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**Contemporary Black Horror Films:  
Reinventing Representations of Blackness  
to Question Post-Racial America**

**Supervisor**

Prof. Simone Francescato

**Assistant supervisor**

Prof. Elisa Bordin

**Graduand**

Paola Trento  
851916

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to study how contemporary “Black Horror” films give space to the African American perspective in horror narratives, in order to mirror the sociopolitical condition of the black community in the “Post-Racial” era. This will be done by showing how these contemporary films subvert or improve previous black representations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century horror cinema. The expression “Post-Racial”, which emerged in the American political debate during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008,<sup>1</sup> is defined by political scientist David A. Hollinger as “a possible future in which the ethnoracial categories central to identity politics would be more matters of choice than ascription (...) in which economic inequalities would be confronted head-on, instead of through the medium of ethnorace.”<sup>2</sup> The “Post-Racial” thought assumes that the American society, especially after the election of the first African American President Barack Obama, has officially overcome racial discrimination and inequality. This work shows that contemporary “Black Horror” productions are powerful tools of visual criticism which defy the myth of “Post-Racial” era and its rhetoric.

The difference between “Blacks in Horror” and “Black Horror” films is substantial to this thesis. Briefly, the first category mostly indicates white-centered, top studio productions which display blacks or blackness without problematizing them, or confine them in a secondary position compared to white characterizations. The second category indicates

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<sup>1</sup> Schorr, Daniel (2008). “A New, 'Post-Racial' Political Era in America.” *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18489466>

<sup>2</sup> David A. Hollinger, “The Concept of Post-Racial: How its easy dismissal obscures important questions.” *Daedalus*, 174-182, 172.

instead cinematic endeavours which are mostly made, produced, and directed by African Americans; they have a black cast and are oriented on a conscious black perspective. This basic distinction will recur throughout the work, in order to identify major studio films which ideologically “control” the idea of race, from those which are instead based on black creativity.

The first part of my thesis consists of a historical overview of the problematic involvement of African Americans in 20th century horror cinema, and their struggle to produce independent self-definitions. The pre-horror blackface minstrelsy and the 1930s horror films *Ingagi* and *King Kong* are examples of racist, ideological manipulations of the dark skin in this cinematic genre. *The Giant Claw* (1957), *The Shining* (1980), or *Nightmare of Elm Street* (1984) will stand as evidence of the systematic marginalization of black images and artists from terror productions. Despite the ideological oppression experienced by blacks in the controlling, white-oriented industry of Hollywood, the African American participation in horror achieves recognition in 1968 with Romero’s *Night of The Living Dead*, and from that moment on black filmmakers start to emerge in horror cinema, becoming particularly active during the 1970s “Blaxploitation Era” with films like *Blacula* (1972) and *Dr Black and Mr Hyde* (1978). Achieving visibility and affirmation in the field of horror movies is a difficult, non-linear process for African American actors and filmmakers who have always been controlled by dominant, white-centered systems of power. The decade 1980s represents indeed a period of total marginalization, and *The Shining* (1980s) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) are two examples of major studio horror movies which systematically omitted or limited black images. However, with the “Black New Wave” in the 1990s, blackness reemerges with affirmation and voice, thanks to “Black Horror” films like *Def by Temptation* (1990).

The second part of my thesis brings attention to “Black Horror” films made in recent years by affirmed, respected African American directors. These productions, based on authentic and updated black perspectives, actively problematize the oppression of the black community in the post-Obama society, and engage in a sociopolitical critique of the “Post-Racial” rhetoric. I will present four case studies: *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), *The First Purge* (2018), and *Them: Covenant* (2021). These narratives revise historical horror representations of black images, either subverting negative and racist stereotypes or improving self-representations made by previous African American filmmakers in order to create innovative and focused portrayals of the black life. By visualizing blackness at the center of the narrative, these horrors raise awareness about the modern condition of African Americans, who are still oppressed, silenced and marginalized by a system that has not actually overcome racial discrimination. Through the communicative power of horror and the representational empowerment achieved in the genre, directors Jordan Peele, Gerard McMurray and Little Marvin provocatively show that racism was always the real terror in America and still is today, even after the “Post-Racial” dream promoted after the Obama administration. In this way, contemporary “Black Horror” transforms the genre from a space of historical discrimination to a dimension of black creativity, activity and vision, powerful in demanding racial inclusion and progress.



**PART I**

**Misrepresentations and Struggles of Blackness in Horror Cinema**

## CHAPTER ONE

### MONSTROUS DEPICTIONS OF BLACKNESS.

#### FROM BLACKFACE TO *KING KONG*

##### **1.1 19th Century Blackface Minstrelsy and the Racial Grotesque**

In order to discuss the African American image within horror cinema, it is important to provide an overview of the historical condition of black imagery in America during the 19th century. In this period, blackface minstrelsy was a popular form of anti-black comedy, from which many offensive stereotypes of blackness originated and subsequently influenced the visualisations of African Americans in 20th century American horror cinema. Indeed, racist myths stemming from blackface shows had a pervasive impact on the perception of race in American culture, on stage and even in children literature (the “Golliwog” is the major example). In this part, I will analyse how certain blackface caricatures — Jim Crow, Coons, Sambo and the Golliwog — portrayed blackness in a particularly grotesque fashion. Secondly, by drawing on the concept of “racial grotesque” developed by Leonard Cassuto (*Inhuman Race*, 1996) and Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund (*Grotesque*, 2013) I will bring attention to the fact that misrepresentations of Blackness as “inhuman” were already influential in American entertainment before the invention of motion pictures, and negatively affected the perception of racial differences through hidden discourses of power.

The adjective “grotesque” is defined by *Merriam Webster Dictionary* as follows:

“(a) fanciful, bizarre; (b) absurdly incongruous, (c) departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical.”<sup>3</sup> Overall, it indicates a subject (or an object) that is considered

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<sup>3</sup> “Grotesque”, *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved 15 February 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grotesque#other-words>.

departing from the accepted norm, that is abnormal, different. Be it visually, socially, or on a human level. From this standard, many blackface caricatures were grotesque, for they were portrayed with excessively marked bodily features that transcended a human recognition and somehow lacked plausibility in their rendering. Blackface minstrelsy was a form of entertainment aimed at comically mocking and imitating black slaves, so the main feature was the black make-up — made of burnt cork — that white actors used to mimic dark skin.<sup>4</sup> Popular from 1850 to 1870, it was introduced by Thomas D. Rice in 1828, who is credited to be just the “father of American minstrelsy” and the inventor of the first blackface caricature, Jim Crow.<sup>5</sup> This latter is one of the first parodies of African American slaves, supposed to entertain white theatre-goers with skits made of singing, dancing, and jokes. White audiences, largely composed of slave owners or former ones, were receptive to this racist satire based on laughing at and mocking black slaves as a whole category, and the entertainment leveraged on the stereotype that Blacks were “lazy, stupid, inherently less human, and unworthy of integration.”<sup>6</sup> Rice alternated Jim Crow’s skits with other counterparts, like “Zip Coon” (which was first performed by George Dixon in 1834), another caricature that satirised on freed Black youths making them appear as ostentatious and arrogant. Jim Crow and Zip Coon then merged into one popular stereotype, the “Coon” figure. With this, Blacks were perceived as “lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle, inarticulate, buffoon.”<sup>7</sup> Another stock character of the blackface minstrelsy was the already notorious “Sambo,” a stereotype

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<sup>4</sup> Pilgrim, David. *Who was Jim Crow?* Website of Ferris State University Sept., 2000. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/who/index.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> “Jim Crow” segregation laws, that lasted from 1877 to 1960 in the United States, were named after this fictional character.

<sup>6</sup> Pilgrim, David. *Who was Jim Crow?*

<sup>7</sup> Pilgrim, David. *The Coon Caricature*, 2012. Ferris State University. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/coon/homepage.htm>

popular in plantation southern culture that parodied the concept of the “happy slave”<sup>8</sup> and represented an old black man who was docile, passive and contented with serving his white masters — of course, a white fantasy that tried to justify the institution of slavery.

On stage, and also in printed images or objects of consume, blackface figures were characterised by a physical distortion and were deliberately created as “grotesque”, ugly and deviant from the human look. For example, already in the first prototypes of Jim Crow’s illustrations from the music sheets written by Thomas Rice for his spectacles,<sup>9</sup> the figure looks distorted. The blue coat, the red bow tie and the ragged pants that Crow is wearing make him look more clownish than solemn, and this attire became emblematic of the whole minstrelsy tradition. Plus, he is drawn with a grinning, unnatural smile and a contorting posture. During the stage performances, white actors made a high use of make-up or prosthetics to exaggerate and demonise the physical features of African Americans. They used to “paint their faces with burnt cork, adding a painted grotesquely exaggerated white mouths over their own, and donned woolly black wigs.”<sup>10</sup> Besides, red or white make-up was used to exaggerate their lips. Thus, the show was not limited to a comic mockery of blacks in their behaviour, but it explicitly exaggerated facial and physical physiognomy to amplify a distorted perception of blacks as a social and cultural group. This physical distortion of exaggerating skin colour or lips and smile dimensions made blackface caricatures appear

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<sup>8</sup> Cassuto, Leonard. *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 129

<sup>9</sup> *Jim Crow Blackface Illustration*, Print, Georgia Public Broadcasting.  
[https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/jim-crow-blackface-illustration/pwG\\_HFK\\_TemfLQ](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/jim-crow-blackface-illustration/pwG_HFK_TemfLQ)

<sup>10</sup> Pilgrim, David. *Who was Jim Crow?* Website of Ferris State University Sept., 2000. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/who/index.htm>

grotesque and unpleasant, and the result was that Blacks were socially perceived as an uncivilised and inhuman presence in society.

Blackface tradition also paved the way for other anti-black inventions that took place in literature. One of these was the Golliwog character, a fictional creature invented by American-English cartoonist Florence Upton,<sup>11</sup> for the children book *Adventures of two Dutch Dolls* (1873). The literature figure of the Golliwog is extremely controversial. Firstly, it was invented and illustrated by Upton out of inspiration from one of her childhood toys, a blackface minstrel doll — and the main idea was that it had to resemble an authentic minstrel.<sup>12</sup> This means that offensive depictions of Black people were normalised and permeated objects for childhood, who grew up with a racist ideology from a young age. Secondly, it is emblematic of the rapid multiplication of anti-black imagery in society, since it was inspired from a toy that was the copy of an already existing parody show. Indeed, since it was not protected by copyright, the image created by Upton was copied and employed by companies as trademark; in this way, it became a cult object in the public domain.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, the Golliwogg was conceived and created as a physically grotesque figure, both in text descriptions and in the book illustrations. The American Heritage Dictionary defines the Golliwogg as “a doll fashioned in grotesque caricature of a black male”<sup>14</sup> — this means that its cultural meaning is now a reminder of the minstrel caricatures and shares the same

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<sup>11</sup> Upton, Bertha and Florence. *Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog*, Longmans , Green & Co. 1895

<sup>12</sup> Pilgrim, David. *The Golliwog Caricature, Anti Black Imagery*. Website of Ferris University. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/golliwog/homepage.htm>

<sup>13</sup> According to David Pilgrim, the Golliwog became an industrial product. Toys manufacturers like Steiff, Schuco, and Levin (three German companies) mass produced Golliwog dolls. Plus, British company of jams and preserves “James Robertson & Sons” started using the Golliwog as their trademark in the early 1900s.

<sup>14</sup> “*Golliwog*”, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. Copyright by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2011.

grotesqueness. Analysing the 1895 original illustrated cover of the book *Adventures*, it is possible to realise that the Golliwogg image is drawn as totally different from the two Dutch dolls. It wears red trousers, a red bow tie and a blue coat — a symbolic trademark of American Blackface minstrels. It lacks precision in facial features and has a short body, so that it blurs the distinction between a man and a toy. Moreover, it has a markedly darker skin colour, a mass of unruly hair, an exaggerated red mouth and eyes wide open, similarly to Jim Crow or Coons. The two dolls look innocently downwards, while the Golliwogg is depicted with his inexpressive eyes staring fixedly the observer. Consequently, there is clearly a visual shock between the two figures that are perceived as white and feminine, and the one at the centre that is visibly different and eerie. Moreover, in the text of *Adventures* the minstrel-like entity is literally described as “a horrid sight, the blackest gnome”<sup>15</sup> when the two Dutch Dolls meet it. This expression works to associate to concept of horror and darkness to a dark-skinned figure, in opposition to ideas of beauty and purity. MacGregor commented on the making of the Golliwogg describing it as “a cross between a dwarf-sized black minstrel and an animal (...) its appearance distorted and frightening.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, since its depiction explicitly deviated from what was meant to be the norm, the Golliwogg was meant to be an extremely grotesque figure, and the use of words like “horrid” and “the blackest gnome” denote racial insensitivity and normalisation of racism. The Golliwogg is racist, but more precisely it is grotesque, because it associates the Black body with horror, abnormality and malformation and transcends a human image.

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<sup>15</sup> Upton, Bertha and Florence. *Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg*, Green & Co. 1895. Produced by Produced by Alicia Williams, Joshua Hutchinson at Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>. Project Gutenberg Ebook, September 28, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> MacGregor, R. M. *The Golliwogg: Innocent doll to symbol of racism*. In Danna, S. R. (Ed.), *Advertising and popular culture: Studies in variety and versatility*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, p 125. 1992.

Grotesque depictions of black ethnicity have important implications in the diffusion of racist ideologies and the social perception of racial difference, as they alter negatively the visual perception of a specific social group that is part of the American society. In the essay *Grotesque*, scholars Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund have analysed the meaning of the grotesque concept and its cultural application to artistic and literary expressions, in particular blackface shows. They define *grotesque* as “a body that forces us to understand what is human and non-human (...) incongruous and inappropriate to shocking degree.”<sup>17</sup> From this viewpoint, a grotesque body is, in the arts, something that blurs categories. It is anomalous, because it transcends the category of “human” and consequently shock the viewers. Grotesque bodies are disturbing in their being explicitly “in between” human and non-human, and for this reason they can reveal hidden ideologies of power and racial discriminations. By analysing chapter “Carnival” in Langston Hughes’ novel *Not Without Laughter*,<sup>18</sup> the two scholars make these considerations on blackface:

Blackface minstrelsy provokes laughter by using their bodies to re-inscribe racial difference, by lampooning African Americans as lazy and buffoonish, musical and superstitious. Such bodily and racially inspired laughter constructs an inside and outside through discourses of difference (...) singling stereotypes of and positions of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>19</sup>

Basically, blackface minstrelsy coincides with a visual deformation of the body to provoke laughter and comic relief. This effect primarily functions to suggest a binary idea of

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<sup>17</sup> J. Edwards, R. Graulund, *Grotesque*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York. 2013. P. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, Langston. *Not Without Laughter (1930)*. London, Scribner 1995.

<sup>19</sup> J. Edwards, R. Graulund. *Grotesque*, pp. 118 - 120

normality and abnormality, and in so doing it highlights “racial difference”. Minstrels portrayed African American diversity with excessive lips, smiles or an unnatural black skin colour, so the distortion was physical, provoking a “bodily inspired laughter”. This latter, the act of laughing at physical differences that are thought to be part of another social group, sets out a systematic mindset of “inclusion and exclusion”, where the audience feels included into civility and is convinced that blackness deserves exclusion. Blackface depicts blackness artificially, falsely, to make blacks appear as worthy of mocking and unworthy of progress. Besides, the grotesque aesthetic also embodies a deviation from the socially accepted norm and provokes effects like fear and revulsion. Thus, when applied to the black image, it has the potential to define African Americans as dangerous, monster-like and disruptive.

Moreover, in *Inhuman Race* Leonard Cassuto studies the implications of “racial grotesque” in many cultures. His essay deals with the cultural transformation from subject to object, and the many ways in which civilities have done this with social minorities. For Cassuto, the racial grotesque “is born of the violation of basic categories. It occurs when an image cannot be classified even on the most fundamental level: when it is both one thing and another, and thus neither one (...) Both human and thing, the body occupies two basic categories at once, creating overlap where we expect none to exist.”<sup>20</sup> Blackface caricatures and the Golliwogg character can be considered examples of racial grotesque because they lack a human recognition — racial prosthetics, makeup, or the way they are illustrated, contribute to define these figures as different from what is considered naturally human. Consequently, these images fall outside the human category and contribute to generalise black individuals as tending to humanity, but not completely. This visualisation of hybridity is particularly evident

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<sup>20</sup> Cassuto, Leonard. *The Inhuman Race*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 6



in the Golliwogg, which had a non-human look between the horrific and the ugly, lacking natural characterisation in the way it was drawn.

Interestingly, 19th century blackface minstrelsy would influence the ways in which the first American horror films of the 20th century visualised the black body. This chapter will observe that the general narrative structure of the classical horror film (1930s) was based on the fear of body transformation (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1933) or the revulsion for the anomalous (*Dracula*, 1933); and specifically in the case of black images, the definition of horror problematically coincided with the definition of race —films like *Ingagi* (1930) and *King Kong* (1933) founded their narratives on grotesque and horrific definitions of the black subject.

## 1.2 Studying Blacks and Horror Films (1930): “Blacks in Horror” and “Black Horror”

During the 19th century, blackface minstrelsy represented the most pervasive anti-black imagery, based on stereotypical and regressive visions of black slaves. The image of blackness was artificially constructed to appear ridiculous and grotesque, and in many cases resulted in inhuman and monstrous representations. Monster-like depictions of Blackness become particularly evident in the context of the horror film during the first decades of the twentieth century and the 1930s in particular.

In *Framing Blackness*, film scholar Ed Guerrero explains that African Americans have historically been disadvantaged in the American cinema industry on a general level. “The representation of black people on the commercial screen has amounted to one grand, multifaceted illusion. Blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, devalued, in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of of American society.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the analysis of cinematic misrepresentations of race diversity become more problematic specifically in the genre of horror cinema. Indeed, as Stephen Neale remarks, “what defines the specificity of the horror genre is not violence as such, but its definition of monstrous”<sup>22</sup> — as we will see, horror has both the power of visually creating the idea of monstrous, and the potential to inscribe ideas of racial differences when blackness or other nonwhite groups are constructed as horrific in the narrative. As blackface minstrelsy created grotesque definitions of black people, the horror cinema is essentially based on creating concepts of revulsion and terror, and for this

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<sup>21</sup> Guerrero, Edward. *Framing Blackness, The African American Image in Film*. Temple University Press, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Neale, Stephen. *Genre*. London. British Film Institute, 1980, page 19.

reason it becomes sociopolitically controversial when displaying grotesque perceptions about racial ethnicity.

According to Robin R. Means Coleman in *Horror Noire*, the 1930s can be identified as the decade in which the American cinema industry starts producing the first cinematic horror projects:

“In 35 short years (1895–1930), in America, film went from being the expensive, experimental hobby of inventors to a full-blown commercial industry—“Hollywood.” By the mid-1930s, film production was hailed as a leading industry in the US, with \$2 billion in financial worth. (...) The 1930s was also when the term “horror film” finally entered into the lexicon. Nearly every mainstream film company began producing horror films; however, Universal Studios can be credited with innovating this “Golden Age” of horror films with their now-classic string of monster movies—*Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), and *The Invisible Man* (1933).<sup>23</sup>

This decade was indeed characterised by the so-called “Golden Age of horror”, a period in which films like *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* displayed cult gothic literature on the silver screen. On a theory level, horror is a complex and wide world, and many scholars have studied it trying to pin down a single, universal formula to answer the question: “What is a horror film?”. Paradoxically, Peter Hutchings, in *The Horror Film*, argues that this kind of genre transcends definitions because of its intrinsic, constant evolution: “Which films are horror and which films are not remains as distant as ever... perhaps the most striking and exciting

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<sup>23</sup> Means Coleman, Robin R. *Horror Noire. Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, Taylor and Francis, 2013. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1607197/horror-noire-pdf> p 12.

feature of horror cinema in this respect is that, like one of its own shape-shifting monsters, it is always changing, always in process.”<sup>24</sup>

However, films and media expert Isabel C. Pinedo claims that there are “identifiable elements that define horror in general.”<sup>25</sup> In *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror film Viewing*, she indicates four elements that apply to both classical horror and postmodern horror.<sup>26</sup> “(1) Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world. (2) It violates boundaries. (3) It puts in question the validity of rationality. (4) It produces a bounded experience of fear.”<sup>27</sup> This index of key descriptors effectively functions as a plausible foundation for the identification of terror films. However, the first two elements are the most helpful to explain how race is visually and semiotically constructed in certain instances of motion pictures.

Firstly, horror presents a (1) violent disruption of the everyday world because “the horror narrative is propelled by violence, manifested in both the monster’s violence and the attempts to destroy the monster. (...) Violence disrupts the world of everyday life; it explodes our assumptions about normality.”<sup>28</sup> This means that there is a constant tension between what is conventionally considered the order of things and what is presented as the disorder; and the narrative unfolds in the process of restoring the initial balance. Secondly, Pinedo explains (2)

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<sup>24</sup> Hutchings, Peter. *The Horror Film*, London, Pearson, 2004, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Pinedo, Isabel C. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror film Viewing*. Albany, New York, Sony Press, 1997, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> In *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror film Viewing*, Pinedo expands the study of the horror film introducing a division between “classical horror” and “postmodern horror”, two different phases through which the genre develops in American cinema in the 20th century. The first one is classical horror and indicates the films characterising the timeframe from the 1930s to the 1960s. The second one is linked to the rise of postmodern era, and indicates horror genre from 1960s to 1980s.

<sup>27</sup> Pinedo, Isabel C. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror film Viewing*. Albany, New York, Sony Press, 1997, p. 17

<sup>28</sup> *Recreational Terror*, p. 18

the violation of boundaries as follows: “although violence is a salient feature of the genre, it must be situated in the context of monstrosity, culturally defined as an unnatural force. (...) the anomaly manifests itself as the monster: a force that is unnatural, deviant, and possibly malformed.”<sup>29</sup> This means that horror is able to upset the concept of normality, by introducing a reality that falls beyond our conception of natural, ordinary, or human.

