Contemporary Trouble in America: *Us*, Jordan Peele, 2019

Yann Roblou

Univ. Polytechnique des Hauts-de-France, F-59313 Valenciennes, France

Abstract: After a tentative definition of what characterizes elevated horror, the paper examines the different layers of meaning and web of references in Jordan Peele's *Us* to try to determine an agenda prolongating and deepening issues already present in his previous *Get Out* (2017).

Keywords: Elevated Horror; Intertextuality; Gender; Race; Ideology

Résumé : Après avoir proposé une définition de ce que peut être le sous-genre "*elevated horror*", le texte explore les multiples strates de sens et ramifications référentielles présentes dans le film de Jordan Peele *Us* afin de déterminer quelles sont les problématiques prolongées et développées après *Get Out* (2017).

Mots clés : *elevated horror*, intertextualité, genre, ethnicité, idéologie

It is not groundbreaking to assert that a movie director making a second film -after a celebrated, by both critics and audiences worldwide, and certainly commercially profitable[1] first- is taking a chance. Maybe all the more so if his area of predilection is the horror genre. However, forty-year-old Jordan Peele seems to have managed to pass the test successfully, not only by making the follow-up film aesthetically different from his previous one but precisely because *Us* also offers continuity, prolongation and deepening of the issues that were brought up in *Get Out* (2017). Indeed, under cover of an elaborately constructed film combining elements pertaining to both the thriller and horror genres, the director finds ample material in the exploration of matters of identity, of gender affirmation and dominance, of codes and norms of representation of ethnic groups,

---

1. According to the website *The Numbers*, the cost of production of *Get Out* was 5 million dollars, with a global revenue theatrical of $252,297,405 – a figure that does not include "Home Market Performance". Source: https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Get-Out-(2017)#tab=summary – last accessed, February 2023.

and of social and ideological anchoring of mass media entertainment in the political context contemporary to the making and release of the film.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the specificities of Peele's recent work in the perspective of a troubled, troubling and troublesome appraisal of contemporary America. In order to do so, the observations have been regrouped within a certain number of themes which are intimately connected to the topic of trouble.

It is necessary however to start with a tentative definition of the framework within which the film is inscribed. *Us* belongs to the type of productions to have emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century, dubbed "elevated horror" or "art-horror".[2] Considered as a sub-genre of horror films, elevated horror could be said to justify the problematic use of the adjective by being more artful in the depiction of moments of extreme physical, emotional or psychological tension, and, arguably, because the films falling into that category share a multi-layered, multi-directional development not unlike that of the rhizome.

Thus, unequivocally, the double strikes the viewer as the foremost aesthetic and thematic component of Peele's film, and as such will be approached first. Further, *Us* is characterized by its palimpsest of cultural references which creates a challenging weblike construction for the viewer to explore. Finally, insofar as it is aesthetically distinct from ordinary horror fodder (too heavily relying on strictly linear narrative or visual clichés and tried and true effects —such as the infamous "jump scare" type of editing) and addresses issues thematically, and eventually ideologically grounded, Jordan Peele's movie cannot be seen without taking into account its social and political ramifications, connected to its time of release —as has always been the case for significant productions since Robert Wiene's 1920 *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari*.

Even before the spectator is allowed to enter the film itself, an essential trope is brought to the fore with most posters, regardless of the market they were destined to: that of the double. To give but a few examples, one visual shows an imitation of an ink-block test, with two profiles in black, looking away from each other, against a white background. Another shows the face of lead actress Lupita Nyong'o staring wide-eyed at us, a tear running down the right side of her face; simultaneously the left side of her face is covered by a look-alike mask she is holding with her gloved right hand. A third shows a pair of gilded scissors held by two hands, one of which is gloved, against what looks like red fabric.

2.   For a discussion about the definition and cultural extensions of the term and other adjacent appellations, see Eddie Falvey, 63-81.

What immediately comes to mind is the rich variety of elements that can be connected to the motif, and the viewing of the film confirms this, as a brief summary of the plot illustrates: the Wilsons' serene beach vacation turns to chaos when their *Doppelgänger* appear and begin to terrorize them.

