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Lost Cause Ideology in America Cinema: White Desire, its Lost Object and the Unconscious
Fantasy of American Society

Within the current socio political climate of the United States, we can see that America and its citizens have reached a tipping point in which structural inequalities and racial tensions can no longer be ignored, it has become part of the everyday discourse of the American people. In light of the George Floyd protests which began this summer, race and redress of racial inequality has become a contentious topic that has taken over the media landscape, from Instagram to Facebook petitions to informative documentaries on streaming platforms. Donald Trump's presidency, his supporters and the rhetoric that is spewed from the current administration, has further exposed the divide that exists within American society, which prior to Trump's presidency was concealed by the fact that America had elected its first Black president.

This paper aims to explore how the United States reached this point through the lens of cinema and the ways in which the medium of film is used to establish and reinforce the hegemonic ideology of whiteness that is so prevalent in American society. Throughout the medium of film we see an overwhelming representation of white people in comparison to people of color and the type of characters they portray. Thus, there has been more room for whiteness to establish its dominance through film and project it onto its audiences. At the same time, the portrayal of people of color, especially Black people, have been confined to stereotypical representations or used as characters which are simply there to further the plot of the white

protagonist. Through this we can see how “Hollywood manufactures products that have given shape to our collective values, aspirations and fears” (Grant) because these representations often reimagine themselves into reality.

To examine this reimagining of history that is presented within films that project a nostalgic narrative for the lost social order of the Old South, I will be doing a close reading of *Get Out* (2017) and using moments from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Help* (2011) and *The Devil All the Time* (2020), so as to prop up and aid in explaining the history and contextualizing my argument. I will examine the Lost Cause narrative and ideology as depicted in film, in conjunction with psychoanalytic concepts of desire, fantasy and pleasure, to demonstrate the ‘lostness’ that white people feel. The lostness is felt initially—and explicitly in the post Civil War era and early 20th century, and then in two contemporary films—for the loss their power and place, based in the Southern plantation, and now felt through their power in American civic and political life. This feeling of lostness has allowed for the constant resurgence of overt racism which has haunted American society and continues to do so.

As not to generalize the entirety of American society, the archetype that I will be talking about when referring to ‘white people’ are those who uphold and reinforce the structures of whiteness within society; ones who proudly endorse the narrative of American nationalism through whiteness as well as those who uphold whiteness behind the veil of American Liberalism. Over the course of its history we see film move from an inherently white medium to a ‘progressive’ one, which seemingly encompasses many aspects of race that were either ignored or stereotyped during the rise of cinema as a mass media. The hegemonic American ideal is one that promotes whiteness at the expense of people of color, specifically Black people, and the

endorsement of it through film makes it one that cements itself as patriotic, traditional and inherently 'American'. This concept that was already so deeply ingrained in the minds of the American people because of our history with slavery and Jim Crow was then reinforced to the masses through the medium of film. While this was done explicitly through films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), as American cinema evolved with history and the ever-changing socio-political climate, ways to maintain this racist hegemonic American ideal became less overt and were masked by performative representation so as to be passively accepted by society.

To better understand the timeline of main events relevant to the argument in this paper, one needs to have the historical background of the realities that occurred, some of which were even inspired by concepts and stereotypes portrayed in films like *The Birth of a Nation*. From the inception of this country, and our participation in the trade of enslaved people, we have shown a disregard for the humanity of people of color, specifically Black people. Enslaved people were considered three-fifths of a person, our police force emerged from the slave patrol that rounded up slaves who had escaped and segregated housing and education systems were influenced by redlining policies and legislation such as the G.I. Bill for veterans returning from World War II. In order to get the South to cooperate after the assassination of President Lincoln, they had to undo the effort for Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era was used as a way for white people to be able to re-cement their power in a way that did that not take society exactly back to the time of slavery, but did allow for whiteness to maintain and continue to solidify its dominance in society (Cesca). From the colonial era to Jim Crow to the present day, we can see the infinite ways in which the Lost Cause ideology has permeated all aspects of society, from an individual level to institutional and structural levels.

The Lost Cause ideology, first coined in 1866 by author Edward Pollard, is one that stemmed from the decades following the Civil War. It sought to preserve and justify the model of social relations of the Antebellum South, that is, a white supremacist social order through which Black people were inferior and subservient to whites just as women were to be deferential to men (Cox). This ideology aimed to absolve southern whites of their approval and defense of slavery, and was “counterfactual propaganda that excused the sins that precipitated and fueled their separation from, and rebellion against, the United States in the name of preserving the right to own slaves” (Cesca). As this ideology was applied to media, the inherent message which was then portrayed was one that acknowledged and endorsed the white supremacist social order that Lost Cause preached.

