

# Difficult Doesn't Mean Impossible: Using Film as a Vehicle for Engaging in Critical Discussion

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## Introduction

The idea of a conversation seems simple but has a lot of implications. Conversations between citizens form a part of social engagement, which can contribute to political activism.<sup>1</sup> Others have argued that some conversations could lead to the opposite. However, for a democracy to work the best that it can, it relies on a diversity of opinions which first needs to be expressed and then discussed to find resolution—and this starts with a conversation.

The U.S. is no stranger to polarizing issues. Conflicts exist on smaller scales and escalate to bigger ones depending on the matter at hand. These larger conflicts are more difficult as they deal with topics like identity, morality, and matters that are deep-rooted and closer to the heart. A study has shown how having discussions about these complex topics results in more understanding when approached in the right manner.<sup>2</sup>

Understandably, having conversations about the state of the country, world, or life can be daunting and feel out of place which is why this paper tries to offer a solution by using film as an anchor of the conversation. With movies occupying a notable portion of the media that people consume and the effect they can have on changing perceptions of people, movies become a valuable item to pursue.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pattie and Johnston, “Conversation, Disagreement and Political Participation.”

<sup>2</sup> Kugler and Coleman, “Get Complicated: The Effects of Complexity.”

<sup>3</sup> Kubrak, “Impact of Films: Changes in Young People’s Attitudes.”

Films are a powerful tool that inspires a visceral response from viewers, evoking emotions as an art form and lucrative endeavor.<sup>4</sup> Films have been a conduit for social change, dealing with issues like gender, politics, identity, social inequality, and many other important discussions.<sup>5</sup> A study found that movies have positive effects on happiness as a leisure activity, invoking emotional responses for therapeutic processes.<sup>6</sup> Films have also been a vehicle for education, whether intentionally or not, as seen through a study that recognized film helped to raise awareness for rare diseases.<sup>7</sup> Media has been utilized as a site for presenting and debating feminist and other discourses in hypothesizing the possibilities of how scenarios will play out.<sup>8</sup> A study also asserts the importance of media literacy for citizens of a democracy in attempting to understand the roles of media as a self-expression tool where people are trying to communicate, which can help with civic engagement.<sup>9</sup> Research has also shown if viewers are prompted to search for and recognize social justice issues presented in a film, those viewers will report more positive attitudes toward social justice.<sup>10</sup> Considering that film can unintentionally change viewers' attitudes and behaviors, the hope is that with difficult discussions through the lens of a film, viewers would not only be more exposed to diverse opinions but also be emboldened into activism and action for change.<sup>11</sup>

We chose film as an anchor for discussing difficult topics because it tends to foster more productive conversations. Films serve as a springboard for deeper discussions that extend beyond their narratives. As mixed-race but brown individuals, we find it intriguing that, irrespective of a viewer's racial background, both the viewing experience and the key takeaways can often be similar. This shared interpretive space is what led us to write this paper, using film as a lens to examine these complexities.

<sup>4</sup> Butler and Kaufman, "Social Science of the Cinema: Fade Out."

<sup>5</sup> Dowd et al., "Movies, Gender, and Social Change"

<sup>6</sup> Uhrig, "Cinema is Good for You."

<sup>7</sup> Domaradzki, "Treating Rare Diseases with the Cinema."

<sup>8</sup> Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*.

<sup>9</sup> Hobbs et al., "Learning to Engage."

<sup>10</sup> Khoo and Ash, "Moved to Justice: The Effects of Socially Conscious Films."

<sup>11</sup> Das et al., "Moved to Act."

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Structurally, this paper begins by providing a brief background on the film of choice for this project, *Get Out*. Then, it segues into a discussion of the conversation we had with a group of friends after watching the film along with the primary themes that emerged from that conversation. What follows is a section delving into our personal reflections, which then concludes by urging others to engage in the conversations we have long held impossible.

## **Background**

### *A Synopsis of Get Out*

The film we chose to frame this project was the 2017 psychological horror film *Get Out*.<sup>12</sup> Serving as Jordan Peele's directorial debut, *Get Out* received acclaim from both critics and lay-audience members alike, eventually going on to win Best Original Screenplay at the 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards.<sup>13</sup> The film follows Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) and his girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams), who, after five months of dating, have decided to take the next step in their relationship: a weekend getaway upstate with Rose's parents, Missy (Catherine Keener) and Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford). Chris expresses his uncertainty in doing so, as Rose has yet to disclose to her parents that Chris is Black. Rose assures Chris he has nothing to worry about, and the pair head to Rose's childhood home. Upon their arrival, Chris initially reads the Armitage's over-accommodative behavior as nervous, albeit seemingly well-intentioned, attempts to grapple with Rose's interracial relationship. However, as the weekend progresses, a series of ever-evolving, disturbing discoveries leads Chris to a truth far more sinister than he could have ever imagined. The Armitage family has been abducting Black people and, through a medical procedure known as the "Coagula effect," transferring the consciousness of both their family and other wealthy white people (who bid on the abductees) into younger Black bodies.

