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Traumatic Horror Beyond the Edge: *It Follows* and *Get Out*

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Abstract:

Within cinematic horror, trauma as a concept has often been used as an allegorical strategy to work through collective anxieties. This article on *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014) and *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) strikes another note. It argues that, by their aesthetic qualities, both films are rendered traumatic in their affective orientation, both toward the cinematic world and toward the spectator. It analyses the two films through trauma as an affective-aesthetic strategy that puts emphasis on the edge of the frame as well as on the offscreen space. This strategy evokes a sinister mood that exists independently of the protagonists, allowing us to meaningfully feel the effects of their trauma as we engage with the film. Especially the use of the offscreen space in both films contributes to the “traumatic mood” of the films, but it also functions to immerse the spectator in the invisible filmic world. In this way, *It Follows* and *Get Out* embody trauma as a denial of relief from dread, which we both recognize in the characters’ experience, and feel in our own bodies through the effective creation of ever-present threat.

Keywords: *It Follows*; *Get Out*; trauma; horror film; offscreen space.

In Film Studies, trauma as a concept has been especially relevant in the study of melodrama as a temporal event (Williams, 1991), a cultural syndrome (Kaplan, 2005), or a “failed tragedy” (Elsaesser, 2011). Within the horror genre the concept has been used in the context of historical trauma and the way in which allegorical representations on

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national trauma offer means to work through collective anxieties (Blake, 2013; Lowenstein, 2005). Likewise, the two films discussed in this article – David Robert Mitchell’s *It Follows* (2014) and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) – are particularly open to interpretations which emphasize their nature as allegories of national trauma, namely urban decay and racial relations in contemporary America, respectively. But instead of reading the films as allegorical commentaries on social problems lurking beneath a surface, this article strikes another note. It argues that, by their aesthetic qualities, both films are rendered traumatic in their affective orientation, both toward the cinematic world and toward the spectator. It analyses the two films through trauma as an affective-aesthetic strategy that puts emphasis on the edge of the frame as well as on the offscreen space. This strategy evokes a sinister mood that exists independently of the protagonists, allowing us to meaningfully feel the effects of their trauma as we engage with the film.

The notion of mood as an affective-aesthetic strategy is central in Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2005), which discusses “tone” as a global and organizing feeling of a work of art. Similarly, Robert Sinnerbrink (2012) talks about “Stimmung” as a sensuous and affective cinematic mood that works to disclose film worlds. But to what extent can a complex affect such as trauma be considered a “tone” or a “mood”? Trauma is often defined as an overwhelmingly extreme and catastrophic affective experience that resists cognitive processing, so that it becomes constitutive of the person’s sense of self (Herman, 1992, p. 33). It is an affective failure that occurs when the effects of an overwhelmingly emotional experience are stored in somatic memory instead of semantic memory. Semantic memory is a dimension of memory that processes an emotional event by means of distortion. This locates the event chronologically and positionally in the past, and ensures that it is differentiated from current reality, the present. Somatic memory resides in the sensorimotor, bodily sensations that are related to the experienced emotional event. Since extremely painful emotional events resist processing by semantic memory, they are persistently stored as visceral sensations and visual images, such as nightmares and flashbacks, in the somatic memory (Van der Kolk, 1994, p. 258). For Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma is both unknowable and unspeakable, disturbing the past while inhabiting a continuous present by means of an eternal return of the traumatic event. This is why some trauma scholars define the phenomenon in terms of mood, or a “mood disorder” (Sher, 2005), insofar as trauma is an underlying and longitudinal affective state.

Another characteristic of trauma is the dissociation of affect and representation, which renders one unable to work through trauma, while

continuously feeling what one cannot represent. The failure to work through trauma blocks the individual's ability to distinguish affectively between the past and the present, so therefore trauma becomes an "arrested process" (LaCapra, 1999, p. 173). In survivor trauma there are also feelings of "fidelity" towards the dead, which invests trauma with a commemorative value that disenables reengagement in life (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 21–22). Even though these phenomena are individual experiences, this article argues that films can have an affective quality that establishes emotional congruence between cinematic mood and the structure of trauma. For instance, a cyclical narrative with the continuous re-emergence of threat in horror film implies the traumatic, recurring return of a nightmare, of which the *Halloween* franchise is perhaps the most obvious example. The anxious mood that is created by such compulsive repetition, is linked to trauma insofar as it is experienced in a similar way to the dissociative patterns of painful memory. The eternal presence of an absent dread can also be evoked by drawing the spectators' attention to that which lies beyond vision, that which could be defined by absence beyond the edge of frame (Bovens, 2018, p. 34). Again, this is linked to trauma insofar as traumatic events are defined by absence: the absence of visual representation and the lack of spoken reconstruction.

