

Analysis on Horror Genre Films - Taking Us as an Example

Yan Lu^{1,a,*}

¹College of Communication, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, US, 02215

a. Ly010130@bu.edu

* corresponding author

Abstract: Horror movies are usually regarded as “empty calories” for audiences to watch. The film industry did not pay much attention to horror genre movies. But since *Get Out* (2017) and *Hereditary* (2018) was released, horror films begin a new era. They have respect from the studios and their audiences and contain many cultural things and become more thought provoking. The paper, through a method of literature analysis, explores some deep meanings behind nowadays horror movies and how they achieve these by using cinematography, color elements and metaphors, especially in *Us* (2019), which is directed by Jordan Peele. In the film *Us*, “us vs. them” mentality is presented. Duality is also a significant idea in the film. Jordan Peele employs visual design like red clothes and gold scissors and uses low key lighting, diverse colors and a lot of props. The paper also emphasizes the political issues that are revealed in the film. The paper finds that horror movies can help people relax themselves and at the same time, reveal humanities, realistic problems and social situations.

Keywords: horror, films, *Us*, Jordan Peele

1. Introduction

People's minds automatically jump to graphic violence, dead bodies, ghosts, the supernatural, terrified cries, vampires, and other such creatures whenever the term "horror film" is used. Beginning with George Méliès' *Le Manoir du Diable* (1896), horror films have progressed over time [1]. The film's opening sequence was terrifying, because of George Méliès's use of false flying bats and genuine ghosts. As filmmaking techniques have advanced, horror films have taken on a wide variety of forms. In addition, filmmakers provide a more in-depth categorization of film types. Because of this, several subgenres of horror have developed, such as psychological horror, zombie horror, folk horror, etc. Horrific movie viewing is an "empty calories" way to let off steam [2]. People's nerves might tighten up in response to it, then unwind again [3]. There are other filmmakers whose work implicitly evokes emotion by expressing societal concerns through film.

Researchers find that horror movies work in a neurobiological and psychological system that can arouse people's fear response [4]. The themes in horror movies are powerful because they are realistic problems that people can meet in their life. In this paper, the author will focus more on the cinematography and the deep political meanings behind horror films, rather than just fear and scary.

The new film by Jordan Peele, *Us* (2019) is excellent and speaks to current political difficulties in the United States. The movie tells the story of a little black girl who went to the playground with her parents on her birthday and was attracted by a fantasy house on the beach. After entering, she found a world full of mirrors. ". The story flashes back to the present. The little girl grows up and has her

own family. Due to the lost incident, she is very nervous about her two children (the eldest daughter and the youngest son), for fear that the two children will run away if she is not careful. The family returned to the beach when they were children for vacation, and strange things began. First, when the youngest son came out of the toilet, he saw a man in red clothes with blood dripping from his hands and standing alone on the beach with his arms outstretched on the deserted beach. Then, after the hostess told her husband about the experience of meeting another "me" in a beach hut as a child, four men in red appeared outside the house. Four people invaded the room, and it turned out to be four "shadows" who looked the same as a family of four.

Using ingenious set dressing, low-key lighting, and a variety of camera angles (long shot, close-up, zoom out), as well as a variety of sound effects, it conveys a "us versus them" mindset. Since this thesis will be employing a literary analysis approach to decipher the hidden meanings in horror films, this particular film was chosen as an illustration.

In the film *Us*, "us vs. them" mentality is presented. Jordan Peele employs visual design like red clothes and gold scissors. Also, it uses low key lighting, diverse colors and a lot of props. Rabbit is a significant symbol in this film. Based on the knowledge we know, rabbits can be adorable, at the same time, they can be potentially vicious. In the film, there are three kinds of rabbits in the cage: white, black and brown. It represents the three races. All of them are the same, which are blocked in one cage. Moreover, sound editing gives the movie more horror feeling. To sum up, *Us* is a meaningful work in horror films. It not only has gorgeous cinematography, but also political problems and inequality in the United States. *Us* is a fable, a story about duality. It has the duality of its own construction. *Us* is both the literal translation of "we" and the United States. Like when the shadow comes up and is asked who you are, she said, we are Americans too. They are a group of clones that have been replaced by government experiments. Like many of the caged bunnies in the movie, they were born in a prison-like underground world. Because they are not regarded as beings with souls, they can only miserably eat raw rabbits with blood, imitating their hosts like wandering spirits. But this imitation is just a frown, they're expressionless and sluggish, like a bunch of beasts that haven't fully evolved. They can only whimper, can't speak, can't communicate.

