

# Revealing the Horror of Capitalism Through Monstrous Narratives in Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019)

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary horror films often incorporate monstrous and chaotic narratives that reflect wider cultural and political conditions. This article examines how elements of monstrosity in the film *Us* (2019) resonates with working-class anxieties persisting under a capitalistic society. The theory of Marxism with feminist approach is used to uncover the relations between capitalism and the oppression of women conveyed by the film. Considering horror films often present complex female characters to tell their stories of resistance against the dominant rule, this research also looks at how the capitalist patriarchy locates marginalized women and their struggles. The method used is a textual analysis by looking into narrative and cinematographic elements of the film *Us* (2019) to investigate how the film presents the influences of capitalism through monstrous narratives. The findings of this research show that the visualization of monstrous acts and images are used to dramatize the effects of capitalism that are most violent among the lower, working-class.

**Keywords:** Capitalism, Class Issues, Gender, Ideology, Monstrous Narratives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Horror films oftentimes “reflect and react against wider cultural trends, political paradigms, and economic conditions.” [1]. As a product of popular culture, horror films “warrant serious study because it is also the most vivid and unrestrained. If motion pictures in general reflect our dreams and fears, then the horror film liberates the dreams and beats back those fears.” [2]. Brayton [1] asserted further that the monstrosity element, which has been a prominent feature of horror films, frequently emblematic of our fears that are rooted from industrial and intellectual production. Horror films do this in ambivalent ways; one of them is “progressive in imagining the collapse of a dominant social structure.” [3], [4], [5]. Brayton [1] and Özgenalp [6] have investigated how contemporary horror films present the influences of the dominant system through monstrous and chaotic narratives, in which the metaphor of the monster reflects the products of the culture that shape them and “used to represent the political and financial influences of capitalism globally.” [6].

In resisting the dominant system, the horror genre oftentimes presents complex and assertive female characters to convey their stories of rebellion. One of the popular types of female characters in the horror genre is the female monster. Many horror films throughout history present its characters in the form of female monsters, such as ghosts in *The Shining* (1980), aliens in *The Faculty* (1998), and demons in *The Exorcist* (1973). Female monsters are observed to have its own appeal in

the horror genre, mostly for its human-turns-monstrous characteristics. Among these depictions of the monstrous female in the horror genre, the film *Us* (2019) might arise to the discourse. Depicted at the very center of a rebellion that resists the dominant system, the monstrous female in the film *Us* (2019) portrays how the female monstrosity initially appeared as pure and innocent, but then she is made monstrous by the environment surrounding her. The presence of the monstrous feminine in the horror film nonetheless challenges to expel the normal boundaries in society [5].

There have been a number of critics that emphasized on the film's interpretation of inequality and class division. In his article, Montgomery [7] asserted that *Us* is a powerful indictment of the capitalist notion of social mobility in which someone's success in a capitalist world is predicated on someone else's oppression. Robinson [8] takes a similar perspective by making an interesting assertion about America's misplaced fear of outsiders in a way that people are unaware about their own capabilities for harm. Studies done in the similar framework on Jordan Peele's latest film *Us* (2019) have not been done, but this paper finds that this particular film by Peele demonstrates attempts to explore the inner workings of a capitalist society. Therefore, when such emphasis on the intersection of capitalism and gender is placed in the context of horror in new ways, it is a topic worthy of further discussion.

It is important to first contextualize the focus of the discussion before analyzing the issue as a whole. Prior on

releasing his latest film *Us*, Jordan Peele has been known for exploring the horror genre with themes taken from the American experience like in his work *Get Out* (2017) that delves into post-racial America and its unspoken racial prejudice. *Us* (2019) features Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o) and her family of two children embarking on a summer vacation in California until they are drawn into a life-threatening situation by attackers who happen to be their physical doubles. These doubles were created by the government, but left abandoned in underground tunnels all across the United States. As the film unfolds, it was revealed through the explanation of Adelaide's double, Red, about the motifs behind their act of mass violence. The doubles living underground were once prisoners deprived of freedom and their violent act is a part of a larger movement that seeks revenge and justice from those who live above ground. When relating to the horror genre, Wood [3] states that such rebellion demonstrates the innate desires of society to release their repressions. However, these repressions oftentimes are still within the constraints of patriarchy. Although the film portrays the downfall of the dominant system by presenting female monsters at the center of the rebellion, the female monsters and their struggles are depicted as the outcome of oppression of women in a class stratified society.