In *It Follows* and *Get Out* we recognize these two strategies, which immerse the spectator affectively in their world, and enable them to feel the effects, if not the experience, of a traumatic event. The "returning presence" of "It" in the form of ever-changing appearances in *It Follows*, and the recurring nightmares that haunt Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) in *Get Out*, contribute to the overarching mood of the films, which is congruent with persistent and intrusive traumatic feelings. The haunting presence of traumatic horror lurking beyond the edge of the frame is signalled in *It Follows* by its cinematography, in such a way that there is a sense of anxious anticipation throughout the film. Similarly, in *Get Out* the signs of hidden menace are often offscreen, emerging from outside the frame sometimes abruptly, sometimes gradually, but always with a ghastly sensation of persistent dread. The power of offscreen space to disturb and torment not only the protagonists but also the spectators, has been recognized, for instance, by Libby Saxton (2008), who argues that Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) produces meaning as much through what it reveals onscreen as through what it conceals offscreen. But the importance of offscreen was already subject matter in Noël Burch's (1981) formalist approach, which made a distinction between "concrete" and "imaginary" offscreen space. Burch considered offscreen space "concrete" if it is visually presented in the film at some point, and "imaginary"

if it is not seen (p. 21); yet, offscreen space need not be defined by its visible traits only, since it can also be situated in an imaginary universe (Aumont *et al*, 1983, p. 15) or in some mental space perhaps.

Both *It Follows* and *Get Out* evoke a sense of trauma by constantly drawing the spectators' attention to the haunting offscreen space, both concrete and imaginary. There is the ghostly presence of Walter (Marcus Henderson) the groundkeeper in *Get Out*, who first enters the frame from offscreen by means of a slow dolly out, or the extreme long shots in *It Follows* that isolate the protagonist in wide-open surroundings, rendering her vulnerable to uncanny, peripheral, invisible threat. In her *Staging Trauma*, Miriam Haughton (2018) speaks of trauma as a "shadowed space" "for the unspeakable to struggle in its desire for articulation and acknowledgment" (p. 2). I argue that both in *It Follows* and in *Get Out* the offscreen space functions as such a shadowed space "associated with threat and danger" (p. 5), where trauma is located, and a space from which the nightmare constantly resurfaces. Offscreen space can also be understood metaphorically. The abandoned neighbourhoods of Detroit in *It Follows* and the Sunken Place in *Get Out* could be seen as examples of this. For even though we occasionally do see these locations onscreen, they function more effectively as what Gilles Deleuze (2005) termed a "radical elsewhere", as a "more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist [...] outside homogenous space and time" (p. 18). Both films show that offscreen space not only contributes to the cinematic "mood" or "tone", but that it also functions to immerse the spectator in the invisible filmic world. In this way the films embody trauma as a denial of relief from dread, which we both recognize in the characters' experience, and feel in our own bodies through the effective creation of ever-present threat.

Trauma Lingers, "It" Follows

David Robert Mitchell's second feature film *It Follows* (2014) revolves around Jay (Maika Monroe), a young woman who is left with a haunting sense of traumatising horror after a seemingly innocent sexual encounter. The consequence of this encounter is that she will be followed by a zombie-like monster, which takes various appearances that only she can see, and that will kill her unless she has consenting sex with someone else, in order to pass the fatal curse on to this person. The film could therefore be seen as a blatant allegory of sexually transmitted diseases except that the "cure" is actually to have more (unprotected) sex. Set in Detroit, the film has also been regularly considered an allegory for inner city decay and the unstoppable dissemination of urban deterioration into suburban neatness, as epitomized in the numerous phantom-like

scenes with dilapidated streets and abandoned houses. The mise-en-scène is undefinably retro yet strangely contemporary at the same time: the colour scheme as well as the decorative patterns are from the 1970s. Yet, there is also a device that looks like a powder box but is actually an e-reader or a “shell phone”, as Mitchell himself defines this prop (Dowd, 2015). The opening scene with the hazy suburban mood is reminiscent of the Orange Grove Avenue sequences in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), an association which is strengthened by the sinister score by *Disasterpiece*. The conscious use of Carpenter’s horror elements, such as the mood of being constantly observed and surrounded by something sinister that made *Halloween* a slasher classic, renders *It Follows* uncannily familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

To place the film outside of time, or within arrested time, is also suggestive of the acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow, which characterises the experience of trauma (Riley, 2012). In a *Guardian* review, Peter Bradshaw (2015) indeed describes *It Follows* as a film that “taps into primal anxieties so effectively you can’t help but be traumatised.” In the following analysis, I argue that such traumatic persistence is one of the most important aesthetic principles in the formal and stylistic organization of the film. The film’s cinematography, for instance, signals haunting persistence of traumatic horror tormenting the victim through circular pans, following shots, and slow dolly-in camera movements. The film contains many extreme long shots that isolate the protagonist in wide-open surroundings, and that render her vulnerable to threat that seems to approach from every direction. On the other hand, the interior shots are characterised by darkness and suffocation, with the resulting effect of enclosing horror. The lurking presence of invisible threat in the film is realized through sudden change of focus to a distant figure in the background, or through allowing the monster to emerge from outside the edge of the frame. There is this relentless presence of a jaunty soundscape, which directly induces a sense of anxious anticipation in the spectator with its pulsating, throbbing rhythm. And finally, water is a recurrent motif in the film – the pool in which Jay floats, the water in the swimming pool into which “It” dissolves in a shot reminiscent of *The Shining* (1980) by Stanley Kubrick, functioning as

a substance that particularly lends itself to the representation of nightmares, hallucinations, depression and trauma, an unusual place of concealment and refuge, and element that can wash away sin, or from which sin emerges. Water is strategically used as a substance capable of [...] “hosting” a crucial event, e.g. loss, trauma, separation, or death. (D’Aloia, 2012, p. 93)