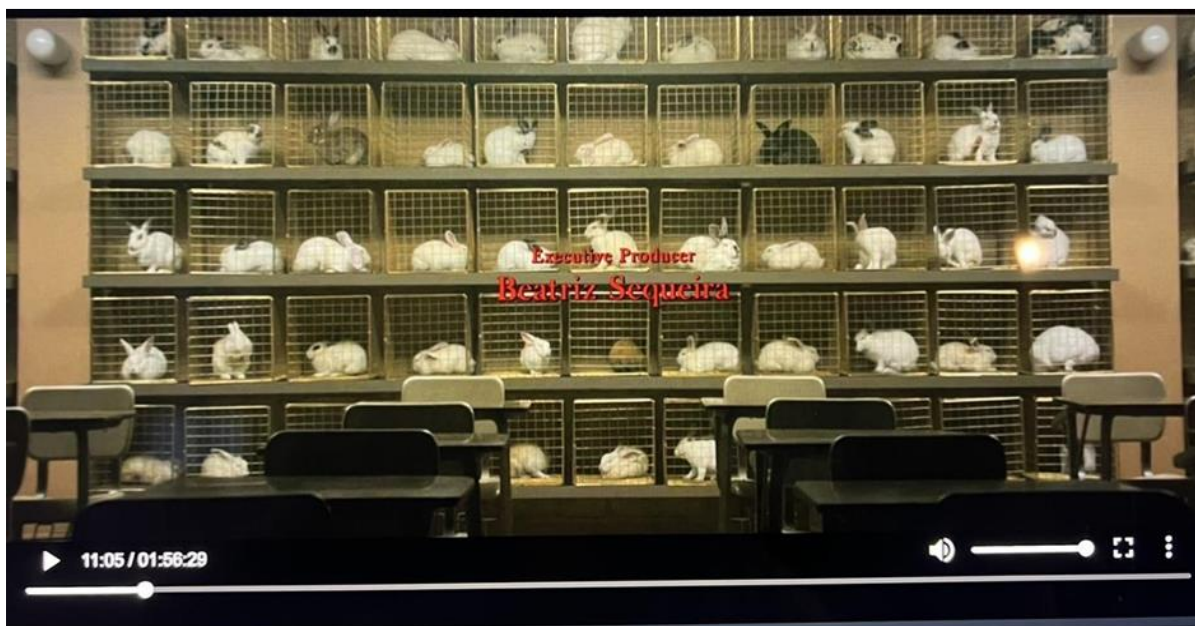


Figure 1: Rabbits (From *Us*)

This is a screenshot at the beginning of *Us*. It is a zoom out shot and there are white, brown and black rabbits. It shows the different races in the society. Also, it reveals the truth that we are all in the “cage”. Their ears are corresponding with scissors.

The paper, through a method of literature analysis, explores some deep meanings behind nowadays horror movies and how they achieve these by using cinematography, color elements and metaphors, especially in *Us* (2019). In the film *Us*, “us vs. them” mentality is presented. Duality is also a significant idea in the film. Jordan Peele employs visual design like red clothes and gold scissors and uses low key lighting, diverse colors and a lot of props. The paper also emphasizes the political issues that are revealed in the film.

2. Introduction of *Us*

The film *Us* presents a "us against them" worldview. There is a lot of "us vs them" thinking in the world. It was a label that divides society into categories. We evolved as social beings in close-knit couples and families. This kind of thinking, however, became an increasing problem in American society as time went on [5]. Jordan Peele conveyed the concept in a horrifying fashion to highlight the seriousness of the problem he felt needed to be addressed. Harrowing films have a larger and more loyal fan base. Because "them" (non-white people) are separated from "us" (white people) by laws, institutions, and structures that penalize, exclude, or disadvantage people of color, "Systemic racism can thus be seen as a cause of an ‘us versus them’ mentality because it segregates and distinguishes ‘them’ (non-white people) from ‘us’ (white people) through policies, systems and structures that punish, exclude, or disadvantage people of color” [6]. This theme is commonly used in America. This movie centers on Adelaide's (Addy) black family [7]. Their family is shown in the film with the White Taylers. Similar to the Addys, "the Tethered" displayed familial unity as they came at the door by holding hands. The movie classifies them as either the Tethered or terrestrial people. Much to the TV show's frame in the film, "the many Tethered have joined hands together in a mirror of Hands Across America" later on [8]. Hands Across America is a charity event held in the United States in 1986. The event called on 6.5 million people to hold hands across the United States, and the entire holding event lasted 15 minutes [9]. Pay attention to the time point here, 1986 is the year when the heroine's real body and shadow replaced their identities, and the heroine disappeared for exactly 15 minutes. It turns out that the director deliberately designed such a coincidence. There is a scene in the movie where the heroine is attracted to an ad for Hands Across America as a child. She also took inspiration from the Hands Across America on her T-shirt after she was shadow-controlled and turned underground. The Hands Across America event has many attributes. In essence, it has brought a lot of hope to people and the entire era, and it is bright; but it was held at a critical juncture during the Cold War. The duality of this itself once again footnotes the profound meaning of the movie's name *Us*. The video also reveals the systemic racism that black people face in the West. Fearful, the father contacts the police, who tell him to wait for a very long time. Addy is concerned and unhappy with the authorities' response. There is also a need for them to take precautions. Prejudice towards black people is on full display in this scene. American culture encourages this.



