

**A Postmodern Study of Jordan Peele's Psychological Horror
Films *Get Out* and *Us***

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) are two recent unconventional psychological horror films. These two films do not incorporate typical horror tropes like jump scares, ghosts, or mindless killings. These two are about human beings, specifically black people. Both films incorporate historical events, distort reality, and jump back and forth in time. These qualities of *Get Out* and *Us* resonate with the characteristics of postmodernism. This thesis aims to show that *Get Out* and *Us* are two postmodern horror films that are helping to keep the horror genre fresh and alive. This thesis also uses theories of postmodern critics like Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Barry Lewis.

Keywords: psychological horror, postmodernism, *Get Out*, *Us*, pastiche, parody, history, black people, America

Acknowledgement

Eternally grateful to the Almighty and my family. Without them, I am nothing.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

It is easy to define the word 'Horror.' In the simplest terms, it hints towards the feeling of fear and disgust, the ominous inkling of something terrible that may happen. By relying on this specific feeling, the horror genre has flourished immensely. From folktales to novels to films, this genre has established itself and garnered numerous attention from people worldwide. Within this genre, there are many sub-genres, making it more versatile and leaving something for its varying range of readers and audiences. Psychological horror is one among the numerous sub-genres that portray the human psyche as the most significant thing to be scared of. This genre is not new because the first ever movie of this genre can be dated back to the mid-1930s, with the release of *The Black Cat* (1934). Since then, it has proved to be a much-celebrated genre because such stories are not entirely bogus or unreal like those of bigfoots, monsters, or aliens. Some notable psychological horror films that garnered much attention from the audience are *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *American Psycho* (2000), and *Black Swan* (2010). Like any other horror film, these films also have different characters. However, a pattern is noticeable in such characters, that is, the dominant presence of white people. At least not until 2017, when a new director, Jordan Peele, released his first-ever film, *Get Out*. Two years later, he made another movie named *Us* (2019). Upon searching for the best psychological horror films ever made, along with other white-dominated films I mentioned above, both *Get Out* and *Us* appear as the only psychological horror films representing black people.

Numerous books and films reflect the tenets of postmodernism. However, not all of them have been researched thoroughly. Black psychological horrors are not as mainstream as the usual horror films, primarily because the directors of these films are not well-known, and

their promotions do not reach a vast audience. Nonetheless, these films are hidden gems incorporating black people's history, culture, and experiences. While the plotlines of the white-dominated psychological horrors are unique and address the conditions of the human psyche, the black-dominated psychological horrors like *Get Out* and *Us* have gone the extra mile and imbued history into their plot in an eccentric way. These two films have also showcased presence of pastiche, parody, and non-linear narrative. The problem today in research is that these two black psychological horror films have not been researched enough to show academia how different they are as opposed to other horror films and how, because of this quality, they can be studied through a postmodern lens. This paper rigorously investigates *Get Out* and *Us* and declares them postmodern based on pastiche, parody, allusion, temporal disorder, fragmentation, and simulacra.

1.2 Background

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, the catechism of the unknown. Horror, scary and gothic stories send a chilling sensation down the spine. But at the end of the story, there is a sense of 'catharsis,' a sense of relief, a sigh: alas! However, when one looks fear in the face, one can easily gain strength, courage, confidence and much more from every experience. (O'Brien ix)

When thinking about a topic for this thesis, I was sure what I would work on. My love for the horror genre dates back to my early childhood. It is not that I have a chilling story of encountering an apparition or organizing a seance with my friends; instead, it is horror stories written in Bangla by Bangladeshi or Indian writers that helped me grow a fondness for this genre. Believing in the words of O'Brien, I always thought that horror can generate both fear and relief. Because of this two-dimensional nature of horror, my fondness for this genre spread from written pages to virtual screens, and I started watching films heavily inspired by it.

Nonetheless, defining *horror* as a genre can be tricky, primarily because it has so many subgenres that it is quite impossible to pin it down to one definition. However, at its very core, horror is a genre that elicits feelings of unease. In other words, it hints at the feeling of fear and disgust. Anything can trigger horrifying feelings within human beings, and it differs from person to person. For example, something as small as a cockroach can be a reason for discomfort for a person. In contrast, for another person, it might be something like supernatural, natural disasters, death, war, displacement, or estrangement from family members. Whatever the triggers are, everyone can agree on the fact that there is something that everyone dreads, which at any time can evoke that feeling of horror in them. Within this horror genre, there are many subgenres, making it more versatile and leaving something for its varying range of readers and audiences.

Horror film enthusiasts can say that they can never get bored of this genre as it never sticks to a tasted formula. Every film has to offer something for its audience; for example, Movies of the 30s like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *King Kong*, *The Mummy*, etc., are about vampires and monsters who do not fit in society. Additionally, everyone has heard the name *Rosemary's Baby* (1968); this movie is about demonic possession, and so are *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976). The slasher movie subgenre does not typically include monsters or animals of any kind; instead, it shows human beings with a twisted psyche who kill innocent people without any legitimate reason. The horror films of the 1980s primarily comprise film franchises of the said genre, for example, *Child's Play*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*, and many more. Witchcraft is another essential element that makes up a volume of horror films, notably *Suspiria* (1977), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *The Witch* (2015), etc. Surprisingly, horror films can be comedic, too. Films like *Scream* (1990s), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), *Tusk* (2014), etc. blend comedic situations with life-threatening horror scenarios. There is also a gore/splatter

subgenre that depends on violence and the dismemberment of living beings, splatting blood. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise of the 1970s, *the Evil Dead* franchise of the 1980s, and the most recent franchise, *Terrifier* (2016), are all members of this genre. These subgenres and films are the most popular among horror film enthusiasts. However, one subgenre has yet to be discussed. The ones I have already mentioned have monsters, supernatural elements, or human beings with eccentric behaviours. The one I will mention does not have anything supernatural about them. Nor do they have any mindless killing or vomit-inducing scenes. These films focus on the human mind, deep into their subconscious, where trauma and grief remain hidden. The psychological horror subgenre is a category that cannot be tagged as a recent addition to the horror film category because it has been thriving for many years now for its different ways of handling horror.

There are plenty of reasons why I prefer psychological horror films over other horror subgenres. First, it depends not on typical horror tropes like sudden jump scares or unrealistic ghosts and witches. This category entirely depends on the film's mood, which is often apprehensive, melancholic, and ominous. Through this category, the makers try to address issues that have traumatizing effects on human beings. The loss of loved ones, death, estrangement, religion, race are the typical themes of such movies. As these themes are closely connected to human beings and have close connections with reality, I enjoy these films more than the ones with ghosts and killers. Some say that the first ever psychological horror film was made in the year 1934, named *The Black Cat*, directed by Edgar G. Ulmer. At the same time, some give this credit to Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 release *Psycho*. Whichever one is the first, these films hold a special place in the audience's heart, proven by the number of successful horror films that belong to this subgenre. Other than *The Black Cat* and *Psycho*, films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) by Robert Wiene, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) by Roman Polanski, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) by Jonathan Demme, *American Psycho* (2000) by

Mary Harron, and *Black Swan* (2010) Darren Aronofsky are some of the most influential and notable psychological horror movies ever made. Aside from these, in 2017, a breakthrough came in this genre of horror films, credited to Jordan Peele, a black American male previously known as a comedian. Peele released a film named *Get Out*, which, despite being a psychological horror, was different than the psychological horrors made before. He did not stop there because, in 2019, he came up with another film, *Us*, which belongs to the same category. Both of these films cast black people as the main characters. After his films, it was as if the black community got the courage and inspiration to create movies about black people and their psychological traumas. In 2022, Nikyatu Jusu released *Nanny*, and recently, in 2023, Laura Moss made *Birth/Rebirth*. These films also had black people as leads. As a horror enthusiast, I find these films to be like a breath of fresh air, primarily because of the choice of the cast members. The other notable psychological horrors which I have mentioned have only white people as actors and actresses. This trend changed with Peele's directorial debut, *Get Out*, and more and more black people started getting the recognition that they deserved to get. I found these black psychological horrors very intriguing, which is why I believe these are research-worthy. However, this thesis strictly focuses on the films of Jordan Peele, i.e., *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019).