The origin of the director's reported fascination with the theme can be easily attributed to his having been impressed by a 1960 episode of *The Twilight Zone* television series called "Mirror Image"[3] in which a young woman is haunted by her double. At the risk of (partly) spoiling the enjoyment of the reader of the present lines, and/or viewer not yet familiar with *Us*, duplication is at the core of the filmic text: the premise of the fiction is that everyone in America has their own replica, called a "Tethered". It should be underlined however that these duplicates are not completely identical: minor physical differences exist and the only common trait all Tethered share is that they cannot speak –save for Red, Adelaide Wilson's supposed other self.

Intimately connected to the "double" motif, the notion of repetition stands out as being of paramount importance. It goes without saying that its variations are numerous in their literal manifestations: mirrors and other reflecting surfaces abound in the film. In matters metaphorical, the movie delves into its instances from the opening. As a matter of fact the first scene describes young Maddison Curry's Adelaide –or "Addy" (a discreet instance of duplication of identity)– and her frightful experience when she wanders alone in a hall of mirrors at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. If the traumatic moment itself is not shown then, it is revisited several times in the course of the film, thus proposing a new facet of the scene with each occurrence. As the tension grows, the protagonist's blocked out memory is amplified before the actual event is exposed in its entirety, hence revealing the final twist of the plot.

Similarly, a remarkably large number of other elements are paired, duplicated or repeated. To give but the most striking instances, the film opens with a TV announcement about the 1986 "Hands Across America" initiative, and ends with an aerial vision of a line of red-clad Tethered running across wooded hills as far as the eye can see; the Wilsons' friends Kitty and Josh Tyler (respectively embodied by Elizabeth Moss and Tim Heidecker) have twin daughters Becca and Lindsey (played by actual twins Cali and Noelle Sheldon); the ominous hall of mirrors mentioned above may change name (passing from "Shaman's Vision Quest Forest" to "Merlin's Forest") it still bears the same invitation: "Find Yourself", and functions as a locus of trauma and revelation; the man of each of the

---

3.   Season 1, Episode 21. First aired April 26, 1960. Director: John Brahm. Writer: Rod Serling. Starring: Vera Miles, Martin Milner, Joe Hamilton, Naomi Stevens.

Wilson and Tyler families owns a boat… Even the end credits associate the names of the actors with the two roles they play, one lettered in white, the other in red.

In keeping with these deliberate choices in terms of scenario and aesthetics, yet more intriguing, is the sticker on the rear window of the Wilson family's car. It forms a schematic representation of one child on each side of the parental couple, all holding hands to form a line. The sticker is the first thing to appear after the ellipsis anchoring the main body of the narrative in the present of the diegesis. It also announces the composition of the said family (as well as their Tethered counterparts) and is taken up again symbolically when an aerial shot shows them arriving on the beach.

To take this chiasmic representation even further, the archetypal Wilson family unit is visually connected to the recurrence of the number 11: the two digits offering both repetition, duplication and symmetry. And the visual pun -which can only be fully grasped after repeated viewing- starts with the first shot of the film, evoked before, showing an old TV screen, and a news broadcast entitled "Tonight 11 at 11". In the early scene at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, young Adelaide's father wins at the "Coconut Shy" skill game, and the little girl begs to obtain prize number 11. Moments later she passes an odd lanky young man holding a cardboard sign that reads: "Jeremiah 11:11". The same sign appears later in the hands of an older man (an aged version of the young man, maybe) being carried off in an ambulance. One of the Wilsons' friends' daughters sports a Black Flag T-shirt with four staggered black lines that are reminiscent of the same repeated number. Further along the narrative, when the Wilsons return from their day at the beach, the husband, Gabe (Winston Duke), listens to a sports broadcast where two baseball teams are tied 11 to 11. That same evening, the Wilsons' son, Jason (Evan Alex), points his digital clock to his mother where the digits read: 11:11. To cap it all, when the Wilsons finally escape, it is with an ambulance whose assigned number, visible thanks to an aerial shot, is 1111.

On the face of it, the most accessible (and sustainable) reason for this recurrence is that it confirms Jordan Peele's savvy playfulness at the use of symmetry, which is coherent with the central plot. However one cannot dissociate this characteristic from the fact that not only is *Us* adroitly constructed (as was the director's previous movie) around the very classical building of tension leading to a final twist, it is also the place to provide a vast number of cultural references, almost as if the intent was to saturate the filmic text and lose the viewer, just as young Addy gets lost in the hall of mirrors.

