

# Jordan Peele's horror film, *Us*: “Us” and them

Kevin Martinez  
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The opening shot of American director Jordan Peele's latest film *Us* tells the audience a good deal about what it can anticipate over the next two hours. An old television set broadcasts news of the “Hands Across America” event, a 1986 benefit campaign in which people held hands across the country to raise money to fight hunger and homelessness. The television is flanked by VHS copies of *The Goonies* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Hands Across America was a semi-officially sponsored stunt that did absolutely nothing to end hunger and homelessness, but the more than six million participants no doubt acted sincerely. Among other things, Peele (*Get Out*), one assumes, is making a cheap jibe, pouring cold water on the possibility of any sort of solidarity across racial and ethnic lines.

A low social and cultural threshold has been established at the start, so one can expect *Us* to be equal parts nostalgia—especially for the horror movies of the 1980s—and perhaps a superficially ironic take on the present day. The girl reflected on the television screen, a young Adelaide (Madison Curry), is then shown with her parents as they try to enjoy the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk amusement park on a dark California night.

Adelaide becomes separated from her parents in the carnivalesque atmosphere and finds herself in a house of mirrors, where she is confronted by what appears to be her double. What follows is unclear, but the girl leaves the encounter unable to speak.

Years later, an older Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o), now the mother of two kids of her own, Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Jason (Evan Alex), is vacationing with her husband, Gabe Wilson (Winston Duke). Their summer home is near a lake and not far from the beach where Adelaide had her traumatic experience as a child.

The family takes a brief sojourn to that beach, where

they meet their friends, the Tyler family (played by Tim Heidecker and Elizabeth Moss, and twins Cali and Noelle Sheldon). On an otherwise uneventful day, Jason sees a man in a red jumpsuit with a pair of scissors and blood dripping down his hands. He neglects to tell anyone about that.

Later that night, as Adelaide's family prepares for bed, the power goes out in their house. On the porch, a “family” of four, all in red jumpsuits and holding hands, stands silently. They appear to be the original family members' exact doubles.

The doppelgängers forcibly enter the home and take Adelaide and her family hostage, initiating a full night of torture and terror. The Tyler family, it turns out, also has a family of doubles stalking them, as presumably does everyone else in America.

The title of the film leads one to imagine that it refers to the U.S., or the United States, and that Peele is offering a commentary on our current social reality. But what commentary precisely?

The doppelgängers, a sort of mute, mole people, have also been interpreted as stand-ins for the lower classes in American society. We have been told Peele is making an insightful commentary on “class-ism” and so on.

Such praise is seriously misguided and betrayed by the actual film itself, a collection of half-baked ideas that never make it past the drawing board. *Us* revels in sadistic violence, while at the same trying to inject humor that seems forced and out of place.

The more one actually thinks about the plot of *Us*, the more questions are raised about the weak script and its unsubtle execution. The “twist” at the end can be seen coming from a mile away and we are left with a “horror” film that is oddly dull and conventional.

The element of “social commentary” emerges, for

example, when the family turns on the television news to find out that the doppelgängers, or the “Tethered” as they call themselves, are attacking the rest of the world and beginning to link hands in a disturbing, but never explained, echo of the aforementioned Hands Across America.

How America, the most heavily armed population on Earth, is unable to resist a group of incoherent maniacs wielding only scissors, is never explained. Later on in the film, we learn that the Tethered were part of a government plot. To what end exactly?

Perhaps Peele and his supporters would remind us this is just a “horror” film, “It’s just meant to be campy fun,” and, anyway, “What did you expect?” Such views are nothing new, of course, but the problem is they are mobilized to defend a film that also aspires to be taken for serious social critique, which *Us* is not.

The filmmakers want to have it both ways. They have an empty product to sell, so they promote its threadbare political themes to impress the reviewers, who will in turn deceive the public about how said product is legitimate and even “critical” culture.

However, the mindless violence in *Us* undercuts this. We, or the more racist-minded members of the audience, are apparently meant to applaud (or accept) the slaughter of the white Tyler family and root for the black Wilson family. This all takes place accompanied by a soundtrack featuring the Beach Boys and N.W.A.. We have seen this sort of “humor” in the horror genre before, but here it is especially tedious and not very insightful.

The characters are never fleshed out, so why should we be bothered by their bloody fate?

Explaining the “serious” side of his film, Peele told an audience at the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival earlier this year, “We are in a time where we fear the other, whether it’s the mysterious invader who might kill us or take our jobs, or the faction that doesn’t live near us that votes differently than we did. Maybe the evil is us. Maybe the monster that we’re looking at has our face.” How helpful is this? Does Peele, already a multi-millionaire, really believe any of it?

The director told *Vanity Fair*, “Hands Across America was this idea of American optimism and hope, and Ronald Reagan-style-we-can-get-things-done-if-we-just-hold-hands. It’s a great gesture—but you can’t actually cure hunger and all that.” Peele takes it for

granted that *Vanity Fair*’s upper middle class readers will agree with this expression of impotence and pessimism, which for the most part they will.

Peele went on in the same interview to make ahistorical and lazy comments typical of today’s racists and identity politics enthusiasts: “We live in a country that is about every man is created equal, and [yet] it’s built on the backs of genocide. It’s built on bloody soil. In the very DNA of this country, there are great ideas, and there are the worst horrors that humans can create. Genocide, rape, slavery. So I feel like if I’m going to accept the privilege I have as a modern American with opportunity, I have to take on some of that guilt of the sins.”

Perhaps the kindest thing that can be said about Jordan Peele is that he at least knows something about filmmaking technique. But is technique really what is most lacking at present in Hollywood filmmaking? The actors do the best they can, especially Lupita Nyong’o. The soundtrack, the editing and so on are competently done. The problem is the direction and the lack of imagination and important ideas.

It is true that the horror genre has never been one prone to realism or good taste. However, in the best examples of the past, there was a connection to what scared audiences inside theatres and outside of them, and not just a superficial one at that.

Despite all the supernatural and irrational elements on display, there is always the sense in a good horror film that what is happening on screen can actually happen in real life, if not worse. This makes *Us*, with its real but unexplored and implausible themes of societal violence and government conspiracy, all the more poor and unserious.



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