The war between order and disorder, and the implied presence of an anomalous force are ideas familiar to anyone when whatever horror movie comes to mind. However, these issues acquire deep, sociopolitical meanings when a black subject, or the idea of blackness, is represented as a monstrous “other” in the narrative. The display of binary forces like order/disorder, human/inhuman, and good/evil may vehicle racist ideologies about a particular ethnic identity, that in most instances coincides with the nonwhite. Since monstrosity in film establishes ideas of difference and distance, this dynamic is problematic when producers have a hierarchical, white-oriented vision of society. For example, in *King Kong* —analysed by Coleman as a “Blacks in Horror” film — the idea of danger is evoked precisely by the character of Kong, a fictional creature that is visually coded as black and is associated to the ape-like stereotype that colonial white science and several U.S. presidents — for example Thomas Jefferson <sup>30</sup> — associated to dark-skinned individuals in the 18th century. This kind of image-making in horror cinema coincides with a continuation of the racial grotesque, because the image of the black body is manipulated to make African Americans appear uncivilised and unequal to whiteness.

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<sup>29</sup> *Recreational Terror*, p. 21

<sup>30</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Edited by William Peden, University of North Carolina Press, 1982. *JSTOR*, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807899809\\_jefferson](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807899809_jefferson) Accessed 20 Jun. 2022.

However, the involvement of African Americans in horror cinema has also developed and evolved throughout the 20th century, since black filmmakers, actors, and producers have worked to resist oppressive dominant ideologies in the industry and have particularly thrived in the contemporary era. Coleman's *Horror Noire* is the most documented and authoritative essay about the chronological progress of the black image within the horror genre, starting from the racist characterisation of the first Hollywood films and arriving to jump-scare movies that are instead products of African American creativity. For this reason, Coleman introduces in *Horror Noire* two additional categories to identify different types of productions: "Blacks in Horror" films and "Black Horror" film.

The first category, "Blacks in horror" films, is described as: "[presenting] Blacks and Blackness in the context of horror, even if the horror film is not wholly or substantially focused on either one. Nevertheless, these films possess a particular discursive power in their treatment of Blackness."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, these movies either present black characters or deal with the question of race, but the story is not substantially focused on it. Blacks, or the idea of blackness, are present; but the movie does not make the issue of race central or valuable to the movie plot. Usually, they are major studio products, for example *Birth of a Nation* (1915)<sup>32</sup> or *King Kong* (1933) and are directed by white filmmakers. They hold a "particular discursive power in their treatment of Blackness"<sup>33</sup> because they share perspectives, ideologies and cultural beliefs that are not necessarily supportive or protective of African

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<sup>31</sup> *Horror Noire*, page 10

<sup>32</sup> As Coleman explains in *Horror Noire* at page 12, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* was the very first American feature-length film, made in 1915 before the conception of the real "horror film". However, this was the first film to transmogrify black men as horrific, as the characters of Gus and Lynch are presented as ignorant, lustful and narrow-minded. Coleman argues that this film "is not part of the horror genre. However, it introduced and secured in in the American popular imagination a character of quintessential horror that would become a recurring, popular narrative device for instilling fear".

<sup>33</sup> *Horror Noire*, page 10

American legacy. In these films, one can observe how the idea of Blackness was perceived by filmmakers who did not support historical progress of minorities, or did not share a sensibility on Black matters and their representational worth. Basically, these films are “unconscious” portrayals of race.

The second kind of films, “Black Horrors”, are instead race films. These share with the first typology elements of horror, such as monstrosity and disruption, however “they have an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity, in this case Blackness—Black culture, history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humour, aesthetics, style, music, and the like.”<sup>34</sup> Importantly, “Black Horrors” are in most cases “Black Films”, that Cripps identifies as completely black-produced works: “Black films have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, “Black Horrors” are usually products of a black independent company and they offer authentic depictions of African American culture and life; being produced by black creators, they have deep sensitivity and consideration for racial issues.

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<sup>34</sup> *Horror Noire*, page 10

<sup>35</sup> Cripps, Thomas. *Black Film as Genre*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1978, p 11.

### 1.3 *Ingagi* (1930) and *King Kong* (1933): Horrific Distortions of the Black Body

This section takes into account two “Blacks-in-Horror” films of the 1930s decade, *Ingagi* (1930) and *King Kong* (1933) and analyses how these productions transmogrified blackness or non-western cultures as monstrous and horrific. Interestingly, these films were influenced by the so called *jungle trend*, a cinematographic vogue displaying an obsession with tales in which Whites conquer Africa; <sup>36</sup> the tropes are the ethnographic travel, the encounter with black natives viewed as exotic and the intervention of white science on wild nature. However, these productions can also be analysed through the horror dimension, as they represent dark skin both as a fascinating, exotic “otherness” and as a monstrous threat to western societies.

Professor of film studies Rhona J. Berenstein argues that “despite the loose generic relationship between jungle and horror cinema, the representation of race and the depths of the jungle in many examples of the former genre bears a striking similarity to the portrayal of the monster in the latter.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the darkness of the natives’ skin portrayed in jungle films works as a physical marker that defines non-American societies as culturally different in the eye of white audiences, but also functions to inscribe connotations of monstrosity, perversity and inhumanity. Considering the negative connotations given to nonwhite social groups and the association to obscurity they endure in such representations, the films in analysis can be considered controversial “Blacks-in-Horror” examples.

*Ingagi* was launched in theatres in 1930, and was initially marketed as an authentic ethnographic documentary by the Congo Pictures Ltd company.<sup>38</sup> Filmmaker William

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<sup>36</sup> *Horror Noire*, page 12

<sup>37</sup> Berenstein, Rhona J. “White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films”. *Film History*, 1994, Vol. 6, No. 3, Exploitation Film pp. 314-339.

<sup>38</sup> *Horror Noire*, 12



Campbell and the producers promoted it as a real, actual revelation of shocking African tribal customs: “You have heard of such things but you doubted their reality (...) but here in this amazing film are shown for the very first time these amazing facts”<sup>39</sup> were some of the slogans promoting *Ingagi* on the advertising bills. Indeed, the film’s intensive publicity highlighted the presumed grotesque, sexual perversity of Congolese people, especially the women belonging to this culture. Observing the way it was marketed, the general attitude of western culture towards blackness and African lands appears as a spectacular, sensational show of mysterious native traditions, rather than a deep understanding of this cultural diversity.

In the plot of *Ingagi* a team of natural scientists travel to the African region of Congo to investigate the odd rituals of a Congolese tribe that both worships and fears gorillas, animals that in the local language are called “Ingagis”. The ritual is based on sacrificing virgin Congolese women to the beasts once a year. The researchers film and observe the everyday life of the tribe, both in daytime and also in the nighttime. One night, the encounter between the wild beast and a Congolese woman takes place. The scientists are shooting attentively the process of the ritual, with the narrator’s voiceover commenting: “Webster (the cameraman) thought of nothing but his picture; to me the whole thing seemed something inhuman. The gorilla was bragging the woman through the thicket.”<sup>40</sup> What they are seeing becomes unbearable to watch, so they stop filming to kill the animal and save the young woman: “Webster wanted to get it all (...) but the limit had been reached, and at last Swayne fired.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Erish, Andrew. “Illegitimate Dad of ‘Kong.’” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2006. Web. June 20, 2010. <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jan/08/entertainment/ca-ingagi8>.

<sup>40</sup> Red Alone Media (2021, September 2). *Ingagi (1930)* [Video]. YouTube, 1:18:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CY0XS8Thhw>

<sup>41</sup> Red Alone Media, *Ingagi (1930)*, 1:18:54

(1:18:54). The gorilla is killed with shootings of rifle, and showcased to the camera. However, while they were saving the woman's life and killing the animal, the men (and therefore the film's audience) are led to believe that the woman was not simply saved from being eaten by the gorilla, but also from enduring a highly erotic encounter with bestiality. At the end of the film, one last disturbing scene draws the attention: "And then we beheld a last strange vision, as we watched in the thicket where the fallen Ingagi lay. (...) One of the rare half-human women gazed upon the dead monster, lifted its arms and let them fall again, seemingly unable to comprehend. And then, she fled into the jungle."<sup>42</sup> The creature is hardly visible because of the blurry lightnings, but in *Horror Noire*, Coleman argues that the monster in question is a frightening entity: "at the film's end another semi-nude woman emerges from the jungle thicket holding a human baby, but its skin is covered in fur. The infant is described as 'a strange-looking child, seemingly more ape than human.'<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, one can observe that *Ingagi's* film has many characteristics of the jungle trend cycle: an ethnographic interest for lands overseas, the western obsession with the "Black world" and the documentation of the wilderness. However, it can be considered a "Blacks-in-Horror" example because of the horrific depictions and associations given to blackness. As Rhona Berenstein observes: "*Ingagi's* version of darkness recalls the horror film. Horror cinema too, explores the spectacular and terrifying repercussions of physical difference and exploits the relationship between seeing and not seeing (...) the monstrosity of the dark races has a long heritage in white western history."<sup>44</sup> In other words, the outlandish otherness

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<sup>42</sup> Red Alone Media, *Ingagi (1930)*, 1:20:40

<sup>43</sup> *Horror Noire*, 12

<sup>44</sup> Berenstein, Rhona J. *White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films*. Film History, 1994, Vol. 6, No. 3, Exploitation Film pp. 314-339.

typical of jungle films is visualised in the form of a horrific otherness. The whole exotic reality of the Congo — natives, animals, traditions— is portrayed under a frightening, abnormal aura and in stark contrast to white civilisation.

Moreover, this film accomplishes Pinedo's horror paradigms. Firstly, the African tribal sacrifice is a violent disruption of everyday life because it upsets the cultural and social reality considered conventional by the western observers. In the process of documenting a ritual that they consider useful to anthropology, they remain emotionally shocked by its inhumanity and try to solve a conflict by killing the Ingagi and save the African woman. In this way, the scene visualises the African natives as uncivilised and the Americans as culturally illuminated, thus suggesting the binary that Americans are good and blackness (or non-American cultures) is evil. The main source of anxiety and terror is located in the animal, but the meaning is extended to the natives who support and promote this tradition. In this contrastive context, the image of black womanhood is ambiguous: Congolese women are viewed as the victims and are saved from an undesired union with bestiality, however the narrative links them with perversion and popularises the stereotype that black women are lascivious and sexually available; or that they are futureless unless they are saved by white manhood. Disturbingly, the woman of the last scene is even described as "half human", so that black womanhood is not only negatively sexualised but also depicted as grotesque. As Coleman rightly observes in *Horror Noire*, "jungle film *Ingagi* is all about Black women's animalistic sexuality. (...) *Ingagi* is one of the more sickening horror films, not because of the expected horror tropes of blood and gore (there is none of that), but due to its disgusting attack on Black sexuality."<sup>45</sup> Secondly, horror in *Ingagi* is realised also through a trespass of boundaries, that implies a dimension of physical monstrosity. The monster is, for Pinedo, the

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<sup>45</sup> *Horror Noire*, 12

embodiment of an “unnatural force, deviant and possibly malformed” and blurs what would be a human appearance. This concept becomes particularly disturbing and controversial in *Ingagi*, as the scientific assumptions of the 18th and 19th centuries believed that dark-skinned people occupied a liminal position between the man and the ape. For Berenstein, the main marker of this abnormality in *Ingagi* is coded through the natives’ dark skin: “connotations of monstrosity inhere in darkness as a visual trope, an already-coded racial category, and a description of the uncivilised forces that crawl in the jungle and threaten to dislodge white supremacy.”<sup>46</sup> Even if the gorillas are the first source of anxiety and terror, monstrosity is extended to the social category of dark-skinned people. American audiences already believed in the negative stereotypes of blacks as socially inferior or threatening, and the film deploys the physical feature of the dark skin to attribute negative connotations to racial diversities.

The second jungle-horror film where blackness endures a monstrous visualisation is the colossal film *King Kong*, made in 1933 in the wake of the economic success of *Ingagi*’s box office. The formula of “dark” primitives, and “light” superiority was economically profitable in Hollywood industry, and it was *Ingagi*’s success that convinced the film studio RKO to green-light the “Blacks in Horror” film *King Kong*.<sup>47</sup> This more advanced and spectacular film shared many similarities with *Ingagi*: the “film-within-a-film” optical colonisation,<sup>48</sup> the encounter between America and the wild land and the monstrous/exotic insight on blackness. However, it will be observed that the monstrosity of the character Kong, a fantastic ape-like creature, manifests an even more complex representation of blackness because of its association to the historical stereotype of black masculinity.

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<sup>46</sup> *White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness*, 317

<sup>47</sup> *Horror Noire*, p. 12

<sup>48</sup> *Horror Noire*, p.12

Briefly summarising the plot, *King Kong*<sup>49</sup> sees white American filmmaker Carl Denham and his crew traveling to Skull Island (in the film, it is said to be located in the Indian Ocean), where they plan to make a movie featuring a beautiful, blond woman named Ann Darrow, in the context of a wild land. Arriving there, the Americans encounter a tribe of Black natives who, similarly in *Ingagi*'s narrative, offer their virgin women as “brides” to Kong, an ape of fantastic dimensions. Ann Darrow is eventually kidnapped by the natives, who solemnly deliver her to the giant Kong, who falls in love with her and wishes to keep her around — here, it can be observed an evident ideological juxtaposition of black and white. Jack Driscoll, the white hero of the narrative, eventually saves Darrow from the ape's clutches. After a violent rampage in the natives' village to search for Darrow, Kong is captured by the Americans, and put on exhibition on a New York City stage in chains — a detail emblematic of the consumeristic interest of American film industry towards exotic creatures. The “monster” ape escapes from the theatre and begins a violent rampage in the metropolis to search for Darrow, destroying and scaring people who flee in terror. After finding Darrow, the monster climbs atop the Empire State Building. In the end, there is a resolution of the conflict between Americans and the monster, in which Kong is ultimately shot down and killed, executed by military airplanes.

Before analysing *King Kong*'s dimension of horror, it is essential to understand how blackness is coded through the figure of an ape-like creature. White scientific discourses of the mid 19th century supported the inaccurate and racist theory that non-American races occupied a liminal status between the man and the apes,<sup>50</sup> and that black males were thus a

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<sup>49</sup> M. Cooper, E. Schoeadshack. (Directors). *King Kong* (1933). RKO.

<sup>50</sup> 19th century pseudoscientific discourses supporting these ideas are evident in a 1865 book by Josiah C. Nott and George Robins Gliddon, titled *Types of Mankind*.

sexual threat for white women in America. George Frederickson has documented this historical reality in the essay *The Black Image in the White Mind*:

The image of the Negro as (in Ben Tillman's words) 'a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour' did not spring full-blown in the 1890s. Like so many other elements in the racist rhetoric and imagery of 1900, it had its origins in the proslavery imagination, which had conceived of the black man as having a dual nature—he was docile and amiable when enslaved, ferocious and murderous when free. The notion that blacks could be seized by uncontrollable fits of sexual passion was derived in part from the traditional picture of Africa as a land of licentiousness.<sup>51</sup>

As Frederickson states, the racist paranoia over black masculinity as primitive and sexually unhinged is a well documented reality in American history, and existed since before slavery. Especially in the antebellum era, it was widely believed that black slaves had a duplicitous essence, one submissive and one brutal. For this reason, *King Kong* has complex implications for the perception of black manhood, and many film scholars have discussed the concept of monstrosity of Kong carefully, as it is reminiscent of these ominous historical discriminations. Since the main display of *King Kong* is an ambiguous bond between an ape-like monster and white womanhood, film experts think that Kong was an explicit representation of blackness, and more specifically, a monstrous emblem of black masculinity. James Snead, in *White Screens/Black Images* studies in depth the codification of Blackness in *King Kong* and observes the sexual and political ideology that the monster mythifies:

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<sup>51</sup> Frederickson, George M., *The Black Image in The White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York and San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971), p 276

King Kong provides an especially telling example of the use of the devices of mythification (...) because of its blatant linkage of the idea of the black with that of the monster. “Monstrousness” is a complex dimension of Hollywood film (...) The Hollywood monster film allows, among other things, a safe outlet of such sexual desires in a surrogate form, and a vicarious experience—pleasurable and horrific—of the chaos that such a release would bring about in reality.<sup>52</sup>

Also Coleman observes sexualisation through the ape figure, and this works particularly through juxtapositions, contrasts and stereotypical references:

If Ingagi prompted audiences to consider the repulsive sexual mores of Black women, then *King Kong* extended the assault to metaphorically implicate Black men through the imagery of the big black ape in pursuit of a White woman. (...) Kong is “blackened,” or racially coded, when juxtaposed against the presence of Whites in the film. Kong is the colour black, emerging from a “lower,” primitive culture in which he is surrounded by Black natives—or mini-Kongs when they dress up like apes to worship their big Kong. The soundtrack that accompanies scenes with Kong and other Blacks in the film consists of drums, an auditory cue that is typical of jungle films and the appearance of Black natives.<sup>53</sup>

From these observations, *King Kong* as a horror film becomes a space of analysis for the political and sexual anxieties that blackness evoked in the racist discourses of 20th century American society. Applying Pinedo’s paradigms, the trespass of boundaries into monstrosity

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<sup>52</sup> Snead, James. *White Screens, Black Images. Hollywood from the Dark Side*. Taylor and Francis, London and New York, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Horror Noire*, 12

is realised by the image-making of Kong not only as a grotesque entity, different from humans, but also as explicitly reminiscent of the stereotyped black physique. James Snead highlights that Kong is “blackened” — this means that dark skin, like in *Ingagi*, functions to define the monstrosity and abnormality of the monster of Skull Island. The image-making can be considered a form of racial grotesque, as it marks, highlights and insists on visual characteristics associated to African Americans. Moreover, the “blackened” monster represents a “violent disruption” into New York’s urban reality. Feeling displaced, he brings physical and emotional panic in the city. The audience sees New York disrupted by an entity that comes from an exotic, remote land, so that through the blackened monster the film delivers the message that nonwhites are not at the same level of whiteness and cannot be accepted into the system of civilisation and economy. The disruption is resolved through a binary conflict between a biased concept of good and evil: in the dramatic final scene, Kong is killed and shot down by military airplanes, whose main goal is to save Ann Darrow — as she symbolizes the future and preservation of white womanhood. This scene displays the rooted ideology that white women are pure — in contrast to black women who are often associated with promiscuity in Hollywood — and need protection from black destructive sexuality. The narrative also accomplishes the classical horror’s scheme of elimination of the danger, as the military forces manage to shot the monster down and reestablish the social balance that is made of white Americans only and is guided by leading white men.

To sum up, both *Ingagi* and *King Kong* are meaningful “Blacks-in-Horror” films which bespeak of the representational control that Hollywood placed over Blackness in the 1930s. The image of the dark skin is commodified in the realm of jungle-horror films, and is depicted both as an exotic spectacle and a horrific, threatening force.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LONG WAY FROM INVISIBILITY TO VISIBILITY (1950s-1960s)

#### **2.1 Absence of Blacks in the 1950s and the Night of the Living Dead (1968)**

The decades 1950s and 1960s have been analysed by Coleman mostly as a period of “Black invisibility,”<sup>54</sup> in which images of blackness did not evolve into uplifting representations, but almost completely faded from the horror scene, and this bespeaks of the difficulty that black creators had in reaching the audience, in a system where the industry of motion pictures was still largely monopolised by white Hollywood. On the one hand, the long era of explicitly racist, monstrous and primitive depictions of blackness was finally declining; on the other hand, Hollywood invested now in terror images that reflected the paranoia of the Cold War — such as aliens, space creatures, and atomic threats— in which African Americans were absent, or scarcely present. As the author of *Horror Noire* argues:

As the 1950s emerged, Black characters were a very scarce commodity in horror. What had in the past constituted “Black” labor, such as domestics or plantation workers, became less necessary in an era of film preoccupied with more scientific and extraterrestrial threats. For these challenges, White and, notably, often female characters would assume the role of aides.<sup>55</sup>

Plus, Coleman uses the expression “commodity” to imply that the film industry had not ceased to be a commercial, lucrative enterprise that promoted film contents that resulted more marketable and economically profitable. Representations of blackness within contexts of

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<sup>54</sup> *Horror Noire*, 14

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 14

horror are explicative of the way race diversities were perceived in society —obscure, threatening, or inferior — but also of the way they were excluded from American discourse of power, technology, and advancement. Consequently, the absence of blackness in the cultural scenario of the 1950s and 1960s is as meaningful as it was its racist demonisation in the early years of American cinema.

The film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1950), a cult-classic sci-fi horror, functions as an example for black invisibility in these decades. The plot sees a shocking, horrific disruption of a serene town, but there are no black images or characters seen as the threat; rather, the horror effect is developed in the spectacular display of aliens and clones. Violent disruption and monstrosity are displayed in the form of extraterrestrial beings, arriving from space to the fictional town of Santa Mira, to kill humans and clone them in order to create emotionally neutralised beings, or “pod people.”<sup>56</sup> There are no references to Blacks neither as monsters, nor as secondary characters, in the resolution of the war between good and evil side. Seven years later, *The Giant Claw* (1957) presents the same lack of interest in Black characterisations and race inclusion in the synopsis.<sup>57</sup> In this film, mundane normality is disrupted by the arrival of an enormous, alien and bird-like monster with anti-matter energy, that cannot even be destroyed with atomic weapons. The conflict between balance and unbalance is accomplished by the clash between the white scientists and intellectuals and the otherworldly threat. On the one hand, this kind of movies show that black images were no longer associated to ideas of danger, and Hollywood was overcoming racist stereotypes. On the other hand, they show how science stories only included white actors and horror/sci-fi films did not consider blackness.

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<sup>56</sup> Siegel, D. (Director). (1950). *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. [Film]. Walter Wanger Productions.

<sup>57</sup> Sears, F. F. (Director). (1957). *The Giant Claw*. [Film]. Clover Productions.