The echoes of Americana (and maybe Anglo-saxon culture in general) encompass the world of literary fiction. Chief among the thematically and aesthetically pivotal pieces Peele refers to stands Lewis Carroll's 1865 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, be it only with the long introductory pulling back of the camera revealing a slew of white rabbits in their symmetrically arranged cages, Adelaide's final descent echoing Alice's fall in the hole, or the confrontation with the "Red" Queen of the underworld... More covertly Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 *Doppelgänger*-based short story "William Wilson" (the commonality of the family name is a transparent indication) may also serve as a literary source in its mood and its implications. And more visibly explicit is Blake Nelson's 2007 popular tale for adolescents *They Came from Below,* whose title is a tell-tale clue, and a copy of which is visible on the Wilsons' daughter Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph)'s bedroom nightstand.

This being stated, it must be added that the director also does not hesitate to use popular, low-brow entertainment. Board games serve as visual nudges: one cannot but cherish the situationally ironic echo of the game's name, *Guess Who?*, or the appropriately named *Monster Trap* that can be found in the closet where Jason hides from his horribly burnt-faced counterpart. Music also contributes to the contextual innuendo: Addy's father wins for her a Michael Jackson T-shirt promoting his 1982 *Thriller* album; a clue to the true identity of older Adelaide can be detected in her ineffective attempt to make her son snap his fingers in rhythm to Luniz' 1995 *I Got 5 on It*. One can surmise that Peele very consciously disseminated these pebbles of information in a Hop-o'-My-Thumb fashion for the viewer to be intellectually titillated: though the ample variety of clues does not hinder the reading of the filmic text if they are not immediately perceived, their sheer presence beckons us –not unlike the pleasurable and formative repeated readings of fairy-tales– to proceed to multiple viewings in order to savor the director's art of narration.

It also cannot go amiss that it is in cinema that Peele seems to have found the most plentiful store of references and cultural connections -and for good reason, as he has been an avid cinephile from a young age. When the camera pulls away from the television set at the beginning of the film, three VHS tapes can be seen sitting on a shelf next to it: *C.H.U.D.* (Douglas Cheek, 1984), *The Man with Two Brains* (Carl Reiner, 1983) and *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), which are all thematically connected to the events presented in *Us*.[4] From that moment on, cinema references

---

4. *C.H.U.D.* (acronym for Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers) is based on the fictional existence of grotesquely deformed vagrants living in the New York sewers – not unlike the Tethered. *The Goonies* relies on a similar exploration of underground tunnels – with a different goal. In *The Man with Two Brains*, the protagonist, a brain surgeon, falls in love with another woman's brain; the emotional connection between the two entities echoes the link between the Tethered and their surface counterparts.

abound: the Wilsons' son whose name is Jason and who wears a mask is a transparent reference to the *Friday 13th* classic horror franchise. Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* is also conjured: not only does Jason wear a T-shirt with the visual of the 1977 film when the family arrives on the beach, but the continuation of the scene in Peele's film is edited to emulate the sequence where Chief Brody anxiously surveys the ocean in wait for the first shark attack.

Perhaps less conspicuously the film's own narrative pace changes with the home invasion: from that moment forward there is a shift, with more fluid Steadycam shots, fewer cut edits and more whip pans over to other characters. This "dispositif" signals, like the lengthy shots in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*,[5] that the protagonists –and the viewer– are trapped in events supposedly happening in "real time". Similarly, cinematographer Mike Gioulakis' signature circling camerawork, which can be seen in the home invasion scene, echoes the visual approach he used in *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014). The process of metaphorizing entrapment works in both films when signifying the unavoidable force of external –visible or not– elements.

However it is more than obvious that the most evident source of cinematic references is *The Shining*. The –even moderately– attentive movie-goer in the audience cannot ignore the visually explicit references to Stanley Kubrick's 1980 classic: the labyrinthine dimension of the underground world duplicating the corridors of the Overlook Hotel; Addy's muted expression of wide-eyed dismay at the spectacle of off-screen horror mimicking Danny Torrance's; or the way the Tyler twin daughters speak in unison, and how their bodies are placed in the corridor after their murder –all elements duplicating Kubrick's film, to evoke but a few examples. From a thematic point of view, one of the most fascinating aspects of Peele's work is that it draws on the same exploration of the tension between seeing/not seeing present in *The Shining*: just as the protagonists in Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's novel are able to "see" what is going on in the deserted hotel –or are blind to it– and evolve with the knowledge connected to that capacity, so do the various members of the Wilson family. The realization of the Tethered's disconcerting physical semblance to their own by Jason is accepted his sister and mother, but not by his father. The latter ends up being the ineffectual element in the progression of events, while the other three cope and survive.[6]

