



Utrecht University

“They are us.”

*A research of the visual portrayal of criticism of fear for the
‘Other’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality in the film US (2019)*

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I research how Jordan Peele's second award winning film *US* visually symbolizes and criticizes the contemporary Western fear for the 'Other' and 'us versus them' mentality. Many films depict 'us versus them' dynamics, but hardly ever is this mentality criticized. I argue that *US* does this by a unique way of portraying the 'Other' as identical to the 'Self'. After discussing the concepts of 'othering', fear for the 'Other' and 'us versus them' mentality through theories from gender/feminist, film/media, and postcolonial academic disciplines (using the 9/11 attacks as the most topical historical event to explain the Western 'us versus them' mentality), I carry out a neoformalist film analysis with the help of feminist film semiotics to analyze the mise-en-scene of *US*, specifically looking at the use of colors, costuming, props, performance and set design. An 'us versus them' mentality, fueled by fear for the 'Other' and created through the process of 'othering', is a problematic phenomenon in the (Western) world: it causes false generalization and the acceptance of stereotypes as realistic representations, which can result in – amongst other things – systemic racism and separation between people. By analyzing visual aspects of *US*, I argue how this film comments on and criticizes these concepts. This way, the film can be seen as socially relevant since I argue it to be a plea for unity amongst human beings at a time when political leaders seem to want nothing more than pursue this damaging 'us versus them' mentality.

Key words: *US* (2019), Jordan Peele, film analysis, neoformalism, feminist film semiotics, us versus them, the Other, othering, social thriller, Western normativity

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Foreword

Before everything, there are some people I would like to thank, as I feel I would not have been able to write my thesis without them. The first person I thank is my supervisor, Domitilla Olivieri, for feedback, support, patience, advice, insight, honesty, motivation and positivity. I also thank my fellow students and friends, especially Donya van Heezik and Lynn Bröcheler, for their endless support, advice, positivity, for the shared moments (fun and less fun), for listening, for being with me in this process. I thank Jordan Peele, for his films I would like to call works of art, masterpieces, both *GET OUT* and *US*, which have awed and inspired me in every way possible and made writing this thesis an incredibly rewarding journey, for showing me that *art matters*. I would like to thank my brother Mick, for advice coming from a mind that works so much like mine, yet provides a fresh perspective when needed. Perhaps unconventional, but I would like to thank the band Anti-Flag too, for their inspiring and motivating lyrics and music, for being my much needed escape sometimes, for their kind words and their contagious faith in humanity. I thank my parents, Yvonne and Marc, for too much to write down here, but mainly for their unconditional love, support and a safe place to write. Last but most definitely not least, I thank all the feminists, theorists, authors, artists, and activists that have paved the (theoretical) roads I find myself on and provided everything I academically and motivationally needed to write this thesis.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you all.

Preface

10 easy steps to create an enemy and start a war:

Listen closely because we will all see this weapon used in our lives.

It can be used on a society of the most ignorant to the most highly educated.

We need to see their tactics as a weapon against humanity and not as truth.

THIS IS HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY. THIS IS HOW TO START A WAR.

THIS IS HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY.

First step: create the enemy. Sometimes this will be done for you.

Second step: be sure the enemy you have chosen is nothing like you.

Find obvious differences like race, language, religion, dietary habits

fashion. Emphasize that their soldiers are not doing a job,

they are heartless murderers who enjoy killing!

Third step: Once these differences are established continue to reinforce them with all disseminated information.

Fourth step: Have the media broadcast only the ruling party's information this can be done through state run media.

Remember, in times of conflict all for-profit media repeats the ruling party's information.

Therefore all for-profit media becomes state-run.

Fifth step: show this enemy in actions that seem strange, militant, or different.

Always portray the enemy as non-human, evil, a killing machine.

THIS IS HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY. THIS IS HOW TO START A WAR.

THIS IS HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY.

Sixth step: Eliminate opposition to the ruling party.

Create an "Us versus Them" mentality. Leave no room for opinions in between.

One that does not support all actions of the ruling party should be considered a traitor.

Seventh step: Use nationalistic and/or religious symbols and rhetoric to define all actions.

This can be achieved by slogans such as "freedom loving people versus those who hate freedom."

This can also be achieved by the use of flags.

Eighth step: Align all actions with the dominant deity.

It is very effective to use terms like, "It is god's will" or "god bless our nation."

Ninth step: Design propaganda to show that your soldiers

have feelings, hopes, families, and loved ones.

Make it clear that your soldiers are doing a duty; they do not want or like to kill.

Tenth step: Create an atmosphere of fear, and instability

and then offer the ruling party as the only solutions to comfort the public's fears.

Remembering the fear of the unknown is always the strongest fear.

THIS IS HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY. THIS IS HOW TO START A WAR.

THIS IS HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY.

We are not countries.

We are not nations.

We are not religions.

We are not gods.

We are not weapons.

We are not ammunition.

We are not killers.

We will NOT be tools.

Anti-Flag – Anatomy Of Your Enemy

Words by: Justin 'Sane' Geever, Pat 'Thetic' Bollinger

“We understand that fiction is a lie to begin with.
To ignore the truth inside the lie is to sin against the
craft, in general, and one’s own work in particular.”¹

Introduction

There are many Western films in which an ‘us versus them’ mentality is represented, often through the depiction of an evil ‘Other’ feared by the ‘us’ the audience is supposed to identify with. Examples are *PATRIOTS DAY* (2016 in which the ‘Other’ is human), *THEM* (1954, in which the ‘Other’ is animal), and *ALIEN* (1979, in which the ‘Other’ is – literally – alien). Although ‘us versus them’ mentalities are often represented in films, they are hardly ever criticized, possibly because the creation of a collective enemy often results in satisfying feelings of unity: it is ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘we’ defeated ‘them’. A film that does not only depict an ‘us versus them’ mentality but actually criticizes it is Jordan Peele’s second film *US* (2019).

In *US*, the family Wilson – mother Adelaide (Lupita Nyong’o), father Gabe (Winston Duke), daughter Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and son Jason (Evan Alex) – go on a vacation to their beach house in Santa Cruz. During this vacation, they are confronted with the Tethered, which are identical copies of themselves. The Tethered seem to want only one thing: come to the surface (as they have been living in underground tunnels) and replace their copies living above the ground by eliminating them, to eventually form a big line across America (in effect copying the Hands Across America movement). The confrontations between the Wilsons and the Tethered result in bloody (and deadly) fights, conversations about unequal opportunities, and a plot twist revealing how nothing is what it seems. Important to note is that this is not your average film about a good ‘us’ versus an ‘evil’ them: the film blurs the ‘us versus them’ distinction, making the viewer wonder who to identify with as ‘us’ and who to characterize as ‘them’. Something that makes this extra challenging is the fact that the initial ‘us’ in this film is not necessarily good, and the ‘them’ not necessarily bad. I argue that this way, *US* challenges dominant film tropes and connects issues from the film to broader social contexts.

The first reason why I chose to analyze *US* is because it is a film by Jordan Peele, and after writing my bachelor thesis on his debut film *GET OUT* (2017), I was excited to see what Peele had in mind with *US*, also because I knew *US* would focus on social issues, just like *GET*

¹ Stephen King, “Acceptance Speech: The 2003 National Book Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters” (2003), in *On Writing Horror*, ed. Mort Castle (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 2007), 7–12.

OUT.² I saw *US* with great anticipation because, after having analyzed *GET OUT* extensively, I knew Peele loves to fill up his films with symbolism, barely visible cues, hidden messages, references, all to give his films a deeper meaning, making them interesting to analyze. He is the kind of director who leaves nothing to coincidence. My prediction came true: with the use of symbolism, I argue that *US* offers a reflection of contemporary social problems (focused on the Western world, not just America). As someone who strongly believes in the power of cinema to open eyes and create awareness for social issues, to analyze *US* was an easy choice to make. The film also tackles the issue of ‘erased’ pasts, of making aspects that make people remember certain moments in history disappear. There have been (and still are) heated debates about this in various Western countries, making *US* relevant for (amongst other things) paying attention to this issue. Lastly, *US* stresses the importance to look at ourselves instead of immediately pointing a finger at others; its social message is, I argue, to work on unity amongst human beings, instead of maintaining an ‘us versus them’ mentality based on social demographic factors and systems of inequality.

The uniqueness about *US* is, in my opinion, that it does not portray the ‘Other’ or ‘them’ as someone (or something) *different*, but as the *same* as the ‘Self’ or ‘us’. I argue that *US* defamiliarizes Western normative ideas about the ‘Other’ through a unique way of criticizing ‘us versus them’ mentalities.³ The concept of fear for the ‘Other’ is applicable because I argue the film criticizes this by connecting it to different social issues (such as issues surrounding gender, race and class). By commenting on the duality, the separation, the distance between people – manifested in an ‘us versus them’ mentality, fueled by the process of ‘othering’ and sustained by fear – I argue that *US* is a plea for unity, for an understanding that *they are us*. By analyzing how *US* visually depicts these concepts, I research the way the film symbolizes and criticizes contemporary fear for the ‘Other’, with a focus on the Western world. The research question I answer with this thesis is: How does the film *US* visually symbolize and criticize the contemporary Western fear for the ‘Other’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality?

I aim to answer this question by first discussing the three main concepts to this thesis in my theoretical framework. Using theoretical information from different academic disciplines, I

² After the release of *GET OUT*, in an interview with Business Insider Peele revealed that he has planned to make a total of five films within the genre of ‘social thriller’, a genre that gained notoriety after the release of *GET OUT*. *GET OUT* and *US* are the first two films of this quintuplet, which is how I knew that *US* was, like *GET OUT*, going to be focused on some kind of social issue. (Source: Jason Guerrasio, “Jordan Peele plans to direct a whole series of horror movies about ‘social demons’”, February 2017, Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/get-out-jordan-peele-horror-movie-series-social-demons-2017-2?international=true&r=US&IR=T>)

³ See my method section for an explanation of the concept ‘defamiliarization’.

explain what the concepts of ‘othering’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality mean, and how these are interconnected and closely connected to the concept of fear (for the ‘Other’). I use the example of the 9/11 attacks as the most topical historical event to explain the Western ‘us versus them’ mentality I also refer to in my analysis of the film. The methodology I used for my analysis is explained in my method section: it is a combination of neoformalism (which allowed me to analyze the way visual aspects of the film make meaning) and feminist film semiotics (which allowed me to connect these meanings to broader social contexts). The last section covers my analysis of *US*. In this analysis I look specifically at aspects of the mise-en-scene of the film to argue how the film visually portrays and criticizes the aforementioned concepts. In my conclusion I provide a short summary of the thesis, an answer to my research question, a suggestion for further research, and the relevance of films (such as *US*) as a medium with social purpose.

Because of its recent release, and despite numerous non-academic articles on entertainment and film critics’ websites, there are no available academic sources that discuss *US* yet, let alone sources that discuss the concepts of fear for the ‘Other’ or ‘us versus them’ mentality in the film. There are, however, enough academic sources that focus on and discuss the concepts of ‘us versus them’ and the ‘Other’ *an sich*, such as publications by Edward Said, Alison Mountz, and Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills. I use sources by these authors (amongst others) in my theoretical framework to explain what the main concepts to this thesis mean in relation to my thesis. Besides a personal and social motivation, this thesis is motivated by the underrepresentation of academic publications about films in which the concept of ‘us versus them’ is not only apparent, but also criticized. I argue it is important to recognize that such mentalities often result in separation between people instead of unity, as many films depicting ‘us versus them’ mentalities make it seem. My thesis will thus contribute to this field of research, and – by connecting the aforementioned concepts to different social issues – fit in with the disciplines of film studies, postcolonial studies, and gender/feminist studies.

Theoretical Framework

In this first chapter I discuss the three main concepts of my thesis – the practice of ‘othering’, the ‘us versus them’ mentality, and the fear for the ‘Other’ – according to theories and conceptualizations mostly by Edward Said, Alison Mountz, Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills – and illustrate how they are related to each other. My theoretical framework is thus situated within the disciplines of postcolonial studies, feminist studies, and media studies, as the aforementioned authors work(ed) within these fields. The concepts of ‘othering’ and ‘us versus them’ are applicable to the film because I argue that the film uniquely defamiliarizes (Western) normative ideas about the ‘Other’ through criticizing (the duality, the binary opposition that comes with) ‘us versus them’ mentalities. The concept of fear for the ‘Other’ is relevant because – as my analysis illustrates – this is something I argue the film comments on and criticizes by applying it to a variety of social issues apparent throughout the film. I argue that criticizing the duality, the binary oppositions, the separation and distances between human beings – manifested in ‘us versus them’ mentalities, created through the process of ‘othering’, and sustained by fear – is what US is really about; it is a two-hour plea for unity.

The practice of ‘othering’

‘Othering’ is the practice of viewing or treating someone as intrinsically different from oneself; to ‘other’ is to “distinguish, label, categorize, name, identify, place and exclude those who do not fit a societal norm.”⁴ The first time I came into contact with academic theory on ‘the Other’ was when reading the introduction to Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, in which Said explains how ‘Other’ is constructed by the West and encompasses the East (or: non-Western world). The idea of who or what the Orient is, was based rather exclusively on a “sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged.”⁵ Said made the argument that Western academia presented inaccurate cultural representations of ‘the East’, or: the Orient, which “is the stage on which the whole East is confined.”⁶ The Orient was characterized by European and American academics as the irrational, exotic, barbaric, weak,

⁴ Alison Mountz, “The Other,” in *Key Concepts in Political Geography*, ed. Carolyn Gallaher, Carl T. Dahlman, Mary Gilmartin, Alison Mountz and Peter Shirlow (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 328.