Situated in a dimly lit suburban setting, the film opens with an extreme long shot with large depth of field that centres everything within the frame from the spectator's perspective. The camera pans slowly in a circular movement to follow a horrified girl running in circles, while a pulsating, throbbing rhythm starts off on the sound track. After a short temporal ellipsis, the next frame is a nightly long shot on a deserted beach, with the girl as a tiny figure in the centre of the image. This is followed by a POV shot of the beach surrounded by forest and lit only by the headlights of the car in which the girl escaped some invisible threat. The opening sequence ends with a shot of the girl's grotesquely mutilated corpse lying on the beach in blue morning light. The organization of framing, lighting, and sound in this opening sequence establishes a disclosing affective mood that functions to determine the characteristic features of the entire film, as Sinnerbrink (2012, p. 161) has defined this aesthetic strategy. Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010) write that openings often cover the whole film in a nutshell, offering "watching instructions" that give the spectator a sense of what the inner dynamics of the film will be by setting "the tone and atmosphere that prepares for the film to come" (p. 42). The tone and atmosphere that is set in this opening is best characterised as haunting, anxious anticipation of a threat that seems to come from all directions at once, and of which there is no escape.

In his *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers* (2010), Julian Hanich discusses such threatening scenes in terms of dread that "lasts until it gives way to shock or horror or disappears otherwise" (p. 156). By contrast, I argue that the horror effect of *It Follows* is based on privileging dread to shock, insofar as the sense of dread does not ease off, even when the protagonist, aware of the horror, takes action, either by escaping or by fighting against the threat. The sense of lingering dread is consistent with trauma theory, which commonly acknowledges that extreme affective experiences resist cognitive processing, so that they become stored in somatic, sensorimotor sensations, and are persistently repeated in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. Furthermore, like Caruth (1996) has emphasized, the nature of trauma is lingering: it is not located in the original violent event in an individual's past, but in the present where it continues to haunt the individual. Likewise, Teresa Brennan (2004) argues that in trauma the individual incorporates the very structure of the violent event in some malformation, which renders the trauma lingering. Therefore, trauma is not merely an event from the past, insofar as it is felt as an impending catastrophe always about to happen.

An example of this is the scene where the film's protagonist Jay is introduced floating in a circular swimming pool, gazing at the



Figure 1. *It Follows*: Jay and Hugh/Jeff at a diner with a front plane in focus.

surrounding treetops. Here the tight framing and the form of the pool, accompanied by non-diegetic ambient music, carry the dread that was established in the opening sequence over into this seemingly innocent setting. There is a sense of enclosing, virtual threat that has not yet materialized. In the diner scene the arrangement of space has several layers with only the foreground featuring Jay and Hugh/Jeff (Jake Weary) in focus at first (Figure 1). But as we observe their conversation, the foreground is markedly thrown out of focus, and our attention is briefly drawn to a dark approaching figure in the nightly rear plane (Figure 2), after which the focus racks back onto Jay again. In the scene in which the threat already has become acute, Jay is shown tied to a wheelchair in the ruins of an abandoned, multi-storey car park with vast depth of field. The lighting creates prominent highlights and shadows, guiding our attention deeper into the depths from which the threat emerges – in the form of Hugh/Jeff’s mother, naked, as we will find out later. The arrangement of space in all three scenes suggests tormented anticipation of an unidentified thread unavoidably closing in, with similarity to the affective experience of trauma. For trauma is an affective state with a temporal dimension, simultaneously waiting and refusing to be cognitively processed and narrated, and the traumatized individual always inhabiting time “out of joint” (Boreth, 2008; Adams *et al*, 2009).