Since its beginnings, film in the American context has propagated various forms of Lost Cause ideology, and especially so in the narrative of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as Lost Cause was the narrative which inspired its creation. I will explain how *The Birth of a Nation*, being one of the first mass consumed feature films in American history, reinforced a hegemonic ideal that further intensified the concept of what it means to be American by insinuating a nostalgia for the southern lifestyle and instilling racism that to this day continues being endorsed by film. Already ingrained in the minds of the American people was an overt racism that longed for a “return” to the plantation; thus at the time of its release, *The Birth of a Nation* and its message, which revered the Confederacy, painted the loss of the South as one of the biggest misfortunes for the United States and labeled Black people as the enemy, only intensified the power and grasp of this dominant ideal in the minds of the American people. The loss of the Civil War was one far too traumatic for white people to simply accept, thus it was reimagined and the story of the post war and Reconstruction era was rewritten into a narrative

which upheld and revered the white supremacist structures that were threatened by the Confederacy's loss.

In the film, the male 'mullato's'¹ integration into the previously all white Congress violated a social order that was then "gallantly" re-established by the "heroic" force of the Ku Klux Klan. This is the story and reimagining of history that this film portrayed to its audience during a time when racism and violence against people of color was rampant. The story of *The Birth of a Nation* is simply an elaborate justification for mass murder and the restoration of the once violated social order presented in a positive light leads the audience to accept this justification. As James Baldwin wrote, "a story is impelled by the necessity to reveal: the aim of the story is revelation... This also means that a story resolves nothing. The resolution of a story must occur in us, with what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us" (46). Thus, this film leaves the audience with nothing more than a story that promotes the white supremacist social order from which the audience then must come to their own conclusions on whether the film is justified or not. As the film plays on the nostalgic longing for the Old South by painting it in a more positive light than the reality, for the white nationalist, this film encompasses their feelings of lostness of the Old South, which admittedly or not, will lead them to justify the norms of that lost social hierarchy. This rewriting of history through film gives way for the justification of people's nostalgia for it as well as the justification for people to reimagine it into reality. *The Birth of a Nation* inspired the continuous perpetuation of stereotypes of Black people as well as a mythic reimagining of history from which those

myths were heavily borrowed to justify Jim Crow laws, which were specifically designed to oppress Southern Blacks. In the Jim Crow South, cops would arrest Black men for not

¹ Mullato refers to a person who is half Black and half white. I use this word in explaining the film because it is how the characters are portrayed and what they are called.

carrying proof of employment, then disappear them into a new and supposedly legal form of slavery. The practice survived until Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the FBI to shut it down at the outset of World War II², yet forms of slave labor continue to exist within the modern prison-industrial complex today (Cesca).

From this we can see the ways in which the effects of a reimagined version of history, which upheld whiteness and promoted a victory of the restoration of the social order of the Old South, have remained long lasting and egregious. Inspired by the plot of *The Birth of a Nation*, Jim Crow laws were imposed and from there a system which still disproportionately affects Black people today. Along with this, *The Birth of a Nation* inspired a violent resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan following the release of the film due to its racist portrayal of Black people (Gajanan). President Woodrow Wilson allowed for this film to be screened in the White House which allowed for the Ku Klux Klan to align itself with the film's success as well as enhanced the public perception that America was endorsing the film therefore molding the ideals portrayed in the film into American ideals (Clark). Through this we can see the ways in which representation informs reality.

Psychoanalytic concepts of desire and pleasure alongside the Lost Cause ideology will be key frameworks for analyzing the key films I selected and their contribution to upholding the fixed ideologies surrounding race in America. Psychoanalysis turns on a key concept, the unconscious, that which is “desire from which knowledge can never extricate itself” (McGowan 17). McGowan explains that desire always coexists with knowledge and thus “trumps knowledge when it comes to how we act” (17). Cinema is inviting to the viewer because it evokes their desire. Film serves an imaginary function in the desiring subject, in that it fills the void of the lack which is present within the subject's desire. While this lack could be perceived by the