⁵ Idem., 8.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 63. Said uses the words “imaginative examination” to describe the way the Western academics studied everything non-Western. In “Orientalism” he uses the word “imaginative” often, not to say that something is false or made-up, but to illustrate that the results of studies (by Western people) are based on perception created through images, discourses and other representations, and should thus not be regarded as truth.

childlike, feminine, non-Western Other, which contrasts with the rational, powerful, articulate, civilized, masculine, dominant Western Self.⁷ These characteristics show that the Westerners did not just see the Orient as different, but also as *inferior*, defining the West as *superior*. Also, such (re)presentations of the East as ‘uncivilized’ – a representation created by the ‘civilized’ West – justified Western colonialism and imperialism: colonialism was seen (and propagated as) a ‘civilizing mission’.⁸

The non-Western ‘Other’ is thus defined (‘othered’) by the Western ‘Self’, and “the ‘Other’ is fundamental to the constitution of the self.”⁹ The ‘Other’ is “a person or group who are different from oneself.”¹⁰ An easy way to characterize the ‘Other’ (perhaps the *most* easy way) is by looking at someone’s skin color as a marker of racial difference. Seeing that ‘white’ is the considered norm in Western countries, non-white people were automatically ‘othered’. In his text “The Spectacle of The Other”, Stuart Hall discusses three moments when “the ‘West’ encountered black people, giving rise to an avalanche of popular representations based on the marking of racial difference.”¹¹

The first began with the sixteenth-century contact between European traders and the West African kingdoms, which provided a source of black slaves for three centuries. Its effects were to be found in slavery and in the post-slave societies of the New World. The second was the European colonization of Africa and the 'scramble' between the European powers for the control of colonial territory, markets and raw materials in the period of 'high Imperialism'. The third was the post-World War II migrations from the

⁷ Idem., 40; 57.

⁸ Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann, *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 67.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of The ‘Other’,” in *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE, 1997), 237. Seeing that the ‘Other’ is seen as someone intrinsically different from oneself, a conception of the ‘Self’ is needed in order to define the ‘Other’, and vice versa. For example: without a conception of who and what the ‘Self’ meant, the Western academics from Said’s *Orientalism* would not have been able to define the Orient, as the Oriental ‘Other’ was essentially characterized as existing in opposition to the Western ‘Self’; where – as I wrote earlier – the Western ‘Self’ was seen as civilized, rational, powerful, articulate, and masculine, the Orient was considered the opposite of this: an uncivilized, irrational, weak, barbaric, and feminine non-Western ‘Other’. Someone who also wrote about this is Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her renowned work “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”: “Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the third world, there would be no (singular and privileged) first world. (...) I am suggesting then that the one enables and sustains the other.” (Source: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (Spring-Autumn 1986): 353.)

¹⁰ Mountz, “The Other,” 328.

¹¹ Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” 239.

Third World' into Europe and North America. Western ideas about 'race' and images of racial difference were profoundly shaped by those three fateful encounters.¹²

In short, those 'Western ideas about race and images of racial difference' are based on the white norm; the Western view of the white 'Self' and the non-white 'Other'. This 'othering' of non-white people was supported by so-called scientific racism, which was essentially a method of Western people to 'justify' racism, racist 'othering' and to prove non-white 'inferiority'.¹³

Along the line of the racialized 'Other' is the sexualized 'Other'. Previously I wrote about how femininity was used by Western academics as a marker of otherness, while the Western 'Self' was characterized with masculinity. Like blackness was regarded as inferior to whiteness, femininity was considered as inferior to masculinity; the former associated with weakness and emotion and the latter with strength and power.¹⁴ The basis of this idea lies in a patriarchal Western norm, a "system in which power is secured in the hands of adult men."¹⁵ Besides this idea that the superior Western colonizers were characterized as 'masculine' and the inferior non-Western colonized as 'feminine', the practice of 'othering' related to gender also happens within feminist discourses. In her renowned and influential key work from 1986 "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", Chandra Talpade Mohanty – Distinguished Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Dean's Professor of the Humanities at Syracuse University – writes about how Western feminists had 'othered' non-Western feminists and illustrates how Western feminisms produced the image of an "average third world woman" who

leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Scientific racism: "the recourse to science to justify and rationalize hierarchical comparison between human populations"; racism based on and supported and justified by "biological measurements of bodily differences between races". (Source: Maurizio Meloni, "Scientific Racism," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), abstract.)

¹⁴ I am using past tense here ("was") because I specifically refer to the practice of 'othering' as it was done by Western colonialists, but current racist and sexist practices show that the idea of blackness and femininity as inferior to whiteness and masculinity is, regrettably, still alive.

¹⁵ George Ritzer and J. Michael Ryan, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 441.

*(implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.*¹⁶

Here we see another example of how the Western world is regarded as superior (by themselves) and the non-Western world as inferior (by Westerners). The problem is, as Mohanty argues as well, one of generalization: Western feminisms, she states, ignore the instability and diverse character of the category ‘women’ by “homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of different groups of women in these [third world] countries.”¹⁷ Here again, non-Western people are characterized by Western people according to the latter’s norms and ideas, which present a case of false universalism, as – in this case – the category ‘women’ is based on a white standard about what a woman is and, perhaps more importantly, should be.

As Alison Mountz – Professor of Geography and Canada Research Chair in Global Migration – writes, the practice of ‘othering’ can be seen as something positive as well: during gay/LGBTQ+ prides, being (seen as) ‘other’ or different from the heterosexual norm – and challenging this norm – is celebrated.¹⁸ “Queer theorists (...) celebrate ‘othering’ in that to ‘queer’ is to challenge normative categories. (...) queer theory does the work of displacing the centre in order to move ‘other’ from margin to centre.”¹⁹ It is then not so much a practice of ‘othering’, but rather a practice of reclaiming of being non-normative. In this research, however, I focus on the negative consequences of practices of ‘othering’. A negative consequence is an ‘us versus them’ mentality.

‘Us versus them’ mentality

Seeing and treating the ‘Other’ as intrinsically different from oneself results in a mentality where ‘they’ (the ‘Other’) are placed in opposition to ‘us’ (the ‘Self’). Building upon texts written by Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills – Professors of, respectively, the Social Science department and English department at Mount Allison University –, it is possible to argue that the creation of the ‘Other’ is often paired with the creation of the enemy: an enemy is always an “enemy-Other.”²⁰ The basis of this argument derives from Said’s aforementioned writings

¹⁶ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 337.

¹⁷ Idem., 352.

¹⁸ Mountz, “The Other,” 333.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, “Infestation and Eradication: Political Cartoons and Exterminationist Rhetoric in the War on Terror,” *Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 13-14 & Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, “Discourses of Dehumanization: Enemy Construction and Canadian Media Complicity in the Framing of the War on Terror,” *Global Media Journal: Canadian Edition* 2, no. 2 (2009): 8-9.

about Orientalism, since “Orientalism allows us to fabricate an alien enemy effectively and dangerously.”²¹ The enemy is the ‘other’ “whose story we have not heard”, who is “representative and indistinguishable”, who is “the evil to our good, destroyer to our preserver, death to our life”, who is “treacherous, warlike and cruel” (while ‘we’ are “trustworthy, peace-loving, honorable and humanitarian”).²² The construction of images of the enemy-Other goes hand in hand with the construction of a positive, good, superior image of the ‘Self’; ‘they’ are defined in comparison to ‘us’. Once an enemy-Other is defined (through the creation of a homogenized stereotype according to Western perspectives), propaganda about this enemy-Other is spread to mobilize people into nationalist sentiments and ‘us versus them’ mentalities.²³ Just like how the creation of the image of the uncivilized ‘Orient’ was a crucial part of justifying colonialism, the creation of the image of the terrorist ‘Other’ was a “crucial part of the process of justifying an unjust war”.²⁴ This becomes especially apparent in the post-9/11 Western world.

The terrorist attacks against the United States that happened on September 11th 2001 is perhaps the most famous recent example of an event that triggered an uprising of the American ‘us versus them’ mentality through the creation of the ‘Other’.²⁵ American rhetoric following these events – especially articulated by George W. Bush – reinforced negative representations of the non-Western (specifically: Arab Muslim) ‘Other’.²⁶ After several speeches in which Bush

²¹ Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, “Making Enemies: Propaganda and the Making of the Orientalist “Other,”” in *At War with Metaphor: Media, Propaganda, and Racism in the War on Terror*, ed. Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 26.

²² *Idem.*, 26-29.

²³ “The Western media’s exclusionary focus on a single aspect of Eastern experience when considering the East as enemy, however, has resulted in a picture of the Arab as essentially and exclusively fanatical, extremist, and violent. The stereotype has become, with repetition, an archetype.” (Source: Steuter and Wills, “Making Enemies,” 25.)

²⁴ Debra Merskin, “The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-9/11 Discourse of George W. Bush,” in *Bring ‘em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War*, ed. Lee Artz and Yahya R. Kamalipour (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 134.

²⁵ I have chosen to use the 9/11 attacks as the most topical historical event to explain the American ‘us versus them’ mentality I also refer to in my analysis of the film *Us* (see Analysis). Although *Us* is not specifically about 9/11, I argue it *is* about an ‘us versus them’ mentality, which is something that the 9/11 attacks strengthened immensely.

²⁶ In his speeches in the immediate days after 9/11, Bush de-individualized, dehumanized, and stereotyped the enemy. More often than not, he used the words “evil”, “evil folks”, “evildoers” and “barbarism”; frequently addressed America’s power in Christianity (as opposition to Islam); referred to the enemy as “dark”, “soulless”, “faceless”; spoke about how “the civilized world was rallying to America’s side” (thus implying that ‘we’ are civilized and ‘they’ are not); declared that America’s freedom was under threat; talked about being determined to “haunt ‘em down, those who did this to America”; wondered “Why do they hate us?”; displayed zero-sum thinking (“Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”); and used economy to show off power when talking about a new budget that funded homeland security (as opposed to the enemy, who are less-developed, poorer, and of lower class). On January 29th 2002, Bush once again spoke about the enemy: “They are wrong as they are evil.” (Source: Merskin, “The Construction of Arabs as Enemies,” 127-133.)

characterized the ‘enemy-Other’ as being (predominantly) ‘evil’, “America’s enemy was fully constructed and retaliation fully justified.”²⁷ Bush’s speeches produced an ‘us versus them’ mentality wherein the ‘us’ were the citizen of the United States and the ‘them’ the non-white Arab *Muslim* people of the Middle East. I use the term ‘non-white’ purposely to illustrate that systemic racism is both a cause and product of an ‘us versus them’ mentality.²⁸ I argue that the characterization, de-individualization, generalization and homogenization of ‘them’ goes hand in hand with systemic racism, as repetitive negative stereotypes are a core ingredient of systemic racism, eventually resulting in a society (and organizations within societies, such as law enforcement, education systems and corporate capitalism) which fails to

*provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.*²⁹

Systemic racism can thus be seen as a cause of an ‘us versus them’ mentality because it segregates and distinguishes ‘them’ (non-white people) from ‘us’ (white people) through policies, systems and structures that punish, exclude, or disadvantage people of color.³⁰

²⁷ Idem., 133.

²⁸ Systemic racism, more commonly known as ‘institutionalized racism’, is “racism that has become part of the normal behavior of people within an organization.” (Source: “institutionalized racism,” Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/institutionalized-racism>) It is racism not on an individual level, but on a bigger systemic level, thus exercised and reproduced by policies of societal organizations (such as the police). “In institutional discrimination the focus is upon the routine practices of the organization and their normalization within the workplace culture. Institutional racism begins to enter into an organization when the institutional routines reflect the interests of only one dominant group.” (Source: John Downing and Charles Husband, *Representing Race: Racisms, Ethnicity and the Media* (London: SAGE, 2005), 11.) Systemic racism, but also capitalism, sexism, homophobia, islamophobia, ageism, ableism, and other systems of inequality can be the cause and effect of ‘us versus them’ mentalities.

²⁹ William Macpherson of Cluny, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (London: Stationery Office, 2009), 49.

³⁰ Examples are racial profiling, racial profiling, underrepresentation (or one-sided representation) of non-white people in the media, unpaved roads in ‘black neighborhoods’, and restrictive housing contracts. None of these are exclusive to the United States. To take the example of restrictive housing contracts to The Netherlands, Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving wrote the following: “from the mid-1980s onward, Dutch moral support for ethnic discrimination in the labor market (minorities to be fired first) and in housing (preference for native Dutch families) has increased,” and “In the area of housing the idea that Blacks and other immigrants do not belong in the Netherlands and that they may become a threat to Dutch national culture permeates dominant thinking from policymakers down to neighborhood dwellers. This is expressed through mechanisms of exclusion and through the requirement that Blacks adopt the Dutch way of living.” (Source: Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving, “Innocence, Smug Ignorance, Resentment: An Introduction to Dutch Racism,” in *Dutch Racism*, ed. Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 12 & Philomena Essed, “Toward an Integration of Macro and Micro Dimensions of Racism,” in *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*, ed. Philomena Essed (London: SAGE, 1991), 22.)

Likewise, systemic racism can be seen as a result of an ‘us versus them’ mentality, since – as I established above – it is born from repetitive negative stereotypes that characterized and generalized the non-white ‘other’ as inferior. In this way we can see how these concepts are interconnected.

It is important to include that – while I have thus far discussed ‘othering’ and ‘us versus them’ mentalities on a global level: the global West versus the global East – the same practices of ‘othering’ and resurgence of ‘us versus them’ mentalities in the United States and Europe happen on a local (national) scale as well. Again, I take the example of the 9/11 attacks to illustrate this. While the – I argue, most crucial – motivation behind Bush’s ‘othering’ post-9/11 speeches was to create a feeling of a utopian American unity and thereby strengthen the mentality of an American ‘us’ versus an Arab ‘them’ on a global level, the 9/11 attacks resulted in harassment and hate crimes against American Muslims and people who looked like them.³¹ Not only mosques and Muslims were targets of hate crimes (such as verbal and physical assaults, firebombing, and other forms of destruction); there are numerous reports of attacks on Sikhs, including the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a 49-year-old gas station owner who was fatally shot as he was mistaken for a Muslim.³² More Sikhs were attacked in retaliation of the 9/11 attacks, simply because *their looks resemble popular and stereotypical representations of a Muslim*.³³ This example show that the ‘us versus them’ mentality enforced by Bush’s rhetoric resulted in more segregation and systemic racism against American Muslims within the United States, illustrating once again that an ‘us versus them’ mentality is first and foremost based on the generalized, de-individualized concept of the enemy-Other: ““they’re” really all alike any way, so it doesn’t really matter if we retaliate specifically against the actual perpetrators or generally against everybody who happens to look like them.”³⁴ Considering this, I argue that 9/11 did not (just) result in a mentality of a *Western* American ‘us’ versus an *Eastern* Muslim

³¹ Although Bush failed to create a utopian American unity on a national level, it is remarkable that right after 9/11, his approval rates skyrocketed to 90%. This suggests that the 9/11 bombings – regarded as attacks against the American ‘Self’ as a whole, committed by the Arab ‘Other’ as a whole – and Bush’s following speeches did trigger a wave of nationalist sentiments and expressions of patriotism. (Source: “Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>)

³² “Family members, friends, and members of the Indian Sikh community say they are being targeted because their men wear turbans and long beards as part of their religious dress, a tradition that's lasted for 500 years.” (Source: “Hate crime reports up in wake of terrorist attacks,” September 17, 2001, Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20051127025019/http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/16/gen.hate.crimes/>)

³³ Naturally, this does not mean that attacks on Muslim Americans are more justified than attacks on non-Muslim Americans. Killing (American) Muslims or people who are mistaken for them in retaliation to the 9/11 terrorist attacks is on no way justifiable.

