Syracuse University

SURFACE

Spring 5-1-2019

Commodification of Blackness in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing and Jordan Peele's Get Out

Nicholas Blauner

Commodification of Blackness in
Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Nicholas Blauner

Candidate for Bachelor of Degree (English & Textual Studies)
and Renée Crown University Honors
Spring 2019

Honors Thesis in Your Major

Thesis Advisor: _____
                    Will Scheibel, Assistant Professor

Thesis Reader: _____
                    Crystal Bartolivich, Associate Professor

Honors Director: _____
                    Dr. Danielle Smith, Director

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper examines the commodification of blackness in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (2017) and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017). The paper traces the differences in representation of a commodified blackness; whereas Lee created a commodification of blackness that celebrated black culture and represented it positively, Jordan Peele used the commodification of blackness as the source of his film's horror. D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) helped propagate the trend of American cinema to exploit blackness and commodify it for a source of filmic entertainment and marketing. The blaxploitation era shifted this method towards a representation of blackness by black directors and writers, who attempted to shift the commodification of blackness to one that represented the lower-class. By the time Spike Lee rose to prominence in the 1980's, this process was again beginning to adapt, this time at the behest of Lee.

Lee successfully proved to Hollywood executives that blackness was something that did not have to be ridiculed and stereotyped to make a profit; rather, it could be respected and celebrated. This concept extended to Lee's marketing strategies, leading to his connection to the sneaker sub-culture and the NBA. He would take criticism for this however, something he explores in his 2000 film *Bamboozled*. *Bamboozled* explores Lee's fear of the commodification of blackness. Jordan Peele, almost 20 year later, explores the horrors of black commodification through the Coagula process in *Get Out*. This paper does not argue for a historical timeline that can be traced between these two films. Rather, it merely compares the processes of representation in each film, and what this may mean for the next generation of films.

Executive Summary

The beginning of this paper starts with an anecdote of Spike Lee's acceptance speech for Best Original Screenplay at the 2019 Academy Awards. This functions to introduce Lee as a creative voice whose message has been to consistently combat traditional modes of representation of black America. After Lee is introduced, discussion begins of Lee's seminal *Do the Right Thing* (1989), which was largely ignored by the Academy during the 1990 Academy Awards. Part of the reason for its lack of recognition is the way it outrightly challenges the modes of representation Hollywood has made a practice of.

Next, the paper's thesis is traced: that Spike Lee created a commodified blackness that both celebrates and represents blackness in a positive manner, an advancement from previous modes of representation. Almost thirty years later, Jordan Peele took the concept of the commodification of blackness and made it into the horror of his 2017 film *Get Out*. Jordan Peele's film explores the extremes of commodification and the negative effects it can have on people of color. This is expressed through the Coagula process the film centers on—namely, the body-swapping process of the transmission of a white mind into a black body, and the "post-race era" following Obama's presidency in which the film is set.

First, the principal terms that are used are defined in the paper: blackness, black film, commodification, appropriation, and representation. After these terms are properly explained, *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith 1915) is introduced as one of the early examples of a commodified blackness in Hollywood film. By prying on stereotypical and exploitative representations of black America, sometimes by white actors in blackface, *Birth of a Nation* helped confirm the financial possibilities of representing blackness in such a way. Mainly, a

heightened criminality of the black subjects in *Birth of a Nation* was a concept that became much more prevalent following the film's release.

Though there were examples of black actors and directors in the 1950's and 1960's, such as Sidney Poitier, that represented blackness with new character types—these character types too fell short of realistic representation. It would not be until the blaxploitation era that black directors and writers were given the opportunity by white Hollywood executives to tell stories of a black under-class, where a strong black male or female lead would heroically save the black community from institutional oppression or criminal endeavors. These films too over time were bastardized by Hollywood, losing their deeper meaning of recognizing systematic oppression in favor of stereotypical depictions of ghettos and slums.

Spike Lee introduced a new form of representation, one that attempted to create a blackness that could be commodified without critiquing its nature. He showed in *Do the Right Thing* that blackness was funny, intelligent, beautiful, and energetic. He reminded audiences of the black heroes that dominate American popular culture. He helped create a black style that could be marketed and sold, especially Air Jordans. Outside of the film, Lee made a career out of marketing his and his films' images, sometimes through his own company Forty Acres and a Mule. Yet these practices have come under scrutiny, as some black critics have stated that the commodified blackness Lee helped create led to adverse effects on the black community, and the characters he created are stereotypical in their own right.

Lee seemed to address this issue with his 2000 film *Bamboozled*, a story of a modern black minstrel show that becomes one of the most popular shows in America. This film can be analyzed as Lee expressing his fear of what commodification can lead to. The commodification of blackness loses the cultural significance it once had and becomes a surface-level product for

consumption. When this happens, the plights and fears of the community that is represented are replaced with a price tag and shallow meaning. Discussion of *Bamboozled* works as a transition to the discussion of *Get Out.*

Get Out creates horror out of the commodification of blackness. Peele makes this horror physical through the Coagula process, the brain-swapping surgery that gives a buyer control over a new body, forcing the former to watch from "The Sunken Place". It must be noted that the buyer is usually white and the body is always black. Once the control of the black body was lost following the abolition of slavery, white America began exploiting the black image for profit, as has been noted earlier in this summary. This film shows a new form of domination, this time physical, over the black body. Through control of the black body, white patrons can fully consume blackness, literally walking in its shoes without any need to live in a black community.

This paper is significant in that it adds to discussions surrounding blackness, commodification, cultural appropriation, and each of the films being analyzed. It provides close analysis to help synthesize the arguments and brings in critical analysis from other authors and fields to round out the argument. This paper will also frame *Get Out* in context of *Do the Right Thing*, as now *Get Out* is being described as a canonical film. By comparing it to one of the classic films of the 20th century, similarities, differences, and progressions become apparent.

Exploration of Commodification

At the 2019 Academy Awards, Spike Lee wore a purple tuxedo in honor of Prince, supported by a necklace with Prince's "love symbol" hanging over his blazer. His feet shined in Golden Air Jordans, and his fingers were bound by Radio Raheem's "LOVE" and "HATE" rings. On his hat and his collar were pins representing his nominated film *Blackkklansmen* (Spike Lee 2018). After Samuel Jackson announced the director and his writing partners as the winners for Best Adapted Screenplay, Lee made his way to the stage and jumped into his friend's arms, throwing a celebratory fist pump into the air. While the Oscars were being handed to the writers of the film, Lee began his speech: "Alright, do not turn that motherfuckin' clock on." Lee wove a tale starting in the present, making note of how Black History Month takes place in the shortest month of the year, and connected it to his familial history—specifically the enslavement of his great grandmother. He mentioned how her daughter, his grandmother, did all that she could to send him through schooling at Morehouse College and eventually NYU graduate film school: "We all connect with our ancestors. we will have love and wisdom regained, we will regain our humanity." This transitioned to discussion of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, of which he stated, "Let's all mobilize. Let's all be on the right side of history. Let's make the moral choice between Love versus Hate. Let's do the right thing." Smiling, as the crowd erupted in applause, Lee finished, "You know I had to get that in there!" (Oscars).