² No doubt because they needed more men to enlist in the army for WWII

subject as a fantastical desire, “the imaginary always points to a missing real” (McGowan 41). Lack is what causes the emergence of desire. Thus, when we desire it is because we, subconsciously, are missing something or are in search of something. The lost object that a subject desires exists only insofar as it is lost. The concept of fantasy allows for this lost object to be a catalyst for those in search of it to turn their “energy against the agent that deprives the subject of its lost object” (McGowan 51). The racist rhetoric and portrayal of Black people in *The Birth of a Nation* blames them for South’s loss of the Civil War, in turn, those who experienced jouissance from the fantasy which the film produced, took it upon themselves to direct their energy toward the Black people who supposedly were at fault for the downfall of the Old South. The film represents Black people as the agents who have deprived the subject of its lost object. Which, when projected into reality through this film, reimagined this concept and historically inaccurate representation of history as truth. McGowan goes on to explain that the “political danger of filmic fantasy manifests itself whenever a film tries to convince us that the lost object once existed and can be recovered” (52). Which then prompts those in search of the lost object of their desire to manifest scenarios which would potentially aid in achieving their lost object, for instance, the implementation of Jim Crow, segregation, the war on drugs and the prison-industrial complex, which all disproportionately affected and continue to negatively affect the lives of Black and Brown people in American society.

The concepts of jouissance and pleasure have an interesting relationship in that one wishes to be in a state of pleasure, being that one remains calm and has balance within the body. Jouissance however, is having ‘too much pleasure’ in that one finds enjoyment to the point of discomfort or pain. We experience jouissance when something excites us too much to the point

where it is no longer enjoyable and we must find a way to quell that excitement as a way to return to a state of pleasure, because if we do not return we cannot be

rational, functional human beings, [or] successfully operate in society. We must be kept at a distance from jouissance. Jouissance overrides our ability to act in accordance with social protocols, ethical principles, etc. Why? Because we cannot put things in context or mediate between them while being utterly submerged in the immediacy of jouissance (The Dangerous Maybe).

The pleasure, or jouissance, that white people derive from racism and upholding the racist American ideal is something that plays an immense role in the reason why this ideology is still present today. We must examine the ultimate “political danger that stems from [the] function of fantasy. It buttresses the dominance of social authority by granting this authority a substantiality that it doesn’t actually have” (McGowan 50). This concept is vital to understanding the fantastical aspect that is present within American cinema and the nostalgia white people can feel for the Old South, in that something has been lost and the medium of film is used as a way for them to live vicariously for what they desire, but know they cannot get back. This is where McGowan’s quote is relevant as is the aspect of politics in the present day. We have a lost object, the ideals of Old South and all the societal norms that come along with it, it is known that this lost object cannot be retrieved or revived because within psychoanalysis the lost object does not and cannot exist in reality, thus, producing a fantasy of this lost object (lost way of life, hierarchy and power), allows for those who are nostalgic for it to enjoy it without feelings of guilt or shame because, as stated before, it is a fantasy. And while fantasy is not opposed to reality, it does work in propping up reality. The problem arises when the fantasy crosses over into reality. While for some, this fantasy is a conscious one, for the majority of white people, this is an

unconscious fantasy which produces an unidentified feeling of jouissance within the self.

Whiteness is already the dominant in society and already holds social authority within every aspect of American society, thus allowing and producing films which display feelings of nostalgia for a time when slavery was rampant and the white supremacist social order was revered, gives that fantasy and nostalgia social authority, an authority that has been granted by 'default' societal norms. To understand this better, McGowan explains this concept using the popular crowd in a high school as an example, he states that "though one may follow the fantasmic roadmap to popularity perfectly, one might easily end up on the outside of the popular crowd. But the greater danger lies in actually achieving popularity. By doing so, one succumbs to the dominance of the social authority despite its lack of any real authority" (50). This applies to what I mentioned above and the dangers of the fantasy of the hegemonic American ideal crossing over into reality, because once it does, the conformity that comes along with supporting the reality of whiteness, which has infiltrated all of our social structures, is more detrimental than allowing people to find comfort in its fantasy. Allowing the fantasy to permeate into reality gives it a social authority which it does not actually have and the constant desire to manifest this fantasy has haunted American society since its inception.

While the concept of desire is more commonly associated with melodramatic films within the framework of love and relationships, it can be applied to many different aspects of life and desire can manifest itself through things other than love. Within desire, a demand for love is present and once achieved, the surplus or excess that is left once we think we have reached the demand, which is fueling our desire, makes the surplus what we actually desire. While the theory of desire has been developed on the basis of love, our need, demand and desire for it, the idea of desire can be applied to other areas of what one may consciously or subconsciously strive for.