³⁴ Steuter and Wills, “Making Enemies,” 26.

‘them’ (global), but rather in a mentality of a *white* American ‘us’ versus a *brown, Arab, Muslim* (and also, but not necessarily non-autochthone) American ‘them’.³⁵

Fear for the ‘Other’

The concept of fear is closely connected to ‘us versus them’ mentalities and the practice of ‘othering’: I argue that fear lies at the basis of the creation of an ‘us versus them’ mentality, of the desire to protect ‘ourselves’ from ‘them’. To stay within the context of the 9/11 attacks, I argue that fear is one of the things that was not only created by the attacks themselves, but also something that was fueled by Bush’s speeches during the aftermath. Just like the Western academics from Said’s *Orientalism*, Bush’s previously mentioned rhetoric painted a picture of the Arab ‘Other’ as barbaric, evil and less developed. ‘They’ (all Muslims, collectively) formed a threat to ‘us’ (white Americans).³⁶

Fearmongering is almost inevitably connected to the creation of (representations of) the ‘other’, especially at times of (inter)national social conflict. As Steuter and Wills write (specifically about the War on Terror), times of war emphasize the threat of differences between people as propaganda images and texts are used (by both ‘us’ and ‘them’) to emphasize the “Otherness of the enemy” and to justify military action.³⁷ One example of this is to characterize the enemy-Other as inhuman, as a threatening disease, connecting it to connotations of “fears

³⁵ Autochthone: someone who is born and raised in the same country their ancestors come from. For example: someone who is born and raised in The Netherlands, who has Dutch parents and grandparents. Allochthone: people who live in a country but have an ethnic background of a different country. For example: someone living in The Netherlands but with a non-Dutch background. Could be immigrants, but also people who are born in The Netherlands with parents from a non-Dutch background are considered allochthone. “The mutually exclusive categories of autochtoon and allochtoon set apart ‘US’ from ‘THEM’; the real Dutch (autochtoon) from the not-quite-Dutch (allochtoon).” (Source: Philomena Essed and Sandra Trienekens, “‘Who wants to feel white?’ Race, Dutch culture and contested identities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 57.) I specifically used the term ‘non-autochthone’ here to illustrate that people who were born in the United States but had parents from Arab countries were considered as ‘them’ and the ‘Other’; these people were American citizens, alienated and targeted because of the way they physically looked due to having Arab parents.

³⁶ Six days after the attacks, Bush made a public appearance at the Islamic Center of Washington D.C., where he said (amongst other things): “they [American Muslims] need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect.” While this initially comes over as an act of solidarity, I find it highly unlikely that he did not consider the consequences of his own fearmongering speeches about the enemy-Other, which – as mentioned earlier – resulted into violence against (autochthone) American Muslims and people who were mistaken for them. The way Bush created fear for the Muslim ‘Other’ through his post-9/11 speeches does not reconcile with his claims that American Muslims need to be treated with respect. (Source: George W. Bush, “Islam is Peace” (speech, Washington D.C., September 17, 2001), Welcome to the White House, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>)

³⁷ Steuter and Wills, “Discourses of Dehumanization,” 9.

not only of destruction, but also of proliferation and encroachment.”³⁸ Characterizing the ‘Other’ as, for example, cancer (as the post-9/11 American media did, claiming that the United States had to “increase its military and covert forces, locate the surviving culprits and exterminate them” with the goal to “root out the global terrorist *cancer*” [italics are mine]), connects the ‘Other’ to something many people fear: a terminal disease, or even death.³⁹ The idea of the ‘Other’ as (horrible and terrifying as) cancer and subsequent death justifies the need to disconnect ‘ourselves’ from ‘them’ and to eradicate or destroy ‘them’.

Propaganda images are used to create an ‘us versus them’ mentality based on fear for the ‘Other’ mostly during times of war, but not exclusively. To bring the construction of fear for the ‘Other’ a little bit closer to home, I would like to include an example from The Netherlands. Geert Wilders, leader of the nationalist, right-wing populist political party *Partij Voor de Vrijheid* (PVV; Party for Freedom), is notorious for his strong anti-Islam expressions. The clearest example of the way Wilders actively distributes feelings of disgust, hatred and fear towards the Muslim ‘Other’ is his 17-minute film *FITNA* (2008). The film shows exclusively footage covering acts of violence and hatred by Muslims, thereby painting a one-sided picture that demonizes and generalizes Muslims as terrorists, anti-Semites and sexist.⁴⁰ Another example of Wilders’ fearmongering is the PVV’s anti-Islam campaign video that was broadcasted on television and social media in early 2018.⁴¹ Needless to say, such propaganda are clear examples to arouse feelings of fear and hatred towards a generalized ‘Other’ (in this case: Muslims) by representing this ‘Other’ as intrinsically different to the ‘Self’, successfully creating and ‘us versus them’ mentality wherein ‘we’ are good and ‘they’ are evil.⁴²

³⁸ Steuter and Wills discuss many different metaphors used by media to create an image of the ‘Other’, mostly focusing on the creation of the ‘Other’ as either an animal or a pestilential: the ‘Other’ is a rat/snake/insect/spider/cancer/virus, spreads through breeding/spawning/mutating, has to be hunted/trapped/eradicated, and lives in swamps/lairs/nests/webs. (Source: Steuter and Wills, “Discourses of Dehumanization,” 13-17.)

³⁹ Robert McChesney, “The U.S. news media and World War III,” *Journalism* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 43.

⁴⁰ *Fitna*, video file, 16:48, YouTube, posted 2013,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HlptyGvIY&has_verified=1&bpctr=1559632752

⁴¹ The 2,5-minute video contains big, clear words, colored in red to a grey background, that say “Islam is”. As the video progresses, these two words remain depicted, as underneath these words negative terms appear. Complemented by threatening music, the video shows how “Islam is discrimination”, “violence”, “terror”, “misogyny”, “homophobia”, “anti-Semitism”, “persecution of Christians”, “submission”, “forced marriage”, “honor killing”, “totalitarian”, “death penalty of apostates”, “sharia”, “animal suffering”, “injustice”, “slavery”, and last but not least, “deadly”. (Source: *Nieuwe video PVV Zendtijd Politieke Partijen*, video file, 2:50, YouTube, posted 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoBeCQhWFFY>)

⁴² There are many more examples of how fear for the ‘Other’ is created, distributed and used in politics that divide ‘us’ from ‘them’, one of which encompasses recent ideas and practices of the current president of the United States, Donald Trump. I write more about this specific example in my analysis.

Now that I have covered the theoretical framework of my thesis by explaining and contextualizing the three most important concepts through mainly the example of the 9/11 attacks against the United States, in the next chapter I explain the method I have used to write my analysis on how these three concepts come back in US.

Method

In this chapter I explain the method I used for my analysis: neoformalism (focused on various aspects of the mise-en-scene) combined with feminist film semiotics. Hereby I look specifically at the concept of defamiliarization and the way feminist film semiotics criticizes dominant systems of power. I specifically focus on the purpose of creating meanings of symbols through their contexts and using this to comment on and criticize dominant and normative representations regarding the ‘Other’ and ‘us versus them’ mentalities, concepts I discussed before.

Neoformalist film analysis

In her chapter “Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods”, film theorist Kristin Thompson writes about (the use of) neoformalist film analyses. She describes what this method encompasses in great detail, and focuses especially on the flexibility of the method and the concept of *defamiliarization*, which she calls the main purpose of neoformalist film analyses; Thompson explains that defamiliarization is a goal of neoformalism: placing conventional aspects in a strange context to create a new meaning and interest for them.⁴³ Defamiliarization “shake[s] up accustomed habits of perception, so that we can experience a range of new things freshly.”⁴⁴ This is also what Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky meant when he coined the term in 1917: “to remove the automatism of perception.”⁴⁵ To name an example I also address in my analysis: taking scissors out of their conventional context and giving them a different purpose in a strange context (defamiliarizing the scissors) removes the automated perception and invites the audience to create new meanings, dependent on this new context. According to Thompson, art continuously changes in relation to its (historical) context, which means that the meanings people ascribe to artworks also change.⁴⁶ Art thus has no fixed meaning, and this is illustrated through the process of defamiliarization. Every film contains specific aspects that create meaning; systems of meanings are thus unique to every film. Thompson argues that this is because meanings are *devices*: “any single element or structure that plays a role in the art-work—a camera movement, a frame story, a repeated word, a

⁴³ Kristin Thompson, “Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods,” in *Breaking The Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, ed. Kristin Thompson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 32.

⁴⁴ Tom Gunning, “Reviewed Work: Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis by Kristin Thompson,” *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 52.

⁴⁵ Viktor Shklovsky, *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 19.

⁴⁶ Thompson, “Breaking the Glass Armor,” 10–11.

costume, a theme, and so on.”⁴⁷ Specific aspects – like these aesthetic elements – can thus invite the spectator to create a unique system of meanings for a film based on the way these aspects are defamiliarized.

A way in which meanings of visual aspects in a film can be researched, is by analyzing the mise-en-scene. Mise-en-scene is an important component of what David Bordwell and Thompson call ‘Film Style’: the pattern of technical choices made by the filmmaker to give a film a certain “look and feel”.⁴⁸ Mise-en-scene is an element that controls the way a shot looks: everything we see in the film belongs to the mise-en-scene; the use of color, props, costumes, performances of the actors, set-design, lighting, et cetera.⁴⁹ In this thesis, I research the mise-en-scene of *US* by carrying out the aforementioned neoformalist analysis: neoformalism is the most fitting method to use here because it focuses on the aesthetic characteristics of a film. This way it emphasizes how visual aspects of a film create meanings unique to this film.

The specific elements of the mise-en-scene I focus on are the use of color, costuming, props, set design, and performance.⁵⁰ I argue that a neoformalist analysis of these aspects makes it possible for me to analyze how the concepts of ‘othering’, ‘us versus them’ mentalities, and fear for the ‘Other’ are visually depicted in the film. For example, by closely examining the usage and function of typically American objects in the film – so by looking at the props – I can say something about what these objects symbolize (in this case: American materialism and the failure of American dream), and how they get a unique meaning in the specific context of this film. This is also how I approached the process of writing my analysis: after closely examining the film, I wrote down as much notes as I could come up with about how elements

⁴⁷ Idem., 15.

⁴⁸ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013), 111.

⁴⁹ The other element that – together with the mise-en-scene – determines what a shot looks like is the cinematography. To put it simple: cinematography is way in which the mise-en-scene is depicted. (Source: Ibid.)

⁵⁰ An explanation of these aspects of the mise-en-scene according to Bordwell and Thompson’s *Film Art: An Introduction*:

Color: Seen as a component of both set design and costuming, color can help costumes, props and set design to become meaningful within the film plot. The recurrent use of certain colors can create motifs that play a role in the plot. Colors can interact with props, set design and costumes (colors can match, contrast, make things stand out or invisibilize). (Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 118-120.)

Costuming: Costumes, the clothes that the actors wear, can play “casual roles” in film plot, signifying clues or becoming motifs, enhancing characterization or trace changes in attitudes. (Idem., 119.)

Props: Short for *property*, a prop is an object that “has a function within the ongoing action” in the film. (Idem., 117 – 118.)

Set design: The setting of a film can be an existing location or a constructed one. “The overall design of a setting can shape how we understand story action.” (Idem., 115.)

Performance: “An actor’s performance consists of visual elements (appearance, gestures, facial expressions) and sound (voice, effects).” The desired performance of an actor/actress is mostly as realistic as possible. (Idem., 131 – 133.)

of the mise-en-scene made me think of something else than what was visible at the surface: I looked at these elements and thought about what meanings they could have other than their obvious connotations; I thus actively removed (or ignored) my automated perception and analyzed aspects in the film as being defamiliarized. For example: upon seeing scissors in *Us*, I could have thought about them in a conventional way (seeing the scissors merely as tools for the physical act of cutting), but ignoring this automatic assumption and seeing how the object was defamiliarized, allowed me to argue that – in the context of this film – the scissors have a deeper and different meaning than just their conventional one. This way of approaching the film eventually enabled me to draw lines between specific meanings I had derived and thereby see how certain elements were connected to each other on a deeper and different level (except merely looking at the conventional connotations that lay on the surface), which – in turn – made me draw conclusions of what I argue the film is *really* about. In other words: by actively analyzing the visual elements of the film (the aforementioned elements of the mise-en-scene) I was able to write my analysis based on my own arguments about what the film means and how these meanings are visually symbolized.

