Get Out: Enforcing Black Stereotypes

Chris Washington, a young African American man, is travelling with his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage, to stay with her parents upstate for the weekend. Chris, already nervous about making a positive first impression, becomes increasingly wary about the Armitage’s over accommodating behavior when they arrive at their secluded estate. The weekend turns into more than just a get-away when dozens arrive at the house for the annual Armitage get-together. Chris continues to feel uneasy about his blackness when he is surrounded by an overwhelming amount of white people at the get-together, as his weekend progresses slowly into a nightmare through a series of troubling events. These events prompt Chris into becoming suspicious about the family’s get-together, leading him to go on a walk with Rose. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Chris, the family holds a silent auction for Chris’s body at the house. The winner of the auction, a blind man by the name of Jim Hudson, will undergo a surgical procedure that will transplant his brain into the body of Chris, where he will experience the physical advantages of Chris’s body. Jim states that he doesn’t care for the color of Chris’s skin, because all he wants is his eyes. Therefore, at first glance, Jim Hudson is portrayed as one of the “good guys” among the Armitages because his motives for wanting the transplant are represented as being non-racist. Through further analysis, this film scene shows the enforcing of common black stereotypes through the Armitage’s commodification of black people, otherwise known as the “procedure”.
In this particular scene, Chris is sitting strapped to a chair in a room in the Armitage’s basement. This scene shows off an interesting mise-en-scene, especially when you acknowledge the television that is placed directly in front of where Chris is seated. The television is very old compared to the rest of the setting, and the Armitage’s house. This detail in the scene may be a symbol to show how the Armitages are playing a role from that time period in a modern form. Suddenly, the television placed in front of Chris turns on to show Jim Hudson looking back at him. Jim begins speaking to Chris, telling him that there will be a transplant of his brain into Chris’s body. Throughout the scene, the camera shifts from close-up to extreme close-up shots of Chris and Jim. These shots help to portray to the audience more effectively the emotions that are going through Chris’s head as well as making a point to show a close-up of Jim’s eyes, emphasizing his blindness. The audience can get an idea of exactly what is going through Chris’s mind as we see the terrified, sickened, lifeless, and hopeless look on his face. After Jim is finished explaining, Chris asks him “why black people?”. Jim responds by saying “some people want to change, some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler. But don’t lump me in with that group, I could give a shit what color you are.”. By Chris’s facial expressions, it looks as if he was expecting to hear exactly what Jim told him, that “some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler”. The scene ends with Chris saying to himself and Jim that “this is crazy”. Jim then says, “I’m done” and the video cuts out, showing his unwillingness to acknowledge the craziness of the situation. This scene shows the Armitage family’s motives behind their operation, suggesting that they may be a part of cultural appropriation as described by Bell Hooks.

In her essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, Bell Hooks offers a unique analysis of the relationship between white people and their desire for the “Other”. Hooks defines the Other as someone whose race is not white; embodying black people, Indians, and Native Americans.
About midway through her insightful essay, Hooks begins to describe the phenomenon known as cultural appropriation of the Other (26). According to Hooks, the cultural appropriation of the Other offers a promise of recognition. This gives white people the ability to pick and choose parts of the Other’s culture and use it as their own. It gives white people the opportunity to say that their culture is moving forward while the Other remains to be “primitive”. This use of the Other as a resource enforces common stereotypes that tend to give an unrealistic definition as to who they are. This is because the desire for the Other is often based on what white people think the Other is like, and not what they are actually like. Having an understanding of Bell Hooks’ description of commodification of the Other offers a unique comprehension of the movie Get Out.

By using Hooks’ insight on the commodification of the Other, a claim could be made that Jim and the other people attending the party, do not see their actions as being racist. Like Hooks argues, the cultural appropriation of the Other gives a promise of recognition. The white people at the party see themselves as being racially progressive by “allowing” black people to be a part of their family. In a previous scene, the Armitages even explicitly say that “you are a part of something perfect”. Jim is telling Chris directly, when they are speaking to each other through the television, that they are after black people for the sole purpose of many of their common stereotypes; like strength, speed, and style. However, it appears that Jim does not see any significance in the fact that all the people that they kidnap are black. This analysis, through the lens of Bell Hooks, proves that the white people at the party do not see their actions as being racist, especially Jim who says that to that he “could give a shit what color you are”. However, Jim refers to the Other in the ways that he thinks that they are like, and not necessarily what they are actually like. Jim is thus enforcing the common stereotypes of black people’s muscular
strength, speed, and style. Although Bell Hooks offers a unique analysis of this scene in *Get Out*, Harlon L. Dalton also helps go beyond the simple understanding of the scene.

In his essay *Horatio Alger*, Harlon L. Dalton calls into question the significance of race-based stereotypes. Much like Bell Hooks, Dalton acknowledges the pre-conceived ideas black people, the Other, that are engrained into modern society. Dalton specifically explains the phenomenon that another scholar, Stephen Carter, calls “the best black syndrome” (128-129). Dalton is referring to the notion of how white people judge black people on a different social scale. He gives an example of how one of the top students in a high school class is seen not as one of the best students, but the best black student. This idea of “the best black syndrome” brings to light race-based expectations, that society already has their own pre-conceived ideas of a race based off stereotypes. This scene expands upon what Dalton describes as the best black syndrome. Like Hooks, Dalton addresses the white perception of blackness. Through this scene, it can be seen that there is an inaccurate white perception of blackness, because it is heavily based on common stereotypes of the race like the ones that Jim states. Jim in this scene represents the rest of the Armitage family, that they all have their own inaccurate perception of blackness, which further enforces black stereotypes.

The conversation between Chris and Jim represents Jim as one of the good guys, because his motives for wanting the transplant with Chris’s body don’t seem to be racially motivated. However, when analyzed through the lens of Bell Hooks commodification of the Other, it is clear that the motives of Jim and the Armitages are still racially charged, and they contribute to the strengthening of common black stereotypes. The issues that are brought out in this scene, as well as the film as a whole, are perhaps being addressed to make a point to the audience. The best black syndrome, the judging of black people on a different social scale based on common
stereotypes, seems to be something that all black people are aware of and used to. However, white people appear to be clueless about the phenomenon, emphasizing the disconnect that between the two cultures that continues to this day.
Works Cited

