most filmmakers would turn the digital stalk-er’s creepy words into a plot twist, Assayas uses them to inspire an essential awakening (and potential weakening) of Maureen’s psyche. That Louis may be attempting to contact her through technological smoke signals inspires a seismic shift in character. Stylistically, the tight set piece feels like a condensed echo of the dynamic, suspenseful OPEC RAID in Assayas’s five-hour epic Caribs. Yet, Stew-art’s beguiled performance remains the human centerpiece, expressing a perfect blend of vulnerability and panic when Mau-reen sinks into the seat, attempting to use her jacket to hide a well of tears.

Upon exposing the depths of Maureen’s fragility, Personal Shopper momentarily resembles the warped psychological thrillers of Brian De Palma. There’s a grisly murder, stolen gems, and police interrogations—sparse parts of an altogether different movie controlled by insidious forces. Assayas has always been a master tightrope walker when it comes to genre and theme. He never simplifies Maureen’s heightened state of perception despite interference from shady charac-ters like Kyra’s boyfriend, Ingo (Lara Eindinger), and the slaezy tropes he comes to represent.

Serpentine camera movements in Clouds of Sils Maria become liberated once Maria and Valentine learn of writer Wilhelm Mel-chior’s death on their train ride through the Alps. Many images in Personal Shopper con-voy the exact opposite feeling—despite multiple long takes, Assayas pins the camera in corners, behind racks of jewelry, and presses it up against closed doors. Yorick Le Saux, the cinematographer for both films, favors smooth, omniscient medium shots that can’t be mistaken for Maureen’s subjective point of view. It’s almost as if the entire film takes place from the perspective of someone (or something) trailing the action in another dimension.

When compared side by side, Personal Shopper feels like a pseudosequel to Clouds of Sils Maria. Many of the same actors appear in both films, most notably Stewart who stars as a beleaguered Jane of all trades who spends more time organizing another person’s life than their own. If we were to abide by the artistic license of Miechior’s play Malouin Snake, couldn’t Maureen be the nat-ural reinvention of Valentine, a character who suddenly disappears from that fateful hike into the mountains with Maria?

Undercurrents of rage hide beneath the couture surfaces of each film, although rage turns into full-blown violence in Personal Shopper. Most importantly, both films abide by a fragmented nonlinear view of the modern world, best described by Maria in a time of creative distress: “Maybe I only remember what suits me to remember.” Maureen’s sideward quest to connect with her dead brother opens up emotional wounds that are clearly byproducts of relying on this kind of distrusting nostalgia.

In turn, Personal Shopper’s strange tonal deviations and narrative idiocynracies seek to stretch the boundaries of an experimental cinematic space, giving Maureen the oppor-tunity to view humanity’s pleasures and horrors anew. If she has spent her entire life up to this point connected (and possibly dominated) by Louis, then the film traces the anxious first steps of her untethered identity trying to achieve balance. Assayas employs fades-to-black with the hopes of calling attention to the inevitable memory gaps of a tormented person, as if Maureen’s subconscious was a racing train momentarily passing through tunnels.

Stewart’s endless curiosity and honesty as an actor allows her character’s unhinged psychological dilemmas to awaken after years of dormancy. Like she would a dress or bracelet, Maureen tries on new masks to see what fits her persona. In one bewitching sequence she glides around Kyra’s swanky apartment wearing a seductive outfit, trying to live in her employer’s glamorous skin for one night only. It’s very reminiscent of the sensual and freeing moment when Maggie Cheung dons an all-leather getup in Assayas’s masterful Irma Vep.

But the world’s riches never amount to meaningful emotional connections, and Assayas’s most recent work suggests that the dead are often better at realizing this fact than the living. Miechior’s decades worth of prose in Clouds of Sils Maria help guide Binoche’s bratty thespian toward a hint of creative resurrection. Louis’s intuitiveness and compassion leave a lasting mark on even the most surprising of characters in Personal Shopper. Maureen eventually gets on the same spiritual wavelength as her brother, but not before almost perilously falling down another dark rabbit hole.

When Personal Shopper reaches spiritual nirvana in the mountains of Oman, Mau-reen’s status as a medium is confirmed even if her future happiness remains equivocal. Standing face-to-face with a presence that could be Louis’s ghost, she poses one last question that also doubles as a self-reflective declaration of independence. “Is it you, or is it me?” The thematic layers and emotional gradations found in the final shot of Stew-art’s stalwart face is worthy of Michelangelo Antonioni’s The Passenger.

Instead of providing closure, Assayas offers Maureen the freedom to “live outside of time,” to quote Brady Corbet’s modernist auteur in Clouds of Sils Maria. Our enter-tainment-gossip, social-media-obsessed cul-ture will probably never go away, and even-ually will evolve into something altogether different. But one can choose to be happy beyond the borders of its purgatory and to live sincerely without regret. Personal Shopper helps Maureen search for such a place where terror and uncertainty are not syn-onymous. It’s a fearless, unclassifiable film that plunges head first into the abyss in order to get her there.—Glenn Heath Jr.