Feminist film semiotics

I complement the method of neoformalism with the one of the approaches of feminist film analysis, and considering the idea that I specifically focus on what the mise-en-scene elements in *Us* symbolize and how they make meaning, I look at feminist film semiotics.⁵¹ My method for this thesis is thus a neoformalist film analysis complemented by feminist film semiotics. The reason behind this combined method is the sheer need I have to use both: I need neoformalism to analyze the aforementioned aspects of the mise-en-scene and to argue how these make meaning; I need feminist film semiotics to be able to argue how the visual aspects make meaning specifically within the field of gender studies. Only looking at what the symbols mean is not enough in this thesis: I wanted to look at what the symbols mean arguing from my perspective as not just a film studies graduate, but as an intersectional feminist, connecting the

⁵¹ Semiotics: “an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated” through signs, symbols and metaphors. “Its origins lie in the academic study of how signs and symbols (visual and linguistic) create meaning. (...) We need to understand the context in which a sign is communicated in order to comprehend its real meaning, and hence act appropriately.” For example: the sign ‘thumbs up’ gets its meaning according to its context: dependent on the context, ‘thumbs up’ could mean that someone did a good job or that things are okay, it could mean to go up (when diving), and hitchhikers use it to communicate to drivers that they want to hitch a ride. The meanings of images are cultured, which means that people generally know what images mean because culture taught them so. For example: most people know that the logo of the brand ‘Apple’ does not signify the actual fruit, but rather the company responsible for various technological devices. (Source: “What is Semiotics?”, Sign Salad, <https://signsalad.com/our-thoughts/what-is-semiotics/>)

unique meanings of visual aspects in the film to contemporary issues related to topics like gender, race, class, privilege, migration and prejudice.⁵²

In the introduction to her book *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Teresa de Lauretis – Distinguished Professor Emerita of the History of Consciousness at the University of California – quotes Claire Johnston's paper "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" and writes: "What the camera grasps is the "natural" world of the dominant ideology. (...) New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film."⁵³ Later on, De Lauretis writes about how feminist critique of representation criticizes the idea that images have a meaning in themselves regardless of their contexts and that viewers are immediately susceptible to such images:

*it is precisely the feminist critique of representation that has conclusively demonstrated how any image in our culture – let alone any image of woman – is placed within, and read from, the encompassing context of patriarchal ideologies, whose values and effects are social and subjective, aesthetic and affective, and obviously permeate the entire social fabric and hence all social subjects, women as well as men.*⁵⁴

This is what I argue *US* does and I try to illustrate this in my analysis: by defamiliarizing certain visual aspects in the film, new meanings are created through the disruption of a dominant ideology; meanings are created within certain contexts. You can read more about this in my analysis in the following chapter, but to already name an example: a Western dominant ideology is that a film starring a seemingly typical American patriarchal, nuclear family must ascribe the accompanying gender roles to the characters. *US* disrupts this idea by contextually upturning such heteronormative gender roles and thereby creating new meanings to these automatically assumed gender roles.⁵⁵

⁵² Intersectionality: A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality theorizes the interconnections between race, gender, class, and other axis of inequality to form an understanding of how these concepts are not separate from each other: it [intersectionality] is "the key vocabulary to signal critical scholarship on interconnections between race, gender and other structures of inequality." (Source: Katrine Smiet, "Traveling Truths: Sojourner Truth, Intersectionality and Feminist Scholarship" (PhD diss., Radboud University Nijmegen, 2016), 103.)

⁵³ Claire Johnston, "What the camera grasps..." in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, by Teresa de Lauretis (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984), 4.

⁵⁴ Idem., 38.

⁵⁵ See the my analysis for an explanation of the concept of 'heteronormativity'.

By upturning heteronormative gender roles, *US* also disregards the 'male gaze' (the way the woman is constructed through the eyes of the male audience) that is predominant in Hollywood filmmaking. Laura Mulvey, one of the most influential feminist film theorists, wrote about the male gaze that "In their traditional

Feminist film semiotics thus helped me analyze *Us* as meaningful on a deeper societal level; it allowed me to not just be a passive viewer, but an active participant, engaging with the film rather than just watching it as a distanced spectator. Feminist film semiotics enabled me to connect the film to certain meanings within societal systems: systems of power that concern issues surrounding race, gender, class, and other axes of inequality. This way, we can see how feminist film semiotics connects to neoformalist film analysis: as I just wrote, feminist film semiotics allows me to see the film as connected to a broader level of societal systems of inequality, which is comparable to the way neoformalism allows me to see the film (or certain aspects of it) as having a deeper meaning than just the conventional ones. As my neoformalist analysis shows (next chapter), the symbols in the film connect to bigger social ideologies, to a broader social context. Feminist film semiotics helped me put the symbols in such contexts. Feminist film semiotics is thus useful to my analysis because it illustrates that certain symbols and images create meanings dependent on their (social) context, and allows me to put these symbols within those contexts. By examining aspects from the *mise-en-scène* within the context of the film, I can argue what these aspects (in the form of colors, costumes, props, performances, and set design) mean, keeping in mind that the system of meaning my analysis creates is unique to this film. For example: the meaning of the color blue might mean something entirely different in a different film, all depending on the context. In this case, the context are the dominant, heteronormative ideologies and systems of power prevalent in Western societies. Feminist theory is often focused on criticizing these dominant, heteronormative societal systems that come with various forms of oppression, inclusion, exclusion and power relations. Feminist film semiotics also does this: it criticizes dominant and normative ways women are (re)presented, looked at and portrayed in film. In other words: feminist film semiotics criticizes certain power relations within the cultures of film(making). As De Lauretis points out, feminist film semiotics look at symbols and signs within their context to criticize and question dominant and (hetero)normative ways of representing women in cinema.⁵⁶ Although I do not only focus on gender in my analysis (but also on race, class, prejudice, migration and privilege), I do argue that this form of feminist research connects to these other systems of inequality as well: the

exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." By challenging normative gender roles, specifically by *not* seeing the woman characters as *to-be-looked-at* but – as you can read in the next chapter – as the most important defenders of the family, I argue that *Us* could also be seen as criticism on the 'male gaze' still prevalent in many Hollywood films today. (Source: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 62.)

⁵⁶ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 35-36.

criticism feminist film semiotics exercises towards heteronormative, dominant systems, ideologies and power relations regarding gender, could be exercised towards, for example, race or class, in the way that these axes of inequality also deal with heteronormative, dominant ideologies and systems of power. Feminist film semiotics form criticism towards unequal power relations, which are prevalent within all social demographic factors. So, although I also focus on other axes of inequality besides gender, feminist film semiotics is useful to my analysis because it allows me to connect the meanings I found in the symbols in the film to different systems of inequality and argue how the film thereby criticizes dominant, heteronormative ideologies and systems of power. This is something I aim to illustrate with my analysis by examining elements of the film in their specific context and arguing how these create meanings that are not just unique to the film but also comment on and criticize other dominant, heteronormative Western discourses regarding the 'Other'.

To keep my analysis as clear as possible, I divided it in various sections that focus on different concepts: in the first section I discuss the depiction of issues related to race and gender roles, in the second section I examine five examples in the film where the concepts of race and 'othering' intersect via costuming, props, set design, and performance. The third section is focused on the way fear for the 'Other' is illustrated through the mise-en-scene, the fourth section is called 'Privilege, materialism and classism: the American Nightmare', and the fifth and last section covers the way the almost overly apparent dualism in the film criticizes 'us versus them' mentalities symbolized in the film. By analyzing the aforementioned aspects of the mise-en-scene with feminist film semiotics in mind, I aim to eventually formulate an answer to the question of how US visually symbolizes and criticizes the contemporary Western fear for the 'Other', and thereby also say something more about the social purpose of films.

Analysis

In this chapter I start with discussing how the film addresses the concepts of race and gender. After that, I focus on the concepts of race and racism in relation to the practices of ‘othering’ in the film. Then there is a section where I pay attention to how the film depicts fear for the ‘Other’ in various examples, followed by a part about privilege, materialism and classism. The last section of this analysis is about how the film criticizes the ‘us versus them’ mentality through duality. Throughout the analysis, I focus on the mise-en-scene of the film, mainly on the use of costuming, props, colors, and performance, and how devices within these categories symbolize meanings that are unique to this film. It is important to note that this analysis does not cover the film chronologically, but rather per category. I focus on specific symbols within the mise-en-scene to illustrate how ‘othering’, fear for the ‘Other’ and an ‘us versus them’ mentality is apparent in, but also criticized by, the film. This analysis is my personal reading of the film, supplemented by existing concepts from feminist (film) theory and interview quotes by Peele himself.

Non-explicit race and gender

As the norm in Western societies is white, and as systemic racism is both a cause and product of strong ‘us versus them’ mentalities and practices of ‘othering’, I argue that it is important to look at how social issues regarding race and racism are addressed in this film.⁵⁷ As US followed GET OUT, it was logical that many audiences expected another film in which there would be a clear focus on social issues. They were right. However, the fact that US is about the holiday experiences of a black family led many to assume that the main social issue addressed in this film would be racism. They were wrong. The film does not pay explicit attention to the fact that the leading characters are black. I argue that the film makes a statement about racism by simply *not* explicitly putting the focus on race. In an interview with SXSW (South by Southwest) Peele spoke about how the film industry begins changing as soon as people can let go of certain long-held assumptions:

For so long in the industry had these baseless ideas that black people can't open movies overseas, these myths that are brought on by systemic racism. It's a self-perpetuating

⁵⁷ See my theoretical framework for explanations on white norms and the role of racism in ‘us versus them’ dynamics and practices of ‘othering’.

*prophecy. If you give people opportunities then, they have opportunities to succeed, but they also need opportunities to fail. The same way white people do.*⁵⁸

By not paying explicit attention to race, I argue that US comments on systemic racism that is apparent in many industries in the world. The idea that audiences assume that the film is about racism when they see that the leading roles are performed by black actors and actresses, indicates how this systemic racism still exists. I argue that one of the messages US tries to convey is that it does not matter what color your skin is: the practice of ‘othering’ happens everywhere. Fear for the ‘Other’ is apparent in the majority of the people, especially obvious in the Western world, regardless of skin color. The ‘Other’ can be someone of a different gender, sexuality, religion, language, class. These social demographic categories have nothing to do with race *an sich*.⁵⁹ I argue that this way, US comments on discourses about the ‘Other’ in a unique way, considering the idea that – as I established in my theoretical framework – practices of ‘othering’ and ‘us versus them’ mentalities are almost always inevitably connected to practices of racialization. By not explicitly paying attention to race, US not only emphasizes an example of the workings of systemic racism, it also offers a unique idea of how the ‘Other’, although usually historically defined as racially different from the ‘Self’, does not *necessarily* need to have another skin color.⁶⁰

I can make the same argument for gender: it does not matter what your gender is, the practice of ‘othering’ still happens. However, there is one important element in the film which I argue really has to do with the representation of gender dynamics. The family in US consists of a father, a mother, a daughter and a son. This set up illustrates but also upturns heteronormative gender roles.⁶¹ Initially, the family seems the perfect example of an American family in a patriarchal society.⁶² When the Tethered show up at the family’s beach house, Gabe

⁵⁸ George Edelman, “If Jordan Peele Isn't Pissing People Off He Says He's 'Doing it Wrong',” March 2019, No Film School, <https://nofilmschool.com/Jordan-Peele-us-lupita-nyongo>

⁵⁹ This, however, does not mean that race does not matter: although the mentioned systems have nothing to do with race (or with one another) in themselves, intersectionality teaches us that race absolutely matters, since all systems of inequality cannot be seen as separate from each other.

⁶⁰ The example of the workings of systemic racism here is the assumption that a Hollywood film with black people as leading characters should automatically be explicitly about race relations or racism.

⁶¹ Heteronormativity: “The assumption that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, ‘normal’ state for human beings because of the belief that people fall into one of other category of a strict gender binary. Thus it involves the further assumption that someone’s biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles are aligned.” (Source: John Harris and Vicky White, *A Dictionary of Social Work and Social Care* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 335.)

⁶² A patriarchal family is a family according to the rules of the patriarchy, which is a “system in which power is secured in the hands of adult men.” (Source: Ritzer and Ryan, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 441.) According to this definition, there are specific gender roles applied to the male (father) and female (mother) of

is the macho man trying to protect his family with loud words and a weapon (a baseball bat). However, Gabe proves rather useless when it comes to *actually* protecting his family: that role goes to Zora, the teenage daughter of the family. She eventually takes the lead to become the family's smartest and most effective defender. She outsmarts the Tethered, keeps calm and calculated and reasons logically at the most important moments, and she is the one Gabe is literally leaning on for support when he has an injured leg. In the scene where the Wilsons went to the Tylers' beach house, only to find themselves face to face with the Tylers' Tethereds, Adelaide emphasizes Gabe's loss of the normative father-figure role by telling him "You don't make the decisions anymore!", before Zora tentatively, but rightfully, suggests a way to escape the house where they have been slaughtering the Tylers' Tethereds.⁶³ Zora survives through her own resourcefulness and is not a helpless victim. These examples show how *Us* criticizes the normative patriarchal family: the dominant role of the father-figure as the most important and powerful protector of the family is challenged and taken over by Zora. The idea of "strong men supporting weak women" as a characteristic of heteronormative gender roles in a patriarchal society is debunked by these examples in the film.⁶⁴ I thus argue that in order for the Wilsons to survive, the hierarchal chains that come with a normative patriarchal family (and its accompanying heteronormative gender roles) had to be broken down.

This specific dynamic in which the heteronormative gender roles in a patriarchal society are challenged is, however, the only example in which gender issues are tackled in the film explicitly. *Us* has made a point of *not* making the film about issues related to race and gender, simply by casting a black woman as the lead character of the film, only to consequently *not* focus on that explicitly. I argue that this way, Peele challenges those "baseless ideas" and automatic assumptions audiences seem to have about a film with black people as successful leading characters. In this specific case the lead of the film is a woman of color, and yet her gender and race have nothing to do with the actual plot.⁶⁵ When is the last time that happened? However, the fact that the film does not explicitly pay attention to Adelaide's race and gender, does not mean that those concepts do not have any meaning in the film. On the contrary: I argue that the fact that those concepts are not explicit means a lot in itself. The idea that Adelaide's race and gender have nothing to do with the actual plot is important to me for two reasons: first,

the family: the male/father is the dominant person, the money-maker, the first protector; the female/mother does provides (unpaid) domestic services, takes care of the children.

⁶³ Jordan Peele, *Us* (2019; Austin, TX: Monkeypaw Productions, 2019), DVD.

⁶⁴ Venla Oikkonen, "Mitochondrial Eve and the Affective Politics of Human Ancestry," *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 756.

⁶⁵ See the introduction to this thesis for a brief description of the film's plot.

it is a way to make the audience reflect on their own assumptions about black characters in Hollywood films, and second, it breaks with the dominant framework of Western horror films, in which the leading character is either a (white) man or a white woman, and where the black character is either non-existent or ‘always dies first’.⁶⁶

Mise-en-scene: race and ‘othering’

In this section of my analysis, I illustrate how certain elements of the mise-en-scene of *Us* create a system of meaning that is unique to this film, with regard to race. Again, the examples I write about are not explicit in the film, but by doing a close analysis of the mise-en-scene I have found several examples in the film which I argue symbolize the issue of race, racism and current Western race relations.