Slavoj Zizek writes, “desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire”, thus when applied to this topic of whiteness being maintained through American film, we can see that people’s desire to return to the Old South isn’t something that they necessarily want actualized, but a nostalgia they want to constantly reproduce so as to continue feeding that desire. The desire to be superior to people of color, the desire to hold positions of power and the desire to emulate aspects of the Old South without completely returning to it, as a full return would mean satisfaction and the surplus (desire) would no longer be present. McGowan states that

we don’t desire to realize our desire and obtain the object, we desire instead to thwart our desire and thereby keep our desire going... we are always repeating, but we aren’t repeating our successes. When we have a success, we forget about it and move on, but when we have a failure, the failure provides a point around which we organize our existence (45).

Thus, we cling to our failures, as they generate and maintain the lost object for us. Within the context of whiteness in America, we can see the ways in which the failure to preserve the model of white power, social relations, and hierarchy among races as it existed in the Old South served as a moment from which the lost object of desire emerged for white people. In every step of the way leading up to the present day, this failure has haunted those who sought to preserve it and gave way for the resurgence of overt racism and racist structures. While it is known within those who desire this return to the Old South that a full return is never possible, they have continuously conjured up new ways to suppress people of color and re-solidify white as the dominant. We see this very clearly in *Get Out*, where white people are quite literally in control of Black bodies, however, they hold power over Black people in a different way than they did in the Old South. It

evolved into more of a mental and psychological hold as well as a physical one, where Black bodies were taken over by white minds.

Desire can also be applied to these films and within the concept of whiteness through its initial developed analysis of love. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the two 'mulatto' characters had no sexual or intimate interest in each other however, "both are driven by a hideous lust for whites, she for the master, he for the maid" (Baldwin 50). These characters having this almost innate interest in white people points to the idea of people of color striving to be white and being able to assimilate to the hegemony of whiteness in American society. This representation of the 'mulatto' characters then bleeds into the mentality of the audience consuming the film and the messages it is conveying, which is then taken back into society and actualized in ways that do not exactly replicate what the film is portraying but does in ways replicate the jouissance that the audience gained from watching the film.

The way this white desire manifested itself through film was that it is simply reflected in the nationalistic American ideals that exist in society. Thus, when it is seen through films, the ideology is one that is so ingrained and naturalized within the fabric of society, that it is not questioned or rejected, but simply reinforced. As we have made our way to the present day, there have been numerous attempts to push against this status quo of whiteness that exists, or even to reject the idea that racism is still very much prevalent in our society. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, films have included a secondary character of color whose sole purpose was to enhance the white protagonist's storyline. This racial casting paradigm perhaps stemmed from and was cemented in film plot lines by Hattie McDaniel's role of 'Mammy' in *Gone with the Wind*. Her Black female character exists solely to prop up and advance the white character's narrative. The inclusion of a person of color was seen as 'good enough' so as to prove that there

is no divide or discrimination, although most of these characters were held close to stereotypical tendencies. In this way,

applying the concept of nation to popular films, we also answer the pertinent calls for the study of nationalism within popular cinema. The power of nationalism lies in its seemingly natural or essential nature, giving the false impression that national identity is intrinsically connected to the human being. This essentialist notion of national identity is strikingly similar to the fixed assertions of both gender identities and (disabled) bodies (Cuelenaere 615).

This also directly applies to the fixed concepts and ideologies of race. Especially within American cinema, we see that this unconscious fantasy is manifested in such a way that it gives cultural capital to these dominant ideologies which are reimagined as 'traditionally American'. An example of this is the Confederate flag, which is still proudly displayed by many people across the nation, and has yet to be banned or condemned on a national level despite its inherent ties to slavery and the ideologies supported by the Old South. Finding national identity and pride through that flag demonstrates one's support for these ideologies and neglects the history that it represents. As it is interpreted by those who carry it proudly as being part of our nation's history, the connotations that the flag brings with it becomes intrinsically connected to the fixed ideology of race that it represents, endorsing it and making it innately American.