---

5. One of the films the director used during the preparation of *Us*, *Funny Games*' plot involves two young men who hold a family hostage and torture them with sadistic games in their vacation home by the side of a lake in Austria. The 2007 remake of the film bears the same name and is virtually identical to the original one, the scene now taking place in America.
6. For a more complete presentation of the links between the two films, see Joy McEntee (2-31) who convincingly contends that Peele "reimagines" Stanley Kubrick's foray into the horror genre, "which is mainly about whiteness, from an African American perspective".

To broaden the scope of the Kubrickian influence on Peele, it is noteworthy that not unlike his model, he also appears to be using his own cinema as matrix. Michel Ciment noted that, almost from the beginning of his cinematographic career, the American-born director settled in England created a self-referential system, with one film nodding towards a previous one (Ciment: 60-62). This interesting trait is perceptible through the Monkey Paw production company credit: the spoon rattling in the teacup is a key element in the narrative of *Get Out*. Visually speaking, two singular stylistic elements present in Peele's previous incursion in the horror genre are again used in *Us*: the way the characters move mechanically and at right angles, or the several close-ups on crying faces, which reinforce the unsettling dimension of the situation.[7]

All the above-mentioned elements could be considered as a means to induce a "tongue in cheek" relation with the viewer. However, if one changes the angle of approach, the director's use of intertextuality acquires another dimension. The sheer number of references creates yet another effect of saturation of the filmic text, to the point where the viewer's attention is unable to make sense of the collection of nods and nudges. In this perspective, the satisfaction of picking up the "bread crumbs" hides the possibility that what is really at stake lies elsewhere: to a certain extent, it could be argued that *Us* repeatedly and purposefully misdirects the viewer.

For instance, the incipit[8] proves to be a red herring *a posteriori*. All the more so if one is versed in American history, as images of the notorious "underground railroad" immediately come to mind. The development of the story does not confirm in any way this lead. Similarly, the viewer may not pick up all the variations on the multiple associations of the number 11, but the biblical reference to Jeremiah[9] cannot be missed, and begs the question of the director's intention when making use of the religious metaphor. Once again, the evolution of the plot does not give the divine ignorance of the pleas of the people of Judah any concrete materialization. As a matter of fact when Red, Adelaide's other self, asserts that she realized the "untethering" –that is to say, the release of the Tethered from their underground prison– was in response to a divine injunction, the viewer expects some form of biblical connection. Yet, the justification supposed to give more weight to this only comes across as vaguely metaphysical. To quote her attempt at formulating a narrative behind the Tethered's existence:

7. However, this indication needs to wait for further expansion of Peele's filmography to be validated.
8. "There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States…
Abandoned subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mineshafts…
Many have no purpose at all."
9. "Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them." Source: https://biblehub.com/jeremiah/11-11.htm – Last visited February 2023.

> And yet it was humans that built this place. I believe they figured how to make a copy of the body but not the souls. The soul remains one shared by two. They created the Tethered. So they could use them to control the one above. Like puppets. But they failed and they abandoned the Tethered. [1.36.18]

Rather, echoing Zora's line "Do you know there's fluoride in the water that helps the government control our mind?" earlier in the film, the rationale behind the words smacks of paranoia, remains unjustified and is rapidly brushed under the carpet in favor of a more pragmatic treatment of the home invasion situation.

Nonetheless, the unrealistic presence -justified or not- of the Tethered elicits a feeling of unease that is initiated by the elements that have been evoked earlier, among which the Blakian "fearful symmetry(-ies)"[10] and their visual corollaries encapsulated by the confrontational frontality of young Addy's wide-eyed stare into the camera throughout the film.

Also, the feeling of *Unheimliche* analyzed by Sigmund Freud develops with the Wilsons' home being invaded by what Jason first describes as "(a) boogey man's family". The young boy's observation is completed moments later by his affirmation: "It's us." This singular and sagacious realization has a series of repercussions.