The first example I analyze here is Gabe’s Howard University sweatshirt. Throughout the film, Gabe is mostly dressed in this sweatshirt. Howard University is a historically black university, which means that it is one of “the only institutions in the United States that were created for the express purpose of educating Black citizens. These institutions were established during the decades after the Civil War until 1964.”⁶⁷ More than 80% of the students attending Howard University are black or African American.⁶⁸ Howard University is one of the universities that is part of the Black Ivy League: a group of prestigious schools that were

⁶⁶ Before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, black actors almost always got stereotyping and degenerating roles; after the Civil Rights Movement, explicit racism became less acceptable, something which reflected in films of that time: black actors were more often portrayed as protagonists instead of the helpers of white people or the victims. (Source: Lee Artz, “Hegemony in Black and White: Interracial Buddy Movies and the New Racism,” in *Cultural Diversity in the United States*, ed. Yahya Kamalipour and Theresa Carilli (New York: State University, 1998), 69.) However: “In 1980s horror films the actual participation of Blacks was fairly fleeting or nonexistent. (...) Not only were the vast majority of Black characters killed off during this period, but they were often the first to die.” (Source: Robin R. Means Coleman, “Preface” & “We Always Die First – Invisibility, Racial Red-Lining, and Self-Sacrifice: 1980s” in *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, ed. Robin R. Means Coleman (New York: Routledge, 2011), xiii ; Idem., 146.) To take the specific example of a slasher (a subgenre that is generally applicable to the film *Us*), racial minorities are either excluded altogether or relegated “to the status of victims, largely undeveloped expendable characters.” (Source: Isabel Cristina Pinedo, “Race Horror” in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, ed. Isabel Cristina Pinedo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 111.) *Us* breaks with this dominant framework in the way that the black characters in the film are not just the leading roles, but they also stay alive and are generally successful in what they thrive to achieve. In fact: the ‘expendable’ characters in *Us* are not the black people, but the white ones: the superficial, largely undeveloped Tyler family, of whom we know nothing about except that they are rich.

⁶⁷ Marybeth Gasman, *The Changing Face of Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 5.

⁶⁸ “Howard University,” State University, https://www.stateuniversity.com/universities/DC/Howard_University.html



Image 1: Gabe wearing his Howard University sweatshirt.

specifically available to African-Americans before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, that pulled “the best and most privileged black students.”⁶⁹ Before the Civil Rights Movement segregation was still in full force in the United States. This means that the Black Ivy League is a group of schools that specifically came out of a historical context of segregation and racial inequality. Gabe’s Howard University sweatshirt represents Gabe as one of those “best and most privileged black students”, subtly confirming the idea that Gabe is part of a wealthy and upper class black family. However, the sweatshirt also refers to a university that was born out of American segregation practices from before the Civil Rights Movement. The shirt thus represents wealth but at the same time it points to one of the darkest parts of American history where black people were shamelessly segregated from white people. It is one of the most blatant forms of racism and by depicting the Howard University sweatshirt as a prominent piece of clothing, *US* plays with the duality of the meaning of the garment while still ensuring to bring in a historical context of ‘us versus them’ dynamics at its finest.

The second example I address is the one of the rabbits. The rabbits in *US* are one of the most recurring symbols in the film. The film begins with showing 11 rows of caged rabbits, Zora wears a shirt with a rabbit on it, Zora wears another shirt with the word ‘thỏ’ on it (which is the Vietnamese word for ‘rabbit’), Adelaide finds the underground tunnels where the Tethered live and literally goes down the rabbit hole, numerous rabbits hop around in the underground tunnels at the end of the film, and in the final scene we see that Jason has taken a rabbit with him. When the Tethered first introduce themselves to the Wilson

⁶⁹ Jacqueline Fleming, *Blacks In College: A comparative study of student success in Black and White institutions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 159.



Image 2: Rows of predominantly white caged rabbits.

family, Red explains that the rabbits are used for food. However, I argue that the rabbits are not *just* for meat. As I just wrote, the film begins with showing 11 rows of caged rabbits. The majority of these caged rabbits are white. The rest of the rabbits are brown or black. I argue that this small detail is important because to me, it is a representation of the white majority and black minority that are all in the same situation. There is no difference in the situation of the rabbits: they are all caged, regardless of their color. The only difference is that there are more white than black rabbits. This can be seen as criticism on the ‘us versus them’ concept: even though someone looks different from us, that does not mean they *are* different, or that their situation is different. Perhaps the message of this caged-rabbit scene is that we should look beyond what is on the outside, and realize that ‘they’ are not so different from ‘us’. Some have “very wrong ideas about the ambition, ability, and economic status of those who do not present the same outward appearance”.⁷⁰ Exclusion is “usually based on some external identifier; such as, ethnicity, nationality, gender, accent, etc.”⁷¹ While our external identifiers, just like our ambitions, abilities, and economic statuses, amongst other things, make us all individually unique and therefore different from one another, the truth remains that we are all human beings. Underneath all those factors that make us so different from each other, we are the same species. This is how I interpret the deeper meaning behind the differently colored caged rabbits.

Thirdly, there is the underground. The very beginning of the film is a text that explains that the United States is built on underground tunnels of which nobody actually knows anything: “There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States... Abandoned

⁷⁰ Amy M. Hamburger, “The Cripple and His Place in the Community,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 77, no. 1 (Spring 1918): 44.

⁷¹ John Evans, “The Use of Othering in the Formation of a Nationalist Society,” (Scholarly article, Portland State University), 2-3.

subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mine shafts... Many have no known purpose at all.”⁷² Eventually it is revealed that the Tethered (and the rabbits) live in these underground tunnels. I argue that these tunnels represent more than just a place to live for the Tethered and the rabbits. To me, the underground tunnels represent the American history of segregation, slavery and racism and how this history is often ‘erased’. The United States is built on a history of slavery and racism; wherever you go, there is something underneath the surface that people do not think about. This is an example of ‘erased history’.⁷³ The era right after Barack Obama won American presidency in 2008 is by some deemed as ‘post-racial’ as “dominant discourse holds that Obama’s election proved the end of racism.”⁷⁴ “We are now in a 21st-century post-partisan, post-racial society,” said right-winged media host Lou Dobbs shortly after the elections.⁷⁵ There was the idea that talking about race was taboo and that the existence of a black president meant the extinction of racism.⁷⁶ As if one black president could end decades upon decades of American racism. As author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote:

*How can it be that, with some regularity, the news describes the shooting of an unarmed African American by the very police officers sworn to protect Americans? (...) From the days of slave patrols, through the era of lynching and work farms, into this time of mass incarceration, criminal justice has been the primary tool for managing the divide between black and white. (...) [This] programming does not require a critical mass of evil racists in order to be carried out. And we will need a lot more than a good president—than a great president—to terminate it.*⁷⁷

⁷² Jordan Peele, *Us* (2019; Austin, TX: Monkeypaw Productions, 2019), DVD.

⁷³ Erased history: specific contributions to history, such as black and lesbian feminist contributions, are erased by the dominant, normative, patriarchal accounts of history, silencing the formers’ voices. The history of slavery, or of colonial oppression, is often erased as in: not talked about, ignored, seen as not important, or only discussed from a one-sided point of view.

⁷⁴ Bettina L. Love and Brandelyn Tosolt, “Reality or Rhetoric? Barack Obama and Post-Racial America,” *Race, Gender & Class* 17, no. 3/4 (2010): abstract.

⁷⁵ Dobbs calls on listeners to rise above “partisan and racial element that dominates politics”, video file, 1:32, Media Matters, posted 2009, <https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2009/11/12/dobbs-calls-on-listeners-to-rise-above-partisan/156917>

⁷⁶ Marlow Stern, “‘Get Out’: How Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton Inspired the Year’s Best Horror Movie,” July 2017, The Daily Beast, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/get-out-how-barack-obama-and-hillary-clinton-inspired-the-years-best-horror-movie>

⁷⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “There Is No Post-Racial America,” July/August 2015, The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/post-racial-society-distant-dream/395255/>

“There is no post-racial America”; racism is still apparent everywhere in many societies on Earth.⁷⁸ It is, however, often seen as something that should not be talked about. Racism becomes something underground, something people do not (want to) see (and Obama’s election provided an excuse to sweep the problem of racism under the carpet), but is apparent in the very foundations of the country. Many instances have always disproven and still disprove the existence of a post-racial society, such as high rates of racially motivated police brutality, mass shootings, mass incarceration, scapegoating, and the Charlottesville tragedy in 2017, caused by groups of the so-called ‘alt-right’ movement. American is built upon underground tunnels in US, and America is built upon racism and – with Donald Trump’s ideals and the rise of the ‘alt-right’ movement – still builds upon that. I argue that this is what the underground tunnels represent: racist foundations of the United States that so many people choose to ignore because it is either taboo or because they believed that Obama cured racism.

To continue the theme of ‘erased history’, my fourth example is the hall of mirrors on the Santa Cruz beach. As a young Adelaide wanders off from her parents (while her parents are both not paying attention to her) towards the beach, she gets lured by the interesting looks of a funhouse. This funhouse – a hall of mirrors – is called “Shaman’s Vision Quest”. A cartoonish Native American figure is draped over the name, echoing the Native American genocide that lies at the foundations of America. Adelaide ventures into this funhouse and this is where she first meets her Tethered. Decades later, Adelaide and her family return to their Santa Cruz beach house. In one scene of the film, the family visits the beach. Adelaide looks purposely for the funhouse she visited all those years ago, and at that moment we see that the name of the hall of mirrors has been changed. Shaman Vision Quest has changed into a more politically correct



Image 3: ‘Shaman’s Vision Quest’ at the beginning of the film.

⁷⁸ Ibid.



Image 4: 'Shaman's Vision Quest' changed into 'Merlin's Forest'.

"Merlin's Forest". There is no remainder of its racial, settler colonialist past. The subtle change of the name and the removal of the Native American figure (which is replaced by a Gandalf-like wizard) represents the erasure of a horrific part of American history that is characterized by racism and an occupation of space.⁷⁹ The more politically correct name of the funhouse represents the idea that race and the colonialist history is often not talked about, that it is regarded as a taboo, and that many people choose to ignore the acts of racism and colonialism that American is built on and continues to build on. I argue that this detail is a perfect example of how political correctness works in the contemporary United States to erase certain parts of history.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ "(...) characterizations of indigenous people and societies" as inferior in mind and body "justified enslavement and colonization." The inferiority of indigenous people was determined by European colonizers based primarily on differences in skin color, language, dietary habits, hygiene rituals, and religion. (Source: Sean P. Harvey, "Ideas of Race in Early America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, last modified 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-262>)

⁸⁰ Although I write specifically about the United States here, erasing history through changing names and objects also happens in other parts of the world. For example, there have been recent debates in The Netherlands about changing the names of various schools and streets, and taking down statues of Dutch people who have played an important role in the Dutch colonialist history, because they refer back to the Dutch history of colonialism. The changes would be in favor of those offended by the names and statues. This is understandable. However, changing those names and taking down statues could consequently cause for an erasure of this colonial history from the public memory. Another example is the censoring of the Tiananmen Square protests that happened in China from April 15th until June 4th 1989 (which was, at the time of writing, exactly 30 years ago). Around the anniversary of the event every year, China's Google services shut down, search terms related to the protests are blocked, journalists and artists writing about the event are arrested, and the massacre has been erased from history lessons in Chinese schools. China literally rewrites its own history books with the goal of erasing the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre from the public memory. These are only two of many examples of nations trying to erase negative aspects of the past. Although the historic events surrounding Dutch colonialism and the Tiananmen Square protests are indeed horrible, I do

A last example of how race and ‘othering’ intersect through the mise-en-scene is the twist ending. In the ending of the film, it is revealed that Adelaide is actually Red. The two switched places when Adelaide visited the funhouse on the beach as a little girl and met her Tethered. We see a flashback where Adelaide (actually Red) gets strangled by Red (actually Adelaide). The little girl from the underground did no longer want to live an unprivileged life inside the tunnels and therefore switched herself with the girl from the surface. I argue that not only the fact that Adelaide is Red and vice versa confirms the idea that the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is not so clear and that in reality, *they are us*; I also argue that the point of the twist was that nobody could tell the difference. Not the audience members, not Adelaide/Red’s own family. The horror here is not the twist itself, but the fact that an entire person got replaced by a copy and for the entire film *nobody could tell the difference*. As long as it looked the same on the outside, it did not matter what was on the inside. I argue that this is a commentary on how people tend to look too much on what is on the outside. In their text “‘Who wants to feel white?’ Race, Dutch culture and contested identities” Philomena Essed – Professor of Critical Race, Gender and Leadership Studies at Antioch University – and cultural sociologist Sandra Trienekens write that “skin colour as a racist marker of belonging should not be underestimated”.⁸¹ They give examples of instances where skin color is directly related to one’s status of being either an allochthone or autochthone.⁸² From the examples it becomes apparent that people who have a white skin color are not seen as allochthone, while those with a non-white skin color are.⁸³ In other words: people are judged on whether they are a ‘real’ Dutch citizen based on what they look like on the outside. Considering this, I argue that the ending of the film I addressed above, with the twist that reveals the little girls were switched – and nobody could tell the difference because too much focus is put on what is on the outside – refers to racism and discourses around immigration. As Essed and Trienekens already illustrate, these two are inevitably connected to each other. To take an example from The Netherlands: when the debate about immigration rises, people tend to automatically talk about immigration from North-African, East-European, and West-Asian countries. Immigration from Western countries is hardly ever discussed in public debate or the media. Systemic racism is prevalent in many Western discourses on immigration, where white immigrants are favored over non-white

argue that they should not be erased, forgotten, or ignored. We should learn from history, not forget or ignore it happened.

⁸¹ Essed and Trienekens, “‘Who wants to feel white?’,” 58.

⁸² See my theoretical framework for an explanation of the concepts ‘allochthone’ and ‘autochthone’.

