Balancing the Line Between Black Horror and Trauma

by Taylor Hardy

Historically, the horror genre has always been used to reflect the unease and fears of the general public during a specific era. Movies like *Kong* and *Godzilla* emerged to parallel the mass destruction that could come from atomic and nuclear power during the early 1900s. Zombie movies in the early 2010s reflected society's fear of terrorism and how someone who looked like you could forever have a drastic change on your livelihood. Horrors' main goal, in a sense, was to turn audiences' fears into a reality they could see play out; that's what made it scary, knowing that these things could happen to you. Oftentimes, however, the fears that were displayed on screen played on the fears of white suburbia, like home invasions or, in survival-based horror, white protagonists having to put their faith in the hands of marginalized peoples. This focus and emphasis on whiteness within the genre have meant that many Black people haven't seen themselves accurately represented within the genre, aside from Black horror films that came from the Blaxploitation subgenre. Often when Black characters do exist within the universe of horror, they're subjected to one-dimensional stereotypes, which can include tropes like the sacrificial negro whose purpose is to sacrifice their life in order to save the protagonist, the magical negro who bestows wisdom and guidance upon the main character in order to help them achieve their goal or defeat their main conflict, and the spook, which happened to derive from the Sambo caricature, which is a melodramatic Black character who provides comedic relief during the stressful situations. Amongst these tropes, there's often an unconscious game many Black audiences play with themselves while watching horror movies, and this is simply determining if the Black character in the film will even survive to the end of the movie.

The horror genre appeared to remain relatively stagnant throughout the 21st century regarding Black representation, and the mainstream media didn't bat an eye until the release of Jordan Peele's debut film *Get Out* in 2017. *Get Out* is a movie about Chris, our African-American protagonist, who visits his girlfriend's family for the weekend only to discover during his stay that the family is hiding a sinister secret.

What made *Get Out* so special is that it was a horror film by a Black director with a Black lead that made its audience feel seen.

This movie felt fresh and brand new, and many Black people relished the joy of seeing themselves in a movie that didn't cast them aside. *Get Out's* success came with its recognition at a multitude of award shows, from the Academy Awards, the MTV Movie & TV Awards, the NAACP Image Awards, and many more. It eventually was nominated 218 times and won 88 of those. From the accolades and positive perception, Peele would go on to create *Us* two years later, another Black horror film, and receive the same praise as before. From the hype that came from these movies and Black audiences getting excited about seeing characters in horror that looked like them, audiences began to see the emergence of visual media that appeared to capture Peele's film aesthetic in their own projects.

Some notable mentions that appear to share a resemblance to Peele's works happen to be the movie *Antebellum* and the TV series *Them* and *Lovecraft Country*, and audiences do not have a positive reception of these media texts. At first glance, one may question why these horror texts could generate controversy. We were now in a time when Black people could be represented in Horror, and many directors were trying to follow in Peele's footsteps. The issue at hand, however, is that the three media texts listed above didn't just create a Black horror text, but instead, their themes played on the trauma and experiences of Black individuals. *Antebellum* is a movie about a modern 21st-century woman who wakes up to find herself on a plantation that feels straight out of the 1800s, *Them* is a series about a Black family that moves into a predominately white suburban neighborhood in the 1950s and has to navigate the racist bubble they've entered, and *Lovecraft Country* is another show based off a book of the same name that conjoins the horror elements previously seen in works by H.P. Lovecraft with the racism and segregation that took place during the Jim Crow era.

The issue that many critics and audiences began to see with these works is that they amplified the traumatic history of what it means to be Black in America rather than the form of escapism horror was initially meant to be.

Rather than creating a hypothetical situation that audiences could try to see themselves in, they were instead greeted with a display of prejudices being acted out on screen and violence being depicted against Black bodies. Black trauma was essentially being amplified on the big screen with a narrative storyline that didn't add to the conversation. What audiences appreciated about Peele was his ability to talk about the Black experience while adding something new and fantastical; though audiences could relate to the experiences of Peele's charac-

ters, he also provided escapism, which many people crave when engaging with this genre. Peele, too, almost toed the line between surrealism and brutal honesty with his decision to alter the ending of *Get Out*.

Spoilers for Get Out

In the ending that premiered on screens, Chris is able to kill his girlfriend and her family, and his best friend comes to his rescue to save him from the hellish experience. However, the original ending displays the police arriving while Chris strangles his girlfriend, but instead of it being his best friend coming to his aide, it is instead an actual set of police officers. From the outside looking in, the officers see this Black man inflicting violence on a helpless white woman. They don't seem to need an explanation, and we later see Chris in a prison jumpsuit, where he's being escorted to the visitation area to talk to his friend while he remains behind bars. Peele states that "this movie was meant to call out the fact that racism is still simmering underneath the surface, and so this ending to the movie felt like it was the gut punch that the world needed." He originally thought this due to feeling that society currently operated as if we lived in a post-racial lie thanks to Obama's presidency, and he wanted to confront the fact that racism was still very real and alive. However, after seeing how society had now shifted once he began shooting the movie, people were confronting and understanding the racism interwoven within their society, and he felt that people didn't need to witness this hard truth but instead needed a release from the real world. I think Peele's thought process perfectly encapsulates the criticism that came with these horror texts's that eventually came to be known as 'Black Trauma Porn.' The uproar that's repeatedly coming from audiences is that directors should know that there's a time and place to address certain issues, and exploiting the trauma of Black individuals for the sake of shock value ultimately isn't the way to address heavy topics.

There's a way to portray Black people within the horror genre without preying on their deepest societal fears, and Peele has been able to depict this with his now three movies.

I hope to see more directors follow in his footsteps by creating suspense and unease while still offering escapism like the horror genre originally intended. ✱