1.3 About the Director Jordan Peele

A director has to be the most crucial person in a film because it is through his/her direction that films become phenomenal. Films can be called a director's brainchild, and directors always try to do justice to it. Jordan Peele can also be tagged as a successful director because his first two films garnered much attention from the audience. Jordan Haworth Peele was born in 1979 in New York City. He is known as a comedian and actor, then a filmmaker. His mother, Lucinda Williams, was white, and his father, Hayward Peele, was an African American. Although his black father was not in the picture and his white mother raised him, he has always been very much aware of the racial condition in the US and worked on this matter in his films. He is married to Chelsea Peretti, a white American actress.

Peele's journey started as a comedian. He started honing his comedic skills when he was in college. In college, he met Rebecca Drysdale, who would later become a collaborator in his comedic career. Peele joined the comedy show *Mad TV* cast in 2003, where he mostly did impersonations and sketch writing. Another successful venture of his was a sketch comedy series titled *Key & Peele*. This show earned him two Primetime Emmy Awards. Although he gained much popularity doing comedy shows both on TV and on YouTube, his aspirations were much higher than that. He wanted to make films, particularly horror films. Now, one may ponder, how can a comedian become a successful horror film director? When asked about the connection between comedy and horror in an interview, Peele answered, "The best comedy and horror feel like they take place in reality. You have a rule or two you are bending or heightening, but the world around it is real. I felt like everything I learned in comedy I could apply to movies" (Zinoman, "Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism").

With the confidence that he could use his comedic expertise in filmmaking, Peele made his directorial debut in 2017 with *Get Out*. He was the director, writer, and producer of this

film. This film was an immediate hit, both at the box office and in the critic's eyes. Seven days after the film's release, Andrew Anthony from The Guardian wrote, "The film took \$33m on its opening weekend in America, gained a highly unusual 100% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and is trailing widespread critical acclaim in its noisy wake" ("Jordan Peele on making a hit comedy-horror movie out of America's racial tensions"). Although it is unusual for a comedian to gain success in his very first movie, it was not difficult for Peele, for he was "something of a horror genre fanatic. Since he was a child, he has watched and studied horror films, working out exactly what makes them scary and why. At 13, he says, he wanted to become a horror film director" (Anthony, "Jordan Peele on making a hit comedy-horror movie out of America's racial tensions"). People who have known Peele as a comedian may think that becoming a horror movie director was a digression for him; instead, it was the other way around. He was highly acclaimed after *Get Out* and won an Academy Award, best known as the Oscar, for Best Original Screenplay for this movie.

After the success of *Get Out*, Peele came up with his second installment in 2019, titled *Us*. This time, too, Peele wrote and produced the film. His first movie had drawn the attention of the masses; thus, people were equally excited for his second release, and Peele did not disappoint. When asked by Alisa Chang of NPR about who this 'us' are, Peele replied,

"Us" is subjective. Everybody thinks of the term "us" in different ways. It can be "us" the family, "us" the town, "us" the country, "us" humanity. I think in the simplest form, the very nature of "us" means there is a "them." So that is what this movie is about to me, is that: whatever your "us" is, we turn "them" into the enemy, and maybe "we" are our own worst enemy. ("Jordan Peele Looked Into The Mirror And Saw The Evil Inside' Us")

Although Peele did not win an Oscar for *Us*, it definitely solidified his reputation as one of the best psychological horror movie directors of recent times. His horror films are not only horror films but also imbued with social commentaries, parody, and satire.

1.4 Overview of the Films

1. *Get Out* (2017)

Get Out is a film about Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), a black photographer, and his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams). Rose wants Chris to meet her family living in upstate New York, and Chris shows his indecisiveness, partly because he thinks being a black person might not be okay with the Armitages. As Rose assures him that her parents are not racists, Chris finally goes to the Armitage house. Upon arriving, he meets Rose's father, Dean Armitage (Bradley Whitford), a neurosurgeon; her mother, Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener), a psychiatrist and a hypnotherapist; and her younger brother, Jeremy Armitage (Caleb Landry Jones). The family welcomes Chris, and everyone shows a keen interest in him. Besides these four, they also have two black servants, Walter (Marcus Henderson) and Georgina (Betty Gabriel), whose behaviour seems strange to Chris. Chris is a smoker and wants to quit, to which Missy Armitage offers assistance through hypnosis. Although Chris is reluctant to go through this process, he gives in to Missy's request on his first night at the Armitage house and unknowingly lets her perform the hypnotism. While being hypnotized, Chris shares that her mother died in a hit and run case when he was a child. He bears a lifelong guilt of not helping his mother as he was busy watching television. In this process, Missy sends his consciousness to a dark place named The Sunken Place while his body remains in the room. Chris becomes paralyzed but realizes that it is too late to protest. He does not recall anything the following day but realizes his urge to smoke is completely gone. The Armitage throws an annual party in their house where the guests are mostly white, except for one guest called Andre Logan King

(LaKeith Stanfield), who comes to the party as the husband of a white lady much older than his age. All the white guests show strange interest in Chris's physique, making him uncomfortable. With this discomfort, Chris has this eerie feeling that he knows Logan from somewhere else. He tries to take a picture of Logan, but the mobile flash sends him into a frenzy, and he starts shouting, urging Chris to get out of the house. This incident scares Chris, and he starts believing something is wrong with the Armitage house. Through the help of his TSA officer friend Rod Williams (Lil Rel Howery), he learns they know Logan through mutual connections. Rod, who was sceptic of white people from the beginning, comes to know about Logan's abduction and Chris's hypnotism. As a result, he urges Chris to leave the Armitage house as soon as possible.

While packing his bag, Chris discovers Rose's pictures with numerous black men, including Walter and Georgina, all hint towards Rose's romantic relationship with all of them. Seeing these photos, Chris asks for his car keys from Rose and realizes that the rest of the Armitage has cornered him. To his horror, he also understands that Rose is a part of this plan as she refuses to give him his car keys. Chris and Jeremy get into a brawl, but before the first can take a stand, he gets hypnotized by Missy. When Chris wakes up, he realizes he has been tied to a sofa. While he tries to untie himself, a video starts playing in front of him. This video shows Roman Armitage (Richard Herd), Dean's father and Rose's grandfather, revealing they are part of a secretive cult named The Order of the Coagula. The members of this cult, who are mainly white people, intend to put their brains into the bodies of black people. In this way, they get to live anew, but with the apparent physical strength of the black people. In the case of the black victims, their consciousness and existence continue to live in The Sunken Place. After knowing this fact from Roman, Chris fights back and succeeds in killing Jeremy, Missy, and Dean. Amidst the chaos, Rose is seen surfing the net, searching for her next victim. Chris tries to escape the house in a car but is stopped by Georgina, whom Chris learns is Rose's grandmother.

Both of them meet in a car accident, and Georgina dies. Hearing the scuffle, Rose comes out and starts shooting Chris. Walter, in reality, Roman Armitage, also joins Rose, but when Chris flashes a light at Walter's eyes, he regains his consciousness and kills Rose instead of Chris and himself. Lastly, Rod comes to rescue Chris, and as they move away from the house, Rose succumbs to her death.

2. *Us* (2019)

Us starts in 1986 on Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, where we see a young girl on vacation with her parents. While wandering around, the girl splits from her parents and enters a funhouse full of mirrors. In one of the mirrors, she discovers a doppelganger of herself. This encounter scares her so much that she stops speaking and interacting with her family. The movie then cuts to the year 2019. Here, we see a family; the mother is Adelaide Wilson (Lupita Nyong'o), the father is Gabriel Wilson (Winston Duke), and their children are Zora Wilson (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Jason Wilson (Evan Alex). This family is also going on a vacation in Santa Cruz, although Adelaide looks reluctant about it. Through this, the audience realizes Adelaide is the same little girl from 1986. At the beach, they meet their friends, the Tylers. While talking, Adelaide notices that the funhouse is in the same place as before and gets ominous feelings about it. At night, when the family is about to sleep, Jason comes to his parents' room and informs them that a family is in their driveway. Gabriel tries to ward them off but fails. Eventually, the family breaks into their house, and in utter horror, the Wilson family discovers that the family is them. There are four members in the intruder family, and they look exactly like the members of the Wilson family. However, all of them wear red suits and have knives in their pockets. Besides that, they also look very dangerous; their faces do not have any softness or kindness. The family introduces themselves as Pluto, Jason's double; Umbrae, Zora's double; Abraham, Gabriel's double; and Red, Adelaide's double. Red is the only double who

can talk, and in her raspy, broken voice, she announces that they are called ‘the Tethered,’ and they have come to take what they believe is theirs. She further states that all of the members of the Wilson family and their tethered counterparts share the same soul but two bodies, so now they have come to ‘untether’ themselves. Red sends each of the counterparts to kill their original ones while she handicaps Adelaide. Jason discovers that Pluto imitates his actions and is fond of fire, just like he does. In the process, Gabriel kills Abraham and the rest of the three escape from their Tethers. The family then goes to the Tyler house for shelter, only to discover that the Tyler family has also been killed by their Tethers. An encounter happens between the Wilsons and the Tyler Tethers, and the Wilsons win.