Spike Lee's first competitive Oscar win (he was awarded an honorary Oscar in 2015)[1] came thirty years after the release of his first film to receive an Oscar nomination, 1989's *Do the Right Thing*. That year, his film—now considered canonical—was not even nominated for Best Picture. That same year, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) won the Academy Award for Best Picture,

something Lee has taken exception to throughout the years.[2] The Academy's disinterest in recognizing films like *Do the Right Thing* is indicative of the Hollywood system at large—for, if they were to recognize films that challenge the very modes of Hollywood representation and commodification, they would begin to unravel their own system. Hollywood has had an evolving history with its treatment of blackness, as has American history.[3] One does not need to look much further than this year's winner of the Best Picture Oscar, *Green Book* (Farrelly, 2018), whose depiction of racial tension was more optimistic and simplistic than *Blackkklansmen*, a repeat in Spike Lee's eyes of the 1990 Awards ceremony.[4]

Lee directly attacked Hollywood tradition to create a new mode of representing blackness, one that commodified black aesthetics and culture in a positive manner. He proved to Hollywood that rather than critiquing and marginalizing blackness, Hollywood could celebrate and praise blackness in film and still make substantial profits. Hollywood's changing attitude towards black commodification directly led to opportunities for more black storytellers, of which many have expressed gratitude to Lee directly.[5] Jordan Peele is an example of a contemporary black artist whose directorial work may not have been possible without Lee's help in shifting the tone, specifically in reference to *Get Out* (2017). Comparing Lee's timeless *Do the Right Thing* (1989) to Peele's *Get Out* is effective in revealing different strategies each director has taken to represent blackness and its commodification.

Both *Do the Right Thing* and *Get Out* directly challenge traditional modes of Hollywood representation through the generation of pathos by the placement of the viewer in a Black perspective: the former evokes both joy and a sobering melancholy as a vibrant and relatively upbeat Black world is shattered from the repercussions of a rising racial tension, where the latter creates horror and confusion by placing the audience in the perspective of a Black subject

enveloped by a eugenic-driven white cult. *Do the Right Thing* proved that a positive representation of blackness, and more importantly black nationalism, was something that could be profitable, notably that the commodification of blackness does not have to be in a critical and judgmental mode. By comparison, less than thirty years later *Get Out* was able to become a major box office hit by centering the horror of its film in the appropriation and commodification of blackness. Where the former needed to create an inviting and vibrant world to justify its themes to Hollywood studios, the latter explicitly framed whiteness as evil, and the commodification of blackness as evil. Where Spike Lee had to propose the financial possibilities of black consumerism, Jordan Peele made this same concept into a terror for the black community.

This paper will begin with the brief examination of the modes of commodification and representation influenced by D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), noting how this film established a practice of profiting off a negative portrayal of blackness. Next, the blaxploitation era will be analyzed for its validation of the profitability of black-centered stories written, directed, and starred by black actors and film workers. This will bring the discussion to Lee's *Do the Right Thing* as well as the man himself—for just as his film commodifies black nationalism and turns it into a substantial profit for Universal Pictures, so too does Lee begin to make a career out of his celebratory status and his ability to sell products. Lee's 2000 satire *Bamboozled* will then be introduced as proof of Lee's own fear of black commodification, something he helped propagate. Finally, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* will be analyzed as an evolving perspective of the commodification of blackness. Though this plan of analysis seems to provide a neat history of the evolution of the commodification of blackness in Hollywood from the early 20th century to the present, it is by no means assuming to represent the various intricacies and factors of such a

broad, dense, and elaborate historical evolution. What this paper is doing, strictly, is comparing Lee's *Do the Right Thing* to Peele's *Get Out*, in terms of their use of commodification, framed in historical context. Yet before these concepts and films can be explored, the terms in which this paper relies heavily on—namely commodification, appropriation, blackness, and representation—should be defined to properly foreground the subsequent analysis.

Though commodification and appropriation are related, they are not synonymous. Richard A. Rogers in his essay, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation" articulates that many scholars in the last fifteen years have used the term "cultural appropriation" to analyze text without bothering to define it (474). Rogers not only defines appropriation—drawing from dictionary definitions and its Latin roots—but also critiques several other studies that deploy the term. In an effort to avoid such critique from future scholars, "cultural appropriation" will be defined here. Drawing on Rogers, appropriation of a culture can be understood as "The use of one culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture—regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome" (476). In Hollywood film, the appropriation of black aesthetics, stereotypes, and narratives for White filmmakers and audiences is a common practice that has received much scholarly critique, some of which will be cited in this paper.

Commodification is related to appropriation. Where appropriation is the adoption of certain aspects of a different culture for the purposes of another, commodification is the dilution of these cultural signifiers to a commodity. Scholar Andrew Sayer marks the relationship between commodification and consumerism, separating the former, for the sake of his analysis, from its ties to employment (Sayer 342). The commodification of a culture has a specific relationship to capitalism:

There have been recurrent concerns that commodification, as a change from producing

what previously or otherwise might have been simply use values to producing goods for

their exchange value, tends to induce a change in normative values and hence a major

cultural shift: by elevating exchange value over use value, questions of what is good give

way to the question of what can be sold at a profit. (Sayer 343)

When blackness is treated as a commodity, and consumed by white audiences, the extensive

history and subtext of black culture is reduced to a price tag, devoid of context. The morality of

the commodification of a culture is laid to the wayside in favor of the potential profits this

generalized understanding could garner.

The commodification and appropriation of blackness can only be understood, however,

when the term "blackness" is properly explored. In a somewhat scathing review of *Do the Right

Thing*, Wahneema Lubiano critiques the understanding of blackness as a blanketed definition:

The problem of Spike Lee's "sample", his place in the sun, is that his presence,

empowered by Hollywood studio hegemony and media consensus on his importance,

can function to overshadow or make difficult other kinds of politically engaged cultural

work, not because it is impossible for more than one African-American filmmaker to get

attention at a time, but because of the implications and manifestations of the attention

given to his work. (255)

Spike Lee's film created a marketable black culture. This culture, along with his celebrity,

became understood as synonymous with black America. Yet this is only Lee's interpretation of

black America; when scouting locations for *Do the Right Thing*, Lee insisted that the film be shot

in Brooklyn, against the behest of Universal. His reasoning was that there was no other black

community like that of the Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn.[6] Blackness cannot be defined by one area, or

one artist's interpretation, just like whiteness cannot be defined by any one sector. Rather,

blackness is a concept that is always evolving and consistently varied. Art from black artists

merely represents their interpretation of blackness, thus making the term tricky to define. Franz

Fanon (translated by Charles Lam Markmann) attempts to textualize blackness:

> Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not
>
> permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be
>
> black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on
>
> themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The
>
> black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. (257)

Fanon argues that the ontology of the black man is impossible to define, for it is bifurcated; on

one side, blackness is defined by black people, and on the other in contrast to whiteness. Thus,

blackness is individualized and othered, simultaneously and constantly. The precarious task of

defining blackness makes the definition of "black film" even more problematic, though not

beyond the reach of some scholars.

Michael Boyce Gillespie provides a useful interpretation of the term "black film' in his

book *Film Blackness*. He argues, "Accounting for black film in a manner that does not adhere

alone to a focus on how cinema must oblige, portend, or emblematize social truth requires

attention to cinema as an art practice with attendant and consequential questions of form and

politics" (Gillespie 2). Gillespie wants to reclassify black film as art, and as such, its

representation of blackness is more nuanced than a direct indexicality as some would argue. As

art, black film is able to "interpret, render, incite, and speculate" on blackness but also any other

subject, for limiting black film to discussions of race is only a concept that applies to black

directors and writers; their white counterparts are allowed to explore a multitude of topics, with little heed to their race or skin pigmentation.