Figure 2: Hands Across America (From Us)

Officials often disregarded and mistreated black citizens. Because of this, the film's already strong "us versus them" theme becomes much more pronounced.

This is the frame on the television of the beginning in *Us*. It conveys the unity of the Tethered, Tayler's and Addy's family. It has an echoing end to end.

The film as a whole conveys a sense of inequity, which is mirrored in this sequence. The American dream is built on these ideals: liberty, rights, equality, democracy, and opportunity. Jordan Peele employs a metaphor in his film *Us*. According to *Tethered*, they are allegedly manufactured by the government. They were compelled to live underground and were unable to choose their own way of life. When situations like this arise, we as a culture in the United States always turn a blind eye. The gap between the Tethered and the rest of us reflects the socioeconomic stratification of the United States as a whole. It exemplifies a "us versus them" mentality, which is diametrically opposed to the American Dream. Those in chains are denied their liberty and forced to live in the dark, whereas those on Earth live full and happy lives. The plot in the United States was finally reversed. The shadow, not the human girl, was the one who returned to the earth world. On the ground, she married and had children, and the "impostor" who broke into the room was the lost child. "We are also Americans" implies that people in the underworld are essentially the same as people on Earth. They can also "speak," integrate into Earth's society, and have a "successful and happy" family if a suitable environment is provided. This is a representation of American social class. The gap between the rich and the poor creates a class divide. The poor in general have lost their voices and are unable to obtain the rights they require to protect themselves. They may not be able to obtain a college degree due to their poverty and low socioeconomic status (the black male protagonist who keeps appearing is wearing a t-shirt from Howard University), and they have no fluent expression, just like those from the underworld. The mastery of language is the key difference between the above-ground and the underground in the film. There is no doubt that the people of the world can communicate effectively in English. They use language to communicate and express their emotions, just like us in a modern civilized society. The underground people have no language and communicate with each other through movement and howling, which is savage and primitive. The male protagonist Gabe's shadow Abraham, for example, expresses his emotions through animal roars, and the little boy Jason's shadow Pluto is good at crawling quickly. The language provides an important clue to the truth that "the shadow of the resistance organization's leader is Adelaide's real body, and the so-called mistress Adelaide is actually a shadow." The whining people who rushed up were regarded as "savages" and

were mocked for their lack of "fluent" language ability, and the United States, in such a highly developed business society, the over-emphasis on social skills, verbal expression, and the capital prosperity established by marketing all show that the opposition between the above-ground and underground worlds.

Duality is also understood via the lens of a "us against them" worldview. Humans on Earth and those who are bound share the same physical form but distinct spirits. They are poor, they are different, and that only adds fuel to the fire of the "us vs them" attitude. In the film, Peele employs a metaphor to show this contrast. Double Eleven in the film was represented by eleven lines of rabbits, which the author noticed for the first time in the title. White, brown, and black Rabbits are among the cutest creatures there are. They can be helpful, but there is a danger that they could be used maliciously as well. A rabbit hole may be found in Alice in Wonderland. When Adelaide first enters the funhouse, she finds herself in a surreal, rabbit-hole-like setting. Peele draws parallels between rabbits and human personalities. Like the twofold nature of the rabbit, the Binder consists of two distinct human personalities. Peele also made use of cinematography in the sequence with the rabbit to increase its impact on the viewer. Using a telescopic lens and a long shot, Peele was able to zoom out from a close-up of a single rabbit to a wide view of a group of rabbits, creating a striking visual impact. The "disturbing soundtrack" and the long shot provide a sense of mystery to the picture. For its part, this kind of photography immediately drew viewers into the picture, piqued their interest in the rabbit, and set the tone of anticipatory anticipation that would last throughout. Then, it forces the viewers to ponder something profound.