The affect of anxious anticipation in cinema regularly comes with the sense of urgency that it is high time that a protagonist became aware of the dread and takes action, as Ed Tan (1996) has argued. By contrast, *It Follows* maintains a sense of urgency throughout with no relief by action so that the dread lingers and does not disappear. In the context of melodrama, Elsaesser (1972) has defined this kind of emotional urgency as failure to function in a way that could shape

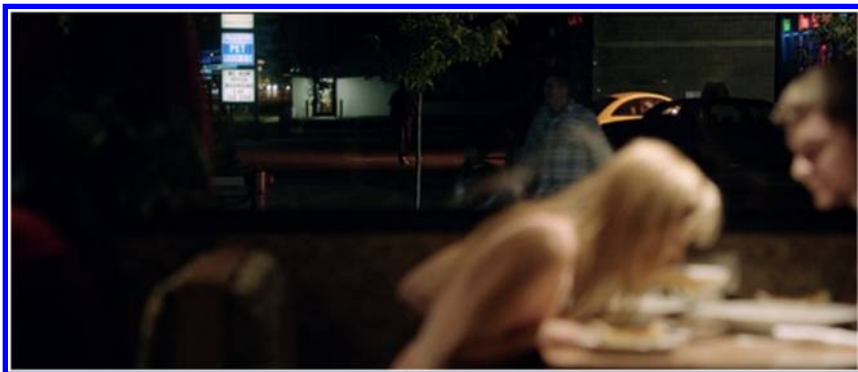


Figure 2. *It Follows*: The rear plane in focus with an unidentifiable dark figure.

the events acting upon the protagonists, which links this affect to trauma. Jay's failure to function in the face of the threat – that she will be relentlessly pursued by a shape-shifting ghoul that will follow her with zombie-like stamina – is evident, even when she is not yet consciously aware of it, due to the omnipresent sense of tormenting anticipation in the film. The moment when Jay finally apprehends that the curse is real takes place during the scene in a classroom, in which she is brought into the frame through a circular pane shot, and shown listening to her teacher reading aloud a passage from T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917/1963). While the teacher recites the line "And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat" (p. 16) Jay glances outside, and the following extreme long shot draws our attention to a distant figure in the rear plane of the image onto which the camera zooms in, while a jarring score starts off on the sound track. Through a POV/reaction shot structure of Jay and the monster, the scene builds an emotional impact that is both alarming and relentless, changing the mood of the film from haunting to menacing as the threat becomes palpable in the form of an abject figure, an insane-looking old woman with a limp, wearing a hospital gown. Other forms that the monster takes include a dishevelled (violated?), topless cheerleader urinating all over herself, a demonic neighbour boy, and finally Jay's deceased father. These are uncanny, abject figures: uncanny, because they are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, and abject because they represent, in Julia Kristeva's (1982) terms, the place where meaning collapses, where innocence and affection become corrupted. Furthermore, the figures embody trauma insofar as they confront their victim with death, with "the border of [one's] condition as a living being" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3).

The classroom scene is a turning point that not only changes the mood of the film, but also its aesthetic strategy, which so far emphasized the rear plane of the image. Now the offscreen space and the edge of the image become more important in the elicitation of dread. Veerle Bovens (2018) has analysed the notion of edge in cinema as a peripheral strategy that can evoke a “creeping sensation” or mood that may signify things that one would rather exclude from the centre (p. 28). This comes down to affirming that privileging edge as a source of threat has more important functions than merely creating cheap cinematic shocks. Furthermore, edge or periphery is linked to trauma insofar as a traumatic event involves dissociation, which locates the trauma at the periphery of consciousness, of memory (Spiegel, 2006). The emphasis on the edge of frame and the offscreen space in *If Follows* could be interpreted in traumatic terms insofar as trauma is simultaneously present and absent, visible and invisible: present in the somatic dimension of the self where it resists narrativization (offscreen), and absent in the semantic dimension where it could be narrated and worked through (onscreen). Furthermore, the lurking presence of (in)visible threat can also be seen in allegorical terms for some traumatic event that Jay herself has gone through, the death of her father perhaps. The story with Jay’s father is notably absent from the film, again indicating that absence occurs when traumatic loss cannot be adequately acknowledged (LaCapra, 1999, p. 698), even when the scene of loss is not explicitly addressed in *It Follows*.

This lurking, absent threat is constantly on the verge of breaking out of the offscreen onto the onscreen space with deadly consequences. First there is the offscreen sound of a window shattering in the scene in which the monster breaks into Jay’s house. As she wanders around the darkened rooms, we are mostly confined to her POV, which situates the threat firmly outside the edge of the frame, until she enters the room where the monster slowly approaches her. A screeching sound on the sound track accompanies the sudden appearance of the monster. In the beach house scene, the monster materializes without a musical/aural warning, appearing as “Yara”, and entering the frame as an almost unnoticeable figure (Figure 3). It is only when the real Yara (Olivia Luccardi) is shown entering the scene from outside the frame and from a different angle that the jarring music starts off on the sound track, indicating imminent danger (Figure 4). This establishes every offscreen space, or every space beyond centre within the frame, as a space where the threat potentially emerges in the film. The hospital scene is a case in point, in which a POV from Jay’s perspective consists of several frames within a frame, thus several offscreen spaces in one shot, the sound of distanced footsteps originating from any offscreen space whatever

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Figure 3. *It Follows*: “It” emerges almost unnoticeably on the rear plane of the image.



Figure 4. *It Follows*: Horror score starts off as Yara enters the image from left.

