, so I'll be –

CHRIS: Me. You'll be me.

In effect, neither Chris nor Jim will be fully himself anymore. The partial transplantation turns them both into partial waste. If the black man's identity is treated as expendable, the white man's body is similarly disposed of without ceremony. The viewer is shown pieces of the scalp and the cranium conspicuously being thrown into a waste bin during the early stages of the procedure.

Through cunning and violence, Chris manages to extricate himself from his captors, and in the process starts a fire which presumably burns the house to the ground. One way or another, the whole Armitage family is killed. It also emerges that Walter and Georgina are none other than Rose's "transplanted" grandparents. It is therefore appropriate that the cook-cum-matriarch makes an attempt to kill or perhaps recapture Chris while shouting: "You ruined my house" (minute 91). As with the unnatural goings-on between the living and the not-quite-dead in Poe's *House of Usher*, it may be supposed that, sooner or later, her house was fated to fall.

It does not take much to see that *Get Out* recycles and revitalizes motifs from the gothic tradition, as it was established primarily by Romantic and Victorian literary fiction in Britain along with its counterparts in the literatures of countries like Germany and the United States. The film resonates with topoi familiar from works by authors like Matthew Gregory Lewis, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Mervyn Peake, to name but a few. One such topos is the crypt or subterranean chamber as a place of imprisonment, torture and murder. Catacombs abound in Lewis's *The Monk*, Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris*, Thomas Moore's *The Epicurean*, and Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm*. Interestingly, interpreting Peele's motion picture against the background of the gothic allows us to see the catacombs as a metonymy for the predicament of possession. Chris's entrapment in the basement of the Armitage house foreshadows his entrapment in his own body after the "transplantation". His body will have been taken by an other, and Chris will be constrained to the passive role of "passenger" or "audience", as mentioned above. The secret society dedicated

to helping wealthy people with physical disabilities or declining health practices a form of body snatching which may remind the viewer both of *Frankenstein* (although it is to assorted parts of cadavers that a new lease of life is given in this case) and of *The Body Snatchers*, Jack Finney's thriller novel (made doubly famous by its film adaptation, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) which transfers the motif of possession into the typically SF domain of interplanetary warfare. Incidentally, the fact that the "transplantation" in *Get Out* depends on a medical procedure, not a supernatural event or intervention of any sort, also connects the film to science fiction.

The Armitage family in *Get Out* may however be overconfident in their technical achievements, for the film develops the idea of the spectral existence in yet another way. As shown in the case of Logan, if the black man is to be possessed, the white man will be haunted. As surgery fails to completely hollow out the manipulated body, under special circumstances the previous and rightful, natural owner of that body manages to resurface. The identity of the black man is never fully exorcised; on the contrary, it proves to be ultimately indelible. Both possessor and possessed are truncated selves, coexisting in insoluble conflict. The "Coagula procedure" generates a *Doppelgänger*, a perpetual Jekyll and Hyde condition. As a matter of fact, the name of the procedure is unwittingly revealing. The idea of the coagulum, of the clot, is suggestive of the unhealthy, dangerous nature of the surgery; it also hints at the formation or intrusion of an unnatural body within the self, a lump. The white brain in the black body can never be anything but an invader and a disease.

Furthermore, *Get Out* may be seen as a variation of the story of Bluebeard, the folktale memorably crystallized by Charles Perrault. Virtually, the entire Armitage household stands for Bluebeard, beginning with the bearded patriarch, Dean. But the central, operative character is in this respect Rose, the *femme fatale*. She is the serial seducer and sexual partner of healthy, young, innocent black men, whose pictures Chris discovers hidden in a small box in a closet in her room. Later those photos are displayed, in frames, on the wall, as Rose is shown browsing the internet for new targets. The pictures are her trophies, recollections of the victims of the Armitages and their "order", a gruesome gallery of the many who have been preyed upon. Actually, the plot of *Get Out* is imbued with the concept of the chase, most palpably emblemized in the deer's head hanging from the wall in the basement, a potential mirror-image of Chris as he is being prepped for surgery. As it happens, the deer's head becomes a weapon of liberation and revenge. The doctor is pierced through with its antlers and dies. With fine irony – or poetic justice, perhaps – the prey turns upon the predator, even if the prey is no longer an agent but a simple tool.