⁸³ Essed and Trienekens, “‘Who wants to feel white?’,” 58.

immigrants, which has everything to do with the practices of ‘stereotyping’ and ‘othering’ by – amongst others – the media:

*(...) moderate voices from the Muslim community are routinely omitted from news coverage, an absence that confirms public stereotyping of all Muslims as extremists. While this omission predates September 11, it has intensified since; domestic news sources “seldom mention the terms ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’ except in the context of conflict, violence, and bloodshed”.*⁸⁴

This is part of the construction of the earlier discussed “enemy-Other”, the ‘Other’ who is dehumanized and devaluated by the media, causing for a certain representation of this ‘Other’ to become the mainstream idea.⁸⁵ An example would be: ‘All Muslims are terrorists’, a (not uncommon) Western generalization born out of post-9/11 practices of ‘othering’ and the consequent ‘us versus them’ mentality. Here, the focus is too much on the outside instead of the inside, and I argue that that is exactly what the big plot twist at the end of US represents.

Fear for the ‘Other’

I argue that fear for the ‘Other’ is what US is actually about, and that this was also the message Peele tried to convey to his audiences. Several times in the film, fear for the ‘Other’ is symbolized, as some examples above show. In this section, I discuss several more examples of how the fear for the ‘Other’ is symbolized through the mise-en-scene in US.

The biggest symbol for creating a distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, for trying to keep ‘them’ out, for sustaining the ‘us versus them’ mentality, is a wall.⁸⁶ The symbol of a wall is prevalent through the entire film. The film opens with a television advertisement of the Hands Across America event that took place on the 25th of May 1986. After the success of Live-Aid in 1985, Hands Across America was organized by Ken Kragen as a project of USA for Africa to raise awareness about homelessness and hunger across the world.⁸⁷ The idea was that as

⁸⁴ Steuter and Wills, “Discourses of Dehumanization,” 10-11.

⁸⁵ Steuter and Wills, “Infestation and Eradication”, 13-14 & Steuter and Wills, “Discourses of Dehumanization,” 8-9.

⁸⁶ Many historic examples could be addressed here where a wall both a symbol and a literal object that keeps ‘them’ out and ‘us’ in: the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, the Israeli West Bank barrier, and more recent examples: the Hungarian border barrier and the infamous Trump wall, the Mexico–United States barrier.

⁸⁷ USA (United Support of Artists) for Africa was a music group that united to feed and relieve starving people in Africa. USA for Africa recorded a single “We Are The World”. The revenues of this single combined with those of the Hands Across America event raised almost 100 million dollars to fight hunger and homelessness in the United States and famine in Africa.

many Americans as possible should form a big line (or *wall*) across the country by holding hands for 15 minutes.⁸⁸ In *Us*, young Adelaide watches the commercial, which seems to have impressed her. As I explained before, Adelaide and Red were actually switched, which means that the Red we know is actually Adelaide and vice versa. Red wants to re-enact the events of the Hands Across America campaign now that the Tethered have risen to the surface. *Us* ends with the image of numerous Tethered holding each other's hands across America. Also, in one of the scenes in the second half of the film, we see Red cutting out red paper figures who are all holding hands. However, the Tethered do not do this for charity. The exact reason why they desperately want to re-enact the Hands Across America gesture is not given by the film, but I argue that it is because, on the one hand, it is the last thing Adelaide/Red sees in the media before she is swapped with Red/Adelaide, and she wanted a big symbolic act while bringing the Tethered to the surface. On the other hand I think that the wall created as a result of many people holding hands symbolizes the separation Red/Adelaide might feel from their mirror selves. I argue that – with this symbol of a wall – Peele reframes the Hands Across America campaign to not symbolize unity, but separation, to show that many people turn a blind eye to social problems instead of actually joining hands to do something about it. According to me, it is simultaneously a commentary on certain wall-building practices currently executed by Donald Trump, a wall that has nothing to do with unity but only ensures a separation of people, with the goal to 'keep *them* out'. However, if we distance ourselves too much from the 'Other', one of us is bound to get hurt (or even killed). This latter part is represented in the scene where Jason indirectly kills his Tethered Pluto. In the scene, Pluto is about to drop a match into a pool of gasoline that leads back to the Wilsons' car. Behind Pluto, there is another car already ablaze. Jason knows that Pluto is identical to him in many ways, so he tries something. Spreading out his arms, Jason sees Pluto doing the same. Jason then proceeds to walk backwards, only for Pluto to do the same. While Jason's walk backwards is safe, Pluto's is not: the Tethered walks into the fire behind him and dies. The creation of distance in this case killed one of the two young boys. Perhaps this is a call for actual unity, and not unity by some forced charity line.

One of the props that plays an important role in *Us* are the scissors.⁸⁹ As might have been established by now, in Peele's films nothing is what seems. This goes for the scissors as

⁸⁸ The event raised only 34 million dollars (which is a lot of money in itself, but not if you consider that the event was planned to raise 50 to 100 million dollars), of which a mere 15 million dollars was actually distributed to charity after deducing the operating costs (Source: Tyler Coates, "Why Hands Across America Is So Vital to Jordan Peele's *Us*," March 2019, *Esquire*, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a26883876/hands-across-america-us-movie-explained/>)

⁸⁹ The scissors are the only object that the Tethered seem to have with them all the time. Most film posters of *Us* also display the scissors in some way or another.

well: they are mainly used as objects that look threatening and it *seems* like they are the murder weapons, while in reality, they are barely used as murder weapons at all. The scissors have more of a symbolic value than a practical one. Where the previously mentioned wall symbolizes the separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’, scissors symbolize the cutting of ties between ‘us’ and ‘them’. They symbolize the Tethered’s desire to become independent forces, instead of having to live their lives as underprivileged copies of their mirror images on the surface. The scissors symbolize the Tethered cutting themselves loose from the Wilson family and replacing them as the only versions of themselves. This again points to the concept of fearing the ‘Other’: Americans (in this case, but doubtlessly people from other continents as well) typically view outsiders and ‘Others’ as a threat, as invaders trying to take over their country, replace them in their jobs, and cause criminality rates to rise. As the aforementioned wall Trump is building is a literal attempt to keep people either in or out of the country, I argue that Peele uses the scissors as a symbol of cutting ‘them’ off, which essentially means – considering that *they are us* – cutting off a part of ourselves.⁹⁰ It is thus more about the symbolic meaning of the scissors than the actual cutting action. As Peele told Entertainment Weekly: “I think rabbits and scissors, they’re both scary things to me, and both inane things, so I love subverting and bringing out the scariness in things you wouldn’t necessarily associate with that.”⁹¹ By letting them symbolize various things dependent on the context of the film, and by mostly *not* letting them fulfill their conventional purpose (physically cutting things), the scissors are thus *defamiliarized*.⁹²

One of the things I learned from writing my bachelor thesis on *GET OUT* is that everything in Peele’s films has a deeper meaning, including the colors. In this case, I look at the colors red and blue, which I argue have a special role in *US*. The fact that the colors red and

⁹⁰ This symbolic meaning of the scissors could be connected to theory about abjection: “it should be stressed that the Other has also been conceptualized as being not only external to the Self, rather, the very threatening connotations of ‘otherness’ become extremely significant when recognizing the ‘other in oneself’ (Kristeva 1991).” (Source: Domitilla Olivieri, “Haunted by Reality” (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2012), 23.) This ‘otherness’ in ourselves could be something that we want to cut off, because we consider it abject: when you are born, you do not know the difference between the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. In order to become a ‘Self’, you have to create a separation between yourself and the ‘Other’. We are distinct, separate, so we have to psychologically throw (or cut) off things that threaten our boundaries, our sense of self. The stuff that threatens our being is stuff that terrifies us. Like horror. Things in society that terrify us are abject. A corpse could be abject: it threatens our boundaries of life, therefore it terrifies us. Blackness could also be abject. It terrifies, it scares, it threatens your own boundaries because you are white. Queerness could be abject as well: it terrifies and scares and threatens your boundaries because you are straight. (Source: Edward Akintola Hubbard, “Intersection of gender, race and culture: Why Race?” (classroom lecture, Postcolonial Configurations, Utrecht, November 15, 2017).)

⁹¹ Trish Bendix, “What Do The Scissors Mean In ‘Us’? Jordan Peele Is A Master At Finding The Terrifying In The Mundane,” March 2019, Bustle, <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-do-the-scissors-mean-in-us-jordan-peele-is-a-master-at-finding-the-terrifying-in-the-mundane-16967294>

⁹² See my method section or an explanation of the concept of *defamiliarization*.

blue (in combination) repeatedly appear throughout the film is relevant when the colors are associated with *political color*: colors that (un)officially represent a political party.⁹³ I argue that the juxtaposition of the colors red and blue symbolize the political division in America between the Republicans and the Democrats.⁹⁴ In the case of the United States, the color red represents the Republican Party and the conservative states, while the color blue represents the Democratic Party and the liberal states. This political distinction plays an important role in American race relations, and therefore in American ideas about ‘us versus them’ and their fear for the ‘Other’: in general, the Republican Party votes against affirmative action in favor of racial minorities and pleads for stricter border controls and a serious limit to immigration; the Democratic Party is generally more sympathetic towards racial minorities and pleads for an open immigration policy.⁹⁵

This political distinction represented by the colors red and blue are apparent in several scenes in *US*. First, there are two scenes in which there is a clear juxtaposition of red and blue: one of which is a scene on the beach in the first half of the film. A red frisbee disc lands on a white-with-blue-dotted blanket on the ground, perfectly covering one blue dot. In another scene, we can see a painting hanging in above the fireplace of the Wilson’s beach house in the scene where they are face-to-face with their Tethered. The painting depicts a figure dressed in red in the foreground of the image, while figures dressed in blue are painted vaguely, blurrily, and in the background behind the red figure (which is painted more clearly and distinguishable). Although there are quantitatively more blue figures in the painting, the red figure stands out as the most dominant figure. Both examples show red as the dominant color to blue, which to me

⁹³ “Political colour,” The Free Dictionary, <https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Political+colour>

⁹⁴ Red and blue (and white) are the most important colors for everything American. A first thing these colors are associated with are the American flags: the national flag as well as the majority of the State flags, territorial flags and flags of the army and marines are colored in red, white and blue. (Source: “Historical Flags of the United States,” US Flag Depot, <https://www.usflagdepot.com/store/page1.html>) This color combination is also used in a flag that in itself says a lot about the separation between a certain group of people from the rest: the confederate flag. This controversial flag is often regarded as symbol for racism, slavery, segregation and white supremacy. (Source: Ta-Nehisi Coates, “What This Cruel War Was Over,” June 2015, The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/what-this-cruel-war-was-over/396482/>) In the 1950s and 1960s, the confederate flag was still used by conservative political parties to fight desegregation and maintain a white supremacist mentality. (Source: John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 294.) Needless to say, this flag comes with connotations of an ‘us versus them’ mentality interwoven in racist practices, as the Confederate States were the ones that subordinated racial minorities and defended slavery and segregation.

⁹⁵ Giulia Squadrin, “Difference Between Democrat and Republican,” November 2018, DifferenceBetween, <http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/politics/difference-between-democrat-and-republican/#ixzz5FhHwLhgO>



Image 5: The red with blue painting in the background refers to political colors.

illustrates Republican conservatives as the dominant group to Democratic liberals. Having established that this film is essentially about the fear for the ‘Other’, I argue that Peele’s use of the colors red and blue in US shows that the fear for the ‘Other’ is more strongly apparent in Republican conservative groups than Democratic liberal ones. The idea that a fear for the ‘Other’ is something felt more strongly in Republican conservative groups, is thus symbolized by the fact that there is a stronger emphasis on the color red. Not only does the red frisbee completely cover the blue dot and is the person in red in the painting clearer and in the foreground to the vague figures in blue in the background, but Adelaide’s double is literally called ‘Red’, and all the Tethered are dressed in red jumpsuits. The Tethered want to re-enact Hands Across America, which originally happened during the Reagan era. Reagan was a Republican. This can also be connected to a more recent Republican president: on the 16th of May 2019, Donald Trump gave a speech in which he talked about his new immigration plans, which – in short – concluded that immigrants are welcome as long as they contribute to American interests.⁹⁶ It is all very nationalist and although Trump seems to try to come over as

⁹⁶ Trump wants to fully stop illegal immigration, full protection of the border (with his wall), and establish a “new legal immigration system that protects American wages, promoted American values, and attracts the best and brightest from all around the world.” He wants to accept only immigrants who are extremely smart and have something to offer the country: only high skilled immigrants are allowed. He also said that “Foreign workers are coming in and they’re taking the jobs that would normally go to American workers. America’s immigration system should bring in people who will expand opportunity for striving, low income Americans; not to compete with those low income Americans.” In addition to these claims, he wants to replace the random Green Card policy with a ‘Build America’ visa: the selection of who gets inside America will no longer be random but based on clear conditions and a point system, where you get more points if you are younger (which is ageist), if you are providing a valuable skill (which he does not specify. Who even gets to decide what is seen as a valuable skill?), or if you have interesting plans to create jobs *in America for Americans*. Immigrants will thus no longer be allowed to bring their spouses and children into the United States (which the existing immigration system does allow), instead replacing this system with one based on the value of the migrants’

tolerant, accepting and progressive with his new immigration plans, the outcome will still be: *America first*, regardless of how.⁹⁷ The Republican president is well-known for his American nationalism, and in many cases, his nationalism is embedded in the repelling of the ‘Other’. I argue that this way, nationalism is a main recipe for forging an enemy-Other and creating and distributing a fear for the ‘Other’.⁹⁸ The fear is mostly spread by Republicans because they *feel* this fear the most, and I argue that US lays a clear emphasis on this fear coming mostly from the Republican side of America’s political spectrum by emphasizing the use of the color red throughout the film, specifically connecting it to the Tethered.