With an understanding of blackness, black film, commodification and appropriation, representation can be understood in relation to this paper as the depiction of blackness on-screen, and how this affects the commodification and consumption of blackness. Manthia Diawara provides a useful tool for analyzing texts' representation of black people. The construction of space determines the power of characters in the film. Diawara explains: "Space is related to power and powerlessness, in so far as those who occupy the center of the screen are usually more powerful than those situated in the background or completely absent from the screen…When Black people are absent from the screen, they read it as a symbol of their absence from the America constructed by Hollywood" (11-12). Whoever occupies more space in any given frame or over the course of an entire film is the controller of power in the film. Similarly, the dictation of time is fundamental to subjectivity in film. Diawara explains time's significance:

> The construction of time is similarly problematic in the classical narrative. White men drive time from the East to the West, conquering wilderness and removing obstacles out of time's way. Thus the "once upon a time" which begins every story in Hollywood also posits an initial obstacle in front of a White person who has to remove it in order for the story to continue, and for the conquest ideology of Whiteness to prevail. (12)

Diawara points out that time in Hollywood narratives is typically dictated by white characters, whose passage through time is hindered typically by people of color. The only relation Black people have to time in Hollywood films is as a deterrent to White progress. Both *Do the Right Thing* and *Get Out* challenge Hollywood's standards of space and time to create a representation of Black Americans that gives subjectivity and power to people of color and relegates White

character to either the supporting cast or the role of the villain, part of why each film has become critical texts in the pantheon of American cinema. Yet as alluded to already, the standard Hollywood practice was not this form of representation, but the one established by Griffith's *Birth of a Nation.*

Any conversation about the representation of Black Americans in Hollywood films must include D.W. Griffith's epic. Screened in the White House following its release, the film has been hailed as one of the most important and influential American movies ever made. In terms of its influence on the depiction of Black Americans on the silver screen, its impact was profound. In his piece "Black American Cinema: The New Realism", Manthia Diawara outlines its relevance: "*The Birth of a Nation* constitutes the grammar book for Hollywood's representation of Black Manhood and womanhood, its obsession with miscegenation, and its fixing of Black people within certain spaces, such as kitchens, and into certain roles, such as criminals" (3). He goes on to add that "*The Birth of a Nation* is the master text that suppressed the real contours of Black history and culture on movie screens, screens monopolized by the major motion picture companies of America" (Diawara 3). *The Birth of a Nation* legitimized racial stereotypes for the film industry, proving they were a marketable tool for blockbusters and small films alike.

Birth of a Nation was America's first true epic, running at over three hours in length, and the first blockbuster, grossing over $20 million (a conservative estimate – some figures show the film could have made upwards of $50 million) on a budget of $110,000 (Fain). Following Griffith's success, Hollywood normalized stereotypes of Black Americans – the Uncle Tom's, Mulattos, mammy's, slaves, entertainers, and criminals and rapists (played by white actors in blackface well into the 1930's) - throughout the first half of the twentieth century. *Birth of a Nation* is partially so significant because it was the first film to showcase all the principle

stereotypes – Mammy, Mulatto, Slave, Entertainer, and Criminal - of Black Americans in a single film (Grant 6). In his book *Black Hollywood Unchained*, Ishmael Reed notes how this depiction of Black Americans was not so different from the depictions of Jews by the Nazis before and during the Second World War (7), in terms of their intentions of warping the public's perceptions of a minority class. This film helped make the commodification of the negative stereotypes of blackness a standard Hollywood practice.

The standard set by *Birth of a Nation* would be reinforced continuously throughout the history of American cinema. That is not to say, however, there were not moments of opposition before Spike Lee's 1989 film. Sidney Poitier films of the 1950's and 1960's were marketed to Black audiences as nuanced discussions of race issues. One of the more famous examples is *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (S. Kramer, 1968), a film that *Get Out* is often compared to. These films, however, eliminated the black lower class, and depicted black America as an idealized, assimilated sup-group of American society. They did not address systematic issues of racism and exploitation that have plagued America since its foundation. Independent black cinema—such as the work of Oscar Michaux, the documentaries of Marlon Riggs, or the early years of black independent cinema outlined in Cara Caddoo's *Envisioning Freedom*—challenged these standards of representation and commodification, but the dominant Hollywood order consistently adapted to maintain control over the cinematic market.

A major shift came in the 1970's during the blaxploitation era. After filmgoing audiences became comfortable with the dignified black man from films in the 1960's, Hollywood was willing to take a chance on other modes of representation. The blaxploitation era arose out of this opportunity, dominated by the films of black directors such as Gordon Parks Sr, his son Gordon

Parks Jr, and Melvin Van Peebles, among several others. Author Kimberly Fain describes the tropes of the blaxploitation era:

> the blaxploitation era promoted economic, political, and social black power coupled with glorifications of black beauty, masculinity, and sexuality in an unapologetic manner. The fashion, the cars, the hair, the attitude were symbols of an era that celebrated pioneering black directors, producers, writers, and actors (…) the musical scores of jazz, funk, and soul elevated the everyday preachers, pimps, pushers, and players to urban heroes. (98)

The blaxploitation era was significant for several reasons: of which, it was one of the first times in the history of mainstream Hollywood cinema that a multitude of black filmmakers were given an opportunity to tell their own stories, without much white influence. Yet, as Hollywood had a tendency to do, these films were bastardized for financial gain. Following some of the earlier blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) or *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles 1971), sequels, spinoffs, and similarly themed films began to be produced, oftentimes with white directors, writers, and producers. The importance of the films shifted from a new representation of blackness to what was profitable—that is, the depiction of black men with a high level of "sexual bravado" (Fain 112), and generally confined to criminal occupations. More generally, the blackness from the earlier films was appropriated, simplified, and typified to produce a formulaic approach to these films' productions. Though the blaxploitation era was significant for its depiction of the black lower-class and many of the systematic issues that oppress black Americans, the commodifiable representations negatively depicted the black world as a criminal underbelly of society, whose soundtracks and images were marketed by Hollywood studios to try and bring in a larger black audience. By the mid-to-late 1970's, the height of the

blaxploitation era began to wane, and again black directors and writers struggled to find a place in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Spike Lee's entrance into American cinematic prominence was so fundamental for this reason. He was able to shift the commodification of blackness from one rooted in stereotypes and a negative representation to one that celebrated and supported blackness. As such, Lee is often considered the forefather of modern black cinema.[7] In a career spanning four decades, Lee has continuously made films challenging Hollywood's representations of Black America, from his first feature film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) to his most recent project *Blackkklansmen*. Though his films have taken some criticism for their often-misogynistic tones and inability to address the systematic issues of racism, Lee has continuously challenged traditional modes of representation and storytelling to create original, unique movies. And at the heart of Lee's filmography is his ability to market both the film and his own image. His production company, Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks, has now burgeoned into a commercial vehicle with a storefront in Brooklyn. This company helps produce all his films, and is usually in charge of the films' marketing, helping to create the 'Spike Lee Joint' brand. As an example, On Lee's personal Instagram page, (at the time of this writing – 4/24/2019) five of his last twelve posts have been an advertisement for one of his company's products. Lee's importance to American cinematic history lies in his ability to market his version of blackness which acts as a vehicle for him to tell stories with controversial subject matters.