They learn from the TV news that this is happening in the entire country. People are being chased and killed by their tethered counterparts. Adelaide finally decides to escape the country and move to Mexico. While they try to do so, they are attacked by Red and Umbrae. Zora eventually kills Umbrae, and in the morning, Jason succeeds in killing Pluto. However, Jason’s act does not go unpunished as he gets kidnapped by Red. Adelaide reaches the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk to free her son from Red and enters the same funhouse she did as a child. This time, she discovers a hidden facility filled with rabbits and abandoned rooms. In one of the rooms, she sees Red, and both of them talk. Red informs that they were created, presumably by the Government, as a part of an experiment. Every human being outside of the facility has a tethered counterpart inside of the facility. All of these Tethers used to imitate what their original counterpart was doing above but in a rough, dull, and sad manner. They were happy with what they were doing until one day when they saw young Red dancing in the halls. They realized Red was different than them and started regarding Red as a superior being. Red could dance and talk, while the rest of the Tethers could not. Red is the one who first thought of taking over the human world and inspired other Tethers. It took a long time for them to prepare for the fight. After the talk, Adelaide and Red fight, and towards the end, the first succeeds in

killing the second by strangling. Adelaide then finds her son, and all four start heading for Mexico. Nonetheless, the twist of the movie is shown in the last scene. The audience realizes that in 1986, Adelaide's doppelganger strangles her to unconsciousness and takes her to the facility. The doppelganger (Red) escapes the facility and starts living as Adelaide. This is why the false Adelaide did not speak as mentioned before, and the Real Adelaide (later Red) could speak in the Tethered world. Thus, the Adelaide the audience was rooting for from the film's beginning was the villain. Furthermore, the Red that Adelaide killed was the human Adelaide. The film ends with Adelaide (in reality, a Tether) driving towards Mexico with her family.

1.5 Literature Review

It is said that postmodernism, a philosophical movement that started around the 1960s in Europe, cannot be pinned down to a specific definition. However, Lyotard has defined this by calling it an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv), meaning postmodernism does not hold its belief towards the existing body of knowledge and history which were deemed to be the solution of every problem in the world. He also believes that despite a reaction against modernism, postmodernism is inseparable from the modern (79). This philosophy has not only touched architecture, but it has also flourished in literature, music, fashion, and film. In Lyotard's own words –

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. (81)

From this, it is understandable that the works of postmodernism do not abide by the rules of works published before postmodernism. Jameson thinks the postmodern is "an attempt to

think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (4). According to him, the world of postmodernism starts when the modernization process is complete and gone. It is also a world that is “more fully human than the older one” (4). However, Ihab Hassan holds a bit of a different view of this phenomenon as he thinks,

Modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern and Postmodern, at once. And an author may, in his or her own lifetime, easily write both a modernist and postmodernist work. (3)

In addition, Hassan also provided some characteristics of postmodern works. He said that if the form is modern, antiform is postmodern. In the same way, if totalization, boundary, selection, signified, narrative, and determinacy are modern, then deconstruction, intertext, combination, signifier, anti-narrative, and indeterminacy are postmodern (6).

In 1984, Edward Lowry wrote about the genre and enunciation of horror movies. Point to note: Hassan has tagged genre as a tenet of modernism and text as postmodern. Nonetheless, Lowry tagged the horror genre as inclusive but at the same time diverse (13). The reason for him to say this might be because horror movies can be set in any timeframe and any place, and the plotline can range from “medieval castles to modern motels, from the cluttered labs of demented scientists to the fog-bound streets of 19th century London” (Lowry 13). Lowry’s research also concerns iconography (visual images) and the structure of the film’s conflict. He tries to show how these two methods, which are often used as tools for analyzing different movie genres, are problematic while defining the specificities of the horror category, primarily because of its diversity. In the paper, Lowry proposes that horror engages the audience in a very “specific type of discourse” (15). He brings the notion of spectacle and how it is essential in the horror genre because, according to him, it is a

spectacle that has the power to horrify the viewers. When it comes to spectacle, he states that in the horror genre, “this spectacle frequently involves confronting the spectator with images of violence, of decay, of mayhem, or simply of eeriness” (15). Lowry also mentions how horror films can also be used by people who gain sadistic pleasure only from the act of looking. This pleasure can be derived through the killer’s eyes because they provide a “scopophilic prelude to the violence which involves the voyeuristic intrusion on the victim, frequently eroticized by her/his nudity and/or overtly sexual activity” (Lowry 17). Lastly, regarding enunciation and how horror elements are provided to viewers, Lowry believes framing, camera movement, sound, and special effects play significant roles here (Lowry 18-19).

Noel Carrol’s article, published in 1987, deals with the nature of horror. By the nature of horror, we can understand that he refers to the characteristics of horror, which people discover and feel while watching a horror film. He starts his writing by stating how horror has become mainstream and welcomed by moviegoers after the succession of William Friedkin’s 1973 release *The Exorcist* (51). He believes that “the genres of suspense, mystery and horror derive their very names from the affects they are intended to promote – a sense of suspense, a sense of mystery, and a sense of horror” (52). Additionally, the monsters that horror films portray are tagged as abnormal, something that is out of order. Carrol also draws a comparison between the world of horror and fairy tales, as both of these genres have monsters in common. He states that in horror, “the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world, whereas in fairy tales and the like, the monster is an ordinary character in an extraordinary world” (52). Other than the monster, Carrol also sheds light on the audience. The reaction of the viewers will be different when watching horror films; as Carrol says -

Just before the monster is visualized to the audience, we often see the character shudder in disbelief, responding to this violation of nature. Their faces contort. They

freeze in a moment of recoil, transfixed, sometimes paralyzed. They start. Their hands are drawn towards their bodies in an act of protection and also of revulsion and disgust. Along with the fear of severe physical harm, there is an evident aversion to making physical contact with the monster. (53)

Carroll ends his essay by stating three more features of horror films. One is that the monsters or the zombies lack the physical strength and swiftness to attack their prey; however, “they are presented as unstoppable” (57). Secondly, the films have two types of plots: one is Discovery, and the other is Overreacher. In the first type of plot, the characters discover the mischief of the monsters later, while in the second, the characters create monsters who later cause havoc. Lastly, he mentions how the monsters often belong to outer space or waterbodies, meaning they do not belong to the earth where humans live (57).

There go the thoughts of writers before the 2000s. In 2011, Maria H. Loh penned her thoughts on early modern horrors, such as Dario Argento’s *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996) and Bryan Forbes’ *The Stepford Wives* (1975). She believes this type of film is about “the subjects’ internal confrontation and experience of the putrid corporeal reality of death and mortality” (327). Thus, as we have discussed before, early modern horrors do not deal with monsters or zombies; instead, they are about human beings and how they find their way out of the two realities of life. She further depicts that this sort of movie does not rely on fleeting moments of triumph or reason; instead, they portray “immediate shock of endogenous, time-bound experiences as well as the lingering affect triggered by the spectator’s immersive confrontation with the image” (326-327). Furthermore, Loh poses a question as to why people should discuss horror films. If horror films scare and bring out feelings of disgust, what is it about horror films that also attract people? To answer her question, she references Aristotle and his idea of catharsis: “Representations of horror steel us for the experience of horror in real life” (326). Most horror enthusiasts agree that horror and the notion of catharsis are closely related. Even

if we watch monsters or ghosts on screen, even if we get momentarily scared, deep inside us, we are relaxed that this is not happening to us. Also, she defines horror in a new way. She thinks that “horror is not necessarily about blood and gore, it is about confrontation” (327); it helps us to face our fears and anxieties and fight against them.

