

White moral infantilism and some help avoiding it

Several recent films and shows portray people of color with a complexity that James Baldwin once assumed was impossible for pop culture.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue



Daniel Kaluuya, center, in the film *Get Out*. Photo by Justin Lubin / © Universal Pictures

James Baldwin, the American essayist and novelist, who died in 1987, believed that American popular media blinded white Americans to the violent, oppressive racial reality that lived beside them. The America of pop culture was “so fat and so sleek, and so safe, and so happy” but also, in Baldwin’s scathing diagnosis, “so irresponsible, and so dead.” He argued that for most white Americans, black life remained opaque. People of color, if seen at all, were reduced to a racial “problem,” not as full human subjects. His own fiction was meant to challenge this opacity.

But many current films and television shows are offering complex characters of color and analyzing race in ways that Baldwin assumed was impossible for pop culture.

The revolution may not be televised, and it certainly won't happen because we are all watching TV, but for those wishing to avoid white moral infantilism, here are some excellent places to start:

1) *I Am Not Your Negro*: Raoul Peck's documentary about Baldwin is compiled entirely from Baldwin's published and unpublished writing, especially the notes for his unfinished book on the lives and deaths of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Spoken over images of Ferguson in 2014, white supremacist rallies in the 1950s, clips from sugar-coated white pop culture, and images of the deaths of black Americans past and present, Baldwin's words are as prophetic now as they were when he wrote them.

2) *13th*: After Baldwin and Peck's persuasive case for the fragility of "racial progress," Ava DuVernay's documentary about the prison industrial complex fills in the missing pieces of the story. Drawing extensively from Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander is one of many scholars interviewed), the film traces the rise of mass incarceration from the end of the Civil War to the present, laying out damning evidence of the persistence of structural racism.

3) *O.J.: Made in America*: About so much more than O. J. Simpson, Ezra Edelman's five-part documentary is a master class on race, masculinity, sports culture, pop culture, police practices, real estate zoning, informal segregation, domestic violence, and celebrity culture. It beat out both *13th* and *I Am Not Your Negro* to win the documentary feature Oscar this year. If you watch the three films in succession, you won't be able to claim that you don't understand how structural racism works or don't know what people mean by a culture of white supremacy.

4) *Moonlight*: Primed with historical, philosophical, legal, and cultural analysis, it's time to turn to fiction, and there is no better place to start than with the winner of this year's Academy Award for Best Picture, not least because it focuses entirely on black lives. There is not a single white character in Barry Jenkins's film. This choice may be as radical as the film's portrayal of black queer sexuality. It is a visually stunning meditation on character, friendship, and inner life. Structural racism shapes the limits of Chiron's life (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes play Chiron at different stages of his life), but the story focuses on his human particularity.

5) *Get Out*: The directorial debut of Jordan Peele (part of the comedy team Key and Peele) is a pitch-perfect satire-horror film about Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), a black man who goes to the country to meet the family of his white girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams). Think *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* meets *Rosemary's Baby*. The instinctive anxiety that Chris feels in a mostly white, affluent environment becomes the basis of an actual horror plot. You will laugh (far more than expected for a horror movie), cringe, shriek, and recoil, all while slowly realizing that the outlandish plot is horrifyingly close to the racism that people of color face every day, in softer liberal forms and in long-standing structural ones.

6) *Fences*: Produced by and starring Denzel Washington, this film of August Wilson's play could fit alongside other historical dramas of the year (like *Loving* and *Hidden Figures*), but Wilson's work deserves a slot of its own. One of America's great playwrights, Wilson wrote *Fences* as the sixth play in his ten-play series about African-American life in Pittsburgh. Digging deep into the inner lives of its characters, their relationships, and the dramas of ordinary life, it is a character-driven masterpiece. Washington's adaptation, which reassembles much of the cast from the 2010 Broadway revival, has been criticized for being too much a stage production put on film, but I am not sure this is a weakness. Many Americans will never get to see a Wilson play on stage, and this film offers a remedy for that.

7) *Atlanta*: Donald Glover's television series *Atlanta* is a unique blend of comedy and drama. It follows two cousins through Atlanta's hip-hop scene. In this golden age of television, it is also one of the first prestige shows to focus entirely on black characters with the same range and depth that pretty much all other prestige TV has focused on white characters. For the simple act of making the humanity of people of color less opaque, it should be required viewing. Before you know it, you will be debating the politics of rap and questioning the romantic plots, proving that watching great television never feels like a moral duty.

8) *Represent*: Technically this is not something to watch but to listen to. Aisha Harris's *Slate* podcast includes guest appearances by creative professionals involved in the films listed above, as well as episodes that press diversity beyond black/white to topics such as Holocaust humor, with Ferne Pearlstein, the director of the new documentary *The Last Laugh*, and an interview with Puerto Rican-American actress Rita Moreno. It's a sophisticated, world-opening exploration of the representation of race (and gender, sexuality, and ethnic diversity) in pop culture.

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