Nevertheless, after half a century of controversial misrepresentations and omissions in the industry, the involvement of Blackness in horror history was about to change at the end of 1960s. The year 1968 marked an unexpected enhancement of black participation in terror films, with George Romero's movie *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).<sup>58</sup> *Night* was a low-budget, independent production, which started with an investment of 114.000 dollars and astonishingly hit the box office with 30 million; an outcome that paved the way for Romero's successful career. *Night* is a zombie-horror movie, emblematic of the shift of classical horror into post-modern horror — it is one of the first films to introduce what Pinedo calls “the repudiation of narrative closure”<sup>59</sup> — which marked a change in the way blackness was depicted in frightening stories. The horror narrative revolves around the character of Ben, a black man who is not only on the good side in the elimination of monstrosity, but is also the main character. The film is classified by Coleman as a “Blacks-in-Horror” movie, because it was not a black film in the narrow sense,<sup>60</sup> and Ben's race is never mentioned explicitly by any of the other characters. However, Romero's decision to cast a nonwhite person as the pivot of the story determined a breakthrough in the way in which blacks were traditionally portrayed in the genre.

The plot opens in a cemetery in the countryside of Pittsburgh, where siblings Barbara and Johnny are visiting a grave. They are attacked by a man in a suit, that was apparently normal from afar but who is actually a zombie, or “ghoul.” Johnny fatally gets killed in the fight

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<sup>58</sup> Romero, G. (1968) (Director). *Night of The Living Dead* [Film] Image Ten.

<sup>59</sup> Recreational Terror, p 29. *Night of the Living Dead* is analysed by Isabel C. Pinedo as the emblem of the evolution from classical horror into postmodern horror, since this film introduces innovative terror elements and the so-called “repudiation of narrative closure”. As a matter of fact, the film's ending deviates from a comfortable restoration of the known world. The heroes of the story collapse instead of triumphing on the evil.

<sup>60</sup> As we clarified in section 1.2, Thomas Cripps argues that “Black films have a black producer, director, and writer, or Black performers.”

against the aggressor, and only Barbara manages to escape, finding refuge in a farmhouse nearby. There, she meets Ben, visually the only black man in the story, who is trying to survive from other zombies too. While locking themselves in the house to survive, Barbara remains traumatised and slips into a catatonic state, while Ben immediately takes action. He boards up the house trying to block the advancing zombies, locates a rifle in a wardrobe and actually uses it to kill the monsters outside and also finds out that lighting fire is an effective strategy to drive them away. Ben also takes initiative to switch on both radio and TV to listen to the news. A radio station broadcasts that authorities are working to save citizens from what they call “an epidemic of mass murder being committed by a virtual army of unidentified assassins.”<sup>61</sup> Unknown to Ben and Barbara, other survivors are hiding in the cellar of the house, and eventually, the group emerges. There is Tom and Judy, a young couple; and the Cooper family, Harry and Helen with their daughter Karen. Immediately, tension for leadership arises between the two men: Ben, “a highly competent, take-action kind of guy, and Harry, a sulky, angry man who wants authority and respect.”<sup>62</sup> They have opposite plans of action — Harry suggests that the group should lock inside the cellar until authorities arrive to help, on the contrary Ben suggests to escape from the house as soon as possible and plans that the group get away in a nearby, but gas-less truck. Eventually, this plan goes awry: Tom and Judy are killed in the explosion of the truck, Harry cowers inside the house and leaves purposely Ben locked out to fight off the zombies alone. Ben forces his way into the house, and after momentarily unite to repair the breach in the house, he beats Harry for having tried to leave him outside. The conflict between the two leading men of the story reaches its climax when Harry tries to steal Ben’s shotgun and they fight in order to get the gun. Ben is

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<sup>61</sup> Kurbel TV. *Night of The Living Dead, Full Movie, 1968 Duane Jones in Night of the Living Dead, TIFF 2019* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yA5kk8LB7BQ>. 32:34.

<sup>62</sup> *Horror Noire*, 14

able to take it from Harry, shooting and deathly wounding him. In the end, zombies start to invade the house and everyone is killed, eaten or taken away. Only Ben manages to survive, by locking himself into the cellar and waiting for the horde to leave the house, and remains there until dawn. The final of the film is unexpected: in the morning, Ben emerges from the cellar to the sound of human voices. The town's police and a posse of locals are rounding up the zombies and killing them. As Ben makes his way outside, he is suddenly shot in the head by the posse members, who mistake Ben for a zombie.

*Night of the Living Dead* introduces an innovation in the depictions of blackness in terror movies, because race is visualised not as the source of monstrosity, but rather through an assertive and decisive character. The only black man in a group of white people, Ben is represented as being part of the good side and is the one who takes initiative and action in the elimination of the evil side — the zombie horde. Tananarive Due has commented on Ben's characterisation in an interview at the Toronto Film Festival (2019):

I am sure that audiences in 1968 were not expecting to see him. He was basically the rare Black lead in a Horror film, or any major film, up to that point; and he is the only Black actor in the film. Romero is introducing many things at once (...) but Ben —Duane Jones —stands up for a lot of viewers, because he is not just that he happens to be a Black guy, he is a very assertive Black guy.<sup>63</sup>

The character of Ben deviates from stereotypical images seen in the 1930s which codified race difference as the monster of the story, and also challenges black invisibility of the 1950s and 1960s. Dark skin is no longer represented as the horrific of the story, rather it is depicted

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<sup>63</sup> TIFF Originals (2019, February 6). *The Rare Black Lead in Horror: Duane Jones in Night of the Living Dead, TIFF 2019* [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbaKJs\\_NaT4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbaKJs_NaT4). 1:08

through a main leading character. As Coleman notices, blackness is not reduced to evil references or stereotypical tropes, and the monsters are not codified as Blacks:

*Night of the Living Dead* did not implicate Blackness in the evil that is happening. These zombies are not Black, and do not emerge from Black places such as Africa, the Caribbean, or some Louisiana bayou; nor do they rise as a result of some odd Black Voodoo ritual. Rather, *Night* used the 1950s film habit of placing the blame on (presumably) White scientists and alien invasion.<sup>64</sup>

*Night* locates the monstrosity and the disruption in the zombie figure — a trope already present in many horror films in the 1940s. Zombies are interpreted by Pinedo as disruptive entities, for their existential absurdity and lack of human integrity. They violate boundaries because they stand in-between the categories of life and death, and embody the monstrous paradox of being “undead.” Pinedo calls them “fusion figures”:

A fusion figure combines contradictory elements in an unambiguous identity. Examples include composite figures of life and death (the creature in *Frankenstein*, 1931; the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968), self and other (the scientist-fly in *The Fly*, 1958, the demonically possessed girl in *The Exorcist*, 1973). In contrast, a fission figure combines contradictory elements in two identities connected over time by the same body.<sup>65</sup>

The terror effect of *Night* staples to a form of monstrosity and grotesque that is not codified as Black. On the contrary, Blackness is presented as a resolved, positive person in the story’s

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<sup>64</sup> *Horror Noire*, 14

<sup>65</sup> Pinedo, Isabel C. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror film Viewing*. Albany, New York, Sony Press, 1997, p. 17

resolution. Ben is inventive, as he devises rational plans of action to annihilate the undead and restore the natural order of things: he is the first to locate the shotgun in the house and bravely uses it to kill some of the ghouls which are trying to enter, he finds out that lighting fire is effective in sending them away and is also the one who controls technology tools — radio and TV— to remain updated and connected to the world outside. Moreover, although Ben’s dark skin is never mentioned by the other characters, scholars have long debated that the film carries implicit racial ideologies, especially if one consider the contrast between him and Harry and the symbolism surrounding these two characters. The scene where Harry tries to encroach Ben’s shotgun is reminiscent of the tensions between the white establishment and the Black empowerment of the Civil Rights movement. The gun symbolises power, authority, and masculinity and delivers an idea of tension between two opposite political forces. Plus, the sequence of Harry leaving Ben outside can be read as a critique of white bigotry. Ben seems “between two different kinds of monsters, both possessing diminishing humanity. This, too, is a unique turn in the film as the representation of monstrous difference typically functions to highlight the favourable, enlightened traits of White characters.”<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* stands as an achievement for the involvement and participation of Blacks into scary films. The only black man in the group of victims is not codified through negative connotations, nor is he associated with obscure forces as it was in *King Kong* or *Ingagi*. Instead, the grotesque element lies in the figure of the zombies, and Ben not only is active in the elimination of this danger, but is also the most resourceful mind in the resolution of the conflict between good and evil. The image of the “leading hero” in *Night* is very important for African American characterisation, as it contributes to innovative

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<sup>66</sup> *Horror Noire*, 14

and modern perception of Blackness in the genre, no longer viewed as the evil in the genre, but rather as on a different level of participation.



## 2.2 Blaxploitation Achievements: *Blacula* (1972) and *Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde* (1978)

In the 1970s, references to blacks within the genre further evolved, especially during the years of the so-called “Blaxploitation Era”, a cinematographic vogue spanning from 1968 to 1974<sup>67</sup> which led to an unprecedented thriving of “Black Horror” productions. It will be observed that William Crain’s films *Blacula* (1972) and *Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde* (1978), authentic black films mostly casting African American actors, re-inscribe classical white horror icons within innovative black narratives, to mirror the sociopolitical experience of the black community in the early 1970s. These two movies use the monstrous element of “twoness,” or duplicity, of classics *Dracula* and *Mr. Hyde* to portray multifaceted and nostalgic monsters, metaphors of the racial struggle of the time.

The Blaxploitation Era — an epithet adding “Black” to the concept of “exploitation” films<sup>68</sup> — has been studied by scholars as a cinematographic current that arose on the historical backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism of the 1960s. In this political turmoil, the black community was fighting for liberation, racial equality and social advancement in the United States, and the theme of black pride was at the centre of media attention.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, these audiences demanded more humanised and dignified representations of themselves in filmmaking, with which they could empathise. The need for more developed black characterisations onscreen resulted in the film industry’s advancement

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<sup>67</sup> Guerrero, Edward. *Framing Blackness, The African American Image in Films*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1993. Page 69.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson, Tre’vell. “A Look Back at the Blaxploitation Era through 2018 Eyes”, *Los Angeles Times*, June 2018. Anderson argues the the term “blaxploitation” — a combination of “black” and “exploitation” — was coined by Junius Griffin in 1972, when Griffin was president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP.

<sup>69</sup> Benshoff, Harry M. “Blaxploitation Horror Films. Reappropriation or Reinscription?” *Cinema Journal*, Winter, 2000, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 31-50. University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies, 33.

of African American cinematic portrayals. Black-centred narratives, alongside revolutionary icons of social power, started to appear on the silver screen with blaxploitation films. As Harry Benshoff comments,

Blaxploitation films depicted a stronger, more militant image of African Americans who triumphed over (frequently racist) white antagonists. As one black critic succinctly put it, “Black heroes were winning and community identification was intense.” The effect of this change on the construction of cinematic narrative was to flip the terms of the hierarchical white-black opposition rather than necessarily oppose it.<sup>70</sup>

According to Benshoff, blaxploitation filmmaking was a positive occasion for black actors and filmmakers to challenge static representations of race with more assertive, empowered characters. For example, the protagonists of touchstone films *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Schaft* (1971) are symbols of racial advancement, as they are depicted as revolutionaries or detectives against a corrupted system.<sup>71</sup>

However, analysing the era also in its fallacies, film scholar Ed Guerrero has observed that the boom of blaxploitation films was only apparently uplifting for African American images, and did not benefit black creativity in the long term. In *Framing Blackness*, the author observes three main favourable causes that led to the rise of this temporary, but innovative period. Firstly, the rising social and political consciousness of Blacks after the 1960s; secondly, the subsequent general dissatisfaction with Hollywood's continuous demeaning of

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<sup>70</sup> Benshoff, Harry M. “Blaxploitation Horror Films. Reappropriation or Reinscription?” 33.

<sup>71</sup> Sung, Wendy. “Mainstream African American Cinema. The Struggle for Black Images in Hollywood”. Article, on *Academia*. [academia.Edu](https://www.academia.edu).

African Americans in films; and, thirdly, the coincidental financial crisis of Hollywood industry at the end of the 1960s:

The mounting pressure of these conditions coincided with the near economic collapse of the film industry at the end of the 1960s. (...) This forced Hollywood to respond to the rising expectations of African Americans by making black-oriented futures in order to solve the film industry and financial problems. (...) And when Hollywood no longer needed its cheap, black product line for its economic survival, it reverted to traditional and openly stereotypical modes of representation.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently, even if blaxploitation films were empowering blackness on the silver screen, this change soon revealed to be temporary. Once Hollywood regained its economic stability, these kind of icons were immediately supplanted by other top-studio traditional narratives and the same stereotypes of the past. Although the era of blaxploitation films came to an end, it served to showcase black talents to the world,<sup>73</sup> and was deemed by cinema critics an impacting moment in the history of black representations, particularly for in the field of horror, as this cycle of films was prolific also in terror filmmaking.

In blaxploitation horror films, mainstream or white monsters, such as Dracula, Frankenstein or Mr Hyde were purposefully transformed into Black Power symbols.<sup>74</sup> William Crain's *Blacula* (1972), and *Dr Black and Mr Hyde* (1978) were the most successful and influential films of this kind<sup>75</sup> — they were both authentic Black Horrors, made by a Black filmmaker.

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<sup>72</sup> Guerrero, Edward. *Framing Blackness*, 70

<sup>73</sup> *Horror Noire*, 15

<sup>74</sup> The Count Dracula Society called it “the most horrifying film of the decade,” and the Academy of Horror Films and Science Fiction Films named it the “Best Horror Film of 1972.”

<sup>75</sup> Benschhoff, Harry. “Blaxploitation Horror Films”, 38

These two films present, indeed, traditional monsters of the 1930s tradition — Dracula and Mr Hyde— and convert them into a modern narrative of African American racial and social identity. Henry Benshoff has argued that this sort of films usually present unconventional versions of the concept of monstrosity and duplicity, that function not only to provoke shock, but also to deepen and value the black experience. “In blaxploitation horror films, the monster often becomes an allegory for the historical experience of African Americans. *Blacula*’s vampirism is an explicit metaphor for slavery (...) the curse of vampirism becomes the lingering legacy of racism.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Benshoff underscores the value of the monster’s twoness, evident in the identity’s duplicity: “many of the films also play out interesting variations on W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of twoness in the African American psyche. As Ronald Green put it, African Americans face the possibility of two social identities at the same time, whose relations to each other are strained (...) each black American must resolve individually for herself or himself.”<sup>77</sup> We can analyse Benshoff’s analysis of monstrosity and duplicity in both films.

*Blacula*, released in 1972,<sup>78</sup> recreated indeed a horror classic in the image of blackness, and explored the effects of racism alongside the need to remember the history of slavery.<sup>79</sup> The film, almost completely casting African Americans (William Marshall as the main character) applies the iconic narrative of Dracula to a modern, satirical, and black-focused reality.

Briefly refreshing the plot, the story dates back to the year 1780, when the African prince Mamuwalde is traveling with his wife Luva to Transylvania for a reunion with Count

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<sup>77</sup> Ibidem, 39

<sup>78</sup> Crain, William (1972) Director. *Blacula* [Film]. Power Productions.

<sup>79</sup> *Horror Noire*, 15

Dracula. Mamuwalde asks Dracula to stop the slave trade, from which Dracula has been financially profiting. Dracula reveals to be not only a vampire, but an aggressive racist as well. It is important to notice that the character of Mamuwalde is black, while Dracula is white — the film is provocative in debunking racist tropes. Dracula bites Mamuwalde and puts the spell of vampirism to the prince, who is also renamed “Blacula”—a discriminatory variation of his White vampire “master’s” name. Dracula entombs Mamuwalde in a coffin and leaves him to suffer forever from blood thirst; Luva, not bitten with vampirism, presumably dies soon after. Mamuwalde/Blacula remains entombed for two centuries. In 1972, Dracula’s abandoned Transylvanian castle is put up for public sale, and the coffin in which Blacula is entombed is bought and auctioned off by two collectors, McCoy and Schaffer, who transfer it from Europe to Los Angeles. At this point, Blacula awakens in the modern world. Still enslaved by vampirism, he immediately kills and feeds on the couple of collectors. At McCoy's funeral, Blacula spies on mourning friends Tina Williams, her sister Michelle, and Dr. Gordon Thomas, a pathologist — who soon suspects that McCoy’s death is caused by vampirism. Blacula believes that Tina is the reincarnation of Luva, and after the funeral starts following her, unintentionally frightening her and making her run away. He is hit by a taxi cab and kills the driver, turning her into a vampire (also the image of a woman driver was unconventional for the time in which the film was released). Blacula continues to wander in the city, killing and feeding on various people he encounters. He shows up at the nightclub where Tina, Michelle and Thomas are celebrating Michelle’s birthday to return the purse Tina had dropped while running away. Meanwhile, Thomas learns from a phone call that McCoy's body has gone missing. Blacula asks Tina to see him again the following evening, and the photographer Nancy takes a photograph of them together. Soon after, Blacula kills Nancy and destroys the photo she just developed, because the photo shows

Blacula conspicuously absent—as vampires disappear on photographs. The next evening, Blacula visits Tina at her house and shares the story of how Dracula enslaved him, and how he was cursed with vampirism; he and Tina get sentimentally close. In the meanwhile, Thomas, Lt. Peters and Michelle are investigating on the trail of the victims, looking for the murderer. They discover that Schaffer’s corpse is now a vampire, and many people have been killed or have been turned into vampires, so they start to cooperate with authorities to solve the mystery and find the assassin. One evening, Thomas, Michelle, and Tina are enjoying drinks at the club, when Blacula arrives to pick Tina up. Thomas questions Blacula about vampires, saying the police are searching for the vampire's coffin. Blacula and Tina understand that they must leave. Later, Thomas investigates in Nancy's house, finding a photo negative of Tina standing in front of the invisible Blacula. He learns that Blacula is the vampire, and that Tina is with him. Thomas and the officers start searching for Blacula, who is escaping and hiding. After McCoy is seen walking the streets of Los Angeles, Thomas, Peters, and police officers find Blacula’s hideout, where they locate a nest of several vampires, including McCoy, and destroy them. Blacula is with Tina and hypnotises her into going to another hideout at a nearby underground chemical plant, while Thomas and the police pursue him. Blacula kills several of the officers, but one of them accidentally shoots and mortally wounds Tina. To save her life, Blacula transforms her into a vampire. Blacula fights the police, one of whom locates the coffin and alerts Thomas and Peters. However, Peters kills Tina with a stake, believing that Blacula would be in the coffin instead. Devastated, Blacula climbs the stairs to the roof, where the sunlight destroys him.

*Blacula* is first and foremost an authentic “Black Horror” film that applies a classic to a focused black reality. It values the African American image because of the application of the

cult of Dracula to a dark-skinned character, who appears as the monstrous main character but also as a modern, and melancholic personality. Mamuwalde/Blacula is the disruptive and monstrous force of the terror dynamic, however his characterisation is deepened through a wide range of human feelings — he lives an eternal love story, feels displaced when he reappears two centuries after in Los Angeles, and conveys anger when killing his victims — this brutality reminds of the “Black macho” culture typical of blaxploitation films.<sup>80</sup> On the level of horror film, Blacula embodies monstrosity for the fact that he lacks human characteristics. In fact, he is a vampire who transcends the normal cycle of life, and is unfit for the modern world he awakens into after two centuries. The narrative develops forward in the resolution of the disruption he is bringing, as he chaotically unravels the urban balance of Los Angeles. However, his monstrosity functions as a metaphor for the social and human condition of black lives demanding recognition and liberation in the political context of the 1970s. As Harry Benshoff comments, “central to these films’ re-appropriation of the monster as an empowering black figure is the softening, romanticising, and even valorising of the monster.”<sup>81</sup> Even if Blacula brings social and emotional chaos in the normal world, the audience empathises with him because of his status of outsider and his tragic epilogue in pursuing the love of his life. His condition of vampire is an allegory for the condition of outcasts, and is reminiscent of the black struggle of being included in the political power. The blaxploitation horror’s monster “often becomes an allegory for the historical experience of African Americans,”<sup>82</sup> and Blacula’s vampirism works as an explicit metaphor for slavery. In *Blacula* this is evident when Dracula, a white horror symbol, puts the spell of vampirism on

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<sup>80</sup> Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York, Dial Press, 1978.

<sup>81</sup> Benshoff, Harry. “Blaxploitation Horror Films”, 37.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, 38.

the African prince Mamuwalde, ignoring his plea to stop slavery in Africa. This scene is powerful in criticising the supremacy of Dracula, wealthy and racist, against the honesty of Mamuwalde, who instead represents a noble African sovereign trying to liberate oppressed peoples from slavery.

Moreover, *Blacula* reflects also the “twoness,” or duplicity, that Benschhoff has noted in this kind of films. Duplicity is a peculiar terror characteristic of both classical and postmodern monsters, in particular vampires, as it blurs contradictory conditions —life and death— in the same identity. However, in *Blacula* it functions to remind the audience of more complex issues, for example the social condition of the African American individual, who lives “two social identities at the same time (...) whose relations to each other are strained.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the status of Mamuwalde seen at the beginning changes drastically, and the curse transforms him in a completely different person in the rest of the narrative. The curse of vampirism/slavery forces him to leave his condition of African prince and his name, to become Blacula — another identity and name chosen by someone who claims to be his master and racially defines him as inferior. Consequently, Mamuwalde changes not only on a “horror level” losing his natural condition of human, but also on a social level, losing his authority, identity and even the timeframe to which he belongs. The split of identity that happens to Blacula can be read as a reference to the real-life condition of black Americans, who strive to harmonise their ethnic origins to the political inclusion within the United States.