From our discussions, we can understand that horror films have specific characteristics that vary with the subgenre of films. Although the primary purpose of all these films is to scare people in one way or another, they do this job by sticking to their respective formulas. As my main concern is black psychological horror movies, it is essential to trace the starting point of black horror films. The movies mentioned here already, i.e., *The Exorcist* and *The Stepford Wives*, are essentially about white characters. In 2021, Clifford Thompson, in his article “The Past and the Iceberg Black Horror Films, Then and Now,” made a detailed discussion on black horror films. According to Thompson, there has been a surge in black horror films in recent times, and it is due to the “response to our times” (36). Before *Get Out*, a long line of black horror films paved the way for the directors in recent times. The first-ever black horror film was made in 1940, titled *Son of Ingagi*, directed by Richard C. Kahn. However, in the 1970s, a tradition of black horror films emerged with movies like *Blacula* and *Ganja & Hess* (Thompson 36).

According to Thompson, these black horrors had some standard features. He said, “They [black horrors] reflect and comment on the challenges facing blacks in America, both historically and during the times in which the films were made” (36). Points to be noted: *Blacula* is a film about a black Dracula, and *Ganja & Hess* is also about a vampire. These two were not psychological horror films, yet they dealt with themes like race and racism. However, there is a significant difference between the black horrors made then and now. Thompson says that -

A number of twenty-first-century films have taken on the fear of more devious forms of racism felt by the ostensibly liberated. In older black horror films blacks themselves were monsters – however unwittingly the characters may have found themselves in those roles. In more contemporary films they have emerged more often as the victims-turned-heroes of their own stories. (36)

It is noticeable that the difference lies within the perception of black people. Earlier, black people were the monsters, aka the villains. But now, the times have changed, and it is possible for black characters to be something other than malicious characters. However, it is this monstrous character, like in *Blacula*, that established a “blueprint” for many horror films in recent times (Thompson 36).

Secondly, Thompson discovered that black horror films have three qualities or, as he said, “commonalities” in them, which they maintained for quite a long time (36). The first one is that black people could not escape from history; the second one is that the villains/monsters could not be blamed for their wickedness; and the third one is that a group of characters die in the process (Thompson 36-37). Not only the commonalities, he also came up with why black people were shown as such in films. He gives an account of a study published by the National Academy of Sciences in 2016 that showed how white medical students viewed black people. They thought black people were simply different than other human beings, or as Thompson put it, “[black people] were sort of like regular people, but with something seriously off” (37). He further mentions that *Blacula* not only tapped into the matter of race, but it included blood-related epidemics as well, as black people were infected with AIDS crisis disproportionately (37). Along with it, he also questions how we should pin a horror movie as a black horror movie. Should the director or the actors be black? He did not answer this question, leaving it to the readers.

When talking about the present-time condition of black people, he mentioned a comment made by his friend, which said, “To be black in America is to devote both time and head space” (39). It is because they have faced injustices and aggression, no matter how big or small, in almost every step of life, and they have to think whether they should protest or not. Thompson’s views on this comment are an incredible one, as he said –

These little moments [of injustices], which are really not so little, can bring on moods that feel either like paranoid delusion or sudden clarity. And the devil is in the uncertainty. Are all those microaggressions isolated incidents? Or are they the barely visible tips of an iceberg, a vast, sophisticated, coordinated, terrifyingly successful, and hidden effort to keep us [black people] “in our place”? (39)

The injustices towards African Americans in the US can occur from a convenience store to simply on the roads while walking. Thus, black people have to constantly think about whether such injustices are coincident or intentional.

Moreover, the three commonalities that Thompson has mentioned before do not apply to *Get Out* because “characters who die do not come back as something else – they stay dead. The monsters are anything but blameless. And the past does not come back to bite us” (39). These three are evident from the movie’s plot; however, he adds more to such commonalities. In the earlier films, black people used to play the evil characters, but in *Get Out*, we see the opposite. Here, the black character is not harmful but rather a positive one. The white people, in contrast, play the roles of evils and monsters. In the film, these white evils “require black bodies to serve their purpose” (40). Besides that, *Get Out* also very meticulously evokes the matter of slavery, although very much different than conventional slavery because here slavery is done through scientific methods. Lastly, in *Get Out*, the black protagonist Chris does not die because he “uses the tools at hand to escape his captors, becoming heroes as well as victims,

which could be said to be true of everyone who survives being black in America” (Thompson 40).

When Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* was released in 2017, the research on horror films took a different turn, and people started writing about these films. One year after the release of the said film, Ryan Poll wrote about the aesthetics of Afro-pessimism shown in this film. Before delving deep into the topic of Afro-pessimism, he explains how white people and black people see horror. He opines that white people “do not see horror until it’s too late, which is another way of saying that for White people, the experience of horror is unexpected and contingent, not foundational to their identity and worldview” (69). It must be pretty underwhelming to discover that just because of skin colour, a group of people is being haunted for the whole of their lives, and this is what Poll focuses on in his study. He draws a comparison by stating that white people “fundamentally imagine the world without horror” (69). In contrast, African Americans are “keenly aware that the world is pervaded with horror and are constantly vigilant for signifiers as such” (69). Poll believes that his statements have been solidified by the portrayal of the African American character Chris in *Get Out*. According to him, “to be Black in America, *Get Out* suggests, is to be trapped within an unending narrative of racialized terror” (70), suggesting that even in the progressed world of today, African Americans cannot escape from the fact that they can be enslaved or terrorized due to their race. This is where Poll starts discussing the matter of Afro-pessimism, a political philosophy coined by Saidiya Hartman.

“Afro-pessimism insists that racialized slavery structures the contemporary” (71) – this is what Poll had to say about the said term. If we try to dissect this comment, it will mean, in recent times, horror films are being made because of the racialized slavery that Black people underwent in the past. He adds that “the world of White Masters and Black Slaves is the world we have inherited and the world we live in today” (70). Even though movies about American slavery had become very common by 2017, notably *Django*

Unchained (2012), *Lincoln* (2012), and *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Get Out* most certainly is the extraordinary one, as “it narrates how American slavery is not an institution confined to the past, nor one locatable in a particular region, but a national institution, practice and affect that continues to shape and structure the present” (Poll 72).

He also sheds light on how geography is connected to race and racism. He believes that many places have White zones in them where a Black person can be potentially harmed (74). So, is there any way through which a Black person may be unharmed? Poll answers,

If people of colour are to enter this White zone, they must enter as domestic helpers, maintenance workers, lawn-care workers – working-class subjects who perform services and deliver goods that allow this zone to thrive. Moreover, people of colour should enter during “working hours.” (74)

In many movies, this White zone is often called suburbia. Films of the second half of the twentieth century have represented this suburbia as a place dominated by the Whites (Poll 75). In 2017, people got to see something similar in *Get Out* because in this film, “the opening sequence does not trope suburbia as an unsafe space for everyone; rather, it reaffirms that suburbia is a safe space – unless you’re a person of colour” (Poll 75).

Moreover, Poll’s article deals with the protagonist of *Get Out*, Chris, whom he believes is a woke character in the era of ‘Post-Blackness.’ A woke person is someone aware of his surroundings. In the beginning, the audience learns that Chris is a photographer, and to Poll, this photography is what makes Chris a woke person. He thinks that Chris’s photographs “represent and celebrate Black life flourishing in Black spaces, photographs that intimately depict everyday Black life in urban America” (79). However, photography is not the only thing that makes him a woke character in the film. *Get Out* affirms Post-Blackness through its portrayal of an interracial couple, Chris and Rose. Poll says this couple at the narrative centre

“symbolizes the nation’s racial progress” (83). Nonetheless, as the movie progresses, the audience realizes that Chris is not much of a woke character. After all, despite his protest of not going to see his girlfriend’s family, he has to go because his protests are soft, meek, and unheard of (Poll 84).

Lastly, Poll brings up the topic of Afro-pessimism. As stated before, Afro-pessimism is basically when the notion of slavery is normalized in everyday life. Even though Chris is not seen being captured and in shackles, he eventually becomes a victim of a new form of slavery. In the film, the Armitage family transplants White minds into Black bodies, which seems to be a new way of immortality. Poll states that in this way, Dean Armitage promotes –

The ideology of scientific racism, the belief that Whites are naturally superior to non-Whites and that different races have different genetic strengths. According to this ideology, Whites have superior minds – a greater capacity for reasoning and rationality – and Blacks have superior bodies, an attribute that makes them closer to nonhuman animals. (87)

Poll thinks that the film's ending also emphasizes the film's Afro-pessimism. There is a theatrical ending in which we see that even after killing the White family, Chris escapes and faces no punishment. However, if there were alternative endings, which people assumed after watching the film, it would be Chris being imprisoned and enslaved in the Armitage plantation (92).