For one thing Jason's statement is rendered problematic in Red's oddly funny answer to Gabe's question: "Who are you people?" "We're Americans." The context of utterance, the straightforward manner in which it is formulated and the development of the narrative all but draw an unflattering portrait of the inhabitants of the United States, as epitomized by the characters presented in the film. If the Tethered are Americans in the semblance of their models, then they are the prime examples of Capitalistic consumer society, where keeping up with the Joneses (or the Tylers for that matter) is both a revenge on historically anchored relegation to second zone citizenship and an *art de vivre* for educated (upper) middle-class African-Americans, as Gabe demonstrates by sporting a Howard University sweater, buying a boat (a staple of expandable income), making a pitiful attempt at defending his "property" and then resorting to petty financial bargaining when all else has failed to prevent the menace of being supplanted by frightful, moaning and groaning look-alikes.

---

10. In William Blake's 1794 poem 'The Tyger', the eponymous tiger is connected to symmetry through the pattern of his fur, on the one hand, and on the other to the lamb also evoked in the text. The presence of the ambiguous adjective 'fearful' –which one could rightly comprehend as 'fearsome'– may be attributed to the fact that both animals being the production of their creator are radical opposites nonetheless. The creation of the Tethered could be construed as working along similar lines of opposition and complementarity.

The other model we are given to observe is the Tyler family, and the characteristics evoked before are amplified. Money may not buy happiness but it allows the foursome to spend their vacation comfortably in an immaculate two-story house[11] overlooking a lake, to drive a luxurious car, to own an expensive-looking motorboat. Like a painter, Peele patiently adds little touches to draw the portrait of each individual member of the family –save for the twin girls who, being twins, apparently need not function in any other fashion than as a single unit–: both adults seem to have grown irked by the other as the quips they exchange testify; Josh does not brag about his professional success but still manages to patronize his "friend" Gabe about the equipment –or lack thereof– of his newly-acquired craft; Josh's wife Kitty is self-absorbed, prone to evoke her short-lived career as an actress, the discreet plastic surgery she undergoes every year, and she is inclined to indulge her alcoholic tendencies; gymnasts of sorts, the twin girls –Becca and Lindsey– look down upon the Wilson offspring, when they are not outright offensive toward them, and toward Jason in particular. The final rendering is as unflattering -if less negative- as the portrayal of the Armitages, the white family in *Get Out*, and it is significant that their demise comes as a form of strange relief for the spectator, more accustomed to seeing the Black characters leave the screen first in more conventional horror films.

Another reading of the words used by Red presents the freeing of the Tethered as an act of revenge, and is essentially expressed through one of the elements most commonly associated with American culture: violence. Though it is part and parcel of the genre explored by the film-maker, what is striking in Peele's feature is that its radicality is more extreme in its message than in its representations. When considering the development of the story, we come to acknowledge that all the Tethered wear the same culturally connoted red jumpsuits and must kill their model in order to invest the world they have been deprived of. Because of the symbolic value of the color red and the final linear formation, one could also be tempted to infer a repositioned reference to the discriminatory practice of "redlining" put into practice in the 1930s and officially terminated in the 1970s. It cannot be dismissed that Jordan Peele's film may propose another possible metaphorical reading by reactivating the tenets of the ideological opposition -rampant in post-Second World War Hollywood cinema- between the United States and the Communist bloc. In this perspective, perceiving the red-clad Tethered functioning as a mindless, speechless, subservient mass[12] under the direction of a leader whose single purpose is to take over the "free world" and get rid of its perverted, capitalistic, bourgeois values

11.   Equipped with state-of-the-art technology, and richly decorated with art, it aptly symbolizes the Tylers' superficiality.
12.   In this respect, one is inclined to connect them to the figure of the zombie that have been ubiquitously occupying screens big and small in recent years.

is textbook ideology –but then again, too blatantly so to be considered as a serious political statement. However, a more contemporary and politically engaging interpretation of the visual and ideological elements could allow us to consider the suits for what they are, regardless of their color. In fact in post 9-11 American history this type of uniform has become intimately associated to the garb worn by the residents of Guantanamo. And if we can consider the Tethered as a metaphor of the alleged terrorists sequestered in the Cuban facility, the ending of the film is far more ambiguous, and also forms yet another ramification of reference with Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*. One cannot but recall the fact that, on at least one of the visual supports of the 1997 version, a frame of the infamous "cat in the bag" sequence where the captive family's son's head is wrapped in a pillow case was used. With the release of the 2007 American version, the posters either focus on the lead actress' face or on the two young torturers. However, after the 2003 revelations about the tortures inflicted on prisoners by American troops in Abu Graib during the second Gulf War, the original films poster and the sequence have acquired a new symbolic significance.