This practice began with *She's Gotta Have It* but came to fruition in *Do the Right Thing*. Spike Lee used the setting of a hot summer day in the Bed-Stuy borough of Brooklyn as a sort of display for the beauty of black culture contrasted with the communal-shattering effects of racism. *Do the Right Thing* was created as a marketable film that showcased a certain blackness – Spike

Lee's version: colors were bright, Air Jordans were worn, and the vernacular was catchy and almost poetic. On a budget of around $6.5 million, the film grossed over $25 million (IMDb), proving to Hollywood producers and executives that black stories, which showcased a proud and positive black environment, could perform well at the box office. Following the film's success, many other directors and writers were given chance to create their films, as mentioned in the introduction to this essay. A close reading of *Do the Right Thing* reveals several examples of this representation, and how it had some adverse consequences Lee may not have considered.

Representation of blackness in *Do the Right Thing* both adheres to Diawara's notions of representation and creates a black world that can be sold. From the opening ten minutes of the film, whiteness is marginalized in favor of blackness. As early as the opening credits, the Universal logo is accompanied by a somber jazz piece (orchestrated by Spike Lee's father) and followed by Lee's 40 Acres and a Mule company's logo. Though standard procedure to start with the largest and follow with the smaller companies, the very name of Lee's company attacks the Hollywood conglomerates, and the false promises made by the American government to emancipated black slaves. In so doing, he is also attacking the false representation that had dominated Hollywood's history. Next comes the title card, a colorful and bold "Do the Right Thing" etches its way across a black background. What follows is one of the most memorable credit sequences in the history of American cinema.

Rosie Perez' dance routine and the accompanying Public Enemy's hip-hop song "Fight the Power" establish the pace, energy, and style of the film. Her bombastic dancing seems to be attacking the audience, reinforced by the boxing outfit she dons near the second verse of Public Enemy's anthem. The verses rapped as she dances evoke references to James Brown, the Soul Brothers, and Malcom X, among others. Specifically, when they mention "Swinging while I'm

singing / Giving whatcha getting". This is a direct reference to Malcom X's famous "Ballot or the Bullet" speech, where he states, "Anytime you live in the twentieth century, 1964, and you walkin' around here singing 'We Shall Overcome,' the government has failed us. This is part of what's wrong with you do too much singing. Today it's time to stop singing and start swinging" (Genius). Malcom X is referenced constantly throughout the film, often representing one of two forms of resistance: an any-means-necessary approach in the case of Malcom X, or the non-violent high-ground approach of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Regardless of which method the viewer finds more effective, the ideas are put into a catchy song that became widely popular following the film's release. In this specific example, Lee and Public Enemy were able to make a discourse on race relations and Black nationalism into a commercialized tune.

Black music becomes both a point of contention and a reference to the exuberance of black culture. Notably, during Love Daddy's "Role Call", the influence of black artists on the music industry is expressed. Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, Run DMC, John Coltrane, Jerry Lewis, and George Clinton are among the names mentioned. This list reminds the audience of black culture's influence over American culture at large and provides in one scene countless role models for the black community. Lee couples this roll call with shots of the neighborhood; One such shot is of Da Mayor, the old drunkard who is a voice of moral righteousness throughout the film. The shot starts on Da Mayor's beer bottle and zooms out to reveal him sitting in a fenced-in block. Though this shot is situated in a sequence showing the heatwave's effects on the residents of the neighborhood, it also calls attention to the problem of alcohol in black communities; Liquor and convenience stores are often more common in black communities than grocery stores, leading to high levels of obesity and alcoholism.[8] Da Mayor suffers from both, explained in a speech later in the film where he describes the ordeal of trying to keep his children and wife

fed. By sneaking this shot underneath Love Daddy's Roll Call, audiences are forced to consider both the bright artistry of the Black community and the effects of exploitation.

Do the Right Thing's climax is catalyzed by the Public Enemy anthem. Sal keeps his pizzeria open past closing time to feed four hungry patrons which in turn allows Radio Raheem, Buggin' Out, and Smiley to enter the shop. Blasting "Fight the Power" out of Raheem's boombox, the three walk towards the counter, Buggin' Out spitting onto the floor in an act of disrespect. Earlier in the film, Buggin' Out was kicked out of Sal's for demanding representation of black people on Sal's 'Wall of Fame', arguing that the amount of money black people spend at his restaurant justifies their representation. Sal disagreed, claiming it was his shop, and only Italian Americans can make his wall. At the end of the film, Buggin' Out's protest garners support from Smiley, the stuttering purveyor of images of Malcom X and Martin Luther King, and Radio Raheem, the black man whose radio blasts Public Enemy throughout the film. Distorted camera angles and close ups united the three against Sal, who yells "Turn that jungle music off, we ain't in Africa!" The argument escalates to the use of the n-word by Sal, uniting the black patrons with Buggin' Out. The noise and energy of the scene is cut when Sal destroys Radio Raheem's boom-box. He states, "I just killed your fucking radio", thereby killing half of Radio-Raheem's identity. Raheem pulls him over the counter, a riot breaks out, and Raheem is eventually strangled to death by a white police officer.

The importance of this scene, aside from it being the culmination of the tension that had been escalating throughout the day, is associated with the message Buggin' Out's protest was rooted in. He was arguing that the customers of Sal's pizzeria have a right to make decisions relating to the representation on Sal's 'Wall of Fame', a point which Sal refused to recognize. Similarly, Sal referred to the Public Enemy track as "jungle music" from "Africa", revealing his

lack of understanding of both the message of protest in the song and the blackness of his customers. This scene is important in the consideration of the commodification of blackness throughout the film; he has made a living off the black economy with little consideration for the community supplying his fiscal gain. When confronted with reasonable arguments about why he should represent the community his business resides in, he resorts to violence. Sal does not wish to know the issues of the black Americans he profits off; all he wants is their money. Music throughout *Do the Right Thing* is used to celebrate blackness while at the same time express the concerns of the community represented in the film. When white characters are approached with this music, and are asked to consider the music's message, the music and the black characters associated are destroyed.

Music is not the only representation of blackness that Spike Lee employs, however. Lee expands his representation of a marketable black world to include black style. Most of the black characters in *Do the Right Thing* wear vibrant clothes, whose colors contrast the stark brownstones and littered streets of the Bed Stuy neighborhood. Several characters wear jerseys of famous black athletes, including Spike Lee's Mookie, who dons a Jackie Robinson jersey in the poster for the film. Other characters were jerwelry, shirts, or other articles of clothing that represent either Africa, black pride, or black nationalism. Buggin' Out, for example, wears a large Africa necklace over his bright yellow-striped shirt. By having the central characters proudly wear black nationalist clothing, Lee is advocating for the black community to consume these types of products – products he himself would provide through 40 Acres and a Mule.

Moreover, the film directly advertises Nike's "Air Jordan" sneakers. After Buggin' Out converses with Pino, one of Sal's sons and Mookie, the protagonist played by Lee himself, a white biker scuffs his shoe. A low-angle shot, seemingly from the perspective of his shoe, looks

up to Buggin' Out, whose countenance reflects true anguish. "Yo!" he yells out at the biker,

drawing a crowd around the two. Buggin' out questions, "Who told you to step on my shoes?

Who told you to walk on my side of the block? Who told you to be in my neighborhood?" The

man responds, "I own this brownstone." In an argument that starts with the scuffing of a shoe, a

dialogue about major issues for black communities emerges. Lee is able to incorporate important

discourse on issues that affect black communities – in this case gentrification – framed by a

marketable aspect of Black culture.

The importance of shoes for Spike Lee extends beyond this film. As mentioned in the

beginning of this paper, Lee wore Golden Air Jordans to the 2019 Academy Awards Ceremony.