### *A Justification for Choosing this Film*

As Lilek states, "The foundation of the Hollywood horror film industry has always included metaphors of what haunts American society."<sup>14</sup> In effect, at the core of the horror film is an attempt at reconciliation, one that sees the myriad of fears that plague the larger American populace manifested as monsters, ghosts, and all manner of things that "go bump in the night." This reconciliatory effort occurs, according to Winter, through the horror film's

<sup>12</sup> Peele, *Get Out*.

<sup>13</sup> Oscars, "The 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards."

<sup>14</sup> Lilek, "Horrors of Society," 125.

utilization of and reliance on metaphor.<sup>15</sup> To that end, Winter asserts that the cultural manifestations of metaphor present in horror films have at least three distinct but related effects:

1. **Elaborating:** Cultural representations may elaborate on existing metaphors, enriching them with specific examples.
2. **Reinforcing and Maintaining:** Cultural representations may strengthen metaphors in the minds of the people who witness these representations, which helps to keep metaphors alive.
3. **Creating and Recreating:** Cultural representations may create new metaphors or recreate old metaphors in the minds of new generations.<sup>16</sup>

These three effects, either on their own or in tandem with one another, aid in creating fear. When afraid, some people opt to investigate why the film made them uncomfortable. Irrespective of the reason for that discomfort, however, such an inquiry necessitates an engagement with the text that is of a more critical caliber (i.e., it requires critical thought).

The ability of horror films to elicit a sense of critical thinking within a viewer is why we opted for the genre, and the commentary-rich nature of *Get Out* made the film a prime candidate for this project. For clarity, our use of the term “critical thinking” is an amalgamation of several definitions<sup>17</sup> and refers to the following: careful thinking (often directed toward a goal) that acknowledges and tests previously held assumptions, allowing one to make more informed judgments and decisions.

## Discussion Themes

This section unpacks the three primary themes that emerged throughout the discussions we had with friends and each other: (1) privilege, (2) activism, and (3) approaching tough conversations. We have made slight edits to all quotes to enhance their readability.

### *Theme #1: Privilege*

One of the core themes evident in the film was privilege. Discussions with our friends about privilege were brought forth in four different forms: (1) racial, (2) financial, (3) familial, and (4) educational.

<sup>15</sup> Winter, “Horror Movies and the Cognitive Ecology of Primary Metaphors.”

<sup>16</sup> Winter, “Horror Movies and the Cognitive Ecology of Primary Metaphors.”

<sup>17</sup> Hitchcock, “Critical Thinking.”

“I'm from California, which is a very well-integrated place,” one of our friends said, recounting an experience from their youth:

There was a corner store by my high school, but whenever I'd go in there with some of my friends of color, there would always be this policy where we had to take off our backpacks. I don't really know why. Maybe the [shopkeepers] were afraid of stealing? [Either way], when I would go in there by myself, I wouldn't have to take [my backpack] off. [When I did so for the first time], I think it was sort of a realization for both sides. [I'd gone in there] with one of my friends, and we both had to take off our backpacks. I told him that I'd never had to do that before, and he was like, ‘Oh, well, I have to do that every time I come in here.’

Our experience informs us that most people only come to fully recognize their racial privilege after they experience and/or witness differential treatment compared to people of color, as the above anecdote demonstrates. Often, this recognition allows for their scope of thinking to widen, and they grow more cognizant of how society treats them versus people of color. It also likely makes a difference in reading it and experiencing it, as it not only forces them to absorb that such privilege exists but also how it affects the other person. Our peer who told us of the backpack incident admitted that the experience did not feel great, and the race-fueled conversation that followed felt even less so.

Another peer brought up financial privilege as a privilege unique to him and a few others. He explained how he is aware of friends who needed jobs to get by in high school and how even though he has a job now in college, his parents would be more than willing to foot the bill. Other friends too have spoken to us about how financial privilege is very powerful, as it gives you access to not only more things or high-quality products/services but it also allows you to be part of an exclusive group. The Armitage family and the guests attending their event are prototypical examples of those whose lives are rife with privilege, both racial and financial.