Besides *Get Out*, I have also found some research done on Peele’s second psychological horror film, *Us*. In “Interpreting Horror – Jordan Peele’s *Us*,” Erick Neher tags *Us* as “more ambitious and more elusive” (111) than *Get Out*. He also provides insights on how Peele’s film turns out to the audience. He says -

Peele's film is a political parable, a social satire, a deconstruction of the horror genre, an intertextual extravaganza, but it is, above all, an exploration of the divisions that structure and then fracture our lives, from the battle of intellect and instinct, to the struggle between nature and nurture, to the societal notion of double consciousness. (111)

From the overview of the film, we already know that *Us* incorporates themes of government, experiments, inequality, and race. For Neher, these themes seemed unconventional to horror movies, so he considered *Us* an ambitious film. He also narrates what horror films are about and why people show such keen interest in horror films. He believes horror films work because

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All horror, at some level, is about our darkest selves, about the capacity for violence, anarchy, even cannibalistic destruction, that exists in the most civilized among us. Horror is a mirror, a reminder that we are, in evolutionary terms, mere seconds away from, reptilian mayhem. *Us*, like so many horror films before it, import this havoc into the most quotidian of settings and asks us to question what it means in political, social and personal terms. (113)

This film is also different than Peele's debut work in another way. In *Get Out*, danger only befalls Chris and other black characters. However, in *Us*, it is not only the black characters, but the white characters also get killed by their Tether counterparts. Neher provides the readers with an interpretation of his own. He says, "The Tethered represent some manifestations of ourselves, " as the film's title indicates. We are all split personalities, all living in a dual state of what we are and what we might have been or might become, all divided between what we think in our heads and what we show to the world" (114). He ends his

research by saying that Peele's movie educates us about our inner demons, about how we know there is a self inside of us that will cause havoc, and we are aware of it.

Niela Orr wrote "The Women Who Knew Too Much" in 2019, where she brought the portrayal of black women in horror films. She did not limit her research to horror films; she discussed female portrayal in action, drama, and rom-coms. She says that black women are rarely seen in action or drama films, and "rom-coms too often present the high-powered black female executive whose role is to emasculate all comers, a more and more popular trope" (87). She exclusively focuses on the portrayal of black women in horror films because this film genre, according to Orr, is the only genre that "punishes black women credibly, or at least in a way that's true to our [black women's] lives" (87). One may think that there must be some solid reasons behind such punishment, but Orr says that these women are often punished and humiliated in cinema because of their "incisiveness, for wondering aloud, for trying to get some answers" (87). She gives examples of film franchises like *Scream* and *Scary Movie*, where black women are killed mercilessly without any apparent reason.

Orr compares Peele's *Get Out* and *Us* and shows how black men and women are punished differently in these two films. Although so far, our discussion has led us in one direction, that black men in Peele's movies were oppressed. However, according to Orr, black females are punished for being "black, a woman, and, usually, American" (88). At the heart of her discussion, Orr has the concept of 'agency.' She argues that *Get Out* and *Us* dealt with the characters' agency differently. She says – "if the child Adelaide [in *Us*] is disciplined for her willingness to explore the amusement park, black men in Peele's earlier *Get Out* are punished oppositely – they are taken to task for not asking enough questions, for not being inquisitive or intuitive enough" (88). In *Get Out*, Chris does not show much agency; rather, he does what his white girlfriend says. He does not even pay heed to his other black friend, who warns him about white people and their racism. Thus, he faces the consequences of not showing his agency.

However, young Adelaide from *Us* went into the funhouse out of curiosity. So, as a consequence, even as a child, she was punished for her entire lifetime.

As previously mentioned, postmodernism has influenced the realm of films, too, and horror films are no exception. Isabel Pinedo wrote about the connection between postmodernism and horror film in her research article “Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film” in 1996. There, she described postmodernism as an unstable world where –

Traditional categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, master narratives collapse the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read: male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates.

Mastery is lost, universalizing grad theory is discredited, and the stable, unified, coherent self acquires the status of a fiction. (17-18)

Postmodern horror films incorporate the general features of postmodernism. Other than the features mentioned above, Pinedo affiliates five specific ones to postmodern horror films. In postmodern horror films, the everyday world of the characters is violently disrupted. Also, transgression occurs, and the evil characters violate boundaries. Additionally, the characters and the audience start questioning the validity of rationality, and the narrative closure is absent. Lastly, postmodern horror films do what horror films are subjected to do, producing “a bounded experience of fear” (Pinedo 20).

From the discussion, it is clear that horror films and their formulaic strategies can have different characteristics, precisely postmodern characteristics, as Pinedo has mentioned. Unconventional horror films like *Get Out* and *Us* have also sparked discussion about how they are different from other horror films featuring black people. However, Amanda Beech has different perspectives regarding the horror film genre. In her 2020 article, “Death of Horror,”

she depicted how horror as a film genre has failed and suggested that “it’s difficult to make a good horror film these days” (72). She backs up her statement with this thought –

The genre has situated itself in retrospective feedback loops of the sequel, the prequel, the remake, and the ironic, tragic replay of itself as farce, where horror makes its own antirealist wink at the blood-spattered lens and knows the condition of its own constraint to horror as genre. In this sense, what we expect from horror, its concept, and what we often get or experience are very different. (72)

Her statement is not entirely true because not all horror films have franchises; there are numerous independent horror films that their successors never followed, for example, *Get Out* and *Us*. In addition, Beech also believes that now is the time for the postmodern to flourish, but in her opinion, horror has notably failed in this postmodern time. Beech’s exact words are

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More than other genres – like the action movie, the spy thriller, or the rom-com, which have all to some extent delivered pastiche, parodic, and ironic self-referential treatments, and all have in their grasp some narrative of the real, be this the real of power or true love – horror seems to fail precisely because it specifies a precise and unique claim to the real in a set of images that are negatively charged with themes of violence, death, sadism, evil, and so on. (74)

It is indeed surprising to see that Beech affiliated violence, death, sadism, and evil only with horror films. In contrast, action movies, spy thrillers, or even rom-coms are often packed with violence, sadism, or death.

Chapter 2

2.1 Research Gap

From the reviews mentioned above, it is clear that postmodernism impacts films; however, according to Beech, horror films are exceptional because they do not have any postmodern elements. She believes horror films follow a tasted formula and release a whole franchise only by sticking to it. These two are the reasons why she thinks horror is a dead genre now. Surprisingly, despite writing after the release of the two movies, her research does not incorporate films like *Get Out* and *Us*, which are two independent films by Peele. Moreover, critics like Thompson, Poll, Neher, and Orr have given their two cents on Peele's films and discussed various topics. However, neither has shown that Peele's *Get Out* and *Us* can be seen through the lens of postmodernism. Pinedo wrote about postmodern horror films, but her research does not include films of recent times. Both of Peele's films borrow concepts from older films; they deal with the notion of identity, allude to different actual events, negate scientific advancement, and, most importantly, deconstruct power dynamics – all of which indicate the tenets of postmodernism. Thus, it is comprehensible that the existing research on *Get Out* and *Us* lacks a discussion on their connection with postmodernism. My thesis will show how horror is not a dead genre by analyzing *Get Out* and *Us* and stating that both films have clear-cut postmodern features.

2.2 Research Question

My research has not one but two research questions that I intend to answer in the discussion section. Both questions arose after going through the research papers I used in my literature review. The first question is: Is the horror genre dead? My second question is: Even if anyone considers this a dead genre, are Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) postmodern enough to keep the horror genre alive?

My purpose is to answer the second question first. The discussion on the second question will hint towards the answer to my first question.

2.3 Theories and Methods

This thesis will delve into the diverse realm of postmodern theorists and their theories. Postmodernism is not the domain of a single theorist, but a rich tapestry woven by many. While I will not be able to incorporate every postmodern theory in this paper, I will focus on the most influential ones, such as Frederic Jameson's idea of pastiche and parody, Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, and Linda Hutcheon's idea of temporal disorder and Barry Lewis's fragmentation. In addition to these luminaries, I will also integrate postmodern features highlighted by author and critic Isabel Pinedo in my paper.