Additionally, it may be suggested that the film's engagement with the problematics of racism is a critical variation (at times verging on the facetious) on

the topic of the sub-human, the quasi-animal, which was historically connected with the institution of slavery and its attendant justificatory discourses (that the idea of “transplantation” may be intended to evoke the “plantation” is not irrelevant). That the thematics of the sub-human play a significant role in the gothic imagination can be shown by looking at one of the grimmest of Walter Scott’s novels, *Count Robert of Paris*. While depicting the most extremely sophisticated, and indeed pompous, social situation – that of the imperial court of Alexius Comnenus in Constantinople at the time of the First Crusade – the novel is shot through with references to animals, from their employment in the symbolic idiom of heraldry to the Emperor’s menagerie. Offensive discourse often resorts to animal imagery in order to express prejudice, contempt or dislike. Most importantly, the language of the emotions in the novel consistently suggests the presence of subconscious, sub-rational undercurrents in human experience, which is in consequence equated with the bestial.

Two characters are particularly invested with this ambivalence. They are, as it were, its embodiments. The philosopher Michael Agelastes is nicknamed “the Elephant” not only owing to his heavy build but also “from his strict observation of the rule which forbids any one to sit down or rest in the Imperial presence” (p. 77). Agelastes is thus a pedantic figure. He is also scheming and darkly ambitious, scoffed by the courtiers and yet feared, among other reasons because one can scarcely account for

an influence gained without apparent effort, and extending almost into the very thoughts of men, who appear to act as he would desire, without his soliciting them to that purpose[.] Men say strange things concerning the extent of his communications with other beings, whom our fathers worshipped with prayer and sacrifice. (p. 78)

The philosopher is credited with cultivating pagan beliefs in an age of Christianity. He is thus alleged to bridge past and present, although he is in truth a sceptic of all religions, just as he bridges the realms of the human, the daemonic and the animal. As far as the latter is concerned, a pivotal moment is located during a visit of the empress and the princess to his house. Receiving them at the door, the Elephant prostrates himself before the elephant carrying the imperial personages. The man bowed down before the pachyderm gives rise to equivocal jibes at “the singularly curious animal” (pp. 133, 135-136).

Like Agelastes, the second relevant character, Sylvan, has diabolic connotations. When Sylvan is first seen by Count Robert in the dungeons of the Blacquernal Palace, it/he is perceived as a strange creature of undefined nature: “Something [...] of very great size, in the form a human being” (p. 169), yet “it would have been rash to have termed it a man” (p. 170), although it/he is wearing clothes. The Count is left to speculate upon the identity of “that furry gentleman”. He infers it “could be no other than the Devil himself, or some of

his imps” (p. 170). The narrator himself contributes to the uncertainty regarding “the tremendous creature, so like, yet so very unlike to the human form” before explaining that Sylvan “was a specimen of that gigantic species of ape – if it is not indeed some animal more nearly allied to ourselves – to which, I believe, naturalists have given the name of the Ourang Outang” (p. 171). Unusually among his fellow primates, this particular orang-utan is an individual endowed with human propensities. It/he is “an animal of an appearance so ambiguous” (p. 350) with a disturbingly quasi-human behaviour and capabilities which make it/him virtually unclassifiable. Numerous epithets denote this hybrid condition. The Emperor calls him “a sylvan man, or native of the woods” (p. 288). Agelastes calls him “that singular mockery of humanity” (p. 271). The soldier, Hereward, refers to “the Man of the Forest, the animal called Sylvan” (pp. 203-204), the twin epithets provocatively implying the interchangeability of human and animal. Some believe Sylvan possesses the ability of speech (cf. 174). As if reiterating the existence of a “half-reasoning capacity” (p. 350), verbs and nouns recur which point to an affinity with human experience, such as “chatter” (pp. 170, 171, 172, 350), “weep” (p. 173), “mutter” (p. 173), “whine” (p. 174), and “bemoan” (p. 170, 204). When the Count wounds Sylvan with a dagger, it/he lets out “a deep wailing and melancholy cry, having in it something human, which excited compassion” (p. 173). Sylvan is not alone in this uncanny likeness to human expressions. Along with many other magnificent beasts, the imperial zoological collections comprise a “huge lizard, which, resembling in shape the harmless inhabitant of the moors of other countries, is in Egypt a monster thirty feet in length, clothed in impenetrable scales, and moaning over his prey when he catches it, with the hope and purpose of drawing others within his danger, by mimicking the lamentations of humanity” (pp. 136-137).