And so we have moved from Lost Cause to lostness and now to haunting. In essence, everything we, as a country, have been going through for the last four years with the actualization of Donald Trump as president is a product of the lostness emerging in the political unconscious of those who support him. As a society, we are haunted by the constant reminder of the injury we inflicted as well as endured. Donald Trump's rise to power and popularity is a

direct result of the ways in which the legacies of the colonial period, the Civil War, Jim Crow and segregation continue to manifest and haunt us by re-emerging in both veiled and blatant ways throughout different periods of time and history. In “What is Hauntology?” Mark Fisher argues that “[hauntology] refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat,’ a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern)” (Fisher 19). Thus, in every new era of this country we have been faced with the seemingly repressed, re-emerging and manifesting in new forms. From the abolition of slavery came Jim Crow, from the Civil Rights Movement and activists came the war on drugs and from the war on drugs we reach a moment in time where we elected the nation’s first Black president and were seemingly absolved of all racism and “calling it out suddenly seemed taboo” (Fortune). From electing our first Black president, we are left in the present day, where a majority of white people were swayed by the nationalist and originalist rhetoric that was spewed by Donald Trump. The enslavement of Black people, which is the foundation on which this country was built, is an injury that, to this day, has yet to be healed. Thus, when we view films that are projecting the message of a certain nostalgia for a white America, or for the lifestyle of the Old South, it is something we must think critically about as we consume it. Through the continuous emergence of new mass media, beginning with cinema, “‘tele- technologies’ collapse both space and time, events that are spatially distant become available to the audience instantaneously” (Fisher 19). In relation to the manifestation of the unconscious fantasy and the desire for the lost object, films like *Gone With the Wind* and *The Birth of a Nation* discuss and depict a nostalgia for the plantation life and glorify a white supremacist social order. Thus, giving the present day audience a feeling that the stories they are portraying occurred long ago, and that these films are simply a reproduction of past events which have no truth in today’s reality. The dimension of

space is and time is distant from the audience, however it is simultaneously instantly available through the medium of film, which allows for the audience to view and consume these films with the mentality that the problems which arise in the films are no longer present day issues, it allows them to feel disconnected and distanced. And while the problems in the films may not be exactly replicated in today's society, the systems put in place at the time when these films were produced, and sometimes even inspired by these films, have long standing legacies which contribute to upholding white hegemonic structures in contemporary society.

The 2017 film *Get Out* directed by Jordan Peele is a contemporary re-staging of Lost Cause ideology and the narrative of a white person's nostalgia for the Old South placed in the context of the present day liberal east coast. These ideologies and dominant ideas are moved from the physical location of the South and placed in upstate New York when Chris, the Black male protagonist, is taking a trip to his white girlfriend's parents house to meet them for the first time. Peele makes it a point to accentuate the plantation style home that Chris is walking into as he and his girlfriend, Rose Armitage, arrive. The white desire to be the dominant and the white person's fantasy to uphold these dominant ideals is demonstrated in this film when Rose's father, Dean Armitage, explains to Chris that his father lost in a qualifying race for the Olympics to Jesse Owens, a Black male athlete. We, as viewers of the film, can then understand that the reason the Armitage's began stealing and controlling Black bodies was because a white man, Rose's grandfather, lost this race to a Black man, in which his desire and need to be the best and superior was taken by a Black man, someone who, through the mindset of the Lost Cause Ideology, is meant to be inferior. In an effort to reclaim the power he was stripped of and maintain his desire which was threatened through his failure, this white man felt an obligation to himself and his family to capture Black bodies and control them, so as for the white people to

possess their strength and ‘superior physical traits’ but still keep their own brains, intelligence and consciousness. Dean Armitage’s failure to be superior to a Black man brought him into a state of jouissance, wherein his loss fueled his desire to be the superior being. In order to attempt to achieve this desire and fantasy, he had to capture and take back control of the Black bodies who had jolted him into the overly excited state of jouissance. In an attempt to return to his pleasure state, his state of calm and balance, his need to search for his lost object through capturing Black bodies was what brought him out of the state of jouissance and calmed him. However, in order to maintain this desire, he needed to continuously capture Black bodies to remain in the ideal pleasure state.

Along with this, the Armitage family was able to convince an entire cavalry of white friends and family to approve of and participate in this possession of Black bodies. Thus in *Get Out*, we have a white family in a position of power through which they are able to manipulate those around them into participating in their contemporary and reimagined form of slavery. As Karl Marx wrote, “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the idea of those who lack the means of mental projection are subject to it... The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness” (Marx and Engels 68). The Armitage family and their white friends possess consciousness, while using Black bodies as their vehicles, thus making them those who make up the ruling class.