For the comprehensive exploration of this thesis, both *Get Out* and *Us* and a selection of YouTube videos have been meticulously studied multiple times to establish their connection with postmodernism. A close-textual analysis has been conducted on the chosen readings of postmodernism, which encompass chapters of books, journal articles, and newspaper articles.

Chapter 3

Discussion

3.1 Pastiche, Parody and Allusion

Frederic Jameson defined *pastiche* as something where individual subjects are non-existent and personal style is unavailable (64). Both pastiche and parody are integral parts of postmodernism. While parody evokes laughter, pastiche is devoid of laughter. According to Shahariar, along with parody and pastiche, allusion is another element of postmodernism. He says, “Pastiche glorifies any previous work in a nostalgic manner. Parody mocks or satires any previous work with a ridiculous manner. Allusion gives explicit or implicit reference to any previous work” (190). Thus, if these elements are parts of postmodernism, it is understandable that no work of postmodernism is entirely original; instead, it is the “amalgamation of different sorts of intertextuality” (Shahariar 190). Jameson has also suggested the same idea because he said, “The producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (65). Starting with *Get Out*, the very title of the film is an homage to Eddie Murphy’s stand-up comedy television special, *Eddie Murphy Delirious* (1983). In this show, Murphy jokes about how, in typical horror settings, people do not leave the house when they sense danger, even when the ghost tells them to. He says if he were in such a house and a ghost were to whisper ‘*get out*’ in his ears, he would immediately get out of the house (1:00:25-1:00:30). Eddie Murphy is famously known first as a comedian, then, as an actor. Then why would Peele refer to a comedian or use one of his dialogues as his movie title? The answer to this question is that Peele himself gained recognition as a comedian first, and Eddie Murphy is a renowned comedian who, through his comedy, explained how black people are often shown as the victims of horror films.

Secondly, Chris's friend Rod Williams, also a black character, provides comedic relief through his dialogues, and through the portrayal of this character, Peele parodies the typical horror trope of earlier horror movies. Previously, if there were black characters in a horror film, either that character was not taken seriously, or that person would die at the film's beginning. Ironically, in *Get Out*, Rod is the only character who spills facts, understands the seriousness of situations, and foreshadows many events that eventually occur in the film. However, no one pays much attention to him because he is a comedic character. At the film's beginning, Rod tells Chris, "Don't go to a white girl's parents' house" (00:09:59-00:10:02). However, Chris does not take this warning seriously and ends up in the Armitage house. Moreover, when Rod goes to the police station to report about Chris, he tells the police officer, "I believe they've [the Armitages] been abducting black people, brainwashing 'em, making 'em work for 'em as sex slaves" (01:17:24-01:17:31); this is what exactly happens in the movie, but the police scoff at Rod and do not report Chris as a missing person. Despite Rod being a TSA officer, none of the other characters believe him, even though his predictions come to pass, only because he is in the film to lighten up the mood amidst serious situations.

Moreover, the opening scene of *Get Out* alludes to a past event in 2012 in the US. An American named George Zimmerman fatally shot a 17-year-old African-American named Trayvon Benjamin Martin. Martin was visiting his father's fiancée's house in a suburban area in Sanford, Florida. He was returning from a convenience store in the evening when Zimmerman suspected him, followed him, and shot him out of racism. Poll commented on this event, saying that black people in America live with everyday terror because "in any space, especially spaces coded as white, one's body is vulnerable and killable" (75). According to Baldwin III of NPR, this incident was marked as a "pivotal point that would change the tenor of American culture and politics" (Trayvon Martin's killing 10 years ago changed the tenor of democracy). In an interview, Peele also stated that he started making *Get Out* when Martin was

killed. He also said, “What originally started as a movie to combat the lie that America had become post-racial became a movie where the cat is out of bag” (“Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism”). Thus, he starts his film with the same narrative – an African-American (the character Logan, later revealed to the audience) walking through a suburban area at night. While talking to his girlfriend, he mentions that the suburb is creepy and confusing, and just when he is looking for an address, he sees a white car stopping (e.g., *see fig 1*). He decides to go to the other side of the road, saying, “Not today. Not me” (00:02:26-00:02:28). This dialogue hints towards the violence black people face regularly and perfectly refers to Trayvon Martin’s case back in 2012. Although Logan is not immediately killed like Martin was in real life, he is abducted and later made into an enslaved person through the Coagula procedure.

In his film *Get Out*, Jordan Peele used both pastiche and parody in abundance; however, he mainly used parody in his second film, *Us*. As already stated, parody is used to mock any former action or incident. Peele used the event Hands Across America, which took place in the US in 1986. It was a fundraising event organized by Ken Kragen of USA for Africa. This event aimed to raise money to fight famine in Africa. The sole activity for people participating in this event was creating a human chain by holding hands across America. They were also supposed to pay \$10-\$35 to secure a place in the chain. However, only some people participated in this event, which made it a big failure. Although the USA for Africa intended to collect around \$50 - \$100 million, it only succeeded in collecting \$34 million and distributed only \$15 million after deducting the production cost, which was relatively less to fight hunger in a vast continent like Africa. Around 6.5 million people, alongside many celebrities, participated in it; however, Coates says, “Hands Across America is now an oft-forgotten punchline, a factoid often referenced in comic fashion, if anyone happens to remember it at all” (*Why Hands Across America Is So Vital to Jordan Peele’s Us*).

Us starts in 1986 with a television playing in the background. The audience can see young Adelaide watching the advertisement for Hands Across America on the television screen, where people from all walks of life hold hands to create the chain. However, it is not confirmed whether Adelaide only watched the advertisement or participated in the event herself, given that the story starts in the same year as the event of Hands Across America. At the beginning of the film, this scene looks pretty trivial and disconnected from the rest of the story, as it does not appear for a second time until the end of the film. It should be remembered that the actual event was unsuccessful because only by joining hands, America could not fight issues like famine and hunger in Africa. Moreover, the money given to fight hunger was less than the money taken to meet the cost of the event. Peele mocks these two aspects of Hands Across America in this film. Towards the end of the movie, when the Tethereds have taken over America, the audience sees the haunting image of the Tethereds holding their hands and forming a chain (e.g., see fig 2). This chain created by the Tethereds symbolizes the actual chain made in 1986. While the actual chain symbolized America's concern for hunger and famine, the film's chain symbolized America's tendency to pay no heed to the weak and ill of society.

Barry Lewis compares pastiche with anagram, but it is “not of letters, but of the components of a style” (114). Jameson also says, “The writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds...only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already” (as qtd. in Lewis). No matter how unique both of Peele's films seem, there were inspirations behind these two. First of all, *Get Out* and *Us* are not entirely horror films. Genre-wise, *Get Out* is an amalgamation of horror, science, and comedy, although horror overpowers the rest of the two. The Order of the Coagula, a type of brain transplantation, is a scientific procedure performed by the Armitage family, specifically Dean Armitage (e.g., see fig 3). As stated before in the overview section,

this procedure is used to transplant the brains of white people into black people's bodies. Like *Get Out*, *Us* is also an amalgamation of two genres – horror and science. The Tethereds were not born naturally; they were created, presumably by the government. When rescuing Jason from Red, Red gives a monologue in front of Adelaide. There she says –

We're human, too, you know. Eyes, teeth, hands, blood. Exactly like you. And yet it was humans that built this place [the abandoned facility]. I believe they figured out how to make a copy of the body but not the soul. The soul remains one, shared by two. They created the Tethered so they could use them to control the ones above. Like puppets. But they failed, and they abandoned the Tethered. (1:36:07-1:36:54)

As already stated in Peele's biography, he is a horror enthusiast and has been a fan since childhood. So, it is only natural that his films would have influences of past horror films and their styles, and this is precisely what Lewis refers to about postmodern writers who "pluck existing styles higgledy-piggledy from the reservoir of literary history and match them with little tact" (115). In an interview with *The New York Times*, Peele admitted that while creating *Get Out*, he was heavily influenced by two films - *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* ("Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism"). *Rosemary's Baby* is a story about a paranoid mother who starts losing control over her body. *The Stepford Wives*, a sci-fi horror, explores the theme of lost identity in the suburbs. If we closely inspect the plot of *Get Out*, it will be noticeable that it has similarities with both films mentioned above. Chris becomes paranoid when he learns about the truth of the Armitage family and he also starts losing control over his body when Missy Armitage starts hypnotising him. This film also takes place in suburban areas where black people lose their identity and are transformed into robot-like white people. Peele's *Us* can also be connected with the qualities mentioned above. This film also deals with the notion of identity, the identity of almost every human being in America. Both the originals and the Tethers fight to keep their identities alive.