Bringing *Get Out* into line with *Count Robert of Paris* makes it possible to construe an entanglement of themes linking both works to countless other narratives of the gothic. In their different ways, but in both cases assimilating contemporary anxieties into their respective iconographies of fear and distress (to paraphrase Noël Carroll, quoted above), Peele’s film and Scott’s novel encapsulate the problem of the vulnerability of the borders of the human. While *Get Out* explores the theme of the violation of the individual in the persons of the abducted black men who are turned into hardware for the ailing members of the “order”, *Count Robert* explores the theme of the violation of the province of humanity caused by the irruption of an underground menace redolent of the jungle – Sylvan, wreaking havoc in the imperial palace of Constantinople and killing the Elephant. Both stories express concerns relative to possible regression into a less-than-human state. *Get Out* couches them in terms that reflect a context in which engineered bodies have ceased to be a dream and it no longer takes visionaries or enthusiasts, but simply believers in the likelihood of certain technological developments in the not-so-

distant future, to voice trans-humanistic prophecies involving the prolongation of life by means of prosthetics for the benefit of a migrating and/or expanding consciousness (see Kurzweil, 2009; Kaku, 2012, pp. 87-117; Harari, 2017, pp. 49-56, 319). Presenting in its turn a plethora of images of animals, *Count Robert* focuses on primates, and in particular on the figure of the orang-utan, in keeping with age-old discourses interrogating species boundaries. The larger primates were deemed relevant analogues to humans throughout the successive epochs of Western culture from the Middle Ages onwards if not before,¹ and in the Romantic period, as has been remarked by Christine Kenyon-Jones (2001), “a new emphasis on nature” resulted in debates “articulated both about animals’ difference from human beings and also about their similarity. [T]hey were [...] perceived as similar, in so far as they have the ability to behave, to feel and perhaps to think like human beings” (p. 2). A list of works of fiction bearing on the former topic would include the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (in its “reimagined” version authored by Ronald D. Moore), as well as the films *Lucy*, written and directed by Luc Besson, and Wally Pfister’s *Transcendence*. A list bearing on the latter topic would include Pierre Boulle’s novel *La Planète des Singes* (*Planet of the Apes*) and its several filmic avatars.

Moreover, either through transmutations between human and animal or half-human, or through the transposition of the self or mind into a new organic body or into data storage devices, the gothic imagination questions the assumption of the integrity of the individual – “individual” being a word which contains the notion of the indivisibility of the subject – which is deeply ingrained in Western culture. Humanist assurances regarding the uniqueness and stability of the self are challenged in a war fought on several fronts: shapeshifters (werewolves, vampires and sundry aberrations), souls without bodies (ghosts), bodies without souls (zombies), all undermine the notion of an integrated subject. Besides, division easily occasions multiplication. The split self indicated by the *Doppelgänger* motif expands into the duplication of the self – Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde do not at bottom differ much from Robert and Gil-Martin in Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* – and the duplication does not necessarily acknowledge any limits. Why should the “Coagula procedure” not allow an old brain to be transferred to a healthy body over and over again, one becoming in effect many? Cloning threatens to disprove that central tenet of Western values, the uniqueness of the individual: that he or she is (a) *one* and *only*. The ultimate step along this path are surely the intelligent, self-perfecting, self-reproducing

¹ For the Middle Ages, see, among other possible references, Curtius (1961, pp. 522-523); for the Early Modern Period, Wiseman, 2002; for the long eighteenth century, Brown (2001, pp. 221-265) and Nash (2003, pp. *maxime* 22-30; 110-116); for the age of Walter Scott, Brown (2010, pp. 27-63; 90-111).

machines which/who lay claim to a higher level of humanity than that of their human creators, as do the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* with their genocidal drive and their resurrection ship. An almost seamless link runs through all of this, from humans tackling the sub-human and/or daemonic components of their being to the self-perpetuating technology that constitutes a negation of conventional anthropology. These notions bring us closer to the core anxieties of the gothic, and *Count Robert of Paris* and *Get Out* evidently share in, and illustrate, this universe.

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