Lee has had a fruitful relationship with the Air Jordan sneaker, starting with his commercials in

the early 1990's. Directed by Lee, and starring Lee as a reprisal of his role from *She's Gotta*

Have It as the outspoken and comical Mars Blackman, he helped create the pandemonium

surrounding Jordan's shoes. Lee's image is now intrinsically linked to both Air Jordans and the

NBA at large, as he is often spotted courtside at his beloved New York Knicks games. By

unifying his image with Jordan and the NBA, Spike Lee has widened his influence past the

world of cinema to the world of American athletics: "The success of the commercial was not

only attributable to its compressed, rock video-style of narrative (…) Spike Lee and Michael

Jordan, two icons of black American culture, also were a key part of the attraction. Spike Lee has

turned the marketing of 'style' into a personal success story" (Wilson & Sparks 399). Connecting

his image with Jordan united two of the biggest faces of black America. Thus, his films and

products have gained a larger consumer base. Yet that is not to say that this growth in Lee's

commercial image and commodifiable blackness have been universally supported.

Jerome Christensen notes how the increase in shoe sales and growth in the underground shoe market that *Do the Right Thing* helped inspire led to adverse effects on the black community. Put simply: "The white man may soil the shoes, but the shoes soil the community. And Forty Acres and a Mule Productions sells the shoes" (595). Christensen's critique highlights the corporate nature of Lee in more detail. Specifically, he addresses the issue of the rise in "shoe violence" indirectly caused by the emphasis on Jordan's in *Do the Right Thing*. He argues, "Spike's Joint exemplifies corporate populism's will to repackage the residue of an archaic act of political assertion into a pure act of consumption with no obligations that are not reducible to the terms of the contract and no consequences besides the ring of the cash register" (593). Christensen expands his argument by describing a Nike shoe boycott that arose following the film. He states that Lee's alliance to corporate America may have created a divide between him and the black community he is trying to represent.

Another criticism of Lee has been his celebrity status and the commercialization of his films. In response to Lee's "naïve" comment on how "profit might not be somehow tied to how much a mass-distributed film can make itself acceptable to vast numbers of United States citizens", Lubiano asserts, "if a production has to return a profit in the millions of dollars, the likelihood of that production's remaining oppositional or subversive with regard to race might well be in inverse proportion to the extent the film relies on the support of a large (of whatever races), politically uncritical audience to turn a profit" (258). Lubiano is claiming that because a film has to appeal to a large, multi-racial audience in order to ensure its profitability, it cannot realistically be subversive of Hollywood trends, for even though these trends may be racist and exploitative they are proven to be profitable.

Though some critics and film viewers do not agree with Lee or his methods of consumerism and commerciality to sell his films, Spike Lee's films have more exposure and appeal to a wider audience than most other directors, be they black or white. Even through the process of calling his films "Joints," Lee has created a brand that is unique to his body of work. This brand is built off black pride and has inspired many white viewers to be more accepting of black culture, while also giving black viewers a chance to embrace and celebrate their own blackness—represented positively in a major Hollywood production. Consistently, he has used consumerism as a cover for his political messages. It is not as if he is selling blackness without trying to argue for its understanding and recognition. Rather, he sells *his idea* of blackness while at the same time discussing issues that negatively affect this community. After he gets an audience to buy into his world, he reveals to them the injustices effecting this world, thereby creating sympathy where there otherwise may not have been.

To blame Lee for this commercialization is to discredit all he has done for the representation and general ability of black Americans to work in the film industry: "The charge that Lee is merely a shill for corporations such as Nike and Sony must be considered alongside the film industry's commitment to corporate advertising that virtually began with the birth of the American Cinema…For an artist to survive today in any marketplace without some connection to corporate interests is scarcely possible" (Gabbard 262). Lee understands the business of film and knows that he has to work harder than any white counterpart to receive proper funding and distribution for his films. It is easy to criticize Lee's methods following his breakthrough; presently, black directors do not need to make their films as marketable, mostly due to streaming services providing more opportunities for the financing of black film and global distribution for these films on the Internet, as well as the general increase in diversity in Hollywood. Yet looking

back on the 1980's, profitability was the only factor in the consideration of black artists; Eddie

Murphy, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, and Danny Glover were able to work steadily throughout the

decade due to their popularity among both black and white audiences (Lommel 61). Framing

Lee's necessity to commercialize blackness in this historical context, the representation of a

commodifiable black America can be seen as a necessary precursor to modern representations.

Yet that is not to say all modern representations are progressive and divergent from their filmic

ancestral roots.

In Spike Lee's 2000 film *Bamboozled*, the director revives minstrel shows to critique the

exploitation and commodification of a negative representation of blackness. Starring Damon

Wayans and Jada-Pinkett-Smith, the film is centered around Wayans' Pierre Delacroix, the only

black television writer for Continental Productions and his creation of The New Millennium

Minstrel Show, a modern blackface satire which – to the horror of Delacroix – is not perceived

as satirical and becomes a major commercial success, leading to a rebirth in popularity of

blackface in American culture. In a critical analysis of *Bamboozled,* Jamie Barlowe argues that

"*Bamboozled* confronts its audiences with the continuing but unacknowledged consequences of

minstrelsy and mimicry in the United States as a postcolonialist slave society" (1). Barlowe's

paper properly outlines the history of minstrelsy in American culture in the early 18th and 19th

centuries and its subsequent portrayal in film, noting its prominence in *Birth of a Nation* and

Bamboozled's explicit acknowledgement of this history.

This reading is articulate and thought-provoking, yet an alternative analysis can frame

Bamboozled in the context of the commodifiable black image associated with Spike Lee. As

much as the film is about the history of minstrelsy and blackface, it is also about the history of

the commodification of blackness. Mainly, minstrelsy and blackface are each a form of

commodification of blackness. Yet more so, the film seems to be commenting on Spike Lee's

fears of what a commodification of blackness can lead to. The reinvigoration of blackface by the

show propagates the classic stereotypes of black Americans once more. The extremes of the

show— it is set in a watermelon patch on a cotton plantation— make the racism obvious.

Alternatively, modern representations of black America still employ stereotypical representations

that are sometimes overlooked by a white audience. Lee himself has even been critiqued of

propagating some of these images. In a sense, *Bamboozled* is Lee discussing the issue of the

commodification of a black image, aware of the charges laid on him and the consequences of the

brand he has created; he is commenting on how a commodification of an improper representation

of blackness can have repercussions that extend beyond the profit margin of a film, affecting the

very foundation of the understanding of an entire race of people.

As such, Lee has worked tirelessly to evolve his representation of blackness with the

changing times, all the while consistently celebrating its diversity and uniqueness. Spike Lee

convinced major Hollywood studios that young black directors could be a worthwhile investment

(Grant 49). He also convinced the moviegoing public that black-centered stories were both fun

and intense, comical and serious. Black people were no longer considered entertainers but artists.

Jordan Peele—who gained prominence as a part of the sketch-comedy tandem with Keegan

Michael-Key on Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* (2012-2015)—has since emerged as one of the

most respected young directors in Hollywood. He is regarded as an artist, when less than ten

years ago he may have been seen by some as a pale imitation of Dave Chappelle.[9] Without Spike

Lee, Peele may never have had the opportunity to write, much less direct a feature film

distributed by Universal, the same company that distributed Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. Yet Peele

is not merely a black director whose fortunes are reliant on his predecessors; he is a talented

writer who took Lee's concept of marketing Blackness and made it into the backdrop of a social-horror.