3.2 Temporal Disorder

History refers to past events and incidents that have negatively or positively impacted the human race. What is positive for one group may not be the same for another. Thus, an accurate manifestation of history is always expected. However, in this era of postmodernism, it is not always the case that authors or writers have called a spade a spade when it comes to history. In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), Linda Hutcheon argued that “Postmodernism is a contradictory cultural enterprise, one that is heavily implicated in that which it seeks to contest. It uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task” (106). It is one of the features of postmodernism where history and fiction can overlap because Hutcheon calls them both “notoriously porous genres” (106), which are permeable. Lewis also quotes Hutcheon, stating, “Postmodernist writing is best represented by those works of ‘historiographic metafiction’ which self-consciously distort history” (113). One of the ways to achieve this is to blend history and fantasy (Lewis 113). In both *Get Out* and *Us*, Peele distorts the history of slavery in America. Although it is more prominent in *Get Out*, *Us* also has this blend slightly differently.

The United States of America has a long history of slavery, which started roughly around the 17th century. Shah and Adolphe state that “Many Americans’ introduction to US history is the arrival of 102 passengers on the Mayflower in 1620. But a year earlier, 20 enslaved Africans were brought to the British colonies against their will” (“400 years since slavery: a timeline of American history”). Since then, Africans and African Americans were equally bought and distributed as enslaved people in the plantations in America. Slavery was not restricted to the plantations only; the black people were sent to white people’s houses as domestic help as well. It was not until 1865 that slavery was abolished in America. This history is significant to the plot of Peele’s first film, *Get Out*. In this film, slavery is not shown as it was in reality; rather, history has been twisted, and scientific advancement has been added to

the storyline. Through this plot, Peele also taps into the aspect of science because the role of science in this postmodern world is unavoidable. Gazetas connects scientific advancement with our lives and opines that “The connection of postmodern culture with the development of science fiction, cybernetics, and high-tech machines demonstrates the way technology is transforming our perceptions of ourselves and our “reality” (24). Peele blends slavery with science and self-consciously distorts history, as Hutcheon has said.

As previously stated in the overview section, when Chris arrives in the Armitage household, he notices two black people, Walter and Georgina, on the house premises who are introduced as house helpers. It struck Chris as awkward that an all-white family has two black servants. Upon seeing Chris’s discomfort, Dean Armitage says, “I know what you’re thinking...White family, black servants. It’s a total cliché...We hired Georgina and Walter to help care for my parents. When they died, I couldn’t bear to let them go. But boy, I hate the way it looks” (00:18:19-00:18:49). As an audience, the question remains, even as caregivers, why two black people? Chris, however, does not ask any further questions, and to attain Chris’s faith, Dean adds, “By the way, I would have voted for Obama for a third time if I could. Best president in my life. Hands down” (00:18:55-00:19:01). Even before arriving in the Armitage house, Chris was unsure of his treatment in the white family. He asked Rose if her parents knew he was black, to which she said they did not know, but they are very welcoming of black people and are progressive. This part is a direct reference to Peele’s own experience. In the interview with *The New York Times*, when asked whether he had a similar experience with one of his girlfriends, Peele replied, “I had a Caucasian girlfriend a while ago. I remember specifically asking if the parents knew I was black. She said no. That scared me. It turned out to be fine, but I didn’t want to even see an adjustment on someone’s face when they realized it’s not what they thought” (“Jordan Peele on a Truly Terrifying Monster: Racism”). Despite being born and brought up in America, that too by a white mother, Peele could never shake off

the feeling of racial inferiority. This feeling resurfaced in his films as well. The concept of racial stigma black people faced in America was conjoined with science in *Get Out*.

The basic concept of slavery is that white people used to buy black people and made them work in either plantations or in their houses. In the film, the audience can see Walter and Georgina from the beginning, so the question is, are they enslaved? Even if they are, how come they agreed to be enslaved people in the 21st century? The answers to these questions can be started with the party the Armitages host in their house. Upon coming to the Armitage house, Chris and Rose learn that a party is coming. On the day of the party, Chris sees that all the guests are white. As mentioned in the overview section, Chris meets the only black person at the party, Logan. When the meeting with Logan does not go so nicely, Chris, distressed, goes for a walk with Rose, and this is when the film alludes to history. While Chris and Rose are away, Dean Armitage holds a silent auction in the garden of his house (e.g., *see fig 4*). All the white guests offer their bids through the game of Bingo (e.g., *see fig 5*), and the guest who buys Chris is named Jim Hudson, a blind art dealer. All of these guests are members of the Order of the Coagula. This is how they ‘buy’ black people, and this is not the first step.

The first step is abduction (e.g., *see fig 1*) by Jeremy Armitage, Rose’s brother. Thus, in the picture, Jeremy is in the white car that abducts Logan at the film’s beginning. Another less severe form of abduction is done through the acting of love by Rose. Before Chris, Rose had been in ‘love’ with several black people. While packing his bag to flee the Armitage house, Chris finds a box of pictures where Rose is seen with other black people (01:05:38-01:06:28), including Walter and Georgina. Chris realizes that Rose is also a part of this cult. Later, Chris sees Jim, whom he met at the party, and Jim explains the whole procedure to him. Jim says –

Let me just tell you what it is. Phase one was the hypnotism. That's how they sedate you. Phase two is mental preparation. It's basically psychological pre-op. For phase three, the transplantation. Well, partial, actually. The piece of your brain connected to your nervous system needs to stay put, keeping those intricate connections intact. So, you won't be gone, not completely. A sliver of you will still be in there, somewhere, limited consciousness. You'll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger. An audience. You'll live in [the sunken place].
(01:23:07-01:24:15)

Thus, Chris realizes that Walter, Georgina, and Logan are the latest victims of the Coagula cult. Different families use black people for different purposes; for example, Walter and Georgina serve as servants, and Logan has been made into an old white woman's husband. Chris was supposed to be the blind art dealer. Although their bodies would remain, their consciousness would remain submerged deep into the sunken place. They were made into slaves, and through their bodies used as vessels, white people would live as long as they wanted.

3.3 Fragmentation

According to Barry Lewis, fragmentation is an element of postmodernism. Regarding this element, Lewis stated, "The postmodernist writer distrusted the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories and preferred to deal with other ways of structuring narrative. One alternative was the multiple ending, which resists closure by offering numerous possible outcomes for a plot" (116). Pinedo also referred to this quality of horror films as having no narrative closure when discussing the elements of postmodern horror films (20). Another way of fragmenting a story is to divide the plot into "small slabs of event" (Lewis 116). Both of Peele's films showcase fragmentation. Both films have different sections and share the quality of having no narrative closure. When a work of fiction has multiple sections, it has a non-linear

narrative. Also, if that work of fiction does not have a narrative closure, it hints toward multiple ending possibilities.

Get Out starts with a simple story of a couple who prepare to visit the girl's parents' house. As the story unfolds, the audience learns that this story is not that simple. At first, it may seem like a linear story, but the first break in the linear narrative comes when Chris sits with Missy in her room. Missy tries to hypnotize Chris by stepping onto his most vulnerable point, his guilt of not attending to his mother when she died of an accident. We do not know what happened on the day his mother died. Nonetheless, when Missy starts talking about his mother, and rather than using a pendulum, she starts making a rhythmic sound with her teacup and spoon, Chris reluctantly starts sharing the event of that day. We can see how Chris is picturing that day in his mind through a flashback shot (e.g., *see fig 6*) at 00:33:30. In that shot, we see a kid watching television, and it is raining outside. Chris shares that her mother met with an accident when she was coming home. He has this immeasurable guilt of not doing anything to save his mother. He starts crying and realizes he cannot move, as he has been successfully hypnotized and paralyzed by Missy. This same flashback is used towards the end of the film when Chris is about to leave, but he cannot because he hit Georgina with the car, and she is lying on the road unconscious. This scene reminds him of his mother, so the flashback occurs again. He could have easily escaped, but as his mother's memory haunts him all the time, he could not escape and got out of the car to save Georgina.