It is not specified in the film how many times this is done, but the Armitage's have a tradition of holding a party for their special friends and family who participate in taking control of Black Bodies. At every party, there is a Black body present, which Rose has lured in by pretending to be their love interest, and this person is bid on at an auction in which the highest

bidder gets to take possession of this Black person's body. The people who participate are usually in search of a Black body because they or a loved one has a serious medical condition and are going to use the Black body as their vehicle, while still retaining their own mind and consciousness. As we meet all of the Armitage's friends and family that are in attendance to bid on Chris' body, there are many parallels to real life that Peele packs into this film. The fact that all of the comments and subtle camera shots are put into one film makes it seem unrealistic and over-exaggerated to the viewer who has never experienced it or is less educated about the treatment Black and Brown folks receive in America. Due to the way this film plays out, with the bidding on Black bodies and using them as molds for white minds, the location of where it is set along with the fact that the family is seemingly liberal and that there is an interracial couple, adds to the assumption that perhaps this film is simply a fictional one that does not hold any truth in reality. However, the placement and the fact that this is a white liberal family is meant to highlight the very intention of the film, which is to make people aware of the fact that this racism and unconscious fantasy for the Old South is a legacy which still haunts American society and is still very much prevalent in even the most seemingly non-threatening circumstances. Because most of these films that blatantly exhibit an attitude in which white hegemony is labeled as a traditional American ideal are set in the past, they become somewhat an exercise for white nostalgia, however the difference with *Get Out* is that it is explicitly not trying to set its story in the past, but highlight that it is very much in the present day, so as to not feed into the trend of a white nostalgia but make its audience think about the prevalence of the issue at hand.

The sly racist comments directed toward Chris and the way he is treated throughout meeting all of Rose's family and friends, is a reflection of the comments and treatment that

Black people receive on a daily basis in real-life. This points to Stuart Hall's concept of inferential racism which he describes as:

those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional,' which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which these statements are grounded (Hall 12).

Chris' calm and compliant reactions to these comments and scenes is an honest depiction of how Black and Brown people are often forced to conduct themselves in certain situations to avoid altercations. In this way, Black people are too often forced to 'control themselves' when they are in uncomfortable settings so as to protect themselves as well as not give into inaccurate stereotypes that white people believe about or have placed upon them. This points to the ways in which even though there is no blatant physical hold over Black people in society today, there is a strong psychological hold over the way Black people feel they need to portray themselves in situations so as to not be isolated by those they are in the situation with. Within the context of *Get Out*, Chris is surrounded by white liberals who hide behind that title so as to excuse themselves from the inferential racism they participate in, as Stuart Hall claims, "inferential racism is invisible and therefore more insidious and is found, for example, in liberal progressives who advocate balance, deny extremism, and yet still see Black people as 'the problem'" (Parker). Jordan Peele wants to emphasize this very point, with the way that he has moved the narrative to the liberal northeast and still kept it as insidious as ever, perhaps even more so than films have done previously.

A turning point of this film occurs when we find out that Walter, a Black male groundskeeper, and Georgina, a Black female housekeeper, are not actual domestic employees of the Armitage family but victims of the brain transplants they perform and they are none other than Rose's grandparents whose minds were placed in Black bodies. Walter and Georgina are not integrated as part of the family and are still shown and treated as the help because of the fact that they are in Black bodies, despite having the minds of white people and being 'part of the family'. They are seen and labeled as objects that are there for the white people to choose from, they are reduced to physical traits which removes their humanity. The concept of race itself came about as a result of the theft of Black bodies, as Steven Thrasher writes for Esquire: "Peele doesn't allow white liberals to view the theft of Black bodies in a faraway frame of an Antebellum Southern plantation, nor to blame crude Trump supporters. Instead, *Get Out* blames the theft on contemporary, Northern white Obamaniacs. American liberalism, not just Trumpism, continues to make race by way of bodily theft" (Thrasher).

The contemporary mirroring and depiction of a fear of 'race mixing', which is justified in *The Birth of a Nation* through "the Ku Klux Klan's violent enforcement of racial subjugation" (Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee 6), is manifested at the end of *Get Out* when we see Rose Armitage eating Froot Loops cereal from one bowl and drinking milk from a glass, this is a subtle nod to the idea of 'race mixing' and not wanting the color of her cereal to bleed into the pristine white milk.