(to emulate Deleuze). Again, the offscreen space functions as the place where the traumatic dissociated experience lingers, always threatening to emerge in the here-and-now.

This is why the image of the naked monster in an angry, violent posture on the rooftop of Jay’s house is so disturbing, manifesting itself visibly within the frame from Jay’s point of view as the car in which she is pulls over. The monster emerges from the periphery of the frame as Jay’s field of vision grows larger, epitomizing that aspect of trauma that is unknowable, unspeakable, and unrepresentable, but nevertheless relentless. The relentless reappearance of the monster epitomizes the functioning of trauma through cycles of uncomprehending repetition, until the traumatic event is translated from repetition into an “articulatory practice” that enables one to recall in the present that something happened in the past, while simultaneously opening to the future

(LaCapra, 2001, pp. 21–22). It seems no coincidence, then, that the strategy to destroy the monster becomes a question of luring it from the edge into the centre of the scene in an abandoned swimming pool. This is a space simultaneously open and confined, with a liquid centre (the pool itself), surrounded by solid edges (the coping). In the swimming pool scene, the handheld camera pays attention to the meticulous way in which Jay's friends place diverse electronic devices onto the edge of the pool, in the middle of which she herself is floating. Water thus functions again as a substance that can dissolve trauma, on the one hand, and from where trauma can re-emerge, on the other. And when the monster finally falls into the pool, it gets killed, dissolving into a red liquid that stains the water, spreading from the centre towards the edges, until the colour fills the frame entirely.

The symbolism in this image could mean that the trauma dissolves, but the monster does not disappear entirely. Instead, "It" lingers on as an unpleasant scene to which one belatedly returns over and over again long after its conclusion. The film ends with a following shot of Jay and Paul (Keir Gilchrist), with an approaching distant figure in the rear plane of the frame. Even though the scene is silent, its effect is disturbing, suggesting the eternal return of trauma even when the threat has been eliminated. The effect is reinforced by an abrupt cut to black and the hasty appearance of the film's title, accompanied by an emphatic beat of the closing music. This is an ending that renders the horror effect enduring, lingering on after the film has finished, suggesting perhaps that dissolution of trauma does not necessarily mean that a break with the past can never be fully completed.

Entrapped in Trauma: *Get Out*

Jordan Peele's directorial debut *Get Out* (2017) is often seen as a social commentary on hidden racism beneath a refined surface. The film revolves around Chris, a talented African American photographer, who, through his white girlfriend, gets entangled in a sinister conspiracy at a secluded Armitage family estate. In the privacy of the estate, Rose's (Allison Williams) mother Missy (Catherine Keener) hypnotises their black guests with the mesmerising power of a steadily stirred cup of tea, after which Rose's father Dean (Bradley Whitford), a brilliant neurosurgeon, performs a transplantation which allows a white person to inhabit a black body for its supposedly superior physical abilities. But in addition to reading the film as an allegory for white liberal racism and the way in which contemporary America deals with race, I argue that the film is also about trauma, characterized by the sense of entrapment, paralysis, and incomprehensibility of experience that is captured in the

idea that the body can be invaded and inhabited by another, alien being. For trauma can feel as if one's body were inhabited, intruded upon by disturbing, uncontrollable, relentless thoughts, as if one were out of control of one's embodied mind.

Even though it may not be a very obvious choice to draw a comparison between *It Follows* and *Get Out*, there are some striking similarities in their aesthetic strategies. With Jay in *It Follows* and Chris in *Get Out* being present in almost every scene, both films are strongly character-driven, encouraging us to develop concern for the protagonists in accordance with the emotional salience of the course of events (Carroll, 1999). Both films might be considered trend-setters within the horror genre as strongly affective films, in which the protagonists suffer from trauma resulting from a (violent, sudden) loss of a parent. But more importantly, both films manifest the creation of cinematic mood and overarching affective-aesthetic strategies that enable us to feel the effects of trauma beyond character engagement.

For instance, similarly to *It Follows*, the opening scene in *Get Out* functions to establish an affective mood for the whole film, which is menacing, although not without comic undertones. The film opens with an extreme long shot of a nightly suburban setting with the chirping noise of crickets on the sound track, and the camera tracking backwards, as we hear the voice of Andre (Lakeith Stanfield) offscreen, talking into his mobile phone. While Andre enters the frame, the camera continues its backward movement until he pauses, at which point the camera makes half a circle around him and hauntingly starts trailing the character from behind. Then we see a car entering the frame from a distance. The camera rotates 180 degrees again as the car pulls over and makes a U-turn, stopping alongside Andre while we hear thirties music playing on the car stereo. Andre turns around while the camera follows him, moving alongside him so that we see the car with an open door on the driver's side, but not the very driver. That is, until the masked driver emerges abruptly from outside the frame and attacks Andre. The thirties music gets louder, suffocating the noises of the attack, until the opening credits start, and the non-diegetic music takes over, with its eerie Swahili vocals and bluegrass undercurrent.