The conversations we had also brought attention to educational privilege, with one person noting, “I am very privileged to be going to college in general.” As most of our friends were pursuing or had already obtained a college degree, this was felt deeply among us. Access to higher education often serves as a gateway to economic mobility and social capital, yet it remains out of reach for many due to systemic barriers like rising tuition costs, especially in the U.S. College isn't just about learning; it's about entering spaces of opportunity that others may never access. In *Get Out*, the Armitages' advanced education—Dean as a neurosurgeon and Missy as a hypnotherapist—symbolizes how higher learning can grant not only status but also power, which, in their case, becomes a tool for control.

There was some discussion about familial privilege as well, as someone shared, “My parents are divorced, and I feel like I did kind of miss out on something.” This comment underscores how societal norms often position the nuclear family as the ideal, leading those

from non-traditional family structures to feel a sense of lack, even if their upbringing was supportive. Familial privilege manifests in ways like having two parents who can pool resources for education or emotional stability. In *Get Out*, the Armitages' tight-knit family unit exemplifies familial privilege—they work together seamlessly to uphold their twisted tradition, using their unity as a source of power, while Chris' family is fragmented and, in some ways, haunted.

A broader reflection on privilege highlighted how it often goes unnoticed until confronted with contrasting experiences. As one person put it, "I think you kind of have to have that 'outside look' or else you're never going to know that you have any privilege. I think that's why a lot of people start to notice that privilege when they go to college. I really don't think that you can come to that realization [without exposure to different people and places]." This speaks to the echo chambers many in the U.S. grow up in—schools, neighborhoods, and social circles that lack diversity—making it hard to recognize one's own advantages. Considering the vastness of the U.S., people tend to have their own enclaves and rarely go out of their own bubble to experience lives led by other people. For many, college had been a place where they found and experienced the most diversity in their lives. By making personal connections with people who were different than them, they began to recognize and appreciate the value inherent in other life experiences but as mentioned above, going to college in itself is already a privilege. In *Get Out*, Chris initially downplays subtle racial microaggressions but, through unsettling experiences, comes to fully recognize the depth of the systemic oppression around him. Similarly, real-life exposure to new environments can act as a catalyst for recognizing the privileges previously taken for granted.

In *Get Out*, privilege operates on multiple levels, reinforcing systemic oppression. Racial privilege is central, as white characters, particularly the Armitages, exploit Black bodies while masking their racism with performative allyship. This privilege allows them to dehumanize Chris without facing societal consequences. Financial privilege is evident in the Armitages' wealth, enabling them to host elite gatherings and fund the Coagula procedure, commodifying Black bodies for their gain. Familial privilege plays a role as the Armitages operate as a cohesive unit, bound by loyalty and tradition, using their close-knit dynamic to entrap victims. Lastly, educational privilege empowers Missy and Dean, whose advanced knowledge in hypnotherapy and neurosurgery grants them control over others, turning intellectual authority into a tool of domination. Together, these layers of privilege highlight how systemic power operates across racial, economic, familial, and academic lines as we had discussed with our peers.

These discussions on the different branches of privilege are very interesting because one is only likely able to recognize privilege when they do not have them. When watching a film like *Get Out*, racial and financial privilege are not the only forms of privilege on display. However, conversations about privilege tend to be informed by our own experiences, and the two aforementioned forms appeared to be the most palpable for both us and our friends.

### *Theme #2: Activism*

Although activism is not explicitly dealt with in the movie, in our conversations with peers, we have found that this was the next step of where our conversations organically led to. One of our peers used the race-heavy commentary of the film as a catalyst to share his thoughts about why people (especially those in positions of authority) should advocate for marginalized communities, “The characteristics that differentiate us on a bigger level don’t really matter in the long run. [We’re] all humans. [We] have an obligation to fight for and help [one another].” This comment illustrates a significant point: that our fixation on difference tends to eclipse the human drive to support. To him, activism and its ensuing principles are not questions of if; they are questions of when and how. This sentiment is not shared with everyone as there have been other comments on how the people we help should try to help themselves first. For the U.S. context, there is still some emphasis on “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” which is not always the most helpful angle. One of our friends who is active in coordinating mutual aid opportunities also expressed the importance of mutual aid as an important starting act of activism to meet immediate basic needs of people rather than letting them go through the very consuming process of applying for financial aid that can feel dehumanizing.

A distinction was also made between activism versus *performative activism* (i.e., shallow and self-serving support for social justice causes).<sup>18</sup> Our peer continued to explain, “There are a couple of people I went to high school with who were [performative]. They would talk about how they were super supportive of [social issues], but when it came down to it, they wouldn’t really stick their neck out for anyone.” While some may view activism as a responsibility, other individuals can warp its positive intent to fit their own solipsistic needs. If things grow knotty, those on the performative end of the activist spectrum will likely capitulate in favor of self-preservation. Their activism struggles to see beyond the scope of the self, and it hinders their ability to wholly advocate for others.