Get Out, Jordan Peele's first directorial effort, is a nuanced response to the post-racial era following President Obama's election in 2008. In "The First Great Movie of the Trump Era", *Vulture* columnists Jada Yuan and Hunter Harris compile snippets of dialogue from principle members of the film, in which Peele states,

> "I had never seen the uncomfortableness of being the only black guy in a room played in a film. That notion is a perfect state for a protagonist of a horror film to be in, to question his own sanity […] And then, [once I] decided that I wanted to bite off the difficult task of making a film about race, that was a scary notion. If you fail at that, you've really failed."

Peele manifested this horror through his protagonist named Chris, a black photographer who travels with his white girlfriend Rose to her parents' house in Upstate New York. What starts as an example of police discrimination, code-switching and micro-aggressions evolves into a tale of body-snatching and hypnosis in the quest of the Armitage family to join the black body with the white mind, making a "superior race". Chris battles his way to freedom with help from his TSA agent buddy Rod, destroying the 'Coagula' cult in the process.

Peele described the film as a social-thriller, whose horror was created through racism. Rod actor Lil Rel Howery explains, "He's turning racism, which is already scary, into a horror! I was like, 'That's brilliant!'" (*Vulture*). Critics were quick to pick up on this thread, noting similarities between *Get Out* and George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), as well as the growing paranoia to reveal the fantastical horror in films like *Rosemary's Baby* (R.

Polanski, 1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (B. Forbes, 1975).[10] Zadie Smith notes in her article "Getting In and Out: *Who Owns black pain?*" that,

> "One of the marvelous tricks of Jordan Peele's debut feature, *Get Out*, is to reverse [constituencies], revealing two separate planets of American fear – separate but not equal. One side can claim a long, distinguished cinematic history: Why should I fear the black man in the city? The second, though not entirely unknown (*Deliverance, The Wicker man*), is certainly more obscure: Why should I fear the white man in the woods?"

Get Out reverses norms of Hollywood film, specifically genre tropes of thrillers and horrors, to create a black perspective of fear previously unrepresented. This creation depended on the film's subject to be black, however, and to not behave as a white character in a similar situation would.[11]

Like *Do the Right Thing*, *Get Out* establishes blackness as the subject and point of view from the onset of the film. Following the production companies' animations, a black screen is coupled with the sound of nocturnal summer bugs. This sound precedes its accompanying image, a sidewalk in a darkened suburb lit by a quaint streetlight. As the camera begins to retreat back along the sidewalk, a voice can be heard from off-screen right: "The thing I've been asking myself is: what kind of sick individual names a street Edgewood Way and he put it half a mile away from Edgewood Lane?". Like a shadow, the speaker walks into frame, eventually making his way onto the sidewalk. Though he is not lit, it is clear he is speaking on the phone to a significant other ("Alright, I love you baby. See you soon"). Eventually, by the time he has hung up, Lakeith Stanfield's character is fully lit, surrounded by the backdrop of white suburbia.

Without cutting, the camera follows Andre (Stanfield's character's name, only to be revealed much later in the film) as he turns the corner and makes his way down Ryan Avenue. Headlights appear in the distance. The camera switches its focus from Andre to the car, swiveling around the former to keep the latter in frame. The car turns around and begins tailing Andre, as he checks his phone for directions. Faintly a song becomes audible: "*Run, Rabbit, Run, Rabbit, run, run, run*". Andre, stopping to look at the car, begins to mutter to himself, "Okay, I just keep on walking. Don't do nothing stupid, just keep on walking." He decides to turn around and walk the other way, the camera still following him. As he passes a tree the camera again speeds past him to maintain his point of view. He turns around to look at the car, now parked with the driver door ajar, "*Run, Rabbit, Run, Rabbit, run, run, run*" bellowing louder from the radio. "Yo, come on bruh… This is – ", he is cut off as the driver suddenly ambushes him, choking him under a streetlight until he loses consciousness. All the while, the camera retreats from Andre's side as the song echoes louder and louder. The attacker drags Andre some fifty feet back to the trunk of the car, almost in beat with the song. Finally, the camera cuts to a distant shot, revealing more of the neighborhood. The attacker loads Andre's body into the trunk, which in turn cuts the music, and begins to pull away as the scraping of a violin leads into the title sequence.

The prelude to the main story works on several levels: it reveals Jeremy's abduction methods, which are talked about second-hand later in the film; it provides a point of contrast between the Andre seen later in the party scene, revealing the effects of the brain-swapping surgery; and crucially, blackness is marked as the subject of the film, and the commodification and appropriation of which the film's true horror resides. Similar to *Do the Right Thing*, the only character to speak in the opening scene is black, whose point of view motivates the camera. As

he moves, the camera moves. Andre's movement thus dictates the flow of time in the film, which is only interrupted by the arrival of a white car; the whiteness of the car is no doubt symbolic of whiteness in general, as is the quiet suburb Andre finds himself trapped in, lost among the "Ryan Aves" and "Peacock Ways". More so, the violence that ensues is not hidden by any means. As noted earlier, Andre is strangled underneath a streetlight, as if he was center stage. He yells before being choked and struggles for a few seconds. When he is dragged, his feet make a shuffling noise, and the process of putting his body into the trunk involves some bangs and thuds. Yet the neighborhood stays silent.

Whiteness engulfs, silences, and subdues Andre. His abduction will lead to his subjugation to whiteness, the end goal of the white characters in *Get Out*. In a paper that uses Critical Race Theory to analyze *Get Out* and *Detriot* (K. Bigelow, 2017), Ciara B. Jackson notes, "The nonexistent effort to hide the crime speaks to the assumption that [Jeremy] is confident in his ability and apathetic about the possibility and consequences of getting caught assaulting an African American" (16). Because he performs the crime in a white community, and in a white-ruled society, repercussions are avoided. An allegory for the commodification of blackness in American popular culture, the abduction Andre is not met with punishment, but mocked with a common jingle from the Golden Age of Hollywood.

"*Run, Rabbit Run*" becomes more interesting when examined historically. The use of the Flanagan and Allen tune (Ray) works against the Hollywood practice of appropriation of black music. In *Black Magic*, Krin Gabbard illuminates White Hollywood's obsession with black culture: "Black music and black masculinity, both of which are seldom directly acknowledged in [Hollywood] movies, are crucial obsessions among filmmakers and audiences, driving the plots of films much more than is immediately apparent" (7). Black music is used in films with a white

subject to create pathos or more generally to advance the story. Gabbard notes how these songs are never in support of black characters. Rather, they are used for white characters with no acknowledgement for the artists: "I use this term [Black Magic] metaphorically to describe the enchanting effect that black music, black sexuality, and other aspects of African American culture have on movie characters, more often than not when the characters on screen are white" (6). *Get Out* uses this concept and reverses it, by appropriating a pre-World War I Flanagan and Allen tune to create horror. The light-hearted nature of the song masks the action that accompanies it, similar to post-racial ideas of equality and fairness masking the truth of police brutality, the prison-industrial complex, gerrymandering, and appropriation.

The commodification of blackness becomes the horror of *Get Out*. As noted earlier, *Do the Right Thing* was created as a marketable film that showcased a certain Blackness – Spike Lee's version. Colors were bright, Air Jordans were worn, and the vernacular was catchy and almost poetic. *Get Out*, by comparison, does not sell blackness; alternatively, it creates horror from the very idea. *The Coagula* is a generations-old cult whose mission is to make the black body subservient to the white mind—a modern, more permanent form of slavery. Peele's film argues that the commodification of blackness by the white hegemony is the ultimate terror, one hidden behind veils of awkward reassurances (Mr. Armitage assures Chris that he would have voted for Obama a third time) and subconscious racism (In their first meeting, Mr. Armitage yells out to Chris, "My Man!").