Likewise, the analysis of nostalgic monstrosity and duplicity can be applied to *Dr Black and Mr Hyde* (1978) another “Black Horror” by Crain that functions on the same blaxploitation horror formula. The famous cult *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931) is reshaped into a black-

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<sup>83</sup> Benschhoff, Harry. “Blaxploitation Horror Films”, 39



focused narrative, and duplicity depicts not only the psychological complexity of the African American psyche — as Dr. Pryde navigates into two different socioeconomic spaces throughout the film and has mixed feelings about his status evolution— but also as a metaphor of white and black dichotomy.<sup>84</sup>

In the plot, Dr. Pryde is an African American doctor who works in a free clinic in the poor community of Watts and is experimenting a promising treatment for the fatal diseases from which members of this town, especially female prostitutes, are suffering. Pryde has spent a troubled childhood in Watts, but has become a professional scientist and now lives in the affluent white environment of UCLA. The film presents two “homes” for Dr. Pryde: the first is where he works and lives, a mansion home in an exclusive community; the second, his hometown of Watts. It is revealed in the film that Dr. Pryde’s boyhood home was a brothel, managed by a presumably white environment, and his mother, a maid, worked hard there until she died for a liver condition. Coleman argues that the Pryde’s residing outside of Watts signifies “not an escape, but a symbolic act of reclamation,”<sup>85</sup> because the protagonist has managed to elevate his economic position from poverty to wealth, and now can afford the same luxuries as whites. Without finding anyone on which testing the treatment, Dr. Pryde ends up testing it on himself, with disastrous side effects: the drug turns Dr. Pryde into a *Doppelgänger* of himself, specifically a white-skinned, ashen-faced, blue-eyed killer monster (presumably Mr. Hyde, though he is never called this in the movie). In the film, there is an emblematic scene of Pryde looking into his reflection in the mirror before testing the drug, a moment that conveys that the personality of the protagonist is going to split into two opposite

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<sup>84</sup> Benshoff, Harry. “Blaxploitation Horror Films”, 39

<sup>85</sup> *Horror Noire*, 15

parts. While transformed into his white *Doppelgänger*, he makes his way into the inner-city, going to Watts not to cure but to kill anyone he meets. Linda, a prostitute for which the doctor had previously fallen for, is on the list of the white monster of Pryde. After assassinating numerous people in the wretched town of Watts and having tried to kill Linda, Pryde escapes from the police who are searching for him, and when the police arrives, the monster climbs to the top of the Watts Towers, with helicopters circling overhead — a scene reminiscent of the ending in *King Kong*. The police shoot the Dr. Pryde monster, who ultimately precipitates to his death. Previously, it was observed that duplicity is a typical feature of 1930s monsters, in particular for Isabel C. Pinedo when a figure combines two contradictory elements in two identities connected over time by the same body is a fission figure;<sup>86</sup> and since the identities of Pryde are divided and disconnected, his monstrosity results to be a fission one. Inversely, *Blacula* is a fusion figure, as it unites the existential paradox of vampires —life and eternity — in the same person. *Dr Black and Mr Hyde*'s storyline makes use of horror duplicity to deliver ideological messages. While in *Blacula* duplicity functions to show the complexity of the African American psyche, in *Dr Black* it symbolizes the dichotomous relation between the black and white communities, and the problematic position of Dr Pryde between these two realities — indeed, he is a doctor who has ambitiously worked his way up to a white elite, and has changed his social status. The horrific transformation of Pryde functions to criticise the bigotry of the white system, indeed Pryde's monstrous *Doppelgänger* is racialized with white codifications. As Cynthia Erb observes, "*Dr. Black and Mr Hyde* inverts the traditional dichotomy, so that black is the norm and white has extremely destructive

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<sup>86</sup> Pinedo, Isabel C. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasure of Horror film Viewing*. Albany, New York, Sony Press, 1997, p. 17

connotations. When Pride changes, he goes from being a handsome black man to a grotesque white monster.”<sup>87</sup>

Summarising the film period of the 1970s, it can be concluded that the image of blackness in the genre finds deepened and more complex characterisation in the Blaxploitation Era, especially through the horror element of duplicitous monstrosity. In particular, with *Blacula* and *Dr Black and Mr Hyde* Crain recuperates mainstream horror classics to convey a sociopolitical message to American society, and underlines the oppression put on African American social development. In the second chapter, it will be analysed how the element of duplicity is reprised and further advanced in Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019), to accomplish an even more complex critique of the Post-Racial rhetoric, and reveal the many contradictions behind the apparent inclusive system of American politics.

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<sup>87</sup> Erb, Cynthia. *Tracking King Kong. A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit. 2009. Page 568.

### 2.3 Systemic Omissions Again: *The Shining* (1980) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)

In the 1980s, depictions of blacks in the context of terror filmmaking did not evolve into uplifting characterisations or central roles. Instead, blackness either endured a systematic omission from horror movies or was limited to secondary and self-sacrificial characters, for example the controversial “Magical Negro” stereotype — a common depiction in American filmmaking defined with magical powers and using them exclusively to help a white protagonist.<sup>88</sup> In particular, a case of omission is exemplified by the popular *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), while the stereotype of black magic is observed in Stanley Kubrick’s *Shining* (1980).

In this decade, films, television and media generally displayed a cultural and geographical dichotomy between the urban world — ideologically and visually associated to decaying inner-cities, criminal activities and drug addiction,<sup>89</sup> and white suburbs — areas representing wealth, social exclusivity and progress in the cultural imaginary of the American middle and upperclass. Notably, the urban space was also deemed to be the site where the underclass and black/nonwhite citizens, two groups often understood to be the same, were destined to live.<sup>90</sup> Depictions of wretched cities can be found exemplified in many action films of this decade, like *Death Wish II* (1982), *Scarface* (1983), and *Robocop* (1987), which reflected a cultural/spatial division between the urban chaos of the cities and the implied “white flight” of the upperclass to idyllic residential areas. This process, evident in cinematic

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<sup>88</sup> Farley, Christopher John, “That Old Black Magic”, *Time*. Archived from the original on November 4, 2007. Retrieved February 3, 2007. <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,998604,00.html>

<sup>89</sup> *Horror Noire*, p. 16

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16

representations, was a socioeconomic reality in American society, that Eric Avila explains in *Dark City*:

“White flight” names the process by which American cities of the postwar period saw increasing racial segregation and socioeconomic fragmentation. As racialised minorities concentrated in American inner cities during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, millions of “white” Americans took to new suburban communities to preserve their whiteness. Through the postwar collusion of federal policy, local land development strategies, and the popular desire to live in racially exclusive and homogenous neighborhoods, “chocolate cities” and “vanilla suburbs” became the spatial and racial paradigm of American life during the 1950s.<sup>91</sup>

According to Avila, the “white flight” was not only an economic fragmentation, but also a new form of racial segregation. White Americans moved uptown primarily to escape the “culture of poverty” unraveling in the cities, but also because they aimed to “preserve their whiteness.” This process of race and class division was mirrored in the way social groups and geographical areas were represented in motion pictures and cinematic images of the 1980s. Indeed, black individuals usually appeared in films in association with ideas of violence and crime of the inner-city, and “played a central imagistic role in inciting racial, spatial, and underclass fears.”<sup>92</sup> However, depictions of black life would become invisible in the horror industry of this decade. As a matter of fact, horror films of this era were mostly interested in

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<sup>91</sup> Avila, Eric. “Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America”. In *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2001, pp. 52-54.

<sup>92</sup> *Horror Noire*, p. 16

portraying the charming, yet mysterious, aura of white suburbia, and the unexpected dangers lurking in these apparently safe areas.

It will be observed, that the horror industry in the 1980s would place the attention on how it was possible to find hidden monsters even in the most seemingly comfortable neighborhoods, therefore it did not consider the urban space as a location for terror storylines. As a result, images of blacks and nonwhites completely disappeared from the genre in this decade, and would endure a systematic omission. In Coleman's words, blackness became "a sort of ghost story symbol or invisible boogeyman."<sup>93</sup> A few examples of black absence from scary movies include hit films like *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Halloween II* (1981), and *Poltergeist* (1982), and in particular, the famous postmodern cult *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) by Wes Craven.

*Nightmare* is an example of how depictions of blackness endured isolation and invisibility in 1980s horror.<sup>94</sup> The omission of black images is studied by James Snead as a real issue in the codification of racial diversities in the film industry, and blacks/nonwhite individuals have experienced this form of racial exclusion for a long time in the history of Hollywood:

Omission and exclusion are perhaps the most widespread tactics of racial stereotyping but are also the most difficult to prove because their manifestation is precisely absence itself. The repetition of black absence from locations of autonomy and importance creates the presence of the idea that blacks belong in positions of

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 16

<sup>94</sup> Ibid p. 16

obscurity and dependence. From the earliest days of film, omission was the method of choice in designing mass images of blacks.<sup>95</sup>

The plot of *Nightmare* proves how blackness was obliterated from roles of importance in terror hits. This film, which Coleman defines as “Non-Black Horror”<sup>96</sup>— presents an entirely white cast, focuses on a residential, suburban environment and locates the source of disruption in a white, non-urban assassin. In the synopsis, the lives of a group of white teenagers are violently upset or destroyed by a delirious psychopath named Freddy Krueger. Apart from being a postmodern monster,<sup>97</sup> Krueger is depicted as a white sadist who belongs to the same white suburbia environment in which teenagers and their families live. Neither the main characters, nor Krueger’s monstrosity are marked with references to an outsider or a “racial Other.” The disruption of boundaries is personified within an “insider” of the white environment, that is not racially coded and has no characteristics of cultural difference. Notably, one of the strategies of 1980s horror filmmaking was to locate monstrosity in the least suspected people or things, to amplify the paranoia of having a dangerous force lurking in an apparently safe surrounding: “if whites were to survive the suburbs, they would have to figure out other ways to discern the good neighbour from the monster, as colour coding did not apply. These white monsters had the particular goal of punishing those closest to them:

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<sup>95</sup> Snead, James. *White Screens/Black Images*. 1st edition. Taylor and Francis, 2016. Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1612988/white-screensblack-images-pdf> (Accessed: 25 September 2021), p. 7

<sup>96</sup> *Horror Noire*, p 16

<sup>97</sup> In *Recreational Terror*, page 16, Krueger is analysed by Pinedo as the embodiment of the postmodern monster, because “in the end (of the postmodern horror film) the inefficacy of human action and the repudiation of narrative closure combine to produce various forms of the open ending: (...) the outcome is uncertain”. Indeed, in *Nightmare* the monster seems impossible to destroy, and traditional representations of heroism and authority (i.e.: the white male) are unable to solve the problem. Moreover, the films of *Nightmare* saga never offer a safe and certain conclusion, as the monster is never completely eliminated and usually returns in the following film.

white, non-urban families.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, any relation to the urban world, or cultural/racial difference is absent and invisible in *Nightmare*, which locates the terror effect only in Krueger’s insanity and the physical and emotional violence he generates as a psychopath. Images of blackness are never considered in the narrative’s purpose — the entire horror story is focused on the socio-cultural microcosm of a white, exclusive, uptown area and issues of race are never mentioned. Consequently, images of blackness, racial otherness or urban spaces containing cultural diversities are non-functional in the horror narrative. The depiction of the tension between good and evil develops in and is related to the social world of white suburbia only, and any reference to blackness is nonexistent. The controversy of *Night* lies in its exclusive, partial vision of American society: the film presents, on a social level, an “ideal” microcosm that can function without any connection to other geographical, racial, and cultural realities. Blackness does not endure discrimination or misrepresentation, however the fact that it is absent in a storyline entirely codified on a white-biased representation of American society is what contributes to amplify the sense of racial segregation occurring in the United States in the 1980s. *Nightmare* turned out to be an astounding success: it reached 57 million dollars at the box office worldwide<sup>99</sup> and paved the way for a long era of sequels (the last is 2003 *Freddy vs Jason*, by Ronny Yu).

Beyond omission, representations of blackness in 1980s horrors were also minimised through apparently positive racial stereotypes that actually served to glorify the white protagonists. One of these figures was the so-called “magical Negro” role. The famous “Blacks-in-horror” film *The Shining* by Stanley Kubrick, released in 1980, is an evident example of how a prestigious terror production casts blackness to provide a secondary character which aids and

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<sup>98</sup> *Horror Noire*, p. 16

<sup>99</sup> Mitchell, Chris. “Shrewd marketing fuels Freddy promotion”, *Variety*, August 10, 1992, p. 36.



supports the dominance of a white narrative with his/her magical superpowers. In the essay *The Power of Black Magic*, Glenn and Cunningham study in depth the cinematic figure of magical Negroes:

These black characters generally focus their abilities toward assisting their white lead counterparts (...) casting the black and white leads in this manner provides examples of black and white characters relating to each other in a constructive manner; however a closer examination of these interactions suggest a reinvention of old black stereotypes.<sup>100</sup>

Glenn and Cunningham also identify five characteristics of the magical Negro stereotype: “(a) the use of magical and spiritual gifts for the white character, (b) assuming primarily service roles, (c) exhibiting folk wisdom as opposed to intellectual cognition, (d) possessing limited role outside of magical guide and (e) displaying an inability to use his/her own powers to himself or herself.”<sup>101</sup>

These principles are accomplished particularly in the character of Hallorann, the black cook in *The Shining*<sup>102</sup>(played by actor Scatman Crothers) who in the film endures what Coleman calls a “symbolic annihilation of Blacks.”<sup>103</sup> In the plot, the white Torrance family — parents Jack and Wendy, and their son Danny — temporarily move to the Overlook Hotel, a detached resort atop the mountains of Colorado. Jack has accepted the job of guardian of the hotel in the winter period, when it is closed and its staff is on winter break. When the family arrives to

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<sup>100</sup> Cunningham, L.J., Glenn, C.L. “The Power of Black Magic. The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film”. *Journal of Black Studies*, Volume 40, Number 2, Sage Publications, 2009, p. 135

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 142

<sup>102</sup> Kubrick, S. (1980) (Director) *The Shining* [Film], Hawk Films.

<sup>103</sup> Horror Noire, p. 16

the Overlook, Mr. Hallorann welcomes and trains the family about their responsibilities in maintaining the hotel. Before Hallorann departs for his vacation, he reveals to young Danny that he has secret telepathic powers — that he calls “shining”— because he has rightly detected that also Danny is telepathic and can communicate non-verbally with him. The two have establish a deep mental connection, both because of the supernatural power they share, and because Hallorann wants to protect the kid from potential paranormal demons present in the hotel:

Danny: “Mr. Hallorann, what is in Room 237?”

Mr Hallorann: “Nothing. There is nothing in Room 237. But you ain't got no business going in there anyway. So stay out. You understand? Stay out.”<sup>104</sup>

Hallorann also explains to Danny that his “shining” is a folksy, spiritual gift he inherited from his grandmother and has no harmful effects to him. The presence of Hallorann, depicted as amiable and positive, disappears for a long time in the film, only to reappear, problematically, in the ending sequence. Indeed, throughout the film, Jack has progressively gone insane and eventually tries to murder his son and wife. At this point, Danny telepathically reaches the vacationing Hallorann for help. The man receives the message and leaves to save the child — he purchases a last-minute flight ticket, rents a car, borrows a SnowCat, and drives through a blizzard in the attempt to reach the remote hotel. However, when Hallorann finally arrives to the hotel after a long way, he is unable to reach Danny because he is immediately axed down and killed by Jack, and left in a horrendous, ever-expanding pool of blood. Hallorann plays only a secondary role in the development of the narrative, and also exemplifies the problematic “magical Negro” stereotype. Indeed, he (a) “uses magical gifts for the white

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Riet, *The Shining scene - Hallorann explains what the Shine is*, Youtube [Video], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rKbtlodzCU>. 4:37

character,” because his presence in the film only serves to lift up Danny’s gift, explain it to him and protect him from anything perilous occurring during his stay in the hotel. Hallorann leaves his vacation to go help the child, so his telepathy seems to serve the only function to save the white protagonist, by “assuming a primarily service role.” Moreover, Hallorann “possess[es] limited role outside of magical guide” because his pleasant, positive influence does not receive other consideration in the film, his life and story are not deepened and he seems to have no other purpose in the context except that of helping Danny. The entire horror story mainly focuses on Jack’s collapsing mental balance and the survival of Wendy and Danny, but the braveness of Hallorann in the story is not dignified or rewarded. In fact, the image of blackness in *The Shining* is ultimately self-sacrificial: he (e) “displays an inability to use his/her own powers to himself or herself.” As a matter of fact, Hallorann willingly overcomes any kind of obstacle to save a white character, but in the end, he cannot save himself and violently dies for the sake of saving someone else. On the one hand, blackness is portrayed as brave, heroic and wise, but on the other hand it does not receive major attention, rather it is auxiliary. Hallorann’s charisma is used “not for his or her own personal, familial, or community protection or advancement; rather, the powers are used wholly in service to white people.”<sup>105</sup>

To sum up, the 1980s films here analyzed demonstrate that the involvement of blackness in horror movies continued to be limited and discriminated even in the ending of the 20th century. Hollywood still did not provide dignified, creative and focused narratives that revolved around the social and cultural value of African Americans; rather, blackness was either completely obliterated from the horror genre or it was attributed devaluing and controlling stereotypes.

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<sup>105</sup> Horror Noire, p.16

## 2.4 The Final Affirmation and Visibility of “Black Horrors” in 1990s “Hood” Films

The 1990s can be considered a prolific and active period for the participation of the African American community within the genre and the representation of black images through horror films. Film scholars view this cinematic period as the “New Black Wave,” or the “New Black Movie Boom,”<sup>106</sup> because these years were influenced by a group of African American filmmakers who had managed to enter film academies and were starting to make their own independent productions, reaching high levels of autonomy from the dominant representation system of Hollywood. Ed Guerrero notes that “production in 1990 and 1991 alone easily surpassed the total production of all black-focused films released since the retreat of the Blaxploitation wave in 1970s.”<sup>107</sup> Moreover, these directors were able to ideate new, more dignified representations of blackness especially by navigating the world of pop culture. As Wendy Sung describes, “the catalyst of this film movement was a new generation of black filmmakers whose films toed the line of socially conscious commentary and mainstream commercial viability.”<sup>108</sup> One of these African American creators was Spike Lee, widely considered the symbolic personality of the Black New Wave and the main voice of this film movement.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, his black-centred film *Malcom X* — casting actor Denzel Washington — portrayed the famous black activist through an authentic black vision and consciousness, thus making a revolution against the traditional ideologies of the dominant industry. As Ed Guerrero comments in *Framing Blackness*, in this film “Lee insists that while his subject is located in the recent past, the issue of African American human rights, so central to Malcolm,

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<sup>106</sup> Wendy Sung. “Mainstream African American Cinema. The Struggle for Black Images in Hollywood”, p. 255. Article, on *Academia*. [academia.Edu](https://www.academia.edu).

<sup>107</sup> Ed Guerrero, p. 158

<sup>108</sup> Sung, p. 255

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*.

is powerfully with us at this moment, socially urgent and ongoing.”<sup>110</sup> Through the tool of cinema, Lee and other black directors like John Singleton, Robert Townsend, and Wendell B. Harris (the most prominent in 1990-1991)<sup>111</sup> followed the mainstream vogue to create modern, authentic and liberated representations of black history and culture, and raised global consciousness around the sociopolitical situation of African Americans.

In this cultural context, black creativity and representations experienced an improvement in the horror genre as well. The 1990s was “America’s love affair with horror,”<sup>112</sup> as Hollywood was hitting box office records with prestige productions like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), the most famous terror cults of this age. On the one hand, the involvement of black actors in these Hollywood films was still limited; on the other hand, in the wake of the “New Black Wave,” many independent black companies were starting to produce their own scary movies, especially taking advantage of the home video market and the mainstream culture.<sup>113</sup> Consequently, “Black Horror” was returning, with a force that had not been seen since the blaxploitation era.<sup>114</sup>

Notably, one of the most common tropes running through this new cycle of “Black Horrors” was the urban world, a geographical area usually neglected in the media depictions of the previous decade. Indeed, when in the 1990s black directors started to finance their own black-centred stories, their films “took advantage of the representational gap left when White horror fled to the suburbs,”<sup>115</sup> and as Coleman notes, “one unifying theme of the 1990s was

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<sup>110</sup> *Framing Blackness*, Introduction, p. 1

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

<sup>112</sup> *Horror Noire*, p.17

<sup>113</sup> *Horror Noire*, p. 17

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p.17

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17.

that the urban, specifically the Black inner-city, was deadly real estate. In several Black Horror films, the inner-city was depicted as dangerous and troubled, but worth fighting for and cleaning up.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, the portrayal of the “hood” — or “ghetto” — became the location of African American horror films, and was represented both as socially wretched but also as worthy of rehabilitation. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the ghetto as “(2) a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure.”<sup>117</sup> Indeed, the synonyms “ghetto” and “hood” identify, in the mainstream slang, the place where racialised minorities face economic hardships but are unified by a culture of fraternity and solidarity at the same time. As will be observed, in the 1990s the ‘hood’ became the main geographical focus of Black Horrors especially because it portrayed authentic black stories and narratives while locating the allegory of monstrosity and horror in the sociopolitical problems that affected blacks living in these communities — interestingly, the source of destruction was usually associated with the lingering racism perpetrated by corrupted cops or white politicians. As Coleman describes the 1990s decade:

These urban-based horror movies presented narratives that were black-centred, that is, drawing on black folklore, histories and culture. The aesthetic was black, with expressions of style, music, language (...) speaking to blackness, as well. The films brought a social realism, revealing that what was most threatening to urban blacks (...) was lingering racism, socioeconomic disparities, health crises (...) gun and gang violence, rogue cops.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p.17.

<sup>117</sup> “Ghetto.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ghetto>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2022.