Building on the performative activism position, a few peers have expressed a similar disdain toward those who refuse to advocate for a cause on the grounds of being neutral and/or impartial. According to our peer, “One, [neutrality] saves people time, and two, it keeps them from being [labeled] controversial, which a lot of people avoid now. It’s just like being moderate. You don’t have an opinion, so no one can get mad at you.” Another peer reflected on how refusing neutrality is to, in effect, align oneself with those in positions of power. In other words, there is no true neutral. At the heart of their argument appears to lie a frustration with neutrality’s use as a tool to circumvent the complexity and difficulty that accompany activism. If one is neutral, they do not have to investigate why a cause is worth supporting (i.e., they save time), nor do they run the risk of adopting a stance that might

<sup>18</sup> Thimsen, “What is Performative Activism?”

upset others (i.e., they save face). Neutrality, to a lesser extent than that of performative activism, exhibits traces of solipsism and promotes idleness. In other words, impartiality breeds inaction.

In *Get Out*, activism, performative activism, and the role of passive bystanders are explored through the film's critique of race relations and superficial allyship. The Armitages and their social circle embody performative activism, masking their exploitation of Black bodies with shallow, self-congratulatory gestures. Dean's comment, "I would have voted for Obama for a third term," and the guests' fetishizing remarks, "Black is in fashion" highlight how some white liberals perform wokeness to virtue signal while remaining complicit in systemic racism. Passive bystanders or people who are neutral are also critiqued, particularly through characters like Jim Hudson, the blind art dealer, who claims he only wants Chris's eyesight, not his race, yet still participates in the violent commodification of Black bodies. His "neutral" stance exposes how inaction or selective morality perpetuates harm. In contrast, genuine activism is portrayed through Chris's survival, which becomes an act of resistance against a system designed to dehumanize him, and Rod's relentless efforts to save Chris, representing grassroots activism driven by loyalty and community care. The film ultimately critiques not only overt racism but also the dangers of shallow allyship and passive complicity, revealing how systemic oppression persists through both action and inaction.

### *Theme #3: Approaching Tough Conversations*

As we spoke to our respective peers, they revealed how films could act as a starting point for having conversations that are difficult but necessary. Moreover, they addressed the importance of one's attitude when entering such conversations.

**Via Channel of Film.** While the film was not always the center of focus throughout our conversation, its existence became an anchor for common ground (i.e., the point of similarity to which the conversation would have returned if things grew intense). One of our peers, R, broached this notion and discussed how movies can act as a gateway to more critical discourse. He stated, "I think that film is a great way to challenge preconceived notions. It talks about these tough issues in a way that many (but not all) people can look at as pure entertainment. You don't have to think critically about this movie, but you should." R's comment alludes to some of the larger objectives of this project, as part of our aim is to encourage individuals to think about and engage with their media (film, television, etc.) through a more critical lens. Indeed, one can be a passive viewer and take a piece of media like *Get Out* at face value; however, it is through a deeper examination of that media that growth occurs.

Our film-focused conversation continued, and we asked our peers if they had any criticism for the film shown. E remarked, "I feel like, especially for me, sometimes you just need to tell me straight to my face what something is. Otherwise, I won't get it. Like with Rose's

character being a villain.” This comment demonstrates how, despite the beauty of subtlety, there is still a need for movies to be blunt when tackling and attempting to comment on certain issues. For the filmmaker, it becomes a game of balancing the need to entertain with the need to inform and criticize in a way that is perceptible to the viewer.

**Inclusion.** One critique that our peers voiced about the tough conversations we attempt to engage in today is that we tend to exclude the people with whom the issue most affects. J commented on this problem: “I feel like, in that sense, you should include [marginalized people] into those conversations because it's about them.” He expanded on this argument, noting that a lack of representation for those who an issue directly impacts silences their voices, downplays their plight, and showcases a general lack of care on the part of the purported activists. J averred that there is little hope in finding a solution when the voices of the affected find little to no airtime to speak.

**Open-Mindedness.** Another approach our peers mentioned dealt with being open-minded. They all conveyed a similar belief that to carry out these difficult conversations civilly and productively, we must approach them from an angle of humility, reciprocity, and consideration. M shared their thoughts on this notion: “Just putting yourself in someone else's mindset—I think that's very valuable. I think humans [tend] to be loud, and the loudest one wins. But I think you just gotta take a step back and relax. Put yourself in someone else's shoes, and just imagine if that was you.” As M illustrates, the monopolization of a conversation does not assure or indicate overt correctness; it simply means that someone has a lot to say. Moreover, M's comment suggests that we need to (a) be more cognizant of what people are actually saying and (b) be willing to look at issues from a perspective that differs or conflicts with our own.