Like in *It Follows*, the circularity of the camera movement, the importance of the offscreen space, and the leafy, suburban mise-en-scène reminiscent of *Halloween*, function to establish not only a haunting tone and atmosphere, but also what Elsaesser (2012) calls the narrative enigma in the film (p. 118). In *Get Out*, this narrative enigma is not merely a question as to who Andre's abductor is, or what his motives might be, but something more intangible at first sight.

The enigma is the unspeakable in trauma that struggles in its desire to be articulated like Miriam Haughton (2018, p. 1) describes this, which is simultaneously expressed and suppressed through affective-aesthetic cinematic strategies. Like in *It Follows*, the opening of *Get Out* establishes a mood of anxious anticipation and emotional urgency that is present throughout the film, and that stems from a traumatic failure to function and to influence the course of events – literally, as Chris’s ability to function will be effectively blocked by practices of hypnotism. This is why *Get Out* is a horror film during which the audience should be screaming “Get out of the house,” as Peele explains in the feature commentary on the film. This emotional urgency is indicated by the signs of hidden menace throughout the film. There is a bad omen when a deer that comes out of nowhere and that Chris and Rose hit with their car is followed by the offscreen groaning of the wounded animal. There is the ghastly presence of Walter, the groundkeeper, who first enters the frame from offscreen by means of a slow dolly out, and later at night in high speed from the surrounding woods, accompanied by a jarring string score. There is the Armitages’ housekeeper Georgina (Betty Gabriel) staring into the offscreen space while serving Chris iced tea, spilling the drink all over, and later appearing on the other side of the corridor in the darkened house, with an empathetic clang sound. In the “Bingo/auction scene”, it is a photograph of Chris that is brought from the offscreen to the onscreen space by means of a dolly out, suggesting that the virtual threat he has constantly been under is about to be actualized.

As argued, the offscreen space is significant in the creation of traumatic mood, functioning as the shadowed space of unspeakability, the origin of menace that cannot be represented. In *Get Out* through, that menace becomes palpable shortly after the auction scene, which is aesthetically realized by means of point of view cutting accompanied by Michael Abels’ suspenseful score, mingled with the atonal plucking of a banjo by Rose’s brother Jeremy (Caleb Landry Jones). We witness Chris and Rose returning to the Armitage house, and being welcomed by silent greetings that range from openly contemptuous (Jeremy and Missy) to triumphant (Georgina, Walter, and Dean). When inside the house, Chris finds photographs of Rose with several black men (including Walter) and one woman (Georgina). The scene with Chris flipping through the photos is not merely a narrative clue that sheds light on the course of events, but also a moment that epitomizes trauma, a moment where the past manifests itself in the present in the form of hidden memories. In the scene, the door to the cabinet containing the bright red show box in which the photographs are kept remains open, as if inviting Chris to discover them, while on the sound track a sinister type of music starts off.

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The photographs have the aura of haunted past, with ghosts of persons in the past demanding to be found and resurfacing in the present as it were. Then, when Chris attempts to escape the house, he is besieged by the family on all sides, while Dean bursts into a strange monologue:

In life, what is your purpose, Chris? Fire. It's a reflection of our own mortality. We're born, we breath, and we die. Even the sun will die someday. But we are divine. We are the gods trapped in cocoons.

In a later scene in the operation room, the music and the wide-angle image composition that centralizes Dean in the setting, suggest that he indeed sees himself as a god-like figure with the power to grant eternal youth the members of his cult – entitled “Behold the Coagula”. This macabre situation in *Get Out* involves a very complicated reflection on the (black) body as the vessel for a strange (white) consciousness. As Richard Brody (2017) from *The New Yorker* described it, the Armitages are creating “inwardly whitened black people.” This is implicit in Jeremy’s openly contemptuous remarks about Chris’s “frame and genetic makeup,” and followed by his vision on jiu-jitsu not being based on strength, but on strategy, thereby implying intellectual (white) superiority over embodied (black) experience. The “inward whiteness” also manifests itself in Walter’s odd hostility towards Chris, as well as in his style of being in the world, his body language, his wardrobe, his way of talking. This is different from the cultural expectations one might associate with an African American male in his thirties. The way in which in the garden party scene white guests recite various fetishizing stereotypes about black men’s physicality in a remarkably straightforward manner, suggests that these physical characteristics are not the embodied property of a person, but a form of corporeity that can be inhabited like one might inhabit a house. This is why there is this strange situation with Logan King (Lakeith Stanfield), a black guest in his twenties at the Armitages’ garden party, who seems jarringly “white” and elderly with his straw hat, committing the faux pas of meeting Chris’s fist bump with an old-fashioned handshake. “It’s like all of them missed the movement,” comments Chris at some point to his friend Rod (Lil Rel Howery) on the telephone.