<sup>118</sup> *Horror Noire*, p. 17

According to Coleman, these kind of “Black-Horror” films are important for the advancement of black images, because the genre of terror is creatively shaped to give focus and attention to the life of the African American community. At the same time, it subtly denounces the political inequities affecting the urban space. *Def by Temptation* (1990) and *Tales from the Hood* (1994) exemplify how the trope of the ‘hood is depicted as home for a number of monstrous and deadly forces, and functions to mirror real-life problems — drug trafficking and abuse, violence, corruption, “gang” and crime activities — occurring in racialised urban areas. *Temptation* — written, directed and produced by first-time actor James Bond III — presents a talented black cast and develops horror effects within the inner-city of Brooklyn. In the plot, 20-year-old seminary student Joel (Bond III) visits his older brother “K” in the city. This is his first time in Brooklyn, as he has always lived in a small town in North Carolina, with his “Grandma”, who has raised him after his parents died in a car accident. The dichotomy between the inner-city of Brooklyn and the small-town South from which Joel travels from is immediately marked: the first one is depicted as a place of corrupting influences, and the second as the place of religious righteousness. The central source of monstrosity in the film is a genderless demon spirit<sup>119</sup>, “Temptation”, who has incarnated into a seductive woman and uses sexuality to hold morality hostage. She lures precisely the individuals that are weaker and keener on yielding to various kinds of temptation. Her victims are: an adulterous man who removes his wedding ring, a man who is supporting the abortion of his girlfriend, and a homosexual man<sup>120</sup> who is curious to

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<sup>119</sup> *Horror Noire*, page 17

<sup>120</sup> In *Horror Noire*, at page 17, Coleman explains that the depiction in *Temptation* of anti-gay violence disturbingly aligned with real-life abuses that gay and lesbian individuals experienced in the inner-city. The violence towards LGBT social groups was only one of the many social issues occurring in the urban centres.

challenge his sexual orientation. All these men are horribly assassinated during the sexual intercourse with this sort of “black widow” who destroys them either through bloody killings or grotesque deformations. The quintessential grotesque effect of the movie is indeed the “body horror” that Temptation creates, and the resulting visual spectacle of the ruined bodies.<sup>121</sup> Eventually, when Joel arrives in the city, he becomes the main target of the demon: as a seminary student willing to become a minister, he is clearly out of place in Brooklyn and is a potential victim. The film insists in the difference between K, familiar with the city and using hip-hop slang, and the refined, but naive Joel, who believes that “fornication is a sin.” K, who symbolises the familiarity with the ‘hood and the many pitfalls hiding in the streets, becomes suspicious of Temptation and with the help of the agent and paranormal expert Dougy tries to kill her. In the end, K and Dougy are killed, leaving Joel unprotected. However, Grandma arrives on the scene to save Joel, and they are able to fight the evil woman together: holding up to Temptation the cross that Grandma has brought along, they are able to reveal her true horrific form and destroy her.

The plot of *Temptation* is entirely structured around the ‘hood of Brooklyn, represented both as a place of deviant “gang” activities but also as a location that should be restored, as it is home for the black lower-class community. The monster of the story, Temptation, functions as a moral allegory of the many negative issues occurring in the urban scenario, for instance the killing of the homosexual man may represent the real anti-gay violence of those years, while the show of the physical collapse of the adulterous man may be read as a warning against sexually-transmitted diseases and the lack of knowledge on this topic. The battle

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<sup>121</sup> In *Recreational Terror*, page 19, Pinedo explains that one of the elements of the postmodern horror is the destruction of the human body, as a visual show: “The postmodern paradigm is characterised by the forceful importance (...) of showing the spectacle of the ruined body.(...) The dismembered body, the body in bits and pieces, occupies centre stage in the postmodern paradigm. Pete Boss claims that the primacy of body horror is central to the contemporary horror genre”.



between good and evil evidently assumes religious tones — the ones who survive are only Grandma and Joel, firmly devoted to the idyllic and Christian life of South Carolina. Def by Temptation, as a completely black-produced and black-oriented film, represents an achievement in the way black directors depict their own community onscreen and denounce the socio-political conditions affecting the black youths.

Likewise, the “Black-Horror” anthology film *Tales from the Hood* (1995) by Rusty Cundieff, —financed by Spike Lee’s production company— is focused on the urban space and the many forms of violence lurking in blighted neighborhoods. Differently from *Temptation*, *Hood* is more centred on criticising the lingering racism of white police agents. The opening credits display the image of a skeleton in hip-hop aesthetic — wearing a “gang-style” bandana around its head and dark sunglasses,<sup>122</sup> which symbolize the linkage between horror and rap culture. The film sees Mr. Simms, a creepy funeral director, presenting four different horror stories, all race-focused and each one narrating the causes that led a specific person to death. The first story denounces the white police’s brutality and the hidden forms of discrimination still pervading this workplace, and presents many similarities with post-Obama 2018 film *The First Purge* for the way white racism is represented. In the plot, professional black activist Martin Moorehouse is working for liberating the ‘hood from the corruption of racist police officers. He is eventually beaten to death by three rogue cops. After killing him, the officers inject drugs into Moorehouse’s body, to counterfeit his death and ruining his post-mortem reputation. Immediately, a binary understanding of good and evil is established: the monster, in this case, is represented by white suprematism and the good part is embodied by a black activist who fights to help his community. One year after Moorehouse’s assassination, he resurrects in a horrifying, zombie-like form and starts to take

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<sup>122</sup> *Horror Noire*, p 17

a deadly revenge on the cops who had assassinated him. Moreover, Moorehouse's ghost also haunts Clarence, a black cop who had witnessed his assassination and did not denounce it. The story both criticises the racism diffused among white policemen and also the code of silence of black individuals who "sell out" to powerful institutions and do not contribute to liberate blackness from racist oppression.

*Temptation* and *Hood* are two examples showing how 1990s "Black Horror" films developed terrifying and shocking stories through the addition of a social commentary over the problems found in the inner-city — a space full of pitfalls but also potentially restorable through black unity and commitment.<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, these two films create the essence of monstrosity as linked to real-life social issues or racial tensions: in *Temptation*, the evil demon is an allegory of unhealthy relationships, immorality and violence and may be a warning for black youths about the harmful affairs they could get entangled in. In the first story of *Hood* it is implied that the real monstrosity is externally inflicted, as the black activist's ghost retaliates against the racism of white agents. As Denzin argues, "films such as these located the responsibility for the 'hood problems with the media, the police and other apparatuses of the state."<sup>124</sup>

In the following chapter, I will discuss the 2018 "Black-Horror" film *The First Purge*, which recuperates the trope of the 'hood to address a contemporary, post-racial criticism. Indeed, Gerard McMurray's film is dystopian, action-horror narrative revolving around a wretched and corrupted Staten Island and similarly to *Tales from The Hood*, it places the monstrosity force within a supremacist white establishment. In this way, it makes a serious political

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<sup>123</sup> *Horror Noire*, 17

<sup>124</sup> Denzin, Norman K. *Reading Race. Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*. London, Sage, 2002. Page 112.

commentary over the white misguided policies. It will be argued how *The First Purge* sharply identifies the monsters into disturbing icons of historical racism — the Ku Klux Klan, Nazi officers, and a white man in blackface— to display a dashing collision between racist ideologies and the braveness of African American community.

## **PART II**

### **Contemporary “Black Horror” Films and the Critique of “Post-Racial” America**

## CHAPTER THREE

### EXPLAINING THE “POST RACIAL” AND ITS PARADOX

This chapter aims to demonstrate that the most recent examples of contemporary “Black Horror” cinema — the films here analyzed date from 2017 to 2021 — have finally reached high levels of black activity and creative power, and freely create black-centred terror stories while contributing to a social commentary on the controversial concept of “Post-Racial”. This latter is a widely debated, complex concept that developed in the American political debate during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and his subsequent election in November 2008.<sup>125</sup>

On a theory level, the term “post-racial” is linguistically defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as “having overcome or moved beyond racism; having reached a stage or time at which racial prejudice no longer exists or is no longer a major social problem.”<sup>126</sup> In political sciences, scholars have tried to formulate various other definitions, with the urge to understand whether the issue of racial identity has ceased to exist or is still present in contemporary and liberal societies. David Hollinger has defined a post-racial society “a possible future in which the ethnoracial categories central to identity politics would be more matters of choice than ascription (...) in which economic inequalities would be confronted head-on, instead of through the medium of ethnorace.”<sup>127</sup> In Hollinger’s account, postraciality

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<sup>125</sup> Mara Liasson, “Obama wins historic US election”. *BBC News*. November 5, 2008. Archived from the original on December 18, 2008. Retrieved November 5, 2008. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96640324>.

<sup>126</sup> “Post-racial.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post-racial>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2022.

<sup>127</sup> David A. Hollinger, “The Concept of Post-Racial: How its easy dismissal obscures important questions.” *Daedalus*, 174-182, 172.

indicates a sociopolitical reality in which the categories of race and ethnicity no longer matter in the life expectations of an individual — employment opportunities, educational possibility, institutional access— like they did in the past; and in which socioeconomic freedom and mobility can be accomplished by anyone, regardless of their ethnic and racial origin. It presumes that only personal effort and energy are descriptors of an individual's prospects<sup>128</sup> and wealth, somehow excluding the fact that race has any implication in achieving inclusion within a society. David T. Goldberg, in *Are we all Post Racial Yet?*, argues that the post-racial idea presumes that discrimination does not exist any longer, and if it exists, “such discrimination is anomalous, individually expressed; it is not structural or socially mandated.”<sup>129</sup> On a theory level, the idea of postraciality would appear as positive and uplifting for the black community — and every other “racialised” minority— which have experienced racism or racial exclusion in American history.

In the political scenario of the United States, the aspiration for a possible actuation of the post-racial society arose in the public and media debate notably during the ascendance of the first black American President, Barack Obama — during his candidacy process in 2008 and from his election on. As Goldberg highlights, “the Post-Racial was born (...) when Obama got elected in 2008. With America's first black President, postraciality went public.”<sup>130</sup> Many journalists at that time began to discuss the historic presidency of Obama as a realistic opportunity to overcome a long history shadowed by slavery and idealise a racism-free future. News analyst Daniel Schorr was one of the first commentators to use the term in January 2008, when Obama was running his first presidential campaign and was a potential

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<sup>128</sup> David T. Goldberg. *Are We All PostRacial Yet?* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>129</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p.1.

winner of the elections: “Welcome to the latest buzz word in the political lexicon —post-racial. (...) The Post-Racial Era, as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history, and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them.”<sup>131</sup> Exactly one year later, journalist Rebecca Roberts interviewed author Ralph Eubanks to discuss if the first year of Obama administration had demonstrated the reality of the post-racial:

After Barack Obama was elected president, in the days leading up to his inauguration, many people heard, for the first time, the term post-racial. It signified a new era brought about by the election of the first African-American president. Many people believed or hoped or wanted or expected that the new presidency would change how we talk about and how we experience race in this country.<sup>132</sup>

As one can observe from a number of interviews such as these, many journalists at that time were associating the first black American President to a post-racial reality. Indeed, the presidency of Barack Obama, along with his public persona, have always symbolised in the political debate the real possibility, or at least the aspiration, that the United States had finally achieved a society free of racial and ethnic discriminations. His access to institutions of power represented an important step forward for the advancement of the black community, however, a great number of scholars have demonstrated the paradox of the post-racial concept, demonstrating that contemporary societies worldwide —especially the United States — ineluctably continue to be predicated on systemic racial and socioeconomic divisions. The

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<sup>131</sup> Daniel Schorr. “A New, Post-Racial Political Era in America”. *NPR*. January 28, 2008. Retrieved 2 May 2022. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18489466>

<sup>132</sup> Rebecca Roberts, “The 'Post-Racial' Conversation, One Year In” in *NPR*, January 18, 2010. Retrieved May 2, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122701272>

only difference is that these divides occur in other, more insidious forms.<sup>133</sup> According to Goldberg, “Race (as we have known it) may be over; but racism lives on unmarked, potentially for ever, even unrecognised.”<sup>134</sup> He argues that the ascendance of Obama to power did not overcome racism itself, but simply brought a change in the national rhetoric and in the way individuals and institutions address and talk about racism — dismissing its existence.

Goldberg bring about events of anti-black/anti-other sentiments and racial injustice that have occurred or become diffused after Obama’s administration:

Why has public racist expression generally become far more virile and vicious in the name of the post racial than it has been since the 1960s? Examples abound: in the United States, widespread racially charged comments about Obama, the killings of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York. <sup>135</sup>

The case of Trayvon Martin was particularly shocking for the black community. On February 26, 2012, Martin was visiting his father Tracy Martin in a neighborhood in Sanford, Florida; while unarmed, he was shot by policeman George Zimmermann who disregarded police instructions.<sup>136</sup> On August 2014, in a Missouri suburb, the 18 year old Michael Brown was accidentally killed by white police officer Darren Wilson.<sup>137</sup> Wilson has claimed that he fired

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<sup>133</sup> Lawrence D. Bobo. “Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today”. *Daedalus* , Spring 2011, Vol. 140, No. 2, Race, Inequality & Culture, volume 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 11-36.

<sup>134</sup> David T. Goldberg. *Are We All PostRacial Yet?* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 6

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>136</sup> “Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts.” *CNN*, February 14, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/index.html>

<sup>137</sup> History.com, “Michael Brown is killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri”, *History*, August 9, 2021. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/michael-brown-killed-by-police-ferguson-mo>



in self-defense, however this version is refuted by a witness that claimed that Wilson warned Brown he would open fire, and that Brown responded with “Don't shoot!” before he was killed.<sup>138</sup> These are only two examples of controversial killings of arguably innocent blacks on behalf of police officers. In a study conducted by The Guardian, in 2015 police officers in the United States killed 7,13 black Americans per million, compared with 2,91 white Americans per million.<sup>139</sup> These events have been widely publicised in the recent years and have globally contributed to decrease the optimistic post-racial sentiment and demonstrate that a real, authentic “Post-Racial Era” is a utopia. In addition, Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo observes that despite the progresses made by modern societies from the Civil Rights Era, a real post-racial situation is difficult to complete because of the everlasting racial-economic inequalities:

Racial economic inequality is less extreme today, there is a substantial black middle class, and inequality within the black population has probably never been greater. Yet there remain large and durable patterns of black-white economic inequality as well, patterns that are not overcome or eliminated even for the middle class and that still rest to a significant degree on discriminatory social processes.<sup>140</sup>

According to Bobo, America has progressed from the Civil Rights Era up to nowadays, however economic inequality continues to be linked to racial divisions, and these divides

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<sup>138</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>139</sup> “The Counted: people killed by police in the United States in 2015– interactive”. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 2016- 01-02. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>

<sup>140</sup> Lawrence D. Bobo. “Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today”. *Daedalus* , Spring 2011, Vol. 140, No. 2, Race, Inequality & Culture, volume 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 11-36.

have not been resolved. Goldberg and Bobo's studies about post-racial inconsistency represent two of the most authoritative analysis within the debate of political sciences, and will recur as references throughout this chapter.

In the following pages it will be demonstrated that also contemporary Black Horror cinema is a powerful tool of communication and activism in the deconstruction of the post-racial myth. Firstly, contemporary "Black Horror" films overcome the misrepresentation and omission endured by blackness in the horror genre, finally visualizing African Americans as undisputed protagonists of horror stories. Secondly, such films visually debunk sociopolitical issues that affect American society in the post-Obama period — for example, the socioeconomic divide analysed by Bobo is explicitly revealed in the movie *The First Purge*, particularly with the recuperation of the 'hood trope. Well-known black images historically represented in horror films in the 20th century — anti-black stereotypes, blackface, *King Kong* and also more advanced black tropes like the duplicity in *Blacula* — are reprised and reformulated in the following 2010s and 2020s movies to address the new forms of anti-black sentiments that still limit American blackness nowadays. The analysis will reveal that Black Horror cinema is empowered by the ideological independence achieved by black directors, and also through the activity of denouncing the subtle forms of political oppression lived by the African American community today.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### *GET OUT* (2017) AND THE SUBVERSION OF WHITE NARRATIVES

#### **4.1 Modern Disposability of Black Lives**

Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, released in 2017, is considered by film critics one of the most remarkable and provoking "Black Horror" movies of recent times,<sup>141</sup> because it deploys the horror genre to reveal the sociopolitical contradictions of the Post-Obama Era. Widely acclaimed as a critical and box office sensation and collecting more than \$253 million worldwide,<sup>142</sup> this film expresses the director's disenchanted view on the post-racial, that he defined "the lie" of contemporary America.<sup>143</sup> Jordan Peele himself confirmed, in an interview for *New York Times*, "I was making the movie in that period when Trayvon Martin was [killed]. It originally started as a movie to combat the lie that America had become post-racial."<sup>144</sup>

*Get Out* ingeniously creates an inversion of previous racial stereotypes, as the protagonist Chris, a young black man (played by actor Daniel Kaluuya<sup>145</sup>) successfully escapes from the racist atrocities of the white elite —the source of disruption in the film and the symbol of American racism — and upsets the system of black annihilation they have designed.

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<sup>141</sup> Lanre Bakare. "Get Out: the film that dares to reveal the horror of liberal racism in America" *The Guardian*. Feb. 28, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/28/get-out-box-office-jordan-peelee>

<sup>142</sup> Rebecca Keegan, "Jordan Peele on the "Post-Racial lie" that inspired *Get Out*". *Vanity Fair*, October 30, 2017. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/10/jordan-peelee-get-out-screening>

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Jason Zinoman, "Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism" *New York Times*, Feb.16 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/movies/jordan-peelee-interview-get-out.html>

<sup>145</sup> Angela Williams. "Oscar nominee Daniel Kaluuya on 'Get Out': 'I was like, are you allowed to make films like this?'" In *ABC News*, February 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/oscar-nominee-daniel-kaluuya-allowed-make-films/story?id=52964702>

This chapter focuses on two specific themes present in *Get Out*: firstly, the disposability/objectification of black bodies and secondly the critique of white liberalism. It will be shown that these issues are addressed by subverting previous racial stereotypes used in horror cinema — in particular in *Ingagi* and *King Kong*.

In the plot, Chris Washington is a young African American photographer who works in Brooklyn, and is engaged to Rose Armitage, a young white woman. The two are going to visit Rose's parents, neurosurgeon Dean and psychoanalyst Missy, a liberal white family in upstate New York. Chris asks Rose if her family knows about their interracial relationship, and she assures that "they are not racist." Arriving there, Chris starts perceiving that something is weird with the attitudes and comments coming from the seemingly warm, egalitarian family. Dean comments on Obama as the best President in his lifetime, and asserts "I would have voted for a third term if I could."<sup>146</sup> Chris also observes that something with Georgina and Walter — two black housekeepers of the Armitage family— is not right. The first night Chris cannot sleep, and Missy convinces him to do a session of hypnosis, saying she can cure his smoking addiction. While in trance, Chris tells about the trauma of his mother's death, confessing he feels responsible for this event as he did not call for help immediately. Then, he sinks into a horrifying dark void that Missy calls the "Sunken Place." The next morning, Chris believes what happened was a dream, until Walter tells him he witnessed the psychoanalysis session the night before. However, he is pleased to discover that the hypnosis worked, because now he no longer feels the need to smoke. Georgina unplugs his phone "accidentally," draining its battery. That day, dozens of wealthy white people arrive for a meeting that the Armitages annually organise. These people admire Chris' physique and beauty, and "glamorise" his skin. Jim Hudson, an art dealer who has gone blind

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<sup>146</sup> Peele, J (Director) (2017) *Get Out* [Film]. Blumhouse Productions. (18:40:00)

in his old age, takes an interest in Chris' photography talent. Eventually at the party, Chris meets Logan King, another black man; this one behaves awkwardly, not like "a brother" as young black men usually call each other in modern culture. Logan is also married to an elderly white woman. Bewildered by what he is seeing, Chris texts the latter information to his friend, TSA officer Rod Williams. When Chris tries to take a photograph of Logan inconspicuously, the flash goes off and Logan becomes hysterical, shouting at Chris to "get out." The others try to calm him down, and Dean later claims that Logan had an epileptic attack. Away from the party, Chris tells Rose that they should leave. Rod communicates to Chris that "Logan" is actually Andre Hayworth, a man who disappeared from Brooklyn. Rod thinks it is a conspiracy and tries to tell the police, but his claims are ignored. While Chris is preparing to leave, he finds photos of Rose in previously relationships with several black partners, including Walter and Georgina, contradicting her earlier claim that Chris is the first black person she has dated. He tries to leave the house, but Rose and her family block him. Chris attacks Jeremy, but Missy uses a psychological "trigger" that she had previously implanted into Chris' mind during his hypnosis —the sound of a spoon scraping a teacup — and makes him pass out. Chris awakens strapped to a chair, now a hostage. In a video presentation, Rose's grandfather Roman explains what the family does: transplanting white affluent people's brains into black people's bodies, assuring them favourable physical characteristics and extending their lifetime. From a video call, Hudson tells Chris the host's consciousness remains in the Sunken Place, conscious but powerless. Although the Armitages target mainly black people, Jim explains that he doesn't care about Chris' race: he only wants his eyesight. Missy performs hypnosis, seemingly knocking Chris out. When Jeremy comes to fetch Chris for the surgery, Chris has managed to avoid the hypnosis trigger by plugging his ears with cotton stuffing pulled from the chair. Chris bludgeons Jeremy unconscious and

kills Dean with the antlers of a deer mount, accidentally setting fire in the operating room with an anaesthetised Jim inside. Chris manages to kill also Missy; he is attacked again by Jeremy while heading to the door but kills also Jeremy before leaving in his car. On the way out, he hits Georgina and knocks her unconscious. Compelled by the memory of his mother's accident, he decides to save her into the car, but she awakens and is revealed to be possessed by Rose's grandmother, Marianne. The car crashes, and Georgina is killed. Rose finds Chris with Walter, who is possessed by Roman. Chris uses the flash on his phone to neutralise Roman. Walter regains control of his body, shoots Rose with a rifle and then shoots himself. In the end, the police sirens loom and officer who arrives is Rod, Chris's friend. They drive away, and leave Rose bleeding on the road.

