

Found Bodies: Messages in Horror Films

There is a sense of humanity that is often overlooked in the genre of horror film. A hesitant audience may not expect to leave such types of films asking themselves important questions. They might ask, how could an entire genre with so many negative connotations surrounding it further art and expression of the human condition? Paying no mind to any doubts, film history has shown us that classic and modern horror films alike not only paved the way for unique stylization but also gave a voice to the outcasts of society and the disenfranchised. *Frankenstein* (1931) faces topics such as eugenics, classism, and homophobia while eighty-six years later we see *Get Out* (2017) turning horror tropes on their heads to tell a story of micro-aggressions towards the black community, give a voice to black people in the horror community, and how liberal America exploits this minority group of people. Time and time again, we have seen horror be able to put a face to the paranoia and pain of an entire generation and even reveal the plights of marginalized people.

By the 1920s, America was hitting its peak of the eugenics movements. Doctors and biologists alike were trying to breed out “negative traits” such as criminal behavior and even traits of minorities. There was a plethora of propaganda being spread around that would proclaim things such as, “only healthy seed must be sown!” or “some people are born to be a burden upon the rest.” The creation of *Frankenstein* (1931) demonstrated the universal trauma of eugenics and how science was rooted in prejudice and racism. James Whale, the director of *Frankenstein*, wanted to use this film to fight back against the fallacies of eugenics and show that societal issues were not based on genetics (Towlson, 2014). We see Dr. Frankenstein treat the monster in the film with love and patience when believing he implanted a healthy and intelligent brain into his creation. He marvels at its perfection and allows the monster to explore its new life as if it

were a child. Once understanding he used what he believed to be a tainted brain from a criminal, he locks up the monster and allows Fritz to abuse and torture it. A lot of societal pressure is based on systemic racism and gives minorities disadvantages in life. Just like the monster in this film, ideas based on things like eugenics can put a target on the back of innocent people. If they gave the monster in *Frankenstein* the advantage of grace and understanding, he may have never been in a situation to run away from the laboratory. Dr. Frankenstein wanted nothing but perfection from his creation based on prejudiced notions of what a perfect person would be like. As an audience, we get a clear view that the “monster” is nothing but a child-like person who wanted attention and the chance to grow, but everyone surrounding him punished him for what his creator had done.

By the 1920s, American businesses were fighting back against labor strikes and trying to regain their power. Many working-class Americans had gone on strike to fight against unfair wages and working conditions in the face of inflation (America in Class). Many laborers were being treated like undercover communists while veterans were ultimately being forgotten by the United States government. James Whale had grown up in these conditions, coming from a blue-collar family. His sympathy for the non-conforming individual fighting against the injustices of capitalism shines through in the film *Frankenstein* (1931), showing a man cast aside in society. James Whale himself was a veteran of World War I and witnessed the devastation many veterans experienced, including homelessness and the isolation of trauma (Towlson, 2014). So not only were these people coming home to a severely damaged country, but they were being shut down by government officials and businesses while trying to recover from the perils of war. As an audience, we can feel sympathy for the monster because he is misunderstood, and we can even view him as a non-conforming individual. Robin Wood mentions how the monster resembled an

American laborer, wearing work clothing and asphalt-spreader boots (Towlson, 2014). They thrust the monster into a violent world that he cannot understand, and the systems that are supposed to protect him ultimately fail him. We can feel the isolation and abandonment that Whale felt in his upbringing through the way that the monster tries to run away from these impossibly painful situations in the film. The mixture of veterans being treated like nuisances and the working class as communists was heavily in the front of everyone's minds in the early 1930s with the arrival of these major strikes and even the Red Scare. While they advertised the film to be extraordinarily terrifying, most people walked away feeling an unfamiliar empathy for the supposed villain in the film. The message and the theme surpassed the expectations of audiences and critics to create a profound monument of what 1930s America was truly like.

As the Great Depression deepened in the 1930s, we saw the rise of the Production Code and the overwhelming need to erase gay culture by lawmakers. They enacted laws to ban any gay or transgender people from bars, and we even saw the rise of police raids to rid of these people (Towlson, 2014). The Catholic Church pressured filmmakers and production companies to not include anything in films that they considered sexual deviancy, which included the portrayal of gay people. Just like the plague of eugenic beliefs, certain government researchers tried to link homosexuality with criminality and anti-social behavior. James Whale himself was a gay man and throughout the film *Frankenstein* (1931) we can pick up on the message of homosexuality and the persecution of gay people. James Whale claimed he wanted to retain sympathy for the plight of the monster throughout the film as a message of tolerance for America and the unrelenting persecution of disenfranchised people (Towlson, 2014). The monster could represent the sexuality of Dr. Frankenstein in the way he desires to create it or express it and then eventually vehemently denies it. Under the consideration that homosexuality was considered

sexual deviancy, it is easy to project this onto the struggles the monster endures. They view him as a threat and even a sexual deviant himself without much thought from the people surrounding him. In the 1930s, they labeled homosexual people as child molesters just to torment them more into hiding. The monster in the film accidentally kills the small girl he is playing with to mirror this idea that was a reality. The town assumes the monster did the worst and assaulted the young girl in the vilest way, not trying to understand that he is innocent and even somewhat a child himself. Through this film, we see the mirrored image of reality and how homosexual people were treated, leaving us as an audience with something more important to think about than what we might expect.