Like Walter, Georgina acts hostilely submissive, gliding through the house in a robot-like fashion when not on standby behind the kitchen door. Midway through the film she appears abruptly in Chris’s room, apologizing for unplugging his phone. Filmed close-up from a slightly low angle, the camera position accentuates her forced facial expressions. As a reaction to Chris’s remark about “getting nervous with too many

white people around”, the close-up gets tighter, and Georgina’s facial expression changes from radiant to confused: her breath starts to tremble and she gasps as if going through some inner struggle. Davina Quinlivan (2012) has argued that breath in cinema operates within an invisible mode of perception, which can draw our attention to the “unseen presence of the human body in film” (pp. 3–4). That unseen presence in *Get Out* is the somatic residue of the sense of self that resides in the body even when the reflective consciousness is trapped in the Sunken Place. And it manifests itself as a suppressed trauma in symptomatic gestures that are simultaneously blocked and expressed. In Dominick LaCapra’s (2001) terms, the scene with Georgina’s struggle could be interpreted as a traumatic dissociation of affect and representation, a moment when one dissociatively feels what one cannot express, and disorientedly represents what one cannot feel at the same time (p. 42).

This means that, even though at first glance the film seems to convey a very Cartesian statement in which the mind has an ontological priority over the body, *Get Out* is not about the body as a vessel, or a “cocoon” after all. By contrast, it is the body that is the locus of agency in the film, which results in a visible emotional conflict or dissociation when Georgina (nervously) laughs and cries at the same time, until she regains control and returns to her “Stepford wife” behaviour. Soon after the scene with Georgina, Chris triggers an aggressive reaction in Logan by the flash of his camera. Accompanied by underwater sound effects that convey the feeling of rupture under the calm surface, Logan freaks out, stumbles towards Chris, screaming at him to get out. Finally, Chris is able to escape only because his body takes over: the traumatic memory of his mother’s death triggers an unconscious reaction that makes him scratch the armrest of the chair he is tied to. With the filling of the armrest he then protects his ears from the hypnotising sound of the clinking spoon, an act that enables him to (temporarily) disable the traumatic dissociation that Missy took advantage of in order to hypnotize him in the first place.

The hypnosis scene is undoubtedly the most important one when it comes to understanding the complexity by which the film deals with trauma. It is indeed significant that Missy uses Chris’s own traumatic memory to get inside his head. Missy waits for Chris in a darkened room and, abruptly switching on the lights, confronts him about his smoking. Face to face with Chris, at an almost exact 180 degree angle, Missy then starts asking probing questions about his mother’s death, scraping across her teacup with a spoon. The sound of pattering rain from the past commences and mingles with the clinking of the spoon in the present,

while the film cuts to a distorted flashback of Chris watching television the night of his mother's accident. Chris starts crying, while the camera moves closer. The shots from the past and the present intertwine as Chris falls deeper into the state of hypnosis, until Missy commands him to sink into the floor. In the next shots, the young Chris in the past slides through his bed accompanied by a hollow sound, while the adult Chris floats in a dark vacuum – the Sunken Place – gazing up at an ever-shrinking televisual view of the outside world. The Sunken Place has a function similar to the offscreen space. Both refer to the shadowed space of arrested time that possesses the traumatized self, locked in the past, faced with a future without a sense of continuity or change (LaCapra, 1999, p. 713).

Furthermore, it is significant that in the process of hypnotizing him, Missy intensifies Chris's feelings of guilt about the death of his mother through the mimetic situation of the evening of this traumatic event. In trauma theory, mimesis refers to a kind of *hypnotic* imitation that

precludes the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what has happened. [This] explains the tendency of traumatized people to compulsively repeat their violent experiences in nightmares [...] by comparing the traumatic repetition to hypnotic imitation. Trauma is therefore interpreted as an experience of hypnotic imitation [...] that disables the victim's perceptual and cognitive apparatus to such an extent that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system. (Leys, 2007, p. 8)

The visual metaphor for the traumatic repetition of Chris's guilt feelings is the deer that Rose and Chris hit on their way to the Armitage estate. A haunting scene follows, in which the camera tails Chris closely as he enters the forest to check on the dying animal. The scene ends with a close up of Chris's transfixed face that functions as a Deleuzian affection image, registering the traumatic memory of his mother. Before the hypnosis scene, Chris's imagination keeps him from sleeping: we see an "inner image" of Chris re-entering the forest in a nightly setting with the loud offscreen moaning of the deer, conveying the depth of his trauma. Finally, the room where Chris is hypnotized has a taxidermied deer head mounted above the television, situated as if gazing directly at Chris, triumphantly, accusingly, with the television set as an additional reminder of Chris's traumatic memory. Obviously, the deer – the buck – represents the idea of black men being prized as fetishized "trophies", and it is significant that towards the end of the film Chris kills Dean by puncturing him with the deer's antlers in a violent, abrupt attack, symbolizing resistance. But as importantly, the

deer is the symbol of Chris's trauma, the emotional pain that he has denied, and that has led to his failure to integrate his mother's death with semantic memory. In addition, the association of the deer with the mother opens up avenues for interpreting Chris's personal trauma of the loss of his mother in much more general terms of the collective pain of the African-American community. However, the film does not resolve the issue of how successfully Chris finally overcomes his trauma. The final shot of Chris in the film shows him through a car window, night reflected on the screen, accompanied by the Swahili/bluegrass score from the opening credits on the sound track, which cyclically locates the ending in the same place the story began. Like the ending of *It Follows*, the scene is without a sense of relief and embodies a mood of resignation instead, suggesting that Chris has not sufficiently achieved a break with the past to be able to anticipate a future free from dominance of his traumatic childhood experience.