Get Out


The Obama Administration—inspired talk of a “postracial America” was always quite silly. In a culture where open racism and hatred toward all sorts of minorities is becoming increasingly acceptable, that phrase has, indeed, become a very sad joke. Get Out highlights just how big the gap remains between people of color and whites. In fact, whiteness is a source of terror in the film—not just to its black protagonist, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), but also to whites them-selves. They associate whiteness with aging minds and weak, uphigh bodies, and idealize blackness as a source of strength (based on stereotypes about sports stars and, frankly, penis size). In this sense, Get Out becomes a metaphor for appropriation. White racism folds over into a patronizing attraction toward African Americans, while literally costing black men their minds in a surgical procedure that transplants white people’s brains into black men’s bodies (although one black woman also is a victim). If the surgery depicted in the film really were to exist, the talentless but popular white rapper Iggy Azalea would likely be the first to sign up—after all, she speaks in her own Aus-tralian accent but raps in a bad imitation of a Southern African American.

Get Out begins in New York City, with Chris and his apparently supportive white girlfriend Rose Armitage (Allison Williams) driving for seemingly long hours upstate for his first-time meeting with her parents, Dean (Bradley Whitford) and Missy (Catherine Keener). When they arrive, Rose is embar-rassed by the awkward attempts of her father to demonstrate how antiracist he is—he declares that, if possible, he would have voted for Obama for a third time. And Chris is creeped out by the fact that Rose’s family hires only African-American servants who act very strangely. Rose’s mother is a psychi-atrist who hypnotizes Chris, without his con-sent, ostensibly to help him quit smoking. Under Missy’s hypnotic spell—induced through the sound of a spoon in her teacup as she calmly stirs—Chris imagines himself floating helplessly downward toward a space that he calls the “Sunken Place.”

A large party of relatives and family friends arrive the next day, almost all elderly white people. Chris finds this situation and the “polite,” admiring conversation about his physical attributes increasingly awkward.
Toni Morrison has written that situations in which black people have to explain themselves to whites are grounded in a white lived experience of most people of color. Particularly the ones vying for Chris’s body, obviously are the ones whose behavior needs explaining—they form an entire community of something like posthuman cyborgs who yearn to achieve the bodies of others. Chris is able to escape before being carted off to surgery. He successfully escapes the Armitage family home—but not before some very bloody moments in which he returns the violence (or potential violence) done to him.

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It takes quite a while, and almost until it’s too late, before Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) realizes why he’s so popular with all these elderly white people at the party in Get Out.

...a moment that temporarily halts all other party festivities. This moment plays as a metaphor for Peele’s own desire to take command of the gaze, while also possibly commenting on the use of photos and video to capture and publicize racist violence. He’s skeptical about media, but as the very existence of this film testifies, he’s not cynical.

Get Out flirts with a touching degree of sexism in its depiction of Rose, but I think her eventual punishment can be justified on non-misogynist grounds. Rose and her mother, the two main female characters, get inside Chris’s head in a way that Dean does not—even though Dean literally tries to destroy Chris’s mind. Rose betrays him on the most intimate level; their entire relationship has been a sham, as confirmed in Chris’s discovery of the photos suggesting that she had seduced dozens of black men in order to get them into the clutches of her family. Get Out takes pains to call out the complicity in racism of both white men and white women, but it seems angrier at the latter.

At the same time, I don’t think this is exactly a case of displacing rage against racism onto a sexist attack against white women. It’s not necessarily misogynist to create a female villain—especially since Williams does such a fine job of embodying the hypocrisy of the white character’s attraction to black men, barely masking an underlying contempt for them. Since Rose and Chris appear to be heterosexual (although this is somewhat ambiguous in the case of Rose, as well as Chris in his relationship with Rod, who becomes a domestic partner, of sorts, in dog sitting and in rescuing Chris, against all odds, in the end), the dynamic takes a sexual form, unlike that of the older white men who literally want Chris’s body for their personal use, although queer readings are certainly possible here. (But this, again, does raise the question of power, itself, in seemingly “normal” and sanctioned sexual relations.)

Compared to a canonical classic like John Carpenter’s Halloween, which kills off teenage girls for merely being sexually active, the women in Get Out actually receive mild treatment considering how awful their actions genuinely are. Rose does embody a sexist trope—the promiscuous seductress, whose sexuality is often used as a mark against women who don’t deserve it in fiction and life—but in this case, Chris’s violent actions toward her are undertaken in order to save his life and don’t compare to her role in helping end and radically alter the lives of many black people (her victims, we must assume, also had loved ones).

As a writer and director, Peele proves to have a real knack for creating images and situations that grow increasingly bizarre without becoming completely unbelievable. He expertly blocks a scene in which all four members of the Armitage family attempt to stop Chris from leaving their house. And Chris wears nothing but blue shirts—a choice echoed in the wardrobe of other characters, in the props (especially the blue and white teacup with which Missy hypnotizes Chris), and even in aspects of the natural landscape. Halfway through the film, the color blue explicitly evokes a hospital setting, the two main female characters, get inside Chris’s head in a way that Dean does not—even though Dean literally tries to destroy Chris’s mind. Rose betrays him on the most intimate level; their entire relationship has been a sham, as confirmed in Chris’s discovery of the photos suggesting that she had seduced dozens of black men in order to get them into the clutches of her family. Get Out takes pains to call out the complicity in racism of both white men and white women, but it seems angrier at the latter.

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