**_Us_, dir. by Jordan Peele**
(Universal Pictures, Monkeypaw Productions, and Perfect World Pictures, 2019)

When young Adelaide Wilson gets lost in a hall of mirrors at Santa Cruz Boardwalk in 1986, she soon encounters a frightening reflection of herself. This reflection, however, is not trapped behind glass, but is in fact another version of her – a doppelgänger. This chilling meeting sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in horror many years later, when the adult Adelaide reluctantly returns to Santa Cruz for a family holiday with her own children. Once again, she soon finds that her family, her safety, and her very identity are put at risk when masked strangers invade the Wilson family's modest holiday home, seeking to take more than just their possessions.

*Us* is Jordan Peele's second horror film. *Get Out* (2017) established Peele as an innovative and intelligent writer-director, skilled in the horror genre, with a flair for dynamic storytelling that is every bit as political as it is horrifying. *Us* strikes the same pitch-perfect notes as its predecessor. Despite the emotional power and urgency of his themes, Peele wisely avoids the easy choice of lecturing the audience. Like Costa-Gavras' *Capital* (2012), or Amos Gitai's *Kadosh* (1999), here, Peele uses the unfolding story to draw the audience in, enabling a strong emotional investment in a tale that has subtle, yet resonant, socio-ethical political dimensions. With *Us*, Peele once again focuses his directorial eye on the mores of modern America and presents an original nightmarish vision.

The cast uniformly deliver compelling performances, made doubly effective by their portrayal of twinned roles as 'The Tethered', a mysterious group of aggressive subterranean doppelgängers. These living simulacra, at times resembling figural dolls used in ritual magic, are cast aside to dwell in forgotten tunnels under Middle America. Lupita Nyong'o is outstanding as the adult Adelaide; Wilson Duke effortlessly portrays the amiable strength but social awkwardness of Gabe, Adelaide's husband; Shahadi Wright Joseph and Evan Alex meanwhile bring authenticity to the subtle differences and similarities between Adelaide's children and their 'Tethered' counterparts. Elisabeth Moss and Tim Heidecker ably round out the cast as the competitively materialistic Tyler family – as well as the Tylers' very own set of shadowy doubles. Peele's attention to detail is quickly revealed in his skill and sensitivity to the complex histories of race, slavery, and privilege that are explored in *Us*, as exemplified by his deploying character names with significant metonymic origins, such as Adelaide, meaning 'high-born', implying a contrast and hierarchical relationship with her doppelgänger, who is (be)low.

Peele guides the narrative with subtle yet unsettling motifs. One of the most prominent of these is symmetry, which is, of course, reflective of the horror of the doppelgänger. This symmetry works in multiple directions: Adelaide's family are reflected by both the abnormal 'Tethered' and the 'normal' Tylers, who further embody uncanny doubling in their own twin daughters. Additionally, actors sometimes mirror each other's movements, and the number eleven – symmetrical in appearance – recurs repeatedly. These unsettling symmetries and impending sense of dread propel the characters, to the point where reflections violently threaten individual identity. These motifs contrast with the convincing, naturalistic acting, conveying an ordinary-looking world where all is not as it should be. A social unease permeates the film and symmetry, reflections, alignments, and balances are all used visually and narratively to erode the individuality of the characters and places, implying a decay deep beneath any surface gloss. As tension builds, the characters are pushed off kilter, such as when Gabe makes a well-intended but uncharacteristic joke that implies latent domestic violence.

The cinematography of Mike Gioulakis beautifully frames a very familiar suburban world that is just slight askew, and the use of light is especially effective in what it reveals and conceals, visually implying the ambiguity that is increasingly evident in all the characters throughout the film. Peele eschews any reductionist 'us-and-them' treatment, instead providing a scenario where all the characters and counterparts share equally in sympathetic and repellent characteristics, as well as a susceptibility to and capacity for violence. Peele seems to suggest that the divisions between protagonist and antagonist might be as simple as chance accidents of birth or opportunity. The fact that 'The Tethered' seem to have as little a choice in attacking the Wilsons as the Wilsons do in defending themselves suggests that it is larger socio-economic circumstances that make them adversaries, an ethical viewpoint that may have consequences for us all.

The staging is modest but highly effective, relying mainly on story and performance to create impact and menace. Kym Barrett's costume design cleverly visualises the discourses at work in the narrative.[1] The Wilsons' costumes have a contemporary cut in softer fabrics, while the doppelgängers' crimson utilitarian coveralls give them a rugged proletarian uniformity, their rough sandals suggesting cultural and economic poverty. There are also visual references to stage-magician costumes, such as in Gabe's tuxedo t-shirt, suggesting the use of mirrors and misdirection to create illusion, while v-shapes are a common motif

[1] Fawnia Soo Hoo, 'All of the Costume Clues to Spot in Jordan Peele's Terrifying Film *Us*', *fashionista.com*, 21 March 2019 < https://fashionista.com/2019/03/jordan-peele-us-movie-costumes> [accessed 29 March 2019].