Another symbol of Chris's trauma is Georgina, who is eerily calm on the surface, but seems fundamentally in distress, as if constantly fighting Rose's grandmother who possesses and controls her mind-body. First there is the sound of a spoon against a glass that sends Georgina in a trance-like state, from which she is only woken up by Missy's snappy reaction. There are the tears that run down her cheeks in the scene with Chris before she proceeds to a creepy repetition of the word "no". It is to this image that Chris's mind returns when undergoing phase two of the transplantation procedure, and after he has run her over when trying to escape. It triggers his decision to save her, as if attempting to make amends for himself, for his traumatic guilt. Furthermore, this is a moment that is not a compulsive repetition of the past, but an event that Chris can attend consciously in the present, anticipating the future as he does. But it turns out that Georgina remains a "possessed monster" to use the terminology of Barbara Creed (1993). She discussed Regan's (Linda Blair) body in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) in these terms, arguing that her abject state has its roots in "a reconciliation with the maternal body" (p. 41). I think that Georgina is an interesting variation of the monstrous-feminine, a possessed mother that does not seem to fit into Creed's categories insofar as she simultaneously embodies an affectionate, loyal bond with a dead parent – LaCapra's (2001) "fidelity to trauma" (p. 22) – and a monstrous mother that represents danger.

Finally, the Armitage house itself can be seen in terms of trauma insofar as it represents those "culturally sanctioned forms of physical, emotional, and psychological violence and abuse [that are] privately ritualized and normalized, while publicly denied and dismissed"



Figure 5. *Get Out*: Extreme long shot emphasizes the Armitage house's importance as a narrative agent.

(Haughton, 2018, p. 27). The menace that the Armitage house represents is already established in the telling first shot of Chris and Rose arriving. Here its front door is centred in the image as a passageway to a situation from which there is no escape. Both the distance (extreme long shot) and the length of the shot – approximately 45 seconds – emphasize the importance of the house for the narrative, as if the house itself were a character. The following long shot is similarly framed, with the front door in the centre of the image, and the house's interior dominating over the human figures. The camera keeps its distance while tracking in a direct horizontal line “through” the house as Chris and the Armitages move from the entry into the living room (Figure 5). It is only after thirty seconds that the Armitages are finally brought into a medium long shot, and the editing becomes conventional for a conversation situation.

I offer as my interpretation that, like the Sunken Place, the Armitage house, and especially its basement, too is a shadowed space characterised by “post-traumatic structures of contradiction, disrupted linearity, compulsive repetition, problematic confusion with Self and Other, ethical murkiness, and a general milieu of potential vulnerability and disorientation” (Haughton, 2018, p. 3). A strange mood hangs over the estate and its residents, starting from the house tour that Dean emphatically insists taking Chris on. It begins with Missy's office, moving through hallways with family photos on the walls, past the basement door that is “sealed up” due to “some black mould down there” towards the kitchen with Georgina in a studied pose, at which point Dean says: “My mother loved her kitchen so we keep a piece of her in here.” The dim candle light in the dining room scene contributes significantly to the change of mood in the film from strange to downright menacing,

and the scene also features a “black buck” sculpture that is prominently brought into view at the precise moment when Jeremy attempts to headlock Chris. The nightly house seems a haunted place, with the camera following Chris as he walks through its corridors, closing in on him in when Georgina suddenly appears on the other side of the hallway like a ghost, accompanied by a high pitch sound. In the hypnosis scene Missy’s command to “sink into the floor” entraps Chris in the Armitage house both psychologically and physically, a feeling that is powerfully captured in the Sunken Place imagery. Obviously, the Sunken Place represents a symbolic entrapment in the social system that suppresses the agency of black people, but it also epitomizes how profoundly trauma is buried in the somatic memory of the traumatized person so that one indeed feels as if entrapped within one’s own body. This is why it is necessary that the Armitage House be consumed by fire in the end of the film as a cathartic event of some sort, although without the notion of hope that Quinlivan (2015) has associated this phenomenon with. In conclusion, this article hopes to have shown that, beyond the most obvious allegorical readings, a “traumatic logic” can be found at the heart of both *It Follows* and *Get Out*. The two films embody absent threat, the presence of which can nevertheless be felt in and through their aesthetic-affective organization that tangibly frames the threat especially by means of offscreen space.

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