One of the clearer examples of consumption of blackness as horror is the auction scene. As Rose and Chris talk about potentially leaving the Armitage's in privacy, Mr. Armitage leads a silent auction. The guests of the party, who earlier were shown in a montage of various moments of prodding and racist dialogue with Chris, raise bingo-cards to cast their bids. The item up for

sale is revealed to be Chris whose buyer is the blind art collector Jim Hudson (played by Stephen Root). Of the pre-auction questioning, Judson L. Jeffries argues, "Chris was a specimen or a piece property to be inspected before the bidding commenced, similar to the way a breeder or equestrian might inspect a horse by opening its mouth or worse yet the way Blacks, who were held as slaves, were poked and prodded by plantation owners before being placed on the auction block" (145). When conversing with his 'buyer', Chris asks Jim "Why us? Why Black people?", to which Hudson replies, "(chuckling) Who knows. People wanna change. Some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler…but don't, please don't lump me in with that. I could give a shit what color you are. No. What I want, is deeper. I want your *eye* man. I want those things you see through."

Though he may try to justify his purchase of Chris's body as racially unmotivated, his action is linked to a longer history of the commodification of black America. Hudson is more interested in a black perspective than the physicality. A black way of viewing will assuredly lead to a success in photography he never gained, due to the marketability of black aesthetics and style. Hudson associates Chris's talent with his skin color, not the hardships of Chris's childhood that gave him an eye for the brutality of life.

Smaller moments riddled throughout the film make the point less explicitly. One of the earlier examples takes place during Dean's tour of the house. He shows Chris Missy's office, where he states, "Turns out people are just as messed up in the head up here as they are in the city" (a dark comment when framed in the context of their body-snatching familial practices). After showing Chris some photos of the family, he looks down to a table and grabs two candle stands: "I picked these up in Bali." Both an example of the fetishization of non-European art and subtle racism, Dean's comment causes Chris to turn him a side-eye. Throughout the tour there is

a constant need to prove that Dean understands other cultures, notably when he gets into his speech about his father losing to Jesse Owens in the qualifiers to the Berlin Olympics. His father's loss is revealed to be the reasoning behind the foundation of the body-snatching practice[12]: "In place of the old disgust comes a new kind of cannibalism. The white people in *Get Out* want to get inside the black experience: They want to wear it like a skin and walk around in it. The modern word for this is 'appropriation'" (Smith 6). Because his grandfather could not beat Jesse Owens physically, he theorized that it was not possible due to the limitations of his body. Thus, he needed to adopt the best parts of black people, their physicality, with the best parts of White people, their work ethic and mental capacity. It is the cruelest and most absolute form of appropriation and commodification.

Dean's son Jeremy is equally interested in the physicality of Chris. During a dinner scene, conversation shifts from embarrassing childhood stories to sport. Dean asks Chris what he plays, to which Chris replies basketball. Jeremy quickly jumps in: "You an MMA fan?" Quickly, the conversation turns to Chris's physical potential. While leaning forward on the table and smiling with pure ecstasy, Jeremy says, "With your frame and genetic makeup, if you really pushed your body… and I mean really trained, you know, no pussy-footing around. You'd be a *fucking beast*." This comment is not necessarily directed at Chris. Jeremy is imagining what it would be like to have Chris's body; he is shown to be physically inferior,[13] only able to subdue Andre in the opening scene by surprising him from behind. The Coagula process allows white customers to purchase black physicality, the only thing denied to whites since the abolition of slavery.

Andre's buyer, whose proud of his new physicality, displays his appropriation during the party sequence. Jordan Peele breaks down the scene in a video essay for *The New York Times*.

Chris introduces himself to Andre, whose manner and clothing are similar to the older white men littered throughout the party. He introduces himself as Logan and shakes Chris's hand instead of returning a fist-bump: "And right there we have the fist bump looking for some, some brotherly love, and of course getting nothing" (youtube). A dumbfounded Chris watches as Logan makes his way to a group of white men, who all watch as he twirls in front of them, displaying his newly purchased blackness. Jordan Peele explains, "Here we have another thing that any self-respecting Black man would never do, which is go and present himself like some kind of weird offering for approval on his clothes" (*New York Times*). Logan proudly models his new black body to potential buyers who are considering purchasing Chris. As if trying to decide if they really need that new pair of shoes, the party-guests must decide how much they are willing to spend on a black body, or whether this black body is a 'right fit' for them.

Get Out creates horror out of commodification. The only aspect of blackness that has not been appropriated by white society is the ownership of a black body, without the need to live in a black community. As stated earlier, a problem with commodification is the loss of the cultural meaning of the commodified object; the bodies' sold to white patrons in *Get Out* are like a new outfit, hip to the season. As one character states, "Black is in fashion!" The former owners of these bodies can only watch as a white supremacist society controls their bodily movements just as black Americans can only watch as the broader American culture adopts blackness and appropriates it for financial gain. The original ending of *Get Out* finds Chris arrested by police, charged with the murder of the Armitage family. Rod tries to get his friend to remember details from the trip to piece together a defense, but Chris is defeated. The last shots of this ending are of Chris walking down a row, heading towards his cell as a metal gate shuts. Everything in the

frame save Chris and the guards walking with him is white. Whiteness engulfs and consumes blackness.

.   .   .

This paper has synthesized an argument about the commodification of blackness in *Do the Right Thing* and *Get Out*. The former was the first film by a black director whose films challenged traditional modes of representation to reach a mass audience and receive critical attention—achievable only through the creation of a new form of commodifiable blackness. The latter made the commodification of blackness into the ultimate horror of its film. What this says about the larger American film industry is not necessarily defining. It would be unwise to generalize about such a wide and diverse industry. Yet the success of both films critically, commercially, and socially—and their impact on the film community—is something to be considered. *Do the Right Thing*, thirty years later, is still being analyzed, discussed, and debated. It is not unrealistic to expect *Get Out* to receive years of critical analysis in the indefinite future. Some scholar may be analyzing the commodification of blackness in a future analysis and may compare *Get Out* to another film by another director. Though it may be lofty to expect the process of commodification of black culture to become unnecessary in the decision by producers whether or not to green-light a project, it is not unreasonable to hope for an improved practice.

Only a day before this writing, John Singleton passed away. The outpour from his peers, athletes, and other members of the black community make it clear how much of an impact films that combat the traditional modes of representation can make on the community they represent. Singleton's passing is tragic, but his legacy lives on through his body of work. And his message,

along with Spike Lee's, continues to inspire young black artists to pursue film as an avenue to express truth. Hollywood is an industry, and as such will always be driven primarily by economic incentives. It is unrealistic to ever expect the necessity to make films commodifiable to wane. One can only hope the commodification of blackness in Hollywood film evolves to a point where the community being commodified is not being sold for the uninformed consumption of a white supremacist hegemony, but for the celebration and joy of all.

[1] Barnes, Michael Cieply and Brooks. "For Spike Lee, an Honorary Oscar, but Diversity Takes Center Stage." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 21 Dec. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/movies/for-spike-lee-an-honorary-oscar-but-diversity-takes-center-stage.html.