The first focus of *Get Out* is the systematic commodification of black bodies and the disposability to which are still subjected in the modern world. As Abdul Moiz argues, “the film (...) portrays the romanticization of blackness by white people as an object to be accumulated instead of a cultural identity to be understood.”<sup>147</sup> As a matter of fact, the film satirises on the way the white community is more concerned with acquiring favourable black characteristics for themselves, rather than knowing Chris's experience as an individual. The affluent whites awkwardly comment on specific attributed they presume Chris has because of his blackness: the physique, the sexual appeal and the glamorisation of dark skin — creepily, a guest even tells Chris that being black in this era “is in fashion.” In particular, stereotypes of black masculinity as physically brutal or hyper-sexualised — elements conceived as horrific in jungle-horror 1930s films — run throughout the film, in form of contemporary micro-aggressions that Chris receives when he engages in these conversations. In the scene

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<sup>147</sup> Abdul Moiz, “Get Out film analysis. Negrophilia, race relation and the new dynamic”. In [medium.Com](https://medium.com/@abdulmoiz168/get-out-film-analysis-negrophilia-race-relation-and-the-new-dynamic-b64f6ed8095f), June 2019. <https://medium.com/@abdulmoiz168/get-out-film-analysis-negrophilia-race-relation-and-the-new-dynamic-b64f6ed8095f>

when Chris talks with Jeremy about sports, Jeremy assumes that Chris enjoys brutal fighting in martial arts: “You know with your frame and genetic makeup, if you just pushed your body to it, you would be a beast.”<sup>148</sup> By this way, Jeremy re-inscribes the racist image of the black man as physically unhinged, and actuates white toxic masculinity in an apparently friendly talk. Moreover, at the garden party scene, Chris is hyper-sexualised by a lady named Lisa and her husband, who are hoping to purchase his body soon. Linda asks Rose: “How handsome he is. Is it true? Is it better?”<sup>149</sup> referring to Chris’ presumed sexual prowess. Also Linda reinforces the racist generalisation that black men are erotically endowed. These concepts serve to shock the audience — since the true horror is that black bodies are commodified and disrupted by the Armitage’s family for a wide range of terrifying experiments<sup>150</sup> — and contribute to critically subvert the racist tropes of *Ingagi* and *King Kong*. As Lanre Bakare argues:

Horror tropes are inverted, subverted (...) Peele takes the idea of a white woman being in peril as soon as she’s in an inner-city area and turns that into a black man being at his vulnerable in an affluent white neighborhood. The unique history – plus the fascination, fetishisation and fear of dark-skinned men – on this continent gives *Get Out* even more punch.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Peele, J (Director) (2017) *Get Out* [Film]. Blumhouse Productions. (00:22:00).

<sup>149</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>150</sup> To clarify certain aspects of the film, Logan’s body is occupied by the consciousness of an old white man, and also Georgina and Walter are the Armitage’s grandparents respectively occupying the soulless bodies of two young blacks.

<sup>151</sup> Lanre Bakare. “Get Out: the film that dares to reveal the horror of liberal racism in America” *The Guardian*. Feb. 28, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/28/get-out-box-office-jordan-peele>

Indeed, stereotypes of animalisation and hyper-sexualisation of black masculinity reappear in *Get Out*, but are critically shown as being commodifying attitudes affecting the white society. Through the emotional expressions of Chris and the discomfort his character evokes when facing these micro-aggressions, the film aims to critique that the dehumanization of black bodies is an unrelenting horror in the modern world. However, the film highlights that this is the outcome of white society's perversity, control and ignorance of the black experience; the animalization of black individuals is an obsolescent, ideological product coming from the dominant system and the hidden forms of racism it propagates.



## 4.2 The Critique to White Liberalism

The second major theme of *Get Out* is the responsibility of the white liberal political class for the modern dismissal of racism. As it was observed with Goldberg's study, one of the paradoxes of the post-racial is the denial of racism problems; and for sociologists Gartner and Dovidio, such denial "characterize[s] the biases of those who are politically liberal and believe that they are not prejudiced, but whose unconscious negative feelings and beliefs get expressed in subtle, indirect, and often rationalizable ways."<sup>152</sup> In an interview for *NY Times*, Jordan Peele confirmed this target:

Jason Zinoman: "You've said your target in this movie is the "liberal elite." (...)

Jordan Peele: "Yes. At the same time, I feel the movie is more relevant. The liberal elite who communicates that we're not racist in any way is as much of the problem as anything else. This movie is about the lack of acknowledgment that racism exists. (...) There are still a lot of people who think: We don't have a racist bone in our bodies."<sup>153</sup>

Indeed, the Armitage family is identified as a friendly, progressive, liberal family — especially when Dean Armitage tells Chris: "I would have voted Obama for a third term if I could." However, it is slowly revealed that Dean is actually the nefarious monster of the story and the mind behind the annihilation of black lives, and that the ideals of equality he had initially showcased are only a façade. The members of the Armitage family are depicted as abusing black individuals under cover, by this way parodying those Americans who "support principles of racial equality, genuinely regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but at the same

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<sup>152</sup> S. Gaertner, J. Dovidio, A. Pearson. *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Prejudice*, Chapter 12, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pages 267 - 294.

<sup>153</sup> Jason Zinoman, "Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism". *New York Times*, Feb.16 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/movies/jordan-peeel-interview-get-out.html>

time possess conflicting, often non-conscious, negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks that are rooted in basic psychological processes that promote racial bias.”<sup>154</sup> Also in this sense, *Get Out* can be analysed as an inversion of *King Kong* and *Ingagi*’s narratives. These two “Blacks-in-Horror” depicted the white power as heroic, illuminated and superior, and represented dark-skinned natives as cultural primitive or “exotic others.” *King Kong* linked blackness to obscurity and fear, ideologically implying the presumed inferiority of racialised minorities. Inversely, *Get Out* depicts the grotesque derangements of white racism as monstrous, while depicting an independent young African American man as the positive protagonist of the conflict’s resolution. On a horror level, the Armitages are monsters because they create the disruption of human boundaries — transferring white people’s consciousness into black bodies. This dynamic both exhibits a “body horror” entertainment, and also recalls the ominous reality of eugenics — a racism-based, scientifically wrong theory of “racial improvement” diffused in America in the early 20th century.<sup>155</sup>

The “monstrification” of white liberalism is also visible in the dimension of existential terror and obscurity they create to isolate black people, the Sunken Place. Here, the victims live the frightening experience of having their body occupied by someone else’s consciousness. In the dialogue between Hudson and Chris before the procedure (that Chris manages to escape) Hudson clarifies: “You won’t be gone, not completely; a sliver of you will still be there somewhere.(...) You will be able to see and hear, but what your body is doing — your existence — will be as a passenger.”<sup>156</sup> The Sunken Place represents the sociopolitical

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<sup>154</sup> S. Gaertner, J. Dovidio, A. Pearson. *The Cambridge Handbook of the Psychology of Prejudice*, Chapter 12, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pages 267 - 294.

<sup>155</sup> [history.com](https://www.history.com/topics/germany/eugenics#section_2) Editors. “Eugenics”, *History*, October 2019. [https://www.history.com/topics/germany/eugenics#section\\_2](https://www.history.com/topics/germany/eugenics#section_2)

<sup>156</sup> Peele, J (Director) (2017) *Get Out* [Film]. Blumhouse Productions. (01:22:20).

“silencing” that racialised minorities continue to experience in the post-racial world. On *Twitter* in 2017, Jordan Peele has explained: “The Sunken Place means that we are marginalised. No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us.”<sup>157</sup> In the film, Chris eventually manages to escape and eliminate the abyss of the Sunken Place alone, with only his intelligence and independence; this bespeaks of the director’s activism to end the silence on racism issues, and his hope that racialised minorities acquire equal opportunities in the future.

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<sup>157</sup> Jordan Peele, [@JordanPeele] March 17 2017. “The Sunken Place means that we are marginalised.” [Tweet] *Twitter*; <https://twitter.com/JordanPeele>

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### *US* (2019): REUSING DUALITY TO ADDRESS INEQUALITY IN THE POST-OBAMA ERA

*Us*, released in 2019, is the second “Black Horror” movie by director Jordan Peele. Like *Get Out*, this horror visualizes blackness at the center of a boundary-pushing narrative and reflects on issues characterizing the post-Obama era.

In an interview at *SXSW* in April 2019, Peele explained the film in the following way:

This movie is about this country. (...) We’re in a time where we fear the other, whether it’s the mysterious invader that we think is going to come and kill us and take our jobs, or the faction we don’t live near, who voted a different way than us (...) And I wanted to suggest that maybe the monster we really need to look at has our face. Maybe the evil, it’s us.<sup>158</sup>

The main idea in *Us* is that monstrosity is not outside the individual; disturbingly, it can be the dark side of the individual himself/herself. Indeed, in the film every character has to face his/her own monstrous *Doppelgänger* — which is called “Tethered” or “Shadows”. This section aims to analyse *Us* observing how the “duplicity” horror trope, previously experimented by Crain in “Black Horrors” *Blacula* and *Dr Jekyll Mr Hyde*, recurs in this movie to reveal the director’s view on controversial post-racial issues — such as contemporary xenophobia/fear of the outsiders, the inequality in the education system and the economic gap within the black community.

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<sup>158</sup> Neha Aziz, “Go Behind the Scenes of the World Premiere of Jordan Peele’s *Us*”, *SXSW*, April 2019. <https://www.sxsw.com/film/2019/go-behind-the-scenes-of-the-world-premiere-of-jordan-peeles-us-at-sxsw-2019-video/>

The plot opens in 1986, when a young girl named Adelaide is watching a commercial for Hands Across America. When a night her parents bring her to a funfair in Santa Cruz, she wanders away and enters a funhouse in which she disturbingly meets the doppelgänger of herself, and is traumatised. Years later, the adult Adelaide returns to this place for a holiday with her husband Gabe Wilson and their children Zora and Jason. She feels anxious about the trip, and is obsessed by the memory of the encounter and the way she had to get over it, as she stopped talking and isolated herself from her family. Eventually, they go and meet their friends Josh and Kitty Tyler with their daughters at the beach. That night Adelaide tells Gabe about her childhood accident; while they are talking, they realise that a red-dressed family of four is standing ominously in the home's driveway. They surround the Wilsons in their own living room, and it is revealed that these people are the Wilson's own *Doppelgängers*: Pluto (Jason's double, a pyromaniac), Umbrae (Zora's sadistic double), and Abraham and Red (Gabe and Adelaide's doubles). Red is the only one who can speak, and explains that they are called "the Tethered" because they are connected with their lookalike counterparts through the soul, and now want to "untether" themselves. Red tells them the story of a girl who lived a life of joy, receiving "warm food and wonderful toys"<sup>159</sup> while her "shadow" remained in the dark, eating raw rabbits and received gifts "so sharp and gold, slicing her fingers when she tried to play"<sup>160</sup> (referring to the gold scissors the Tethered use to kill). Basically, the Tethered live a mirrored, heart-breaking version of their aboveground lookalikes. The doppelgängers handcuff Adelaide and haunt the rest of the family. Jason understands that Pluto mirrors his actions. Eventually the family reunite on their boat and go find help. The Wilsons arrive to the Tyler's house, finding out that the family has been murdered by their

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<sup>159</sup> MovieClips "Us (2019) - Meet the Tethered Scene (3/10)". *Youtube* [Video]. 0:47 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vh7\\_WKODIE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vh7_WKODIE8),

<sup>160</sup> *Ibidem*, at 1:04

own doppelgängers. The Wilsons realise that they are not the only people with doubles and from the tv news they learn the Tethered are killing their own surface copies all across America, and forming a massive human chain. The Wilsons decide to escape to Mexico, but on their way they find that Santa Cruz's citizens have all been murdered. The road is blocked by a burning car, but Jason understands it is a trap set by Pluto and orders his family to get out from the car. Before Pluto sets fire to the family's car, Jason walks back so that Pluto imitates him and ends up dying into the burning car. Red suddenly appears to kidnap Jason, and Adelaide runs after Red to the funhouse where they first met. She finds a secret way leading to underground space overrun by white rabbits, meeting Red in a classroom. Red reveals to Adelaide that the Tethered are genetic clones produced by the government to control the citizens aboveground. When the experiment failed, the Tethered were abandoned down there for years, forced to imitate the actions of their originals, surviving on raw rabbit meat. Among them, Red was worshiped because uniquely skilled; and she led the Tethered revolution to escape and retaliate over the surface world. Red and Adelaide start a "dancing fight" in which Red evades skilfully and Adelaide loses balance. Eventually, Adelaide manages to hit Red, strangles her to death and finally rescues Jason. In the end, while Adelaide drives the family away, the movie reaches a shocking turn because Adelaide's psychological trauma resurfaces: she suddenly remembers the night she first met Red in the hall of mirrors. It is revealed that the clone had choked Adelaide unconscious (damaging her vocal cords), dragged her underground, handcuffed her there, and returned above ground to take Adelaide's place in her life, eventually learning to speak and adjusting as a human being. Shockingly, the film reveals that she was originally the Tethered one and Red was the real Adelaide. A final scene shows the Tethered have formed a human chain, replicating the Hands Across America demonstration of 1986.

The main horror effect of the movie is provided by the final, unexpected revelation that the Adelaide the audience have known and trusted is instead the Tethered Red. The whole story revolves around the disturbing reality of duplicity/duality, which can be interpreted in many ways. This trope was experimented by Crain in 1970s in films like *Blacula* and *Dr Black Mr Hyde*, in which the “identity split” reflected the human and social tensions experienced by African Americans in the post-Civil Rights period. The dual personality of Mamuwalde/Blacula evoked the black displacement and frustration in a white-driven world, and the *Doppelgänger* of Pryde was allegorical of the socioeconomic dilemma faced by many black professionals in Los Angeles who had managed to uplift their job status and relocated to uptowns. Similarly, *Us* represents blackness as the central focus of the story, and the concept of dual identity is employed to spark debates on the contemporary American system.

The first reading of the film’s duality may be the xenophobic fear of the outsiders/outcasts in the post-racial era and the responsibility each human being has in contributing to this pattern unconsciously. For Goldberg, contemporary liberal societies continue to function on hateful ideologies such as “the resurgence of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-immigration sentiment.”<sup>161</sup> Peele commented on his film: “I wanted to make a movie that allows everybody to face their demons (...) But as a starting point, the United States and our xenophobia was the front and centre idea to grapple with.”<sup>162</sup> Moreover, in an interview with Tananarive Due he claimed: “My thesis is that there is a demon in human DNA that we

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<sup>161</sup> Goldberg, *Are We All PostRacial Yet?* P. 3

<sup>162</sup> Jen Yamato. “This is ‘Us’: Jordan Peele wants Americans to ‘face their demons’ in new home-invasion horror film”. *Los Angeles Times*. March 14, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-jordan-peelee-us-lupita-nyongo-winston-duke-20190314-story.html>

cannot get away from.”<sup>163</sup> Consequently, the idea of duality between humans and *Doppelgängers* is a way for Peele to universalise the concept of evil, advancing the thesis that “us” — a double-entendre for United States and “us” as parts of the system — are responsible for the marginalisation, exclusion and neglect of the outcasts, that can be identified either with immigrants escaping from wars, or simply the ones living on the edge in the U.S.. Indeed, in the film Red and her “Tethered” family symbolise these classes — the damaged voices, aggressive behaviour and emotional unbalance recall the lack of access to healthcare and educational system. Notably, the very fact that they are constructed as the story’s monsters but at the same time they are the mirrors of the Wilsons reflects the director’s thesis that evil usually need to be searched not outside, but inside one’s identity, meaning that “us” as American/European countries have an obscure side underneath our identity as we unconsciously belong and contribute to systems of economic power intrinsically ruthless and responsible for the disadvantage of other classes.

The second interpretation of duality in *Us* may be the director’s critique of the inequality affecting the education system; and a critique of the post-racial assumption that personal development is determined solely on his/her individual effort.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, Red explains that she and the Tethered have always lived underground, poorly fed, with no access to health care or education and she had to rise up beyond a system that was forcing her to stay ignored and ignorant.<sup>165</sup> In the end, it is revealed that the Tethered version of Adelaide traded places with the above-ground girl when they were both elementary school age, so the Adelaide we have

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<sup>163</sup> HuffPost Video. “Jordan Peele On ‘Us’ And ‘The Evil In Our Own Humanity’”. *Huffington Post*. 01:30. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jordan-peelee-on-us-and-the-evil-in-our-own-humanity\\_n\\_626aef5ee4b0bc48f5794054](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jordan-peelee-on-us-and-the-evil-in-our-own-humanity_n_626aef5ee4b0bc48f5794054)

<sup>164</sup> David T. Goldberg. *Are We All PostRacial Yet?* Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>165</sup> [ScriptPlug.com](https://www.scriptslug.com/assets/scripts/us-2019.pdf). Script of *Us*, 2019, [Pdf]. <https://www.scriptslug.com/assets/scripts/us-2019.pdf>



always known from the start was actually the underground version all along. When the Tethered version of the protagonist rises to the real world by replacing the aboveground girl, she is able to achieve a middle-class living and the “American dream.” Likewise, when Adelaide is taken underground by Red to the Tethered, her life quality and expectations decrease — scarce nutrition based on raw rabbits, no education, limited communication — and she grows up as a murderer. The two different versions of the same woman —one healthy and socially fulfilled, one living on the edge— may be Peele’s commentary over the “nature vs. nurture” educational theory,<sup>166</sup> which argues that the social environment determines the future possibilities of an individual. According to an article from *Newsone*, “Adelaide and her *Doppelgänger* represent two women with the same intellect, same mindset and same abilities; but only the one who enters a middle-class family is able to climb the social ladder.”<sup>167</sup> Consequently, the conflict between the doubles of the same individual Red/Adelaide and their switching process may reflect the director’s idea that sociocultural environments do affect the way an individual develops in the adult life, in opposition to the post-racialist rhetoric that only an individual’s intelligence —not race, not ethnicity, not original wealth— influences his/her life success.<sup>168</sup>

Thirdly, a possible reading of duality between the Wilsons and underground *Doppelgängers* is the overview of the ongoing economic divergences in the black community. The Wilsons

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<sup>166</sup> In psychology, the expression “nature vs. nurture” describes the question of how much a person's characteristics are formed by either “nature” or “nurture.” “Nature” means innate biological factors (namely genetics), while “nurture” can refer to upbringing or life experience more generally. “Nature vs Nurture,” in *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/nature-vs-nurture#the-nature-vs-nurture-debate>

<sup>167</sup> Editors of *Newsone*. “Unpacking ‘Us’: Imposter Syndrome, Social Mobility And More Themes I Can’t Stop Thinking About”. *Newsone*, March 2019. <https://newsone.com/3849378/us-movie-themes/>

<sup>168</sup> Goldberg, *Are We All PostRacial Yet?* Page 2.

are presented as a black-middle class family haunted by demented and disadvantaged “copies” of themselves — who instead have experienced bad nutrition, abandonment and marginalisation. Such contrast in the movie reflects Bobo’s study on the misdistribution of wealth inside the black community: “There is a substantial black middle class, and inequality within the black population has probably never been greater.”<sup>169</sup> Duality in in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* functioned to highlight the racialised socioeconomic difference between Pryde’s black origins and his acquired “whiteness” status, while in *Us* it goes beyond clear-cut racial differentiations and illuminates the economic inequality existing now in the same ethnic group. The Wilson own goods such as a car, a vacation home and a boat, therefore representing Bobo’s “substantial black middle class”<sup>170</sup> who has recently risen size, security, and influence in the United States. On the contrary, the repressed versions of themselves, Red and Abraham, symbolize what Bobo calls “the proportion of blacks in the ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ categories [that] remains large in 2008”<sup>171</sup> and is currently exposed to risks of experiencing welfare dependency, juvenile delinquency, and involvement in crime. Notably, the Tethered versions of Zora and Jason — Umbrae and Pluto — are characterised by sociopathic attitudes such as hysterical laugh and pyromania, which evoke real criminal behaviours that individuals may develop when in conditions of extreme social and financial discomfort.

*Us* represents a momentous development in “Black Horror” cinema. Like *Get Out*, it makes blackness protagonist of the terror narrative, especially Adelaide/Red is the mastermind

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<sup>169</sup> Lawrence D. Bobo. “Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today”. *Daedalus*, Spring 2011, Vol. 140, No. 2, Race, Inequality & Culture, volume 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 11-36.