Moreover, this film does not have a narrative closure. The film also does not have a happy ending. Although Chris gets saved by his friend Rod, we cannot say that is a happy ending, primarily because Chris is a black person, and he has killed a family of four white members. In the last scene, when Chris has just killed Rose, a police car arrives. This scene is a moment of anticipation because, in those few seconds, it seems like some policemen would come out and arrest Chris, given how black people are treated in America. However, something

different happens as Rod exits the police car and saves his friend. This anticipation is legitimized because of one scene at the film's beginning. When Rose is driving to her parent's house, and Chris is in the passenger seat, Rose suddenly hits a deer. When a police officer comes, he asks for Chris's license before asking who was driving the car. When Rose confirms she was the driver, the policeman still kept asking for Chris's license (00:12:18-00:13:05). In that scene, it is visible that although that incident astounds Rose, it does not astound Chris, as if this confrontation is typical to him. So, in the end, upon seeing the police car, Chris raised his hands despite being the victim. Peele himself, knowing the history of America and the treatment of black people in America, thought of an alternative ending where Chris does not get rescued by Rod. In that ending, he is seen being captured by the police after killing Rose. Later, he is seen in jail, talking to Rod. Although Rod wants to help him escape the jail, Chris responds by saying he is okay and helped the Armitages stop (Alternate Ending 01:05-3:30).

Us is also a fragmented, non-linear story with no narrative closure. The film starts in 1986, and the audience sees young Adelaide with her parents. The moment Adelaide sees her doppelganger in the mirror house, the scene abruptly shifts to a scene of caged rabbits. Then we see the present day in 2019, where Adelaide is a grown-up with her own family. As this film has a non-linear narrative, thus the audience immediately does not know what happened to young Adelaide. In this film, the storyline keeps shifting from 1986 to 2019 and then again to 1986, making it increasingly difficult to keep pace. There is no mention of the years on screen, so the audience has to know which timeline they are seeing by identifying Adelaide. The flashbacks that older Adelaide keeps having help the audience navigate the story. Because of these flashbacks, we learn that Adelaide stopped speaking after returning from the mirror house. In the final act, the story shifts from 2019 to 1986, and the audience sees the big reveal. They learn that the older Adelaide, whom we deem the protagonist, is the antagonist (the original doppelganger). Without the flashbacks, understanding the story would have been

significantly challenging. As there are double versions of every character, the fragmented story helps us understand it. In addition, this film also does not have a narrative closure. When we learn that the original Adelaide was stuck in the facility for all these years, we cannot blame the doppelganger for it. The doppelgangers were created by the government and were left unattended to perish. When the Tethered Red and her family visit the Wilsons, Red compares the lives of the Tethered and the people aboveground. Red says –

Once upon a time there was a girl. And the girl had a shadow. The two were connected, tethered together. When the girl ate, her food was given to her warm and tasty. But when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbit, raw and bloody. On Christmas the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy. But the shadow's toys were so sharp and cold, they'd slice through her fingers when she tried to play with them. (00:44:43-00:45:52)

If we stop thinking about the film and read the dialogue by Red mentioned above, it is noticeable that it applies to society in general. It hints at the distinction between rich and poor, privileged and non-privileged people of society. Peele has done such a masterful social commentary on the film that the audience remains flabbergasted regarding the ending of the film. It is impossible to reach a narrative closure as it cannot be decided whether Adelaide/Red was right or wrong.

3.4 Simulacra

In simple words, simulacra means an unsatisfactory image or representation of a certain reality. Jean Baudrillard is associated with this term of postmodernism which indicates the loss of real. When the real is lost, what remains is the hyperreal. Baudrillard mentioned four stages that an image has to go through – 1. Reflection of a basic reality, 2. Masking and perversion of a basic reality, 3. Masking of the absence of a basic reality, and 4. No relation to any reality

(5). This concept of postmodernism can be affiliated with Peele's second film *Us* only. Although these four stages apply to images, we have to remember that a film is a culmination of thousands of images. When young Adelaide sees her Tether counterpart for the first time, it is unclear whether that is a ghost or young Adelaide's imagination. So, the basic reality seems intact. However, as it is a movie, the four stages are not identifiable in the film. Moreover, the fourth stage remains completely missing in the film as the Tethers at least look similar to their original counterparts. However, phases one, two, and three are clearly present in the film. When the Wilson family and Red's family face each other (e.g., *see fig 7*), the similarities and the differences are visible. The Tethers are the masked and perverted version of the basic reality; however, they lack certain features from their original counterparts. Adelaide does not have a scar on her face; Red does. Gabriel wears glasses, but Abraham does not. Zora is lovely, whereas Umbrae looks terrifying. Little Jason wears a mask out of his playfulness; little Pluto wears a mask to hide his burned face. Other than the animalistic behaviour of the Tethers, they also lack some characteristics of the original ones. Thus, even though all of the Tethers have made a hyperreal world of their own, there remains a gap between the real and the hyperreal.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The discussion mentioned above on Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*, released in 2017 and 2019, respectively, makes one thing clear: the horror genre is far from dead. It has its fair share of franchises and unsuccessful films; however, it is not wise to say that a genre is dead because it does not incorporate characteristics of the current literary period in most of its films. Through his cinematic mastery, Peele has shown that even in horror films, it is possible to incorporate postmodern features like pastiche, parody, allusion, temporal disorder, fragmentation, and simulacra. *Get Out*'s unconventional storyline and filmmaking helped Peele get his first Oscar. This has inspired new directors who want to incorporate postmodern elements into horror films. Thus, Peele's *Get Out* and *Us* remain rays of hope for the horror genre.

Illustration References



Figure 1. In *Get Out*, Logan walking in the suburb when a white car stops in front of him.



Figure 2. At the end of *Us*, all of the Tethers have made the human chain like Hands Across America.

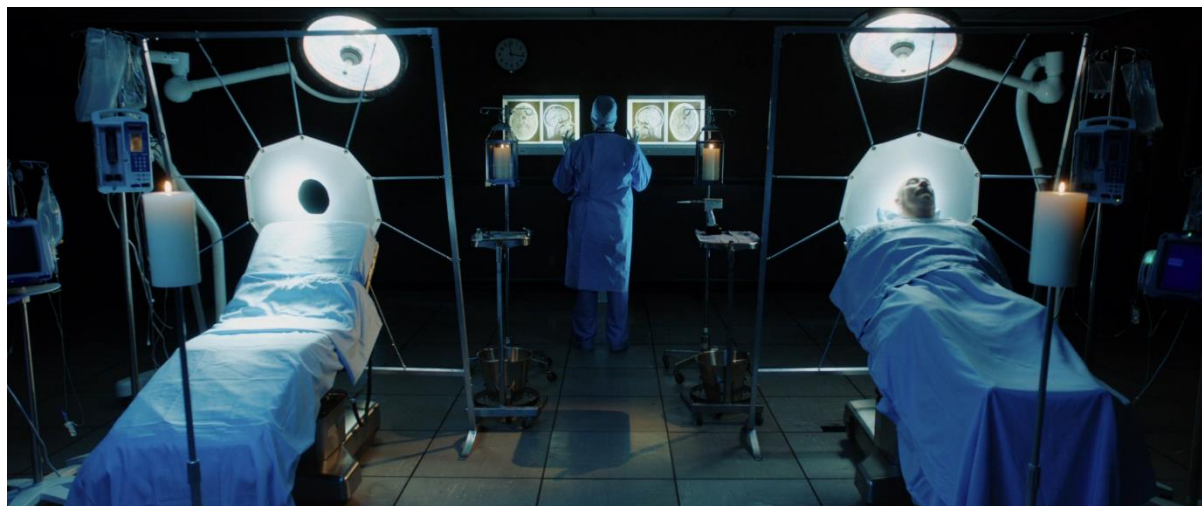


Figure 3: In *Get Out*, Dean Armitage preparing before the brain transplantation.



Figure 4: In *Get Out*, Dean Armitage in the middle of the slave auction.



Figure 5: In *Get Out*, the white guests offering their bids to buy Chris.



Figure 6: In *Get Out*, little Chris immersed in TV while his mother fights for his life.



Figure 7: In *Us*, the Wilson family and their Tethers facing each other, blurring the reality

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