In society, there has always been the resounding idea of the “other.” We could consider this an outcast and, even in severe cases, this could be someone unjustly treated with prejudice. Just as we saw the depiction of the monster being treated as the other in *Frankenstein* (1931), we can still see this story being told in *Get Out* (2017). Jordan Peele’s breakout film *Get Out* presents us with a beautifully articulated story of the modern-day life of black people through the lens of horror and suspense. The protagonist of the story, Chris, is a young black man set out to meet the family of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage. Despite the worries of his best friend, who is also a young black man, he meets the Armitage’s. Next, he is thrust into a party with all the family’s wealthy white friends. Throughout his stay, we see him experience many micro-aggressions that are off-setting and racist. This propels him into the role of the “other” (Simenson, 2020). At the party, some guests inform him that “black is in fashion” and an older white lady even goes as far as to ask Rose if he is a more desirable sexual partner. All the while, Chris is maintaining a very polite demeanor because these are all things he is very used to in his everyday life. Unbeknownst to him, he is being auctioned off to the highest bidder so that his

body could be taken as a vessel. Not only does this express how micro-aggressions towards black people can lead to macro-aggressions, but it maintains the history of black people and how they were once sold as slaves in the United States in the 1700s and 1800s. Chris is familiar with being treated as someone who lives under the scrutiny of white people and expects to be treated in a racist manner, especially in a white suburban area. At the beginning of the film, Chris expresses this when he asks Rose if her parents know he's black. Simultaneously while compelling the audience with high suspense, the film continually conveys the black experience.

One of the most iconic moments of *Get Out* (2017) is when Chris is drug to the “sunken place” by Rose’s hypnotist mother, Missy Armitage. In this scene, she separates his consciousness from his body. He is only able to view what is going on around him through a small screen while powerlessly trapped within his own body. When Chris first arrives at the Armitage residence, the house is brightly lit and highly welcoming, indicating it is a safe place. Differences between this and the dark imagery of the sunken place could represent subconscious ideas that the intentions of others aren’t always what they seem (Long, 2018). The Armitage’s seem nice enough upon the arrival of Chris and Rose, greeting them with hugs and warm welcomes. The fact that we learn that this family is intending to sell Chris and remove parts of his brain is what later makes these platitudes so haunting. It reminds us that danger lies in plain sight and even the people that seem the most well-intentioned could want to either take advantage of us or even harm us. The juxtaposition of the sunken place digs deeper into other ideas that black people, more specifically, must live somewhat of a double life to avoid these ill intentions. He only ever agrees to sit with Missy to be polite and not create a scene on the pretense she will help him quit smoking. She instead suppresses his autonomy to manipulate him

casting him into the sunken place. The sunken place concept provides horrors unique to an oppressed minority while sympathetically can be experienced by the broader audience.

Not only does *Get Out* (2017) deal with the impotent feelings of being oppressed, but it also deals with arrogance projected by white liberal attitudes. We see this liberal ignorance early in the film with the Armitage patriarch remarking that he would “vote for Obama for a third time if [he] could.” This type of virtue signaling remark happens quite often throughout the film that only comes off as awkward and quite racist. Rose displays volatile levels of fetishization of the black body for Chris and the other black men she has lured into her family’s trap (Bakare, 2017). She tries to preserve his body until she realizes he has nothing to offer her. She then decides to shoot at him with a rifle at the end of the film. This refracts how Liberal Americans will loudly claim that they are not racist and don’t contribute to the alienation of minorities, yet they will turn on them when it no longer benefits them. The Armitage father tries to downplay the fact that all the servants are black at the residence but fails to see how arrogant he sounds. Rose only tries to “protect” Chris from the police officer at the beginning of the film because she knows it will not benefit her if people know where he is at. Pulling these ideas of virtue signaling and fetishization into the film exposes the self-importance status middle-class Liberal America holds to this day. Jordan Peele brings these ideas together in *Get Out* in a funny, relatable, and suspenseful way that maintains the film’s commercial success.

Under the revelations of empathy and societal awareness in the films *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Get Out* (2017), it is easy to see the scope of thematic elements horror films can contain. *Frankenstein* director James Whale refused to turn a blind eye to eugenics and class related mistreatment. Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* is a precise representation of his experience of being a black man and the horrors of racism. Both films display the emotions of being an outcast in society and

how a disenfranchised minority of people can be manipulated. What is unique in these films is the representation of autonomy through the mutilation of human bodies. These visuals are visceral and easy to relate to in the way we would fear losing control over our own bodies or possibly losing parts of our bodies. James Whale and Jordan Peele are not the first or last artists in the horror genre to take a crack at social commentary, but their creations are amazing representations of humanity and the human condition. Within the parameters of the horror genre, we can relate to many generations of fear and worries. Whether it's 1930s classism and identity politics or present-day racism, the horror genre provides a place where individual pains can be experienced and understood intimately by the audience.

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