3. Technique of Expression in Us

3.1. Physical Violence and Psychological Terror

Beautiful sets, costumes, and lighting were all added by Jordan Peele to drive home the film's "us vs them" message. Both physical violence and psychological terror are staples of the horror genre [9]. Us, like many other horror movies, has a grim atmosphere that builds to a terrifying psychological climax. Dark places tend to bring out the worst in people, making them more susceptible to anxiety and panic. The scary mood is heightened by the use of low key lighting. The haunted home sequence in the opening of the film makes extensive use of mirrors. The horrifying mirrors symbolize the film's central concept, which is that the limits represent the duality of the family, their second, darker or more deadly sides [10]. Since this is the case, the mirror serves as a perfect symbol to convey the film's message.

3.2. Visual and Sound Effect

Technically, the funhouse scene is so intense because Peele employed handheld photography and continuous editing. Clip was shot with a handheld camera at 7:40. This method of filming may make the setting and the building seem more genuine and authentic to the viewer. Simultaneously, it conveys the little girl's anxiety.

When it comes to the audio, the scenes in the haunted home are eerily quiet. An overwhelming feeling of sadness has overtaken me. The whistle serves as both a mystery and a possible clue. The sudden shift from silence to a whistle sparked both alarm and interest among the spectators. Sounds continued to emanate from the house even after the girl had ceased whistling. Then, the worst fears of the viewers are realized. It is indeed impressive how well Peel has planned the film's events to lure the viewer in. After the alarm went off, Peele employed editing methods to make things even more tense. The girl saw the chained girl when she stood in front of the mirror. Peele places them on the left screen before cutting to a close-up of the girl's face who is holding the scorecard. The girl's eyes

opened extraordinarily, revealing her deepest feelings of terror and peril. The combination of the eerie soundtrack and the up-close camerawork is enough to send chills down your spine.

3.3. Color Elements

Gold scissors and crimson apparel were also prominent in Peele's *Us*. As a symbol of menace and bloodshed, red is often featured prominently in horror films. Red elements are everywhere in the movie *Us*. When Adelaide was lost with her parents as a child, she was holding red candies. The T-shirt she was wearing had "Thriller" written in red. The last escape sign "Exit" she saw before entering the mysterious tunnel was also red. The most direct connection is that the official team uniform of the underground shadow organization (Tethered) with resistance attributes is uniform red. The red color represents Aledley's life memory before his shadow replaced his identity, the real memory. When Adelaide was forced to become an underground man, she embarked on a long plan of revenge. Dressing the entire organization in red is a call to primal memory and a desire to regain control of life on earth. The red color suggests the heroine's psychology of retaining and resisting the memory before the age of 14. The red color of Tethered clothes adds an air of mystery and foreboding to the film as a whole. Red in the United States is also a symbol for blood. There is no mercy for the shackled, and their bloody rage stains the red linen. Peele also arms The Tethered with a pair of golden scissors. For their aesthetic value, they were chosen. The term "pairs" can also be used to refer to scissors. It fits well with the film's ideas of duality and "us" vs "them." In addition, double eleven, mirrors, and the architecture of the film all have a connection to the symbolism of scissors. A lot of the film's themes are repeated, creating a sense of balance. Both the amusement park and Adelaide's house play significant roles in the story's opening and closing scenes. Finally, the rabbit-ear shape of scissors is not accidental. As Peele put it, "they got those scissor-like ears that creep me out" [11]. Therefore, it was quite original to use scissors throughout the entire film.



Figure 3: Golden Scissors (From *Us*)

This is a promotional picture of *Us*. The woman is the mother of the Tethers. She is holding a golden scissor in her hand, and there are many matchstick men on the blackboard, which echo "Hands Across America".

There are many visual similarities to the zombie film *Train to Busan*, which are not limited to the palette. There are a lot of escape sequences in *Us*. Just like there are several stories in which zombies

pursue the protagonist in *Train to Busan*, these stories are also common in the original [12]. The Tethered kills Addy at 1:21:00, and a zombie kills a woman in *Train to Busan*. Both pictures were taken from above, providing an aerial perspective. Using this method, Peele makes his characters helpless and vulnerable. This tactic is frequently employed in scary movies.