<sup>170</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

<sup>171</sup> Ibidem, p.19

behind the resolution of the enigma. Moreover, the film produces a substantial innovation in the horror trope of duplicity/duality as applied to black characters. As a matter of fact, William Crain in the 1970s had already used the “split of identity” to mirror a particular situation of American politics, the racial turmoil occurring during and after the Civil Rights Era. Similarly, Jordan Peele reprises duality to create a multifaceted African American characterisation, however he uses it to address race relations and economic/educational issues present in the post-racial scenario.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### *THE FIRST PURGE* (2018) AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HOOD TROPE

#### 6.1 The 'Hood Addressing Racial and Economic Divides

This part analyses *The First Purge*, a 2018 “Black Horror” movie directed by African American director Gerard McMurray. The movie is the fourth from the anthology media franchise *The Purge*, a film series that started in 2013 and was mainly scripted and directed by James DeMonaco.<sup>172</sup> In this action-horror, which “features a predominant cast of colour and no sympathetic middle or upper-class characters,”<sup>173</sup> an imaginary government party named “The New Founding Fathers of America” announces a social experiment called “The Purge” in Staten Island, in which citizens are free to unleash their aggressions for a 12-hour period: every crime, including murder, is legalised. The film reveals that the party’s hidden agenda is not to give people catharsis, but to make an ethnic cleansing of the underclass-of-color, which causes a strain on the government’s resources.<sup>174</sup> As the setting is the inner-city of New York and its social dissolution, *The First Purge* is reminiscent of 1990s “hood films”; this section demonstrates that the 'hood trope is reprised to create a thriller in which two black heroes unify to fight against a dystopian, racist-suprematist project. Ultimately, the urban environment reflects criticism on issues that affect racialised groups in the post-racial

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<sup>172</sup> “The Purge Franchise Box Office History”. *The Numbers*. Retrieved September 8, 2020. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Purge-The#tab=summary>

<sup>173</sup> Inkoo Kang, “*The First Purge* Is a Messy, Violent Thriller for a Messy, Violent Nation”, in *Slate.com*. July 2018. <https://slate.com/culture/2018/07/the-first-purge-reviewed.html>

<sup>174</sup> Alissa Wilkinson, “The First Purge completes the franchise’s transition to full-on social horror” in *Vox*, July 2018. <https://www.vox.com/summer-movies/2018/7/3/17530400/the-first-purge-review-horror-marisa-tomei-kendrick-lamar>

period, such as 2008 economic inequality and the resurgence of new supremacist organisations.<sup>175</sup>

The plot opens in 2014. A psychopath named Skeletor confesses to a NFFA employee his desire “to purge” and unhinge his violence on humanity, and is told that he very soon will be able to. Two years later, NFFA chief of staff Arlo Sabian and scientist Dr. Updale announce a social experiment to take place in Staten Island: for 12 hours, citizens will be allowed to commit any crime they want to vent their frustration, including murder. The NFFA incentive people with \$5,000 to stay on the island during the experiment. Extra compensation is given to the ones who actively commit crimes. The film reveals that the ones who participate are mostly blacks and latinos, the part of the population with the lowest income and economically hopeless. Participants are provided with contact lens with micro-cameras, so that the experiment can be tracked by NFFA’s masterminds. Staten Island’s drug-lord, Dimitri, decides to not leave the island, because moving his dealers and large amounts of money will draw attention. Nya —an anti-Purge activist and Dimitri ex-fiancé— and her friends Dolores, Selina and Luisa decide they will try to stay safe during the Purge, while Nya’s young brother Isaiah decides to secretly participate, as he wants to take revenge on Skeletor for having harmed him some time before. Dealer “Capital A” also plans to go out and purge, as he is seeking an opportunity to betray Dimitri to steal his empire. The experiment begins, and Skeletor commits the first Purge murder: this event is recorded by the NFFA and goes viral. Many other crimes occur, such as looting, vandalism, irregular conduct and disturbance of loud parties; however, the NFFA is expecting to see more killings. Isaiah, after trying to shoot Skeletor without success, runs away in terror and loses himself in the

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<sup>175</sup> Robert Costa. “Church shooting suspect Dylann Roof captured amid hate crime investigation”, *The Washington Post*, June 18 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/17/white-gunman-sought-in-shooting-at-historic-charleston-african-ame-church/>

urban maze, where other purgers try to kill him. He hides and calls Nya for help. In the meantime, dealer Capital A has tried to set a trap to Dimitri in order to eliminate him and take over his business, however Dimitri discovers the deception and kills Capital A and everyone who tried to betray him, reestablishing his control. Nya encompasses the city to look for Isaiah, and she encounters many dangers, included Skeletor's attempted rape. Isaiah is able to wounds Skeletor, so that he and his sister Nya can escape to the church where many people were hiding. They discover that the people in the church have been murdered by a militia of white supremacists who are leaving in motorbikes.<sup>176</sup> However, Luisa, Selina and Dolores are survivors. At the NFFA headquarters, Dr. Updale notices a strange increase in murders by masked participants. Reviewing the video footages, Updale sees masked killers arriving in vans, and she is shocked to discover that these killers are trained mercenary militias killing civilians in mass. NFFA chief of staff Sabian reveals to her that he sent mercenaries to depopulate the underclass, because "The country is overpopulated; there is too much crime; people don't want to raise taxes, the debt has tripled and we can't pay for anything."<sup>177</sup> Updale, who was only interested in a "psychological experiment," learns the truth: the NFFA and Arlo Sabian are rebalancing the wealth gap amongst the affluent and the indigents, by exterminating the lower classes which represent a financial burden for the government. Sabian learns his corruption has been exposed, so he gives order to execute Updale. In the city, Nya, Isaiah and their friends are hiding at Nya's apartment. Dimitri and his men discover that the masked killers are NFFA mercenaries. Wanting to protect the neighborhood, Dimitri and his crew arm themselves with machine guns, to take a stand against a group of

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<sup>176</sup> As it will be analysed, this sequence is allusive to facts that really happened in the United States: 2015 supremacist-terrorist shooting to Charleston Church; and 2017 "Unite the Right" white-supremacist rally event, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>177</sup> Gerard McMurray, (Director). (2018). *The First Purge* [Film], Universal Pictures. 1:48:00

mercenaries dressed in Ku Klux Klan costumes and save local businessman Freddy and his associates from a shooting. However, NFFA drones kill most of Dimitri's men when they are about to go save Nya and her friends. Left alone, Dimitri calls Nya to tell her that mercenaries are about to invade the building, and goes to help her. He successfully kills a first group of blackface-masked mercenaries<sup>178</sup> and helps Nya's group to hide in a safe room. A second group of mercenaries, led by a boss wearing a terrifying Nazi/SS black outfit, are about to launch a rocket-propelled grenade into the apartments. A deranged, rampaging Skeletor arrives on the building's floor, and manages to eliminate some of the mercenaries, before being shot himself. Dimitri throws a plastic explosive out of the room, and shoots it repeatedly until the remaining mercenaries are killed in the explosion. In the end, Dimitri and Nya's group survive. As sirens announce the end of the purge, people in the streets hail Dimitri as the hero and he says that now the black community's survivors must somehow fight back.

*The First Purge* can be considered a contemporary 'hood film in many respects. According to Richard Newby, "*The First Purge* is aligned with the black and brown perspective through and through. From its hip-hop music, the solace found in church and gangs — not always mutually exclusive — and recognition that a government run by middle-aged white men will always sacrifice people of colour first, McMurray's movie is a 'hood film."<sup>179</sup>

The movie values "the black and brown perspective" as the main characters are of African American (Nya, Dimitri and his crew, Isaiah, and Skeletor) or Latino (Luisa and Selina)

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<sup>178</sup> Sarah Szabo, "Small details that you missed in the First Purge", on *Looper*. December 2020. <https://marvelmoviesnews.com/small-details-you-missed-in-the-first-purge>

<sup>179</sup> Richard Newby. "How 'First Purge' Takes a Hands-On Approach to Race". *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 6, 2018. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/first-purge-is-a-hood-film-disguised-as-a-horror-movie-1125203/>

ethnicity. The black culture of the 'hood is recognisable from the language, images and characterisations, for example Nya, Isaiah, and Dimitri's crew speak the African American slang and use expressions such as "bro," "sis," "y'all be easy," "see ya 'night."<sup>180</sup> Shop owner Freddy even uses the term "'hood" by referring to the NFFA: "They are turning our home into ancient Rome; our 'hood into the colosseum."<sup>181</sup> Dimitri is called with the initial "D" by his dealers, as it was with "K" in *Tales from the Hood*. Such hip-hop slang is starkly opposed to the accent of white characters, such as the NFFA members. The urban imagery is divided into two opposite sides of the same black community — the church where religious people and families protect themselves, and the blighted streets where the most desperate go to participate to the purge. Dimitri's attire — a gold chain, a leather jacket and usually a gun in his hands — is also emblematic of the "gang culture" typical of hip-hop films, along with the drug business he owns. Interestingly, Nya and Dimitri symbolise these two opposite sides of the black urban neighborhood, with the former being a virtuous activist who protects workers and family rights, and the latter choosing instead the dishonest path of drug business — his only way to escape poverty. Although they have made different life choices, they come from the same African American community and ultimately join forces to defend against a common enemy, identified in racism and white supremacy. As Newby comments in his article on *Hollywood Reporter*, "in this film, black and brown people are shown saving each other because they know no one else will,"<sup>182</sup> and since these two characters cooperate with

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<sup>180</sup> Gerard McMurray, (Director). (2018). *The First Purge* [Film], Universal Pictures. On *Amazon Prime*, <https://www.amazon.com/First-Purge-Ylan-Noel/dp/B07F4477JY>

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* at 0:10:50.

<sup>182</sup> Richard Newby. "How 'First Purge' Takes a Hands-On Approach to Race". *The Hollywood Reporter*



other black and latino citizens and ultimately manage to defeat the enemies, they evoke a modern version of the “black unity and commitment” described by Coleman.<sup>183</sup>

Importantly, *The First Purge* can be considered a contemporary implementation of ’hood films such as *Def by Temptation* (1990) and *Tales from the Hood* (1994) because the storyline unfolds in the setting of Staten Island’s inner-city, a space which informs on the social and economic deprivations of racialised minorities. As *Def* presented Brooklyn as a space of urban temptations, dangers and violence and *Tales* insisted on the corruption of white policemen as the main cause of decay in the ’hood, *The First Purge* recuperates and amplifies these two issues, showing such facts as still prevailing in the contemporary United States. Staten Island is portrayed as home to different sorts of human and socioeconomic ills, where blacks have the potential to actively fight the oppression of a monstrous, supremacist-racist government, the “NFFA”. The 1990 movie *Def by Temptation* made use of a woman-looking, demonic figure as an allegory for the multiple social ills that are found in the low-income areas of Brooklyn, like emotional and physical abuse, sexually-transmitted diseases, and anti-LGBT violence. Likewise, in *The First Purge* urban pitfalls are presented through different problematic characters who are desperate enough to participate to the experiment for monetary gains. Each participant symbolises a specific social disease: Skeletor symbolises mental insanity and drug addiction — he uses a fist of hypodermic needles to kill his victims,<sup>184</sup> Isaiah is a metaphor for the lack of economic expectations of parentless black youths, and the two mentally deranged spinsters who activate dynamite-filled toys<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> *Horror Noire*, 17

<sup>184</sup> Gerard McMurray, (Director). (2018). *The First Purge* [Film], Universal Pictures. On *Amazon Prime*. Sequence 0:29:30. <https://www.amazon.com/First-Purge-Ylan-Noel/dp/B07F4477JY>

<sup>185</sup> Gerard McMurray, (Director). (2018). *The First Purge* [Film], Universal Pictures. On *Amazon Prime*, sequence (...) <https://www.amazon.com/First-Purge-Ylan-Noel/dp/B07F4477JY>

represent the frustration of the outcast and the marginalisation of psychotic people. Such variety of social plagues may be interpreted as a way for the director to map that part of the population that Lawrence Bobo indicates under the “poverty line” — that is, having a family income that is 50 percent less of the poverty level— and the social-relational problems this part of the population suffers from.<sup>186</sup> Bobo argues that racial economic divide is persistent in the post-racial period, indeed in the year 2008 “the proportion of blacks in the poor (at the poverty line) or very poor categories remains large, at a combined figure of nearly 40 percent. This contrast with the roughly 20 percent of whites in the same categories.”<sup>187</sup> Moreover, the economic disadvantage leads racialised minorities to develop “rising rates of single-parent households, out-of-wedlock childbearing, welfare dependency and greater risk of juvenile delinquency and involvement in crime.”<sup>188</sup> These are social dysfunctions visible in the film, for example single-parent households are the situations of Nya and Isaiah —as Nya has raised her younger brother without their parents,— and Luisa is presumably the single mother of Selina. Moreover, the young Isaiah shows the proclivity to juvenile delinquency in black adolescents in his feeling tired of being poor. McMurray’s movie is remarkable in enhancing the popular ’hood trope observed in *Def by Temptation* through a modern understanding. Indeed, the same attention to the black inner-city is readdressed in a contemporary setting, especially by denouncing the persistence of racial economic divide and the social aftermath of such condition.

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<sup>186</sup> Lawrence D. Bobo. “Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today”. *Daedalus*, Spring 2011, Vol. 140, No. 2, Race, Inequality & Culture, volume 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 11-36, page 19.

<sup>187</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>188</sup> Ibidem.

## 6.2 Systemic Racism and Neo-Supremacist Groups

*The First Purge* also has analogies with *Tales from the Hood* (1994). The 1990s “Black Horror” narrated the story of Martin Moorehouse, a black activist who, after being brutally assassinated by racist white policemen, resurrects in the form of a ghost to take revenge on, or “purge” them — white corruption was in the film the main impediment to the inner-city progress.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, *The First Purge* deals with the theme of white systemic racism as well, and amplifies the criticism by “monstrifying” the supremacist ideology of the NFFA and its mercenaries. The movie depicts the NFFA government and the Chief of Staff Arlo Sabian as the evil masterminds, as they plan a strategy of depopulation to eliminate civilians, keep their economic affluence and protect the wealthy class; the supremacist government is visualized as a monstrous power, disruptive for the lives of the unfortunate. On the opposite, Nya and Dimitri are depicted as positive and virtuous heroes in their attempt to save their neighbourhood. Therefore, the image of blackness is associated to positive, valuable psychological traits. As Keith Phipps also comments on *The Verge*, “The heroes are all people of colour. The villains are the New Founding Fathers of America and the puppets, witting and unwitting, they use to enact their agenda.”<sup>190</sup> McMurray’s film sheds light and visual power on ethnicities that were historically undervalued or misrepresented in the horror movie industry, and instead constructs satire over representations of conservative whiteness.

Moreover, to demonize supremacist and racist ideologies, *The First Purge* makes use of intense racist and anti-black symbolism. In the plot, the groups of mercenaries sent by the

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<sup>189</sup> As Denzin Norman K. argues, “films such as these located the responsibility for the ’hood problems with the media, the police and other apparatuses of the state.” In *Reading Race. Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*. London, Sage, 2002. Page 112.

<sup>190</sup> Keith Phipps, “With *The First Purge*, the *Purge* series finally says something daring”, *The Verge*. July 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/7/10/17555524/the-first-purge-series-politics-trump-anarchy-election-year>

NFFA to kill civilians wear Ku Klux Klan hoods, others have “blackface minstrelsy” balaclavas on, and especially the boss leading the final attack wears an intimidating SS/Nazi outfit and a disquieting executioner headgear.<sup>191</sup> These characters constitute the film’s terror, not only because they are carriers of death but also because the mask they wear are emblematic of the most genocidal and racist ideologies in history. McMurray confirmed that he wanted to present horrors of the real world,<sup>192</sup> and depicting these forces as real horrors of American society. Indeed, in an interview the director confirmed that “Those guys with the blackface masks and the KKK, they needed to be taken on,”<sup>193</sup> and indeed, *The First Purge* disestablishes racist ideologies through the character of Dimitri. In the final scenes, when he is going to save Nya and Isaiah from the mercenaries’ attack, he is able to eliminate the mercenaries alone, only counting on his confidence and sense of responsibility. The resistance is also visualised in the scene in which Dimitri’s friends are under the attack, as they are businessmen of many different nationalities — an African American, a Chinese, and a Jamaican — make resistance together and fighting off the assault of the mercenaries in KKK hoods.<sup>194</sup> This scene is highly evocative of the potential of ethnic diversities to eliminate rooted xenophobic ideologies to achieve rights in the United States. The highest political and historical tension is reached by the scene in which Dimitri is able to strangle to death one of the assassins wearing a blackface balaclavas. The depiction of a strong African American man defending his community against an enemy who wears a racist-inspired mask

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<sup>191</sup> Article Editors, “Small Details You Missed In The First Purge”, in *Marvel Movies News*. <https://marvelmoviesnews.com/small-details-you-missed-in-the-first-purge>

<sup>192</sup> Kare Erbland, “The First Purge. Director Gerard McMurray Crafted a Horror Film About Being a Black Man in America” *Indie Wire*, July 2018. <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/07/the-first-purge-director-gerard-mcmurray-horror-film-black-in-america-1201981311/>

<sup>193</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>194</sup> Gerard McMurray, (Director). (2018). *The First Purge* [Film], Universal Pictures. On *Amazon Prime*, 1:11:23. <https://www.amazon.com/First-Purge-Ylan-Noel/dp/B07F4477JY>

is a powerful message of ethnical self-respect, recognition, and historical reaffirmation. A character of human complexity,<sup>195</sup> Dimitri has a cathartic anti-racism effect and symbolises the triumph of black pride over historical anti-black, racist and hateful ideologies condensed in an army of mercenaries. Consequently, the film is effective in satirising the negativity of white supremacy especially because it highlights the heroic ambition of freedom and responsibility of a black character.

On a level of sociopolitical criticism, the symbols of racist-supremacist violence can be read as a way to denounce resurgent white-supremacist organisations and real racial crimes that occurred in the post-Obama era. In a sequence, a militia of mercenaries leaves the church in motorbikes after bloodily murdering in mass all the black and latino civilians who were hiding in the sanctuary. According to an article on *The Hollywood Reporter*, this scene is allusive to 2015 Charleston Church massacre <sup>196</sup> in which nine African Americans were killed in a white supremacist mass attack perpetrated by Neo-Nazi criminal Dylan Roof during a Bible study session.<sup>197</sup> Plus, the element of the motorbikes is reminiscent of the 2017 “Unite the Right” event, a white-supremacist rally which took place in Charlottesville, Virginia<sup>198</sup> — to which affiliates of neo-Confederates, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and

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<sup>195</sup> Fred Topel, “The First Purge’s Director Gerard McMurray On How Modern Events Shaped The Movie”. *SlashFilms.com*, July 2018. <https://www.slashfilm.com/559382/the-first-purge-director-interview/>

<sup>196</sup> Sarah Bailey, “The Charleston shooting is the largest mass shooting in a house of worship since 1991”, *The Washington Post*. June 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/06/18/the-charleston-shooting-is-the-largest-mass-shooting-in-a-house-of-worship-since-1991/>

<sup>197</sup> “Attorney General Lynch Statement Following the Federal Grand Jury Indictment Against Dylan Storm Roof” [Press release]. *United States Department of Justice*. July 22, 2015. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sc/pr/attorney-general-lynch-statement-following-federal-grand-jury-indictment-against-dylann>

<sup>198</sup> Richard Fausset, Alan Feuer (August 13, 2017). “Far-Right Groups Surge Into National View In Charlottesville”, *The New York Times*. August 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/far-right-groups-blaze-into-national-view-in-charlottesville.html>

other right-wing extreme organisations participated. These two real facts have been widely considered the most appalling racist crimes of the recent years, and the fact they occurred in the post-Obama era has obviously contributed to the dubiousness of the post-racial progress in the public opinion. The filmmaker has explained in an interview with *IndieWire* his perspective towards such modern realities:

I think horror movies take the scenes that scare you in real life and turn it into a boogeyman, like a monster. I think these things are a metaphor that we can confront and maybe conquer. What I see as real and as horrific, it is scarier than ghosts. The government is the boogeyman. The IRS is scary. Not aliens, not supernatural, that stuff – the KKK in the streets at night, Charlottesville, that’s scary. That’s horror.<sup>199</sup>

In conclusion, McMurray’s black horror filmmaking goes beyond mere entertainment and provocation. References to real facts of systemic racism throughout the movie contribute to inform about the unrelenting social and political abuses that black lives are facing nowadays in certain areas of the United States, thus manifesting a profound political skepticism towards the rhetoric of “racial prejudice no longer exists or is no longer a major social problem.”<sup>200</sup> *The First Purge* is a remarkable “Black Horror,” because it is grounded mainly on a black cast — the main characters are indeed of black or latino ethnicity — and through the reprisal of the theme of white corruption brings actual events of the post-Obama era to the surface and educates about the urgency to support and improve the African American social and economic future.

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<sup>199</sup> Kare Erbland, “The First Purge. Director Gerard McMurray Crafted a Horror Film About Being a Black Man in America” *Indie Wire*, July 2018. <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/07/the-first-purge-director-gerard-mcmurray-horror-film-black-in-america-1201981311/>

<sup>200</sup> “Post-racial.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post-racial>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2022.

## CHAPTER SEVEN:

### *THEM: COVENANT* (2021). AN INNOVATIVE USE OF BLACKFACE TO EXPLAIN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

The last contemporary “Black Horror” in analysis is the horror-drama television series *Them: Covenant*, directed by Little Marvin, produced by Lena Waithe and released on Amazon Prime in 2021.<sup>201</sup> It focuses on a black family which relocates to Compton, California, during the 1950s. Depicting racism as the true horror experience that the family lives in the white suburbia of Compton, the series offers insights on the psychological trauma that discrimination had and continues to have on African Americans. Although the series is set in the past, the filmmaker’s objective is to show that institutional racism continues to terrorize black people in the present day: “Segregation is not a word from the past. There is a tendency to think of it as something from another era, but the truth is we are living it now, every single day. At a state level, at a federal level, at a local level, and this began way back.”<sup>202</sup> In exploring the effects of racism on the black psyche, the series recuperates the grotesque stereotype of blackface minstrelsy and ingeniously reuses it to show the psychological trauma that anti-black representations have historically caused on African Americans. The series is grounded on the idea is that racialized minorities have been, and still are terrorized by American institutions, and contributes to criticise the post-racial claim that the United States is free from racial prejudice.

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<sup>201</sup> Press Release, “Terror Anthology Series ‘Them’ from Executive Producers Little Marvin and Lena Waithe to Premiere April 9 on Amazon Prime Video,” *Amazon Studios*. March 9, 2021. Via *The Futon Critic*, retrieved March 9, 2021. <http://thefutoncritic.com/news/2021/03/09/terror-anthology-series-them-from-executive-producers-little-marvin-and-lena-waithe-to-premiere-april-9-on-amazon-prime-video-326113/20210309amazon01/>.

<sup>202</sup> Little Marvin. “THEM Season 1 - An Introduction to THEM with Little Marvin”, Bonus Content, [Video Interview] *Amazon Prime Video*. 05:00. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_4\\_2](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_hm_hom_1_c_cjm7wb_4_2)

*Them: Covenant* is made of ten episodes spanning ten days in the year 1953. The temporal context is the Great Migration Era — a historical period that went from approximately 1916 to 1970 in America — in which more than six million African Americans departed from the segregational Southern states to the Northern and Western states, in search of a better life.<sup>203</sup> *Them* frames this historical period and follows a black family of four, the Emorys, who are relocating from North Carolina to East Compton, California, after experiencing a devastating trauma — the loss of their third child. The Emorys — patriarch Henry, matriarch Lucky and their two daughters, teenaged Ruby and little Gracie — are moving to Compton also because Henry, an engineer, has landed a new job here and hopes to give his family a future. However, Compton is a lily-white, racially exclusive, affluent suburbia, where the Emorys are not welcomed: the neighbors start to treat the family with hatred, suspicion and loathing. For example, when Henry is at work and the daughters are at school, Lucky sees that a group of neighbours —led by Betty Wendell, depicted as the perfect 1950s American housewife — has set up chairs outside in the street in front of her house and has switched on a cacophony of loud music to intimidate her. Ruby and Gracie receive unpleasant looks from white kids when they are at the bus stop going to school. Ruby receives racial offences from all the classmates, who make monkey noises when she speaks up and is punished from her teacher for having “disturbed her class”. As Henry begins to work as an engineer for the Compton firm, he too receives suspicious looks from the colleagues and passive-aggressive provocations from his boss, Stu Berks, who looks down on and accuses him of goldbricking. Later in the season, a sequence shows Henry in the elevator with his colleague and Berks, with these two talking to each other ignoring Henry’s presence. Betty Wendell continues to

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<sup>203</sup> Editors of *History*, “The Great Migration”, Updated June 2021, On *History*. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>.



conspire with the other families to drive the Emorys out of their neighborhood as quickly as possible. When Henry buys a new tv set and goes on the roof to set the satellite up, a group of male neighbors arrive to ask Henry explanations about a misunderstanding, and tease him with stereotypical racist expressions, like “buck”, “pickaninny”, “coons are as strong as apes”, “King Kong” — and “mammy”<sup>204</sup> referred to Lucky. That night, the white men go write a racist expression with the “N-word” on the grass of the Emorys’ garden, and set the writing on fire. In the fourth episode, when Henry is going to work, he finds the neighbors have located anti-black toys around his house: there are numerous “golliwog dolls” hanging with nooses on his front porch, and also a “jack-in-the-box” with a black-faced clown inside, in front of his door.<sup>205</sup>

Therefore, as the Emorys continue to experience all sort of racist insults outside their household, each family member starts to go mentally insane, consequently seeing monstrous hallucinations. Lucky has visions of the hideous “Black Hat Man” — whose identity is revealed in the fifth episode; Henry is haunted by “Da Tap Dance Man”, a villainous blackface minstrel who teases him and pushes him to take revenge on Berks; Ruby sees her imaginary friend Doris, a blue-eyed, white cheerleader; and the little Gracie is obsessed by a vision named “Miss Vera”. The Emorys see their own ghosts when subjected to discriminations coming from the outside, and the visions become more and more overwhelming as their psychological stability collapses. In particular, “Da Tap Dance Man” emerges in Henry’s mind because of the biased treatment he receives in his workplace as the

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<sup>204</sup> “Day 4” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 4. Sequence 00:15:10. Amazon Studios, 2021. Amazon Prime Video. <https://www.amazon.com/THEM-Season-1/dp/B08XXDRJKH>.