Privilege, materialism and classism: the American Nightmare

Another big theme in the film is the failure of the American dream. After having paid close attention to the way privilege, materialism and classism are represented in the film, I use this section of my analysis to argue how the mise-en-scene in US symbolizes the failure of the American dream.⁹⁹ There is one distinct scene in which the difference in privileges of the Wilsons and the Tethered is explained. In the scene where the Tethered are sitting opposite of the family Wilson inside their beach house, Red speaks:

skills and merit. (Source: *BREAKING: President Trump MAJOR Immigration Policy Proposal*, video file, 24:55, YouTube, posted May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Xg25iv5gPY>)

⁹⁷ Perhaps it is better to rename the slogan ‘America first’ to ‘Trump first’, considering the fact that the idea of ‘America first’ more often than not only applies to wealthy, white, autochthone, heteronormative, Republican and Christian Americans, in other words: Americans like Trump.

⁹⁸ “nationalism has employed a tool by which it separates us from them, the nation from the barbarians. It creates a paradigm in which members of the nation begin to separate themselves from any that do not fit within the typology of the nation. It draws lines, it bifurcates, it divides, it separates; yet this process is seldom peaceful and never without the infliction of pain. Indeed, this process of division is the very root of evil within nationalism. Othering, otherness creation, and exclusion, all refer to the process in which groups or their individuals are defined by the social majority as different, incompatible, unworthy, or otherwise unwanted or ostracized. This act results in the dichotomist formation of an us-group and a them-group, or in some places an in-group and out-group.” (Source: Evans, “The Use of Othering in the Formation of a Nationalist Society,” 2.)

⁹⁹ To shortly define privilege, materialism and classism in this context (Source: “privilege”; “materialism”; and “classism”, Dictionary, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/privilege>;

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/materialism?s=t>; <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/classism>.)

Privilege: a right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person beyond the advantages of most. One could be privileged based on skin color, gender, class, income, birth country, job, abilities, etc.

Materialism: preoccupation with material objects, comforts, and considerations. Having the most/best material goods is seen as the most important privilege, the solution to problems, the ultimate destination.

Classism: a biased or discriminatory attitude based on distinctions made between social or economic classes. Classism is related to both privilege and materialism. Those in the upper class of a society usually have more privileges than those in lower classes. Classicism is also related to materialism as it is related to *owning things*. To own a nice car, expensive clothes and the newest technologies might be an indicator of belonging to the upper class, of being more economically privileged than others.

*Once upon a time, there was a girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected. Tethered together. When the girl ate, the food was given to her warm and tasty. But when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbit, raw and bloody. At Christmas, the girl received wonderful toys, soft and cushy, while the shadow's toys were so sharp and cold they sliced through her fingers when she tried to play with them. The girl met a handsome prince and fell in love, but the shadow, at that same time, met Abraham. It didn't matter if she loved him or not; he was tethered to the girl's prince after all. Then the girl had her first child. A beautiful baby girl. But the shadow, she gave birth to a little monster. Umbrae was born laughing. The girl had a second child, a boy this time. They had to cut her open and take him from her belly. The shadow had to do it all herself. She named him Pluto, he was born to love fire.*¹⁰⁰

This is not just a way for Red to tell her how she (as the shadow) suffered while Adelaide (as the girl) thrived; I argue that a bigger meaning lies behind Red's monologue, namely the wealth differences within America. The American/Western society knows an obsession with material objects while those less wealthy are left to suffer. Class differences are big and the capitalist system often ensures wealth for a small percentage while the most people suffer to keep up financially. What Red comments on in her monologue is another example of an 'us versus them' dynamic, where the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is based on privileges, class differences, and materialism. Those who live in the underground (literally!) have much less privileges, material, and money, and are therefore often looked down upon by those on the surface who actually *can* keep their heads above water. Some Americans who live a privileged life are ignorant to fellow Americans who are suffering right under their noses. It is classism at its finest, and Red's monologue gives a clear example of this by downsizing the situation to only her Tethered family and the Wilsons. In her monologue, she actually both symbolizes and criticizes the idea of a separation between 'us' and 'them', because besides representing class differences, Red specifically mentions that the shadow and the girl are connected. Everything that happens to the girl, also happens to the shadow, only in some kind of contrasted universe. When Gabe asks the Tethered in the same scene "Who are you?", Red's response is: "We're Americans." All of the Tethered have a person on the surface they are inevitably connected to. They are not different: they are the same as us. *They are us*. They are just faced with different privileges, material belongings and class for reasons nobody really knows. Sounds familiar?

¹⁰⁰ Jordan Peele, *Us* (2019; Austin, TX: Monkeypaw Productions, 2019), DVD.

Another way in which materialism is discussed is through the actual materials used in the film: the props. Much of the American Dream is based on *stuff*, on having the biggest boat, the fastest car, the best technology. Material prosperity plays a big part in the promise of the American Dream, as it also does in US. Where material prosperity is a part of making the American Dream come true, the materials in US are not used to make anyone happy: they are used to kill. The weapons that are used to kill in the film are not actual weapons (not guns, swords or any kind of stereotypical ‘weapon’): the real murder weapons are upper class materials that so often symbolize the American Dream: a baseball bat, a boat, a golf putter, Amazon Alexa, a flare gun from the boat, a decorative amethyst crystal, a land rover. All these *things* are supposed to indicate wealth and economic privilege, but in reality they are doing more harm than good. They are murder weapons. Cause of death: materialism.

I would like to spend a part of this section of my analysis to the character of Gabe. Gabe is essentially the personification of American (or perhaps more accurately: Western) materialism. I have already discussed how Gabe’s Howard University sweatshirt represents his wealth and privilege, but more things about Gabe seem to symbolize the American Dream and its materialism. Throughout the film we see a lot of characters who all seem to have nice stuff. One example is Gabe and his boat. A boat is the ultimate symbol of expendable income for many Americans: something only meant for leisure and relaxation that costs a lot to buy and maintain and which is probably only used a handful of times a year. Gabe is achieving the dream: happily showing off his brand new boat. However, the boat is slightly too small to fit a family of four and it does not work perfectly (it randomly turns off and has a pull to the left, causing it to go mostly in circles, not going forward, *not progressing in time*). It is the American Dream in name, but in substance it is empty. Also, after the Tylers are killed in their (bigger, prettier) house by their Tethered, Gabe still sees the *stuff* as the things that are going to protect him: “We got everything we need here: food, water, back-up generator.”¹⁰¹ Materialism is Gabe’s shield and solution. When the Wilsons’ beach house is invaded by the Tethered, Gabe’s first reaction is to offer the Tethered material goods to make them go away, which is a direct nod to the perceived power of capitalism in making your problems go away. Gabe offers up the boat, offers to empty his bank account, but the irony is that all this *stuff* is not protecting anyone; it is instead killing everyone. As discussed above: even though scissors are the main weapon,

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

they rarely actually kill anyone. All the killing is done with symbols of the American upper class, defamiliarized into murder weapons.¹⁰²

The evolution of Adelaide's character is also something I would like to shortly address here. At first in the film, Adelaide was not ready to fight. She seemed to take things easy, was not aggressive at all and tried to outsmart her opponents rather than hurting them. Throughout the film, Adelaide's white shirt becomes more red, until the piece of clothing is blood soaked at the end. This shows how Adelaide changed her approach from pacifistic to violent. She became a monster to protect her privileges: a nice beach house, a boat, a car, a family of her own, wealth and love. She became the monster she feared, but it all sounds reasonable because she tries to protect what she has. That is, until you realize at the end of the film that Adelaide is actually Red and vice versa. At the end of the film it is revealed that the woman we know as Adelaide is actually Red: as little girls, they switched places in the mirror house. The Adelaide we know wants to protect the privileges she had already taken in the first place when she switched places with Red. The reason why Adelaide and Red switched is because Red did not want the underprivileged life she would lead in the underground; she wanted the life of her double at the surface. The girls switched places, the original Adelaide came to live in the



Images 6 and 7: left we see Adelaide in the beginning of the film (clean), right we see her at the ending (bloodied).

¹⁰² Such as the baseball bat, which is one of the clearest examples of a material object that symbolizes the United States. The appearance of a baseball bat almost always indicates something American. "Nowadays, baseball is considered to be the integral part of America's national leisure time." (Source: "Essay on Baseball, the American Dream," Essay, <https://www.essay.ws/essay-on-baseball-the-american-dream/>) Considering that "access to leisure remains relatively open for members of the wealthiest classes", I argue that baseball symbolizes the upper class, since it is seen as an integral part of America's national leisure and leisure is mostly open to the wealthiest classes. (Source: Jeff Rose, "Leisure and Social Class," in *Diversity and Inclusion in the Recreation Profession: Organizational Perspectives*, ed. Ingrid E. Schneider and B. Dana Kivel (Urbana: Sagamore Publishing, 2016), 128.)

underground – thereby becoming Red – and the original Red took the place (and name) of Adelaide, which is something the film already hints at by making Adelaide literally more red with blood as the film progresses. By becoming Adelaide, the original Red ensured her own life would be filled with wealth and love, knowing Adelaide's life would be her original life consisting of the pain and coldness that comes with living in the underground tunnels. Realizing this reminded me of America's colonial past, where European colonizers settled in the west coast of a country we now know as the United States, exterminated the indigenous people in this country, only to currently fear exactly that which they were years ago: the 'Other', 'the outsider', the immigrant, who are feared for taking over the American country and jobs. (America is, after all, a nation of immigrants.) There is an obvious parallel here: Adelaide represents the colonizer who settled on American land, eradicated the original inhabitants, and now fears those who might come and take over her own life. Adelaide's privilege is a stolen one that she tried to protect by becoming the monster she always feared.

With all these examples of how materialism is something that causes more harm than it makes people happy, *US* turns the American Dream into an American Nightmare. Materialism, just as unequal privileges and class differences, only work to enhance 'us versus them' dynamics as those living a privileged life can (and often do) choose to ignore fellow Americans ("we're Americans") who are suffering right under their noses. Campaigns like Hands Across America have proven to be ineffective, and with a president who does not shy away from racism, transphobia, and disregard to anyone who does not directly provide profit for the United States, it seems that the 'us versus them' mentality is still going strong. This might sound negative or pessimistic, but this is exactly what I argue *US* is trying to point out: so many things happen in the (Western) world that enhance practices of 'othering' and in effect maintain the 'us versus them' mentality, that we collectively tend to forget to first look at ourselves instead of pointing the finger. It reflects the fear for the 'Other' that is so apparent these days and seems to comment on this by saying 'they are not different from us, they are the same, *they are us* and maybe we should change our way of looking at them, perhaps by putting ourselves in their position: look at yourself, reflect upon your own actions, and perhaps change. Instead of pointing a finger, look at yourself first.' The problem of thinking in an 'us versus them' distinction to which practices of 'othering' contribute is not something confined to America only: it is something that happens all over the Western world. Think of populist political leaders such as Geert Wilders in The Netherlands and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Although these people did not invent fear for the 'Other', the unacceptance, dehumanization and devaluation of the 'Other' they seem to practice, encourage and propagandize is a real problem. I argue this film

comments on this in subtle and less subtle ways through the mise-en-scene, as I have illustrated in my analysis above.

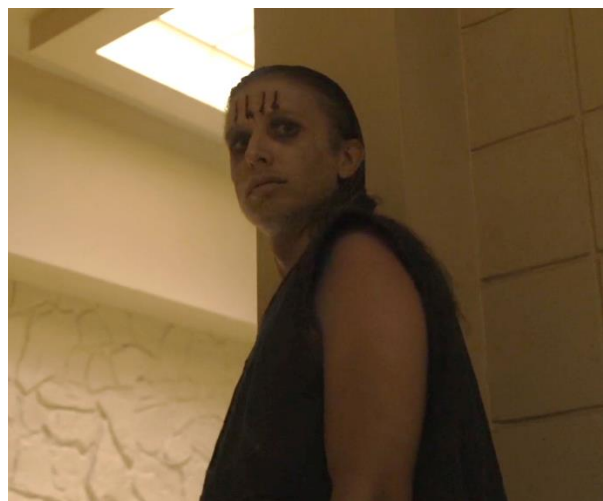
‘Us versus them’ criticism in duality

Throughout my analysis so far, the concept of duality has come back several times.¹⁰³ This is no coincidence: the concept of duality is one of the most prevalent concepts throughout the entire film. In this section of my analysis I discuss several examples of this duality in *US* and argue how they are relevant to the film’s symbolization of ‘us versus them’ dynamics and the practice of ‘othering’.

Duality in *US* is apparent in many instances. First, the title itself: ‘*Us*’ refers both to the word ‘us’, which gets its specific meaning once you realize the film is about ‘us versus them’ and that actually *they are us*. Besides the dictionary meaning of the word, it is also an abbreviation for the United States, which is the location of the events in this film and the country that the film seems to criticize the most (American politics, American immigration plans, American fear for the ‘Other’, American racism, American Dream).¹⁰⁴ Then the characters themselves: each character is a pair: each character has a mirror image living in the underground or on the surface. The number 11 also appears numerous times throughout the film: there are 11 rows of caged rabbits, the time on Jason’s bedside alarm says 11:11 (two doubles), there is an eerie looking man on the beach with a cardboard that says “Jeremiah 11:11” (referring to the biblical verse), one of the Tethered in the underground tunnel has 1111 on his forehead and when the Tethered all stand in line in front of the Wilson’s beach house, their line up forms the shape 1111, a single scissors is referred to as a pair, the ‘Thriller’ t-shirt Adelaide’s father wins for her at the beginning of the film is prize number 11, the Tylers have two daughters who are identical twins, one of these twins is wearing a Black Flag shirt (the logo of the band

¹⁰³ Duality: “the state or quality of being two or in two parts; dichotomy.” (Source: “duality,” Dictionary, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/duality?s=ts>) “The Western view rests on a strong belief in the validity of observing the world in terms of binary oppositions and in the necessity of proving that one side of the binary is always elevated above the other side.” (Source: Hanan A. Muzaffar, “Feminist Postmodern Disruption of the Patriarchal System of Binary Oppositions” (PhD diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2000), Introduction.) Many Western ideologies and systems are thus based on duality, of which the following binaries are examples: male/female, good/evil, culture/nature, life/death, black/white, allochthone/autochthone, right/left (politically), rich/poor, Western/non-Western, Self/Other.