4. Discussion

Overall, *Us* has good technical aspects and elegant visual designs, and it also expresses social issues and realistic relationships between different races. The homeless man held a card with the words Jeremiah 11:11 written on it. As a result, the LORD says: "I will bring disaster upon them, from which they will be unable to escape. They will beg me to listen, but I will not." The film's irony is never broken, with middle-class black families using their last remaining water yachts and white friends' families complacently enjoying a sense of superiority in high-intelligence modern homes. The second white woman enthusiastically inquired about the black heroine's current situation, and the black heroine admitted, embarrassedly, that she has always been bad at speech and communication. The director's ambition in *Get Out* (2017) is not limited to the world of race. Feminism can also be seen in this film. Each family's leader, whether Tethered, White Taylor, or Addy's family. Their mothers guide them in making decisions. We all know Red is the real Adelaide. She was replaced by the Tethered very early in her life. Despite the fact that Red was created by the government, she manages to live among real people. Another concept is "Hands Across America." It appears that in our society, if you are born with priorities, you have an advantage over others. This is a serious issue. Aside from these social issues, the film also employs some shooting styles that are common in horror films. Handheld is a common shooting technique in horror films. For example, when the protagonist is captured by zombies in *Train to Busan*, there are numerous handheld shots. Handheld shooting is popular in other horror films, such as *A Quiet Place*. Editing is also important in *Us* and other horror films to draw audiences into the story. In general, horror films use fast-paced editing to convey a frightening atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

Us is a story about society, economic class, and America's inescapable systematic power and racial issues. Scissors, rabbits, low-key lighting, and a variety of camera angles all contribute to *Us*' portrayal of a "us vs. them" mentality. The color red is used effectively in the film to convey the ideas. Another important way Jordan Peele expresses the differences between Tethered Adelaide's family and true Adelaide's family is through language. Furthermore, Jordan Peele discusses the societal issue of inequality in the United States. At the end, polarity is also revealed. Red represents the real Adelaide, demonstrating how we must constantly confront our demons, our shadows. The story's unexpected climax offers a new perspective on the American Dream. The film follows the standard conventions of the horror genre while adding a stronger political undercurrent.

References

- [1] "How Horror Movies Have Changed since Their Beginning." *Film School And Acting School Of New York Film Academy*, 21 Oct. 2015, www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/how-horror-movies-have-changed-since-their-beginning/.
- [2] Short, Jase. "The Formless Monstrosity: Recent Trends in Horror." *Red Wedge*, 18 Feb. 2020, <http://www.redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/recent-trends-in-horror>.
- [3] "Horror Film." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., www.britannica.com/art/horror-film.
- [4] Psyarxiv.com. 2020. <https://psyarxiv.com/b8tgs/>.
- [5] *Officialhornetnewspaper*. "Us vs. Them: Unpacking Racial Biases in Film." *THE HORNET NEWSPAPER*, 30 Mar. 2021, <https://thehornetonline.com/2021/03/30/us-vs-them-unpacking-racial-biases-in-film/>.

- [6] Welten, Amy. "'They Are US.' a Research of the Visual Portrayal of Criticism of Fear for the 'Other' and 'Us versus Them' Mentality in the Film *Us* (2019)." *DSpace Home*, 4 July. 2019, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/383875>.
- [7] Dash, Danielle. "How Jordan Peele's *Us* CENTRES Black Women in Horror." *Stylist, The Stylist Group*, 22 Mar. 2019, www.stylist.co.uk/life/lupita-nyongo-us-film-black-women-in-horror-jordan-peelee/257871.
- [8] VanDerWerff, Emily. "Jordan Peele's *US* - and Its Ending - Explained. Sort of." *Vox, Vox*, 22 Mar. 2019, www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/22/18275141/us-spoilers-twist-ending-explained-jordan-peelee-lupita-nyongo.
- [9] pasiuk, Author. "The Evolution of Horror Films: A Look a Horror Movies from the 19th to 21st Century." *Media Services News*, 28 Oct. 2020, <https://blogs.library.american.edu/mediaservices/2020/10/30/the-evolution-of-horror-films-a-look-a-horror-movies-from-the-19th-to-21st-century/>.
- [10] Ewing, Jeff. "Exploring 'the Tethered' Of JORDAN PEELE'S New Film 'Us'." *Forbes, Forbes Magazine*, 18 Mar. 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/jeffewing/2019/03/18/exploring-the-tethered/?sh=669173392e1b#500434962e1b,2019-3-18.
- [11] Miller, Matt. "In 'Us,' the Real Meaning of the Rabbits Is Much More than Food." *Esquire, Esquire*, 21 Aug. 2020, www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a26944087/jordan-peelee-us-rabbit-meaning-explained-theory/.
- [12] Park, Michelle. *The Aesthetics and Psychology Behind Horror Films*. 2018, https://digitalcommons.liu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=post_honors_theses.
- [13] Coates, Tyler. "Why Hands across America Is so Vital to Jordan Peele's 'US'." *Esquire, Esquire*, 2 Nov. 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a26883876/hands-across-america-us-movie-explained/>.