<sup>205</sup> “Day 6” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 4. Sequence 00:00:50. Amazon Studios, 2021. Amazon Prime Video. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/00G49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_4\\_2](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/00G49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_hm_hom_1_c_cjm7wb_4_2)

only black engineer. Henry first sees this demon at a business party in which he is excluded and undesired among his colleagues. In this scene, Da Tap Dance Man appears performing with an all-Black music band, and reveals his minstrel show origins: he wears a “Jim Crow” outfit, a grotesque blackface make-up, and makes theatrical movements. In the sixth episode, after Henry experiences a setback by his boss, he and Da Tap Dance Man start to talk and the demon — who sings a creepy mantra with the words “What you gonna do?”<sup>206</sup> — teases Henry to take revenge on Berks. Thus, Henry yields to the temptation and actually breaks into Berks’ house, eventually attacking one of the boss’ neighbors and murdering a police officer. The fifth and ninth episodes provide flashbacks explaining what happened in the past. In the fifth, “Covenant I”, it is revealed the racist-driven tragedy that devastated the family when they lived in North Carolina: one day, when Henry and the girls were at the movies and Lucky was staying home with their newborn Chester, a group of white countrymen broke into Lucky’s house to rape her and violently murder the baby.<sup>207</sup> This analeptic passage explains that Lucky and Henry had already experienced racist abuses long before Compton, and they are still recovering from this traumatic event. The 9th episode reveals the demonic and racist origins of Compton, and discloses the truth behind “The Black Hat Man” spectre. This one is the reincarnation of Hiram Epps, a priest that once lived in the Civil Rights Era in a religious Dutch community, “Eidolon”. Epps welcomed a young couple of black immigrants as the Bible commanded. However, the Devil manipulated him into antagonising dark-skinned people, so that Epps and the entire community began to ostracize and torture the

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<sup>206</sup> “Day 6” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 6. Sequence 00:20:30. Amazon Studios, 2021. Amazon Prime Video. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_4\\_2](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_hm_hom_1_c_cjm7wb_4_2)

<sup>207</sup> “Covenant I” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 5. Sequence 00:16:00. Amazon Studios, 2021. Amazon Prime Video. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_4\\_2](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_hm_hom_1_c_cjm7wb_4_2)

couple. Accidentally, the entire town caught fire and before Epps would perish in the flames he agreed with the Devil to a “Covenant”: Epps would live forever as long as he caused any Black people who arrive in his land to suffer intensely. Consequently, after a century, Eidolon eventually becomes East Compton — in which the ghost of Epps torments any black life arriving there, in this case the Emorys.

In the end, Lucky is able to fight back the Black Hat Man, break his covenant and make him disappear into flames, thus liberating the souls of her families from the curse. Indeed, also Henry, Ruby and Gracie finally confront their own paranormal demons and kill them. At this point, their house has been set to fire by the neighborhood, the whole town of Compton is now against them, Henry is wanted by the police, and their reputation is forever ruined in the eyes of the racist community— as they have committed crimes or have shown signs of mental insanity. However, they have eliminated the malevolent forces hiding inside their psyche, and are now finally themselves again. The final shot resembles a heartbreaking family portrait: close to each other by their house in flames and standing in front of the hostile people of Compton.

*Them: Covenant* is an innovative “Black Horror” production which informs about the historical reality of the Great Migration Era and uses the horror device to explore the effects that racial discrimination had, and still has, on the African American psyche. The series depicts sociopolitical dynamics of systemic racism that were rife in the Great Migration Era, but are still continuing in the post-Obama scenario. The first issue of social terror is that Emorys are struck out of their possibility of home ownership and integration — two keys of the “American Dream” — as Betty Wendell conspires to drive the Emorys away as soon as possible. Virulently protective of their whiteness, she and the neighborhood do not consider

“Them” as worthy of owning a Compton property or deserving the right to stay in this racially exclusive place, and this bespeaks of the real discriminatory real-estate laws existing in the Great Migration Era:

In the 1930s, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) had color-coded maps. These maps determined where they were going to put funding, where they won't, who received low mortgages and who got longer payout periods. There was always green-coded neighborhoods maps to indicate white areas, and red-coded neighborhoods or “redlined” maps to indicate black areas.<sup>208</sup>

Redlining <sup>209</sup> was the basis of state and local strategies and these laws did not allow black families into a system of long-term wealth. This economic deficit has extended until recent times, and according to a 2021 report on *CAP*, “in 2019 the average wealth of black households in the United States was \$24,100, compared with \$189,100 for white households. Therefore, the typical Black household had 12.7 percent of the wealth of the typical white household, and they owned \$165,000 less in wealth.”<sup>210</sup> Consequently, the many scenes in which Betty Wendell or the neighbors try to terrorize the Emorys in order to send them away — i.e. the anti-black toys put in the front porch, the neighbors stereotyping Henry, and many others — bring about real discriminatory facts that began in that era and continue today.

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<sup>208</sup> Little Marvin. “THEM Season 1 - An Introduction to THEM with Little Marvin”, Bonus Content, [Video Interview] *Amazon Prime Video*. 00:50.

[https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_sr\\_fle\\_c\\_Tn74RA\\_1\\_1\\_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=B08XLMY9MN&qid=1654784948](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_sr_fle_c_Tn74RA_1_1_1?sr=1-1&pageTypeIdSource=ASIN&pageTypeId=B08XLMY9MN&qid=1654784948)

<sup>209</sup> “Redlining.” *Merriam-Webster.com Legal Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/redlining>. Accessed 12 Jun. 2022.

<sup>210</sup> Christian E. Wellers. “Eliminating the Black-White Wealth Gap Is a Generational Challenge”, [Report] *CAP*, March 19, 2021.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/eliminating-black-white-wealth-gap-generational-challenge/>

Moreover, *Them* explores the psychological trauma of African Americans as one of the effects of social terror. Although the story deals with this aspect in the 1950s, in an interview with *Screen Rant Plus* in 2021 the filmmaker has explained how the inspiration to write the series came from recent events:

Interviewer: When did you know that you wanted to create the show?

Little Marvin: I started to write it three or four summers ago, during a time where I was waking up every morning and seeing videos on my phone of black folks being terrorized by the police or with the police. It got me thinking about my own experience of terror, but also about history of terror that stretches all way back to the founding of this country, the weaponisation of the public space against black folks (...) and the tension between the public and the private.<sup>211</sup>

Marvin probably refers to the many video footages gone viral in 2017 and 2018, which showed cases of police brutality against unarmed black lives — for example the harsh beating of Dejuan Hall in 2017,<sup>212</sup> or the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in 2018.<sup>213</sup> Spread on social media, such events were widely viewed as contemporary examples of brutalization against black lives. Since Marvin observed these events as the inspiration for *Them*, the series addresses the terror of American racism as an

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<sup>211</sup> Joe Deckelmeier. “Little Marvin Interview: Them” [Video]. April 2021, *Screen Rant Plus*. <https://screenrant.com/them-show-little-marvin-interview/>

<sup>212</sup> Sarah Almukhtar. “Black Lives Upended by Policing: The Raw Videos Sparking Outrage”, Updated April 2018, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html>.

<sup>213</sup> Holly Bailey. “George Floyd died of low level of oxygen, medical expert testifies; Derek Chauvin kept knee on his neck majority of the time”. April 2021, *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/04/08/derek-chauvin-trial-2/>.

unrelenting issue, that caused damages in the past but continues to affect black lives in the post-racial phase. A psychological-paranormal narrative, *Them* metaphorically represents the power of racism as a destructive, multi-shaped force traumatizing the main characters, from the outside to the inside. On the one hand, the Emorys experience external aggressions from the neighborhood, from the workplace, and in the school environment. Moreover, they endured a racist aggression when they lived in rural North Carolina, as a white group of countrymen raped Lucky and murdered her newborn Chester — these murderers were never seized by authorities nor arrested. In the tragedy's sequence, the deranged, old white woman leading the men to Lucky's house approaches by singing a Jim Crow Era song, "Old Black Joe."<sup>214</sup> This music detail points out the slavery tradition of the 1860s still rooted in the Jim Crow south in the 1950s. On the other hand, the racist humiliation the Emorys experience in Compton impact them on the psychological sphere, to the point that they see hallucinations. Each family member mentally collapses and is haunted by his/her own "personal spectre," which is the personification of a particular insecurity, trauma, or paranoia that white racism is causing on their psyche. For example, Miss Vera is the protagonist of Gracie's textbook "Miss Vera Says", a manual of manners which teaches the rules to become "good girls". A spectral, stern schoolmistress, Miss Vera terrorizes Gracie into thinking that black girls like her will never be worthy of a good education or awarded for their intelligence. This demon may represent the rigidity of education system and the racism found in segregated schools.<sup>215</sup> Doris, a lively white teenager and cheerleader, appears as Ruby's demon and imaginary friend. She preys on Ruby's insecurities — like the self-doubt over her skin color, the desire

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<sup>214</sup> Brad Witter, "The Haunting Song From *Them* Has A Long History", April 9, 2021, *Bustle*.  
<https://www.bustle.com/entertainment/the-song-from-them-old-black-joe>.

<sup>215</sup> Editors. "Classroom Segregation: History and Current Impact on Student Education." August 2019. *School of Education*.  
<https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/classroom-segregation>.

to be a cheerleader and have a boyfriend. Preying on these paranoias, Doris makes Ruby feel ugly and makes her obsess over becoming white, until Ruby arrives to actually paint herself white<sup>216</sup> in a desperate attempt to become like the girls considered attractive and desirable by society. Doris represents the effects of racism on the psychology of teenagers in the high school environment, and the marginalisation that black youths may live because of white “beauty standards”. The Black Hat Man stalks Lucky and is the paranormal reincarnation of Hiram Epps, a man who lived in the Civil War Era in Eidolon — the village that then took the name of Compton— and promised to the Devil to persecute all the black lives arriving in this territory. The Black Hat Man is the personification of the ancient anti-black origins of the land and embodies the paranormal curse put on Compton.

The most complex “personal spectre” is Henry’s vision, Da Tap Dance Man,<sup>217</sup> which appears as the devilish embodiment of a blackface minstrelsy caricature. He is depicted wearing the typical Jim Crow outfit and a black hat, his face is completely painted in black coal make-up, has lips and eye circles marked in white paint, and has demonic, enormous black eye pupils which make him immensely grotesque. His distinguishing trait is his hysterical laughter and his Tip-Tap dance moves, reminiscent of the comedy blackface shows were supposed to make.<sup>218</sup> Interestingly, the monstrosity of Da Tap Dance Man can be analysed as a contemporary and innovative implementation of blackface minstrelsy, as it

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<sup>216</sup> “Day 7” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 7. Sequence 00:25:20. Amazon Studios, 2021. Amazon Prime Video. <https://www.amazon.com/THEM-Season-1/dp/B08XXDRJKH>.

<sup>217</sup> This name is never mentioned in the series, it only appears written in the final credits. “Day 10” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 10. Sequence 00:48:14. <https://www.amazon.com/THEM-Season-1/dp/B08XXDRJKH>.

<sup>218</sup> Pilgrim, David. *Who was Jim Crow?* Website of Ferris State University Sept., 2000. <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/who/index.htm>.

provocatively shows the historical atrocity of anti-black imagery from a 2021 perspective and sheds light on the issue of African American psychological trauma.

Firstly, this character is not only a psychological-horror monster which violently disrupts the life of one of the protagonists. Its monstrosity obliges mainstream audiences to see and reckon what blackface minstrelsy actually was. As observed in section 1.1, in the 1850s-1870s blackface shows were aimed at comically mocking black people through extremely boisterous and offensive stereotypes. For Leonard Cassuto, blackface representations were examples of “racial grotesque,”<sup>219</sup> as they negatively parodied and spectacularized black physical features to inscribe ideologies of racial difference and justify Jim Crow segregation. Elements of outfit, make-up, gestures, and the tragicomic behaviour of Da Tap Dance Man’s characterisation design a visual simulation of how blackface caricatures were actually constructed and how they meant to transmogrify black people as not fully human. Plus, this blackface is associated with monstrosity in the narrative, as it is disruptive for Henry’s life balance and violates the boundaries of the human form — existing only in the form of a hallucination. From this viewpoint, the racial grotesque concept is reused to make a modern horror monster, and is consequently functional make a sociopolitical provocation onscreen. Blackface in this instance reminds modern audiences that the dehumanization and monstrification of black individuals were the real horror in American history, and this horror continues to be a traumatic and unforgotten legacy in the post-racial present.

Moreover, the use of blackface in *Them* is functional to explore the psychological trauma generated by racist representational systems. According to the editors of *History*, the

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<sup>219</sup> Cassuto, Leonard. *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 129.



controversy of parodying the dark skin has persisted until recent times,<sup>220</sup> for example blackface was performed at the Oscars ceremony in 2012,<sup>221</sup> and wearing blackface to impersonate famous African Americans as Halloween costumes remains an ongoing issue.<sup>222</sup> In *Them*, Da Tap Dance Man manifests as Henry's hallucination and makes the protagonist uncomfortable about racial abuses — pointing out the treatment received in the workplace, pushing Henry to take revenge on his boss, making him feel guilty for Lucky's trauma, and ultimately showing him a blackface show film in a cinema. These visions are unreal and take place in Henry's mind, but are disruptive because this character is the psychological reflection of the protagonist's deepest paranoias, frustrations and insecurities originating from racial stereotyping. As Ashley Thomas (the actor playing Henry) comments in an *Amazon Prime* interview, this blackface is “how I guess Henry felt the world was viewing him, even if he was a man with pride.”<sup>223</sup> Consequently, Henry's mental resistance to his obsession metaphorically shows how black people have been psychologically traumatised and distraught by offensive stereotypes rooted in American society — such as blackface minstrelsy itself, 1930s jungle-horror movies, or the “King Kong” movie trend.

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<sup>220</sup> Alexis Clark, “How the History of Blackface Is Rooted in Racism”, Updated April 20, 2021, on *history.com*. <https://www.history.com/news/blackface-history-racism-origins>

<sup>221</sup> Tim Molloy. “Billy Crystal in Blackface at Oscars.” February 27, 2012, *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUS200898361820120227>

<sup>222</sup> Marc Malkin. “Julianne Hough Blackface: Crazy Eyes Actress Breaks Silence About Controversial *Orange Is the New Black* Costume.” November 2013, *ENews*. <https://www.eonline.com/news/483505/julianne-hough-blackface-crazy-eyes-actress-breaks-silence-about-controversial-orange-is-the-new-black-costume>.

<sup>223</sup> Little Marvin. “THEM Season 1 - Understanding Da Tap Dance Man with Ashley Thomas”, Bonus Content, [Video Interview] *Amazon Prime Video*. 01:00. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_4\\_2](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_hm_hom_1_c_cjm7wb_4_2)

Nevertheless, in last episode of *Them* Henry is able to kill the blackface clown, by saying the words: “You ain’t me, and you ain’t never gonna be me,”<sup>224</sup> this way realising that he must regain control of his identity, and no one can define him but himself. In the same scene, Henry cleans the black make-up off the demon’s face, and discovers that Da Tap Dance Man was actually a white man underneath a blackface mask. Consequently, this metaphor firstly explains that blackface is a repulsive invention created by the segregation system to manipulate the social image of African Americans and their self-perception; secondly, it claims the psychological potential of the black community to take ownership of someone else’s depiction of themselves. Jeremiah Birkett, the actor impersonating Da Tap Dance Man, has explained the concept he wanted to explain through this character:

I wanted to make a commentary of the commentary. Blackface in history was always a commentary on us [black people], so I thought this character needed to be a commentary on that. If this is what you think we are, what you think we act like, well — this is how you are like, this is how you act like. (...) Every negative word, image, depiction that has been put out on black people, we have been able to take that and make it ours.<sup>225</sup>

According to Birkett, the stereotype of blackface is grotesque and repulsive not because of the black subject portrayed, but because of the ideologies which designed and supported this kind of representations. Consequently, Da Tap Dance Man is a modern “representation of the

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<sup>224</sup> “Day 10” *Them: Covenant*. Little Marvin, Lena Waithe. Season 1, Episode 10. Sequence 00:37:00. Amazon Studios, 2021. Amazon Prime Video. [https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv\\_hm\\_hom\\_1\\_c\\_cjm7wb\\_4\\_2](https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0QG49RD8NK3CHUYPMBRUXPR0AM/ref=atv_hm_hom_1_c_cjm7wb_4_2)

<sup>225</sup> Taylor Cassidy. “Minstrelsy and Da Tap Dance Man with Actor Jeremiah Birkett // Black Girl Magic Minute” 5 June 2021, [Video] *Youtube*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHe7eX\\_x1T8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHe7eX_x1T8) 00:02:20.

representation” because it reflects how a contemporary African American filmmaker views/ comments the way in which blacks were viewed/commented in blackface minstrel shows, and the innovation stands in the fact it dignifies the real emotional pain that resulted from this historical reality. The fact of minstrel mocking and depicting black skin as grotesque, inhuman and monstrous is confronted and is used to claim that these attributes define instead the horror of white racism in America, which actuated imagistic distortions of race to justify slavery, segregation, redlining, and systemic racism — all issues depicted as upsetting for the psyche in *Them: Covenant*.

Ultimately, this “Black Horror” is a remarkable production in the post-racial years, because it uses a traumatic anti-black image to affirm instead a sociopolitical criticism over the guilt of white racism and the limited recognition given to black individuals, actors, and portrayals in the horror genre. As it was said in the section 1.1, blackface minstrelsy was not only one of the first structures of racist imagery in the American entertainment, it also influenced the way in which 1930s American horror cinema misrepresented, stereotyped and omitted the cultural value of African Americans. As this thesis tried to demonstrate, from the 1930s on blackness has experienced in films either ideological association to monstrosity — in *King Kong*, *Ingagi* — or limitations/omissions from mainstream productions — *Nightmare of Elm Street*, or *The Shining*. Consequently, a blackface character meant to self-analyse and self-reflect its own historical meaning is an important claim of reinvention, self-definition and empowerment for future representations of the black image in terror films.

## Conclusion

With the present research, I attempted to demonstrate that contemporary African American filmmakers have managed to achieve independence and recognition in the horror film industry, finally creating “Black Horror” films which revolve around authentic, complex and interesting representations of blackness; and that these productions ingeniously reinvent stereotypes, misrepresentations, or self-representations that the black image has encompassed in the history of horror cinema, to finally address a sociopolitical criticism to the concept of “Post-Racial” America.

The first chapter was meant to overview the problematic involvement of blacks within the industry of American horror film in the 20th century, to show the representational abuses, limitations and struggles that African Americans have endured to affirm their own image with independence. The pre-horror tradition of blackface and 1930s “Blacks-in-horror” films were problematically dependent on white-oriented, racist-based discourses of power, which controlled the image of blackness by overlapping the concepts of race and horror. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* is a momentous achievement, as it reacts to the systematic omission and invisibility experienced by blackness in Hollywood horror productions. Attention was given to the 1970s Era of Blaxploitation films, and the 1990s “Black New Wave,” periods in which African American actors and filmmakers actively manage to produce their own “Black Horror” films, in the struggle for their self-definition in the genre.

It is hoped that the second chapter exhaustively explained the value of contemporary “Black Horror” films, directed by affirmed black filmmakers such as Peele, McMurray and Little Marvin. These directors have reinvented and reshaped black stereotypes or images of the previous horror tradition to create modern self-definitions of blackness which also contribute

to the social and political advancement of their community. By analysing in-depth *Get Out*, *Us*, *The First Purge* and *Them: Covenant*, it was found that these films engage in a sociopolitical critique against the Post-Obama rhetoric “racial prejudice no longer exists or is no longer a major social problem.”<sup>226</sup> Indeed, these narratives denounce racial issues unrelenting in the United States, such as the modern disposability of black bodies, xenophobia, the economic divergences both between black and white communities and within the black community, fallacies in the education system, the modern supremacist and anti-black organizations, the generational wealth gap, and systemic brutalization/terror on black lives. These issues have always been problematic for the advancement of racialized minorities, and still occur after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, contradicting the idea of progress that this administration symbolized in American politics.

Hopefully, this research contributed to value the contemporary Black Horror films cinema as a representational tools of black liberation and visual awareness on the discrimination experienced by African Americans in the past and in the present day. Moreover, this work hopes to encourage scholars and experts in the field to continue the analysis on future Black Horror films, filmmakers and actors, as these artists powerfully engage in the inclusion of minorities in the “Post-Racial” future.

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<sup>226</sup> Hollinger, David. “The Concept of Post-Racial: How its easy dismissal obscures important questions.” *Daedalus*, 2011.

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