The film concludes with Chris escaping the Armitage home, however in the process he ends up killing Rose's mother, father and brother.³ He makes it a few minutes driving before Rose and her grandfather (in Walter's body) catch up to Chris after he has crashed into a tree. Rose has a shotgun, and while Chris tries to fight off Rose's grandfather, Rose is shooting at

³ Could be important to note that at this point in the movie, the audience is screaming and rooting for Chris to make it out unscathed.

them, however, in fight or flight mode, Chris is able to position Walter's body for him to get shot. As Chris approaches Rose (no longer with her shotgun), he picks up the gun and shoots her, as well as begins choking her as she is bleeding out. Just as the audience has this moment to take a breath and continue to root for Chris now that the whole Armitage family is dead, we see police lights and a siren. As an audience member, your heart sinks because of the situation presented on the screen, there is a Black man covered in blood hovering over a white woman choking her, the odds are not in Chris' favor. However, Peele gives his audience a break from the horror of this film and it is revealed that Chris's TSA agent friend named Rod, who has been in communication with Chris during his trip to the Armitage home, is the one in the police car. Throughout the film, Rod is a source of humor that the audience can laugh at with the ways that he warns Chris not to go alone to a white family's home, in essence foreshadowing the danger that Chris finds himself in. While Peele had initially set the ending to be that Chris gets caught by the police and arrested, he thought that due to the socio political climate that the country was in at the time, he "felt like we [were] in an era where the audience need[ed] an escape from the horror of reality" (Fortune).

Another aspect of this film which shows parallels to real life is the intergenerational gap and the ways in which people can be and often are born into a family which upholds these racist ideals. Insofar as being born into something usually means you grow up learning the values which are projected onto you, you are only blameless for so long. Those who are white liberal families living in the North have the capacity to depict to the world that they are a 'woke' family who "would've voted for Obama for a third term if they had the chance" (Get Out 19:20), but still project their racism in subtle ways and because the dominant ideology in America is that which upholds whiteness, these subtle messages are overlooked. And thus passed on from

generation to generation. This film, as well as *Gone with the Wind*, utilize family melodrama at their core and use the past to comment on the present. While *Gone with the Wind* presents its audience with a story of a white couple placed in the South, the themes carry through to the present day in *Get Out* in that the family is an essential part of the story the films are telling. Through this familial element, the audience can see the impact it carries in influencing those in the film within the family dynamic.

In contrast to the setting of the Northern white liberalism depicted in *Get Out*, the 2020 film *The Devil All the Time* directed by Antonio Campos, is an exploration of the trauma and violence that follows multiple families across generations in the heartland of America. Although this film is set in middle America across the 1950s and 60s, there is not a single mention of race within the whole film. This film aims to capture the deep rooted intergenerational trauma that affects families in the heartland of America. In *The Devil All the Time*, we see the younger generation of these families try to escape the violence and heavy set religion that has been passed down to them from their parents, but being unable to do so successfully. Similar to *Get Out*, Rose and her brother were never able to escape the ideologies passed down from their parents. *The Devil All the Time*, grapples with themes of religion and the evil that lies within having uncontested faith. This intergenerational trauma is something that haunts all characters in this film and it even points to the concept that “envy..brings out the worst in people. It's our delusions that lead us to sin” (*The Devil All the Time* 1:00:23). Through this we can see the connection between the Armitage's envy and desire of the ‘physical superiority’ that Black bodies have which fuels their desire to monopolize them and the intergenerational trauma present in both films that is inevitable due to the delusional and innate nature of them because of how ingrained the trauma becomes.

As we reach the present day, we are living in a historic moment in which America, particularly white America, is faced with a racial, cultural and political awakening surrounding the reimagined history and the harsh realities of The United States. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, national lockdown, Black Lives Matter protests, civil unrest and Donald Trump's presidency, it has become increasingly clear that this country as a whole, not only the half of it who voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, are unwilling to confront and acknowledge the hegemonic ideologies which uphold racism in America. As James Baldwin wrote in *The Devil Finds Work* while giving his analysis of William Friedkin's 1973 film *The Exorcist*,

For, I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and I've seen him in you and in me: and in the eyes of the cop and the sheriff and the deputy, the landlord... In the eyes of some governors, presidents, wardens... The devil has no need of any dogma... Nor does he need any historical justification, history being so largely his invention. He does not levitate beds, or fool around with little girls: we do... At the end of *The Exorcist*, the demon-racked little girl murderess kisses the Holy Father, and she remembers nothing... The grapes of wrath are stored in the cotton fields and migrant shacks and ghettos of this nation, and in the schools and prisons, and in the eyes and hearts and perceptions of the wretched everywhere, and in the ruined earth of Vietnam... and in the young men, dreaming dreams: these have already kissed the bloody cross and will not bow down before it again: and have forgotten nothing (126).