[2] Stern, Marlow. "Spike Lee Blasts 'Selma' Oscar Snubs: 'You Know What? F*Ck 'Em'." *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 16 Jan. 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/spike-lee-blasts-selma-oscar-snubs-you-know-what-fck-em.

[3] Mahar, William J. "Black English in early blackface minstrelsy: A new interpretation of the sources of minstrel show dialect." *American Quarterly* 37.2 (1985): 260-285.

[4] Rao, Sonia. "Spike Lee Was Horrified 'Green Book' Won Best Picture. He Wasn't the Only One." The Washington Post, WP Company, 25 Feb. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/02/25/spike-lee-was-horrified-green-book-won-best-picture-he-wasnt-only-one/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9acdbe5270a2.

[5] Erbland, Kate, and Kate Erbland. "Samuel L. Jackson Hopes Spike Lee Wins an Oscar, but Thinks His Legacy Is Bigger Than an Award." *IndieWire*, 23 Feb. 2019, www.indiewire.com/2019/02/samuel-l-jackson-spike-lee-oscar-win-1202046168/.

[6] Lee was willing to forego a larger budget to maintain the Bed-Stuy location, a major point of dispute between he and Universal (Grant 51).

[7] "If one is going to write a study on Post-Soul Black cinema, *She's Gotta Have It* holds this position of a traceable signifier marking the emergence of the third significant period of Black feature film production" (Grant 1).

[8] Nowobilski, Andrew J. "Running from Money?." The puzzle of bars and liquor stores locating in black neighborhoods. Undergraduate Honor Thesis, Duke University (2007).

[9] *Key & Peele* (2012-2015) has been compared to *Chappelle Show* (2003-2006). Chappelle himself in a Netflix comedy special called out the duo for stealing his show's format.

[10] For Peele's discussions of his influences, see "Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism". Zinoman, J. *The New York Times.* Feb 16, 2017.

[11] In a somewhat critical review, Judson L. Jeffries notes proclaims, "Admittedly, the idea of a horror film where the lead character […] is Black is in my view, an oxymoron. The silly head-scratching things that whites do in horror movies, Blacks simply wouldn't do, *ever*" (140).

[13] During the party scene, his comical badminton abilities are on display in the background. Similarly, he drops Chris when carrying him to the basement, and seems to only know one mixed-martial arts tactic: the strangle-hold.

Works Cited

"Do the Right Thing." IMDb, IMDb.com, 14 June 1989, www.imdb.com/title/tt0097216/.

Barnes, Michael Cieply and Brooks. "For Spike Lee, an Honorary Oscar, but Diversity Takes

    Center Stage." The New York Times, The New York Times, 21 Dec. 2017,

    www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/movies/for-spike-lee-an-honorary-oscar-but-diversity-

    takes-center-stage.html.

Christensen, Jerome. "Spike Lee, Corporate Populist". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 17, No. 3 (Spring

    1991), pp 582-595. University of Chicago Press.

Diawara, Manthia. *Black American Cinema*. American Film Institute. 1993

Erbland, Kategrau. "Samuel L. Jackson Hopes Spike Lee Wins an Oscar, but Thinks His Legacy

    Is Bigger Than an Award." IndieWire, 23 Feb. 2019,

    www.indiewire.com/2019/02/samuel-l-jackson-spike-lee-oscar-win-1202046168/.

Fain, Kimberly. *Black Hollywood: From Butlers to Superheroes, the Changing Role of African

    American Men in the Movies.* Praeger. 2015.

Fanon, Frantz. "The fact of blackness." Theories of race and racism: A reader (2000): 257-266.

Gabbard, Krin. *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture*. Rutgers

    University Press. 2004.

Gillespie, Michael Boyce. *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*. Duke

    University Press. 2016.

Grant, William R. *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints,

    1970-1995*. Taylor & Francis Books, Inc. 2004.

Jackson, Ciara C., and Matthew H. Barton. Power of Whiteness: Critical Race Theory and

     Words in'Get Out'and'Detroit'. Southern Utah University, 2017.

Lommel, Cookie. *Black Filmmakers*. Chelsea House Publishers. 2002.

Lubiano, Wahneema. "But Compared to what? Reading Realism, Representation, and

     Essentialism in *School Daze, Do the Right Thing*, and Spike Lee Discourse". *Black*

     American Literature Forum, Vol. 25, No. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer, 1991), pp. 253-

     282. African American Review (St. Louis University). www.jstor.org/stable/3041686

Mahar, William J. "Black English in early blackface minstrelsy: A new interpretation of the

     sources of minstrel show dialect." American Quarterly 37.2 (1985): 260-285.

Nowobilski, Andrew J. "Running from Money?." The puzzle of bars and liquor stores locating in

     black neighborhoods. Undergraduate Honor Thesis, Duke University (2007).

Oscars. "'BlacKkKlansman' Wins Best Adapted Screenplay." YouTube, YouTube, 25 Mar.

     2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIzK9rFkTx0.

"Public Enemy – Fight the Power." Genius, 1 June 1989, genius.com/Public-enemy-fight-the-

     power-lyrics.

Rao, Sonia. "Spike Lee Was Horrified 'Green Book' Won Best Picture. He Wasn't the Only

     One." The Washington Post, WP Company, 25 Feb. 2019,

     www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/02/25/spike-lee-was-horrified-green-

     book-won-best-picture-he-wasnt-only-one/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9acdbe5270a2.

Ray, Deen. "Popular Music: 'Run Rabbit Run' by Flanagan and Allen". *CUNY Academic Commons*. November 27, 2017. eng410wwiilit.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2017/11/27/run-rabbit-run-by-flanagan-and-allen/

Reed, Ishmael. *Black Hollywood Unchained*. Third World Press. 2015.

Rogers, Richard A. "From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation." Communication Theory 16.4 (2006): 474-503.

Sayer, Andrew. "(De) commodification, consumer culture, and moral economy." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 21.3 (2003): 341-357.

Stern, Marlow. "Spike Lee Blasts 'Selma' Oscar Snubs: 'You Know What? F*Ck 'Em'." *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 16 Jan. 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/spike-lee-blasts-selma-oscar-snubs-you-know-what-fck-em.

Wilson, Brian and Robert Sparks. "'It's Gotta Be the Shoes': Youth, Race, and Sneaker Commercials". *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Vol 13. Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc. (1996): 398-427.

Yuan Jada and Hunter Harris. "The First Great Movie of the Trump Era: How *Get Out* began as arebuke to Obama-inspired dreams of racial harmony and became a conduit for fears reignited by the rise of the new president". *Vulture*. February 19, 2018. www.vulture.com/2018/02/making-get-out-jordan-peele.html

Zinoman, J. "Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism". *The New York Times.* Feb 16, 2017.

Filmography

Birth of a Nation. Griffith, D. W. David W. Griffith Corp. 1915.

Blackkklansmen. Lee, Spike. Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks. 2018.

Chappelle Show. Comedy Central. 2003-2005.

Do the Right Thing. Lee, Spike. Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks. 1989.

Get Out. Peele, Jordan. Blumhouse Pictures. 2017.

Green Book. Farrelly, Peter. Participant Media. 2018.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Kramer, Stanley. Colombia Pictures. 1967.

Key & Peele. Comedy Central. 2012-2015.

Night of the Living Dead. Romero, George A. Image Ten. 1968.

Rosemary's Baby. Polanski, Roman. William Castle Productions.

She's Gotta Have It. Lee, Spike. Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks. 1986.

The Stepford Wives. Forbes, Bryan. Palmar Pictures. 1975.