¹⁰⁴ Dictionary meaning of the word ‘us’: “Pronoun, the objective case of we, used as a direct or indirect object: *They took us to the circus. She asked us the way.*” (Source: “us,” Dictionary, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/us>)



Images 8, 9, 10, 11: Dualism in the shape of |||| or the number 11 is a recurrent theme in the film.

looks like 1111), Adelaide get switched with Red in a mirror house, which is of course full with doubles of yourself. Besides all these examples, America itself is a land of dualism: it is often regarded as the land of the free and the home of the brave, which is an image that is inconsistent with the country's legacy of slavery, mass incarceration and institutionalized racism. In this sense, one could argue there are two America's: one above the ground, full of privilege, wealth and opportunity, and one underground, where society is separate and unequal. There is also duality in the rabbits. In many various Disney films, rabbits are depicted as sweet and cuddly, while in other media, rabbits are scary and menacing.¹⁰⁵ Rabbits are both animals of darkness and light, as they live above ground but create their homes in holes under the ground. Peele himself speaks about this duality of the animal too: "They're adorable but they terrify me at the

¹⁰⁵ Princess Weekes, "Why Are Rabbits Cute, but Also Kind of Spooky?," March 2019, The Mary Sue, <https://www.themarysue.com/bunnies-cute-spooky-tricky/>

same time. And they've got those scissor-like ears that creep me out.”¹⁰⁶ The last example I would like to mention here is Michael Jackson. In the beginning of the film, young Adelaide is wearing a Michael Jackson ‘Thriller’ shirt that her dad won for her at a game booth on the Santa Cruz boulevard. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Peele said that Jackson is “a person with a great duality attached as well.”¹⁰⁷ This is most likely due to the cultural legacy of Jackson, which contains dual images of both a superstar and an accused sexual abuser. Besides that, Jackson embodies a racial duality of black and white, and actually sings that ‘it don’t matter if you’re black or white’. This could refer back to the beginning of my analysis, where I argued that *US* makes a point of not paying attention to the skin color of the leading characters, which makes that the film breaks with dominant tropes about black people in horror films.

These many examples of the appearances of duality through the mise-en-scene of *US*, might not mean much in themselves. The fact that the Tyler girls are identical twins is not a significant detail *an sich*, but in combination with the many other doubles and dualities in the film, I argue that duality plays a bigger role in the film than just a reference to the idea that everyone has a mirror image. I argue that the whole idea behind so many doubles in the film is a continuous stressing of the criticism the film depicts of the ‘us versus them’ distinction. We are not different, we are the same. You might have a different skin color, gender, income, political preference, home country, family situation, but in the end, we are all human. It is not just that; not just that we are the same in species, but also that we *need* each other to function. We need unity, not separation. A twin is not a twin without the other half. A pair of scissors is never going to work if only one half of the identical parts functions. With a second ‘one’, the number 11 does not exist. The ‘Self’ is only identifiable in relation to the ‘Other’, and vice versa. The idea of ‘us’ does not exist without an idea of ‘them’. Maybe we should be more what the first half of the *US* abbreviation stands for: United.

In this analysis I have illustrated that the fear for the ‘Other’ can be applied to a number of social issues, such as race, class, wealth and immigration. “Americans spend so much time worrying about “the other” — demonizing immigrants, unfamiliar races, or the all-powerful 1% — that we seldom think to look for what’s holding us back where we’re most likely to find it: in the mirror.”¹⁰⁸ American citizens are afraid of immigrants coming into this country trying

¹⁰⁶ Cady Lang, “Why Are There So Many Bunnies in Scary Movies?,” March 2019, Time, <http://time.com/5559750/us-movie-rabbits-meaning-bunnies-in-horror-films/>

¹⁰⁷ Jen Yamato, “This is ‘Us’: Jordan Peele wants Americans to ‘face their demons’ in new home-invasion horror film,” March 2019, Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-jordan-peele-us-lupita-nyongo-winston-duke-20190314-story.html>

¹⁰⁸ Peter Debruge, “Film Review: Jordan Peele’s ‘Us’,” March 2019, Variety, <https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/us-review-jordan-peele-1203158604/>

to replace them (as their European-colonizer ancestors did so many years ago), which is something symbolized by the Tethered. I argue that all of this happens because the film is actually a social commentary on the concept of fear for the ‘Other’, while the message is to look in the mirror, to look at yourself instead of immediately pointing a finger because *they are us*. Consequently, I argue the film could be a plea for unity. As Red tells Adelaide: “I never stopped thinking about you, how things could have been, how you could have taken me with you.”¹⁰⁹ A simple coming-together might have saved both Adelaide and Red from a lifetime of torment. Just like that, the formation of a more unified people is probably for the best to all of us, because while I agree that we should pride ourselves on our differences that make us all so unique, in the end, we are all human beings, and we should be able to live our lives accordingly.

¹⁰⁹ Jordan Peele, *Us* (2019; Austin, TX: Monkeypaw Productions, 2019), DVD.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated how *US* visually symbolizes and criticizes the contemporary Western fear for the ‘other’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality through a neoformalist film analysis – with aid of the method of feminist film semiotics – of certain aspects of the mise-en-scene of the film. By critically examining the use of color, costuming, props, set design, and performance, and connecting this to existing theories and ideas within the (inter)disciplinary fields of postcolonial studies, gender/feminist studies and film/media studies, I have been able to answer my research question: How does the film *US* visually symbolize and criticize the contemporary Western fear for the ‘other’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality?

As my analysis illustrates, the aspects of the mise-en-scene work together to portray and criticize the concepts of the practice of ‘othering’, ‘us versus them’ mentality, and fear for the ‘Other’. I argued how the use of color symbolizes and criticizes the distinction being made between ‘us and them’ based on *outer* differences, on external identifiers; I argued how color refers to fear for the ‘Other’ that is most strongly expressed by Republican conservatives; I argued how props are used to symbolize the failure of the American Dream, as materialism only works to enhance ‘us versus them’ mentality by emphasizing class differences; I argued how scissors are used to not only symbolize the cutting loose off the ‘Other’, but also criticize ‘us versus them’ mentality through the emphasis on dualism (as scissors are always referred to as a pair and cannot function without the identical other half); I argued how costuming is used to symbolize wealth and privilege but simultaneously refers to American segregation from before the Civil Rights Movement; I argued how the performance of upturned gender roles criticizes the heteronormative patriarchal family which is partly responsible for the creation and maintenance of a so-called weak, feminine ‘them’ and strong, masculine ‘us’; I argued how set design is used to symbolize (the erasure and ignoring of) the racist and colonialist foundations of the United States; I argued how the appearance of doubles is used to criticize ‘us versus them’ dynamics as it illustrates that two halves are interconnected and in most cases cannot function without the other: the ‘Other’ cannot be identified without a conception of the ‘Self’ and vice versa. The two are not, and can never be, mutually exclusive; I argued how the biggest symbol for creating and sustaining a distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is through the performance of re-creating the Hands Across America movement, or: re-creating a wall: the way the film criticizes separation led me to argue that the film symbolizes a call for unity. With all these examples I have aimed to illustrate that fear for the ‘Other’ can be applied to various social issues, such as race, class, gender, migration, privilege and prejudice. The film’s criticism

on the ‘us versus them’ mentality made visually apparent through – amongst other things – the use of dualism, makes *US* a film with a message: look in the mirror, look at yourself before pointing a finger, because ‘they’ might not seem as different from ‘us’ as you think; see the difference, but understand that – in some cases – the differences (in race, gender, class, sexuality, and other axes of inequality) do not matter, as *they are us*, we are all human, and should be treated accordingly; strive for unity, not separation.

The methodology I used for this thesis was a combination of a neoformalist film analysis with feminist film semiotics. The use of neoformalism affected the execution and processing of the results of my research in the way that it enabled me to look further than automatically assumed perceptions and meanings of an aspect in the film: it allowed me to generate deeper meanings, to give new meanings to conventional aspects by placing them in a different context. This different context was, in the case of this research, a context beyond the filmic one: the context of dominant, heteronormative ideologies and systems of power prevalent in Western societies. This is where the method of feminist film semiotics comes in. Where neoformalism allowed me to analyze aspects of the *mise-en-scene* and argue how these make meaning, feminist film semiotics allowed me to argue how the visual aspects symbolize meaning specifically within the field of gender studies. Feminist film semiotics was useful to my analysis as it helped me to connect the meanings I found in the symbols of the film to a context of different systems of inequality and argue how *US* thereby criticized dominant, heteronormative (Western) ideologies and systems of power. The method thus affected the results of my research because it allowed me to examine elements of the film in their bigger social contexts and argue how these defamiliarized elements create meanings that are not just unique to the film, but also comment on and criticize dominant, heteronormative Western discourses regarding the ‘Other’.

A suggestion for further research I would be interested in, is to research this film in relation to *GET OUT* and other future films by Peele, since he said he has a plan for five “social thriller” films, as he calls them.¹¹⁰ *GET OUT* and *US* make up the first two of this quintuplet, and these are already comparable in relation to their social significance. Perhaps a research to Peele’s five social thrillers – after they have all been released – might result in academic writings about this new genre of which the social message of the films seems to be at the core. Research to films with social significance is not new, but five films from the same director

¹¹⁰ Jason Guerrasio, “Jordan Peele plans to direct a whole series of horror movies about ‘social demons’”, February 2017, Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/get-out-jordan-peelee-horror-movie-series-social-demons-2017-2?international=true&r=US&IR=T>

belonging to a film genre made notorious by this director might prove to be fruitful, opening up new discussions within the discipline of film studies and setting steps to, as Peele himself said, break with long-held ‘baseless’ assumptions and dominant frameworks of Western horror films, as I briefly addressed in my analysis. Another suggestion for further research would be to carry out a similar analysis on a deeper level, for example: not only looking at the mise-en-scene, but at all the components of the film’s aesthetic character (editing, cinematography, narrative, and sound). The result would be a generally more concrete conclusion based on all elements of a neoformalist film analysis. Perhaps this kind of research would be able to show the possible existence of an aesthetic pattern Peele uses for his social thriller films (especially when compared to the analyzed aesthetic character of Peele’s other films as well); this kind of research could then be usefully combined with the research I suggested above, as extensive neoformalist film analyses of all Peele’s films can help to illustrate the aesthetic character of his ‘social thriller’ genre.

The social significance Peele’s films (so far) all seem to have is thus also apparent in US. As I stated above, something feminist film semiotics allowed me to do was take the analyzed (aspects of the) film out of its filmic context and apply it to the bigger context of actual (Western) social issues regarding gender, race, class, privilege, migration and prejudice. By looking how US portrays and criticizes the (fear for) the ‘other’ and ‘us versus them’ mentality within these interconnected categories, I was not just able to answer my research question, but it also allows me to say something about the medium of film as a means to make people think, to reflect, to inform, to inspire, and perhaps even to motivate and mobilize people into action. The idea that films can most definitely have a social purpose is illustrated by many filmmakers, amongst which Peele. An example of this is how the “Sunken Place” from Peele’s debut film GET OUT became an actual term, thanks to its usage in the film.¹¹¹ Ever since the release of GET OUT, people have been using the term (primarily, but not exclusively, on social media) as “a metaphor for the feelings of helplessness and subjugation that black people experience in society built on systemic, institutional racism. It also represents the control that white people can assert over black people through psychological, economic, and cultural oppression.”¹¹² In an interview at the end of May 2019, Jason Blum – American film producer, founder and CEO of Blumhouse Productions, a production company primarily known for the production of low-

¹¹¹ The ‘Sunken Place’ is a term Peele coined in GET OUT to name the state of hypnosis in which the black characters are aware of everything that happens but cannot do anything about it. They are, in fact, paralyzed, mere passengers in their own bodies while their brains are controlled by white people. Watch GET OUT for a clearer understanding of the concept of the ‘Sunken Place’.

¹¹² “Sunken Place,” Dictionary, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/sunken-place/>

budget horror films – said that, although his work will probably not trigger social revolutions, he does believe that

*stories can change the perception of people who are open to this. Sometimes you can be reminded of things you were actually completely unaware of, such as unconscious racism. This is, in any case, something that I became much more aware of during the making of the film [GET OUT] and that I also tried to change in my own life.*¹¹³

Films can thus most definitely comment on and criticize ‘real’ social issues that are currently happening in our world; films can have a social impact. This might be on an individual level (as Blum illustrates in his quote above), but the process of making a change has to start somewhere, and I believe that changing even just one person’s perception, or making them aware of certain social issues, is a step in the right direction of creating more understanding, empathy, justice and equality among people. Films can do this. Blum uses GET OUT as an example in the interview, but I argue that US does this as well. As film critic Monica Castillo wrote: “‘Us’ is another thrilling exploration of the past and oppression this country is still too afraid to bring up. Peele wants us to talk, and he’s given audiences the material to think, to feel our way through some of the darker sides of the human condition and the American experience.”¹¹⁴ I could not agree more. By criticizing an ‘us versus them’ mentality that is created through the practices of ‘othering’ and sustained by fear for the ‘other’, US is, in my opinion, a two-hour plea for unity, with the message to look at yourself before pointing a finger to others, and although I agree with many others that we should pride ourselves on our uniqueness as individuals, I also argue that we should not forget the sameness we share in our fight for equality and unity.

We are all human.

¹¹³ “Horrorproducent wil wereld veranderen,” May 2019, De Telegraaf, https://www.telegraaf.nl/entertainment/3672161/horrorproducent-wil-wereld-veranderen?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic. This is a Dutch interview; I translated Blum’s quote from Dutch to English, as I was unable to find an original English source for this interview.

¹¹⁴ Monica Castillo, “Us,” March 2019, RogerEbert, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/us-2019>

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Filmography

Peele, Jordan. *Us*. 2019; Austin, TX: Monkeypaw Productions, 2019. DVD. Starring Lupita Nyong’o, Winston Duke, Shahadi Wright Joseph, Evan Alex. Director: Jordan Peele. Producer: Jason Blum. Distributed by Universal Pictures. The film *Us* made its worldwide premiere at the South by Southwest film festival on March 8th 2019 and has a running time of 116 minutes.

Used Images

All images used in this thesis are screenshots taken by the author who owns a legal copy of the film *Us*.

PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:


- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism

entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.	
Name:	Amy Welten
Student number:	4252039
Date and signature:	04-07-2019 

Submit this form to your supervisor when you begin writing your Bachelor's final paper or your Master's thesis.

Failure to submit or sign this form does not mean that no sanctions can be imposed if it appears that plagiarism has been committed in the paper.