So as to say that the 'devil' is not solely existent within the pictures, films and texts we produce, but present in those who produce them. In essence, we disregard as well as displace the history and injury that this country has caused, onto a generic version of 'evil' that is able to be

presented through film. This critique of the American people speaks to the way we can produce the most monstrous things, yet refuse to confront and mend the atrocities we have committed in real life. Thus, we produce films which are mass consumed and which continue to endorse the dominant ideology that expresses a nostalgia for the Old South and all the social norms that come along with that, which allows American society to label these films as fiction, nonrealistic or part of our history without taking accountability for the real influence it has over us. If the majority is still, consciously or unconsciously, internalizing these messages which express these dominant ideologies and are able to manifest the unconscious fantasy, then it is impossible for us to correct any of the racist history or the haunting of these continuously re-emerging desires that exist in the present.

In light of the George Floyd protests this summer, classic films such as *Gone with the Wind* have been called into question due to the content and messages they emit. The civil unrest and divide of this country has made society contemplate the idea that cinematic representation does in fact carry a significant weight and impact on our society in the ways messages from films are interpreted. *Gone with the Wind* remains on various ‘best films of all time’ lists despite the events of this summer having led to it being temporarily taken off of HBO Max. Later in the summer, HBO Max promised to reupload the film with “a discussion of its historical context and a denouncement of its racist depictions” (Gajanan). After *Gone with the Wind* was pulled from HBO Max, there was a surge in people watching films about racism and race relations. In mid-June, the 2011 film *The Help* directed by Tate Taylor, which presents a white savior narrative in which Black women worked for a white protagonist, became the most viewed film on Netflix. This statistic showed “that intentionally or not, non-Black audiences are trying to learn about racism from movies that offer entertainment and catharsis rather than education”

(Gajanan). Watching films like *The Help* and *Gone with the Wind* to learn about race relations during a time of civil unrest, only works to mitigate white guilt and anxiety. People who were uneasy about the Black Lives Matter protests looked “for nostalgic reminders of a racial context that they understand” (Gajanan) because these films only promote an unrealistic, neat version of racism that is familiar and easy to stomach.

As we have reached the present day, where socio political racial tensions have inspired non-Black audiences to begin searching for films, and other media, to educate themselves about racism in America, it is more important than ever to identify how American films often inherently uphold white hegemony and endorse social structures where whiteness is the dominant. White desire, in search of its lost object of the social order of the Old South, has reimagined race relations and its implications through the nostalgic narratives of a time when Black bodies were directly controlled by white people. This manifestation of the Lost Cause ideology is not only present within old classic films like *Gone with the Wind* or *The Birth of a Nation*, but also made evident in *Get Out* in the way that it relocates the setting to the liberal northeast, so as to not let its audience forget that these problems are still prevalent in seemingly ‘woke’ or accepting settings. Peele makes it a point that his audience understands that the nostalgia for the Old South is present within all areas of American society. The failure to maintain the social structures of the Old South evoked the desire for it as a lost object. Through this, a fantasy, which was projected through the reimagining of this country’s history has allowed for countless attempts to remake and reformulate this social structure of racial hierarchy in reality. Everytime this new structure is threatened, it forces those who search for the lost object to imagine new ways of upholding the hegemonic ideals of whiteness in America. As mass consumers of cinema, and media in general, that we understand, dissect and critique the media

we consume, the messages it portrays and the ways we are influenced by said messages. With all of the civil unrest, racial tension and political debauchery that continues to unfold across the country, we must think critically about the films we consume and how we internalize the themes, stereotypes and ideologies that are ingrained in them. Being that we are in a moment in history where understanding race and fighting for racial equality is more prevalent than it's been since the happenings of the Civil Rights Movement, we must watch films that project the Lost Cause ideology in conjunction with ones that present historically accurate representations of race relations. In order to be more self-aware and critical about what we consume and how it influences our reality, we must identify that film is an inherently white medium that props up the hegemonic narrative of white superiority within American society. Once identified, we can try to understand why and how this was made possible and the ways in which we can take this new understanding and implement it into our reality, so as to undo the reimagining of history that was enforced by films which preached the Lost Cause.

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