Much less expected, and thus all the more intriguing, is the important place attributed to art in its connection to violence in *Us*. For one thing, the disturbingly familiar apparition of the Tethered on the Wilsons' driveway evokes images found in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings: the maliciousness inherent to the physically bizarre intruders in increased by their blankness –if the reader will pardon the pun– of expression. Another startling occasion is staged later in the film, when Jason wields a sculpture of a rock encased in metal to come to his mother's rescue. Even the final *mano a mano* between Adelaide and Red takes on an oddly artistic form, that of a lethal dance. And it is strikingly telling that, in the editing of the sequence, the struggle between the two women is combined with shots from the younger selves' actual –or duplicated– ballet endeavors.

This singular shock of forms –a characteristic of the film– could be perceived as a critical address –and maybe debunking– from the director to the propensity of commercial cinema to revel in the graphic display of gore or to aestheticize violence, and could therefore serve as yet another argument in favor of integrating Jordan Peele's work in the "elevated horror" category.

Another dimension of Jordan Peele's *Us* lies in its conclusion: the universe it describes does not return to a harmonious stability. Quite on the contrary, the viewer is faced with several challenging and troubling issues of various orders.

To begin with, it is rather evident that in the wake of the #MeToo movement the crisis staged in the film confirms the centrality and dominance of the feminine, first signaled by the posters described at the beginning of the present text. Not only that but, when considering the principal family, the viewer witnesses the jeopardizing of the male adult's role. Gabe progressively loses his supposed status of all-knowing, all-powerful father figure. Early on he acts like a child when he tries to coax his wife into going to the beach. As an alpha male, he also looks inadequate in trying to emulate his white friend Josh who apparently bests him in his material possessions –a bigger car, a bigger house…– by buying a boat that, unfortunately for his male pride, proves to steer to the left and is not fully equipped. Trying to frighten away the intruders by wielding a baseball bat, he ends up getting hit in the leg and limps –a metaphor of castration of sorts?– for the rest of the film. As previously stated Michael Haneke's film was a significant influence on Peele's production, and Gabe's predicament cannot but be perceived as yet another link with what happens to the Austrian tortured family – though with a different ending.

More challengingly, Gabe is unable to grasp the seriousness of the situation by trying to buy off his family's release when the rest of his family –and the viewer– immediately understand the pointlessness of this posture –and another critical observation of self-satisfied capitalism. Further emphasizing his role as a side-kick to his wife –not to say as the comic relief of the film– it is essentially through sheer luck that Gabe manages to avoid getting killed by his other self. The final discomfiture comes when he insists that they should stay in the Tylers' house after killing off their friends' replicas. He is then met with Adelaide's forceful: "You don't get to make the decisions anymore." Consequently, Gabe does not even get to drive a vehicle -and symbolically lead his family- from that point on… In light of what has been observed above, Jordan Peele seems to push the envelope even further by giving multiple –and contradictory– facets to the central feminine figure: the former Tethered who has replaced Addy to become Adelaide is a young African American woman who sheds her originally shy demeanor to become an assertive, willful and resourceful leader. As such, she distances herself from the characteristics proper to the "final girl" trope found in 1970s, 80s and 90s horror films such as Laurie Strode in the *Halloween* series, Elen Ripley in the *Alien* series or Sydney Prescott in the *Scream* series. In the context of the film, she combines the traits of a protective mother, a social liberator as well as a monster.[13] A combination which can then certainly be perceived as revolutionary in terms of gender, race, social and political representation.

---

13. For an extensive presentation of the monstrous feminine in recent films, see Christopher Sharrett (27-31).

An important element should also be considered which conditions, in a way, all the other particularities previously touched on. Language was present in *Get Out* in the form of a tool of manipulation. Here it is exposed through its cryptic inadequacy. From the onset of the film, communication is presented as problematic: Addy's father and mother don't seem to be on the same page concerning the little girl, regarding first the attention she requires and later the medical care she needs. After her fifteen-minute disappearance and her return in an apparently catatonic state, the psychiatrist in charge of Addy tells her parents that they should let her express herself to recount her traumatic experience through any means –other than language– possible. As an adult Adelaide acknowledges the fact she is ill at ease when she has to speak, and when Adelaide's *Doppelgänger* speaks, her voice sounds extremely odd, broken and erratic in its delivery.[14] Ironically –but in keeping with the intertextual strategy implemented by Peele–, when she justifies the home invasion she resorts to using the tried and true formulation: "Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow". As the archetypal opening line of fairy tales this instance is intriguing. The edifying dimension of the tale is tainted from the start by the presence of the ominous "shadow". And the development of the narrative upsets and redefines the perception of the situation as it stood before the arrival of the intruders. As such, language is inadequate in its discrepancy from its original usage.