**Common Ground.** Our peers also raised the importance of finding common ground during these difficult conversations. J explained, “As the conversation progresses, we're going to find some common ground. Instead of going into [the conversation] antagonistically, [we should realize] that we'll find something to agree on at some point.” Before a conversation can reach a state of commonality, those involved must be willing to actively listen to one another. When they have established that sense of reciprocity, feelings of antagonism and combativeness should subside—albeit slowly. By adopting this mindset, our peers argued that people would come to realize that, upon entering a communicative encounter, most people harbor good intentions. It is only with this recognition that individuals can attempt to find solutions to any number of social issues.

## Our Personal Reflections

Engaging in discussions about race, privilege, and activism through the lens of *Get Out* prompted us to reflect on our own experiences and positionality. As mixed-race but brown individuals (with one of us being half Black), our engagement with the film was shaped by a unique duality: We are not white, yet we exist in a racialized hierarchy where one of our experiences differs from those of Black individuals and the other readily aligns with those experiences. This positionality allowed us to observe both the subtle and overt ways privilege operates, while also recognizing the limitations of our own perspectives. The process of analyzing *Get Out* and discussing it with our peers reinforced the importance of dialogue as a tool for self-awareness and collective understanding.

One of the most striking aspects of our discussions was the realization that many of our friends had never deeply interrogated their privileges before. The film served as a catalyst for these reflections, highlighting how racial, financial, and educational privileges manifest in everyday life. While we, too, have encountered our fair share of racial microaggressions, our discussions led us to reflect on how our own privileges—educational access, financial stability, and familial support—have influenced our experiences and perspectives. Recognizing these privileges is not about guilt but about understanding the systems that shape our lives and the lives of others.

We found the conversations surrounding activism and performative allyship to be particularly compelling. The critique of those who remain neutral resonated deeply, as we have encountered individuals who espouse progressive values in rhetoric but fail to act on those very values. This reflection led us to examine our own engagement with activism. Are we doing enough? Are our conversations translating into action? The discussions reinforced that activism is not just about public advocacy but also about everyday choices—challenging biases, supporting marginalized voices, and refusing to be complicit in injustice.

Additionally, we reflected on the emotional labor involved in having these conversations. Discussing race and privilege, especially with those who have not previously engaged with these topics, can be exhausting. The tension between wanting to educate and the frustration of encountering resistance is a challenge we both have faced. The conversations *Get Out* prompted were, at times, uncomfortable, but they also underscored why these dialogues are necessary. Silence only perpetuates the status quo.

Ultimately, this project reaffirmed our belief in the power of media (film, in particular) as a site of discourse and transformation. *Get Out* did not just entertain; it provoked, unsettled, and demanded critical engagement. As we move forward, we hope to continue using film and other cultural texts as entry points for difficult conversations, recognizing that these discussions, however challenging, are integral to fostering awareness and inspiring change.

## **Conclusion**

We cannot expect to engage in or fully actualize a democratic society when we view the conversations needed for its flourishing as synonymous with the impossible. It would be remiss of us to contend that such conversations are not difficult; however, the tendency to conflate “difficult” with “impossible” need no longer occur. This conflation makes many people reluctant to even attempt to converse with one another, let alone come together to engender change on a large scale. While this project is in no way perfect, it still demonstrates that, at least at a micro level, these conversations are possible. To transpire, they take time, effort, and a genuine sense of willingness and reciprocity from all involved. We recognize that these elements are difficult to fulfill on their own, and they grow increasingly so when one combines them. Where, then, does an effective starting point for these conversations lie? It could, as this project reveals, lie with film.

When entering these film-prompted conversations, we recommend that the parties position the film as an anchor for common ground (i.e., the point of similarity to which the conversation returns if things grow intense). From there, the parties should do the following: (1) approach the conversation from an angle of open-mindedness; (2) listen to understand, not to refute or attack; and (3) take time to reflect on not only their own positions but also the positions of the other party once the conversation concludes. We hope that readers adopt this three-part approach (or one similar in tone) when they inevitably find themselves amid a difficult conversation. Adoption of this approach could materialize into action, which might then improve and reshape how we approach democracy and its attendant discourse. Perhaps the conversations we long held impossible could take on an air of possibility and result in proper, profound, and widespread change.

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