throughout the production design, creating suggestive visual connections between different characters and locales. The production design by Ruth DeJong (fresh from Mark Frost and David Lynch's 2017 *Twin Peaks*), along with the art direction by Cara Bower and set decoration by Florecia Martin, effectively use the space around the actors to provide details about the inner lives of the characters. For example, where the Wilsons' holiday home is bookish and filled with personal bric-a-brac suggesting learning and memory, the Tylers' more lavish holiday home visually conveys their more materialistic aspirations. Michael Abel's score is a mix of polyphonic children's voices, an adult choir, and percussion. By turns rhythmic and melodic, it is shot through with skeins of discord, and the repetitive voices and bell-like chimes of the sub-Saharan Mbira create an unsettling atmosphere, hinting perhaps at exploitative historical connections between Africa and America. Toward the film's climax, the music rises to a relentless, pounding pulse, as if Adelaide's journey has bared the wound in the fractious beating heart of American society. Peele's script is sharp and the dialogue sounds spontaneous, while Nicholas Monsour's editing carefully strikes a disturbing balance between the full-on menace of the home invasion at the centre of the plot, and the uneasy disarticulation of identity felt by Adelaide when lost in the paranoia-inducing underground home of 'The Tethered'.

Peele has spoken openly about the political and religious symbolism of the film.[2] Original and effective antagonists, 'The Tethered' materially embody a spectral underclass, created as a Frankensteinian experiment in social control. When these neglected individuals rise up, their resemblance to and connection with those who live in comparative privilege above embodies the uncanny. Peele here may be suggesting that the 'land of the free' must face the unspoken, buried spectres of its past – specifically genocide and slavery – or face the consequences. Obliquely referencing the role that Calvinism has played in the construction of American identity, when the 'Tethered' version of Adelaide rises from her underground home to lead a revolution, we glimpse a scruffy side-walk preacher. He stands clasping a board that references Jeremiah 11:11. This biblical verse promises that injustice will not go unpunished, and that retribution is coming. Further cementing the biblical parallels, when Adelaide defends her family, one of 'The Tethered' strikes a cruciform pose as they are consumed by fire. This striking moment evokes powerful yet contradictory visual references: the burning cross of the Ku Klux Klan and the Christ-like suffering of the victims of

[2] Charles Barfield, 'Jordan Peele Breaks Down Religious Themes of *Us* and Calls His Latest a "Dark Easter" Film', playlist.com, 29 March 2019 <https://theplaylist.net/jordan-peele-us-dark-easter-20190329/> [accessed 30 March 2019].

lynchings and burnings; endemic racism and personal sacrifice; ideas of persecution and faith, violence and defence. These complex, irreconcilable themes, all-but impossible to excavate in prose, are effectively suggested in imagery that speaks to America's racial crisis on multiple levels simultaneously.

Peele's narrative implies that American society, and perhaps all Western society, has evaded its responsibilities – that for every individual who enjoys privilege, another elsewhere has been penalised to enable this to happen: our inexpensive clothes come from sweatshops; sold to us by sales advisors on zero-hour contracts; our cheap food is farmed by underpaid growers at home and abroad; our luxury technology results in the accumulation of toxic-waste products. Peele, however, avoids the trite Hollywood cliché and presents his tale with a rounded three-dimensionality, recognising the complexities involved and the repercussions of such arguments, to point out society's own complicity, vested interests, ambivalence, and duality. Whilst 'The Tethered' are horrifying, it is clear that their violence stems from their origins – a governmental experiment in social eugenics. Their existence also suggests that privilege and exploitation are monstrously interconnected. Whilst race is the most distinct element of these problems, Peele makes it clear that to view these concerns purely in terms of colour would be reductionist, and would allow larger global questions to escape our attention. He is not prepared to let us off the hook. Peele looks at the modern technological world and implicates us all in these divisive acts of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental violence; the film suggests that, through our irresponsibility, we each create our own Tethered nemesis.

The depth and breadth of Peele's thought on the subject is typified by the film's deceptively simple title – *Us* – which implies identification with and responsibility for the others of society, while also being the national acronym for what he sees as the context of a particular set of problems. Harry Tucker observes that cultural explorations of 'the double' seem most prevalent when society experiences division or conflict, and that the doppelgänger figure commonly appears in literature written in periods of social unrest.[3] This can be seen in fiction ranging from the works of E. T. A. Hoffman to Philip K. Dick. It is surely no coincidence that Don Seigel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), perhaps the perfect film manifestation of such anxiety, appeared just as McCarthyism declined in the United States. Peele too, has used the horror genre to craft a gripping socio-political tale which offers audiences cinematic thrills, while challenging them to ask themselves, and their peers, some

[3] Harry Tucker, 'Introduction', in Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Survey*, ed. by Tucker (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), pp. xiii-xxii (p. xix).

disturbing ethical questions. *Us* is frightening to watch in the moment and even harder to forget, leaving a lingering unease long after the film is over.

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