Furthermore, it could be argued that through the many-faceted issue of language, the director tackles the issue of connection. As has been noted at the beginning of the text, the film does open on the Hands Across America initiative presented in a TV announcement with the words:

> A four thousand mile-long chain of good Samaritans, hand in hand through fields of green, past purple mountains and across fruited plains, from sea to shining sea. That's right: this summer, six million people will tether themselves together to fight hunger in the United States. [1:38 – 2:10]

No need to be an expert linguist to pick out the words belonging to the semantic field of linking. What needs to be observed, though, is the fact that not only are the protagonists originally at various stages of distancing themselves from the others, but also that most technological tools of communication fail to fulfill their task in the film: upon arrival at their summer retreat Gabe tells Zora she does not need the Internet when there is the "outernet"; the telephones rapidly become useless; even the Tylers' home virtual assistant, in another moment of paradoxical comedy, fails to understand Kitty's desperate call for help –"Ophelia, call the police!"

---

14. A characteristic akin to spasmodic dysphonia, a condition involving involuntary muscle movement in the voicebox.

– and instead puts the N.W.A. song *Fuck Tha Police* on the sound system. As a potent symbol, the scissors visible on the visuals of the film appear time and again in the film to signal forceful symbolic separation: all the Tethered use scissors to assault their models; similar-looking scissors are used by Red in the final sequence to cut out –and cut off– paper figures, and slash Adelaide's body.

To add to the inadequacy of language, Adelaide's final words are meaningfully problematic. Addressed to her son, "Everything's gonna be like before!", though meant to be reassuring, should nonetheless be perceived as ambiguous. If we follow the logic of the diegesis, the bleak future suggested by the last images of the film comes as an apparent contradiction to her statement: what we see is that everything is indeed going to be different, as the entire population of the United States is bound to be replaced by duplicates incapable of speech, and led by a red-clad feminine figure. In addition, Adelaide takes for granted that Jason will believe her. Nothing is less sure, however: Jason stares at his mother and slips his favorite mask on, as he systematically does when prey to doubt. This is the fourth occurrence of the little boy's incredulity concerning the identity of his mother. In this final instance, the symbolic use of the mask is telling: he may accept what his mother says but hides his real thoughts behind the cover of a blank -again, pun intended- face, maybe not wanting to confront the reality of what surrounds him and his family, and what is yet to come.

This feeling created by the contrasted evocation of the world in *Us* may be a way for Jordan Peele to make a statement about the United States under the rule of the 45th president whom Spike Lee calls "Agent Orange".[15] While the cultural context[16] seems to be paradoxically favorable to African-Americans, and participates in the current modification of the entertainment film industry's continuum by having a director proposing a story that does not involve traditional white male-centered representation, the harsh reality of the Black Lives Matter movement in reaction to a seemingly endless string of police shootings puts into relief the ambivalence of the film's tone: the protagonists may be Black and have survived some form of general replacement, they are still led by a deceitful woman and headed for an uncertain future.

---

15. After all, the letters of the movie's title do evoke those of the acronym used to designate the country.
16. At least in the domains of cinema, with the global success of various films such as Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) or Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), to give but two examples at various ends of the spectrum, and television, with the extremely popular Marvel inspired series *Luke Cage* (created by Cheo Odari Coker, 2016-2018), or horror exploration of *Lovecraft Country* (created by Misha Green, 2020).

For what seems to be really at stake in Jordan Peele's cinema is the fundamental questioning of identity. A central issue in *Get Out*, the theft of identity -through slavery, acculturation or bogus scientific experimentation- is here presented in a different but no less problematic perspective. After all, the alternative designations of all the characters tell of a cold and distant –in a nutshell, inhuman– existence, which does not abode well for the future of the United States and all its citizens, not exclusively the African American community, at least as far as the ending of the film is concerned. However, where Stanley Kubrick uses the tension with the family nucleus to explore issues of race and class relations via the synecdoche of a hotel, Peele broadens the scope of his statement by addressing issues of class and gender from an African-American perspective encompassing the whole of the country.

In this perspective, it could also be contended that Peele's film also manages to expose an apparently well-intentioned action like Hands Across America for what it really was financially and ideologically[17] and to present it through another lens. The director's use of a supposedly memorable event, with all its flaws and shortcomings, questions the status of images. Peele revisits the past and actualizes it through fiction –the final images are not actual footage from 1986–, but by doing so, he prompts the viewer to reconsider the event as well as its recreation, and hence the ideologically manipulative power of cinema, even his own. The elaboration of an alternative presentation of a historical fact then stands as a dystopian "fake". It is both sinister in its implications –the possibility of a complete replacement of the population by a nightmare of a population– and a playful exploration of the possibility of an alternate outcome of what was –taking the imperfections of the noble initiative to a grotesque extreme.

And it should come as no surprise, then, that a similarly ambiguous revisiting of a historical event –combined with a cinematographic landmark– should occupy a significant part of Peele's latest work, *Nope*, released in 2022. Without spoiling some of the discoveries of the film, suffice it to say that the identity of the African-American jokey riding the horse in Eadweard Muybridge's series of stills turned into the first ever film is at stake.

---

17. As a matter of fact, the initiative, whose purpose was "to cure homelessness and hunger" took place at the height of the Reagan era, during which economic growth, positivity and the firm belief in the supremacy of American ideals left room for unchecked capitalism. At the end of the day, the event lasted fifteen minutes, the chain had many missing links and raised thirty two million dollars, seventeen of which were used to pay the initiative's own bills.

Works Cited

Berisch Elce, Erika, "Unsettling the Spectator", *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Fall 2018, Vol. 51, N° 2, 5-12.

Booker, M. Keith & Daraiseh, Isra, "Lost in the Funhouse: Allegorical horror and cognitive mapping in Jordan Peele's *Us*", *Horror Studies*, 2021, Vol. 12, N° 1, 119-131.

Ciment, Michel, *Kubrick*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2011.

Dawn, Randee, "Despite the odds, there have been Oscars for horror films. Are more on the way?", *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 19, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-11-19/horror-oscars-us-

De Bruge, Peter, "*Us* Review", *Variety*, March 12, 2019, 61-62.

Falvey, Eddie, '"Art-horror" and "hardcore art-horror" at the margins: Experimentation and extremity in contemporary independent horror', *Horror Studies*, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 1, 63-81.

Gates, Racquel J. & Gillespie, Michael Boyce "Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies," *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, Fall 2021, Vol. 13, No. 1, 582-585.

Hans, Simran, "The Lives of Others", *Sight and Sound*, May 2019, Vol. 29, No. 5, 34-36.

Holloway, Daniel, "House of Horrors", *Variety*, August 14, 2018, Vol. 341, No. 4.

Jancovitch, Mark, "Introduction", *Horror Studies*, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 1, 3-5.

Keegan, Rebecca, "Black Lives Matter", *The Hollywood Reporter,* November 2, 2020, 32-41.

Landsberg, Alison, "Horror vérité: politics and history in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)", *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 2018, Vol. 32, No. 5, 629-642.

McDonald, Soraya Nadia, "Free to Be You and Me", *Film Comment*, May/June 2019, Vol. 55, No. 3, 44-47.

McEntee, Joy, "The Tethered Shadow: Jordan Peele and Stanley Kubrick", *Film Criticism*, 2022, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2-31.

Neher, Erick, "Interpreting Horror", *The Hudson Review*, Spring 2019, Vol. 72, No. 1, 111-114.

Pruner, Aaron, "The Most Important Pop Culture References Made in Jordan Peele's 'Us'", *Thrillist*, March 23, 2019, https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/us-movie-1986-references-easter-eggs-meaning

Quinn, Eithne, "Race, Creative Labor, and Reflexivity in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood", *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood*, New York, Columbia UP, 2019, 207-229.

Sinha-Roy, Piya, "*Us*", *Entertainment Weekly*, Dec 28, 2018, No. 1542/1543, 22-24.

Sharett, Christopher, "New Horror Cinema and the Return of Politics", *Cineaste*, Spring 2021, Vol. 46, No. 2, 27-31.

Wall, David C., "*Us*", *Black Camera*, Fall 2019, Vol. 11, No. 1, 457-461.