The issue of social hierarchy between the upper and the lower class existing in the film is the focus of this study. An analysis of capitalism through the perspective of Marxism is therefore needed because it provides context to the notion of class as models of oppression and liberation. Marxist feminist, however, has been seeking to raise the question of gender in the discourse of Marxism due to its conception of class as the sole factor of oppression in which gender has no role. This article explores further on how the symbols of monstrosity within the film serve as an allegory for the downfall of the capitalist system and working-class experience and also looks at how the capitalist patriarchy locates these women who resist the dominant system. To draw out the connections between the monstrosity element and class politics inherent in a capitalistic system, I rely on textual analysis of the film *Us* (2019) by looking into narrative and cinematographic elements of the film. As such, Turner [9] asserted that the way film functions in our culture goes beyond aesthetic. Film is, therefore, a social practice in which its narratives and meanings provide us evidence of the ways our culture operates. In this context, my research includes organizing symbols of monstrosity and chaos present in the film to reveal the influences of capitalism and to problematize the portrayal of the monstrous feminine.

## 2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 2.1. A Dystopian World: Depictions of the Lower Class under Crisis

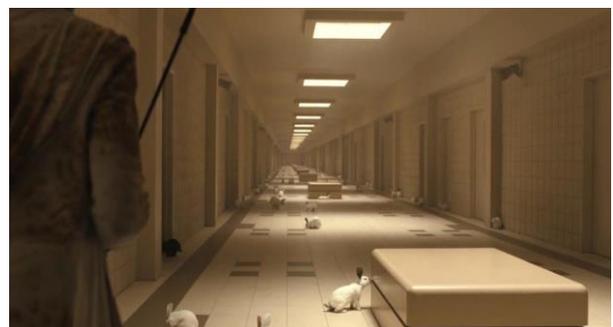
Dystopian narratives are oftentimes brought up into the discourse of horror genre typically because the genre

incorporates multiple fragments of themes and ideas. Horror and dystopian are intertwined in a way that both fictions deal with fear beyond the self. Thus, it would be safe to say that dystopian fiction is indeed horror considering its aim was to horrify audience by means of terror. Despite the fact that the dystopian films are considered as a mainstream fiction genre, its narratives have the potential to explore the possibilities for social change precisely because it allows imaginative ideas to become concrete [10]. With the surge of contemporary works like Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), James DeMonaco's *The Purge* franchise, literary phenomenon Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series and the famous George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, dystopian genre became filled with themes of exploitation, class struggle, and revolution against the existing oppressive system [11], [12], [13], [14]. As that being said, dystopian fictions are "appalling in their similarity: they describe nightmare states where men are conditioned to obedience, freedom is eliminated, and science and technology are employed not to enrich human life, but to maintain the state's surveillance and control of its citizens." [10]. In regard to the previously mentioned theme of oppressive control of the state, Jordan Peele's *Us* should therefore arise to the discussion.

Narratives of dystopian horror in *Us* is prevalent in a way that Peele draws on the details of terror rather than hopeful tones like in the works of authors and directors that precede him. In order to understand this, we must first take a look at the setting in which the film takes place. In [0:57], *Us* begins with an opening title that explains the context of the setting:

"There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States... Abandoned subway systems, unused service routes, and deserted mine shafts... Many have no known purpose at all."

These abandoned underground tunnels are where the Tethered, or the doubles, have been placed to live in. The place is filled with rabbits which have been set free from their cages and empty spaces that appear to be classrooms. In the following scene [1:34:13], a visualization of the tunnels is provided:



**Figure 1** Underground tunnels where the Tethered have been living. Screenshot from: *Us* (2019). [Video file].

In terms of the mise-en-scene, figure 1 presents the slow pace of the camera that takes the audience to observe the eeriness of the area. The length of the tunnel seems to have no end, in which it adds to the overall mysterious and odd atmosphere of the setting. Concerning the camera movement in this shot, it uses smooth movement that blends together with the placement of the camera that follows the subject from behind or close to her point of view. A common trait in the horror genre is that the slow pace of the camera is oftentimes used to enhance fear and accelerate rhythm leading up to the terror stage of the film [15]. The use of low-key lighting is also present in this shot in which the source of light accentuates shadows and creates contrast between light and dark tones. The dim hue and shadowy effect created by this particular lighting technique are suited to the conventions of horror films for the effect it creates are oftentimes associated with fear and suspicion. Above ground, we meet Adelaide and her family being terrorized by horrifying double versions of themselves wearing red jumpsuits, which are played by the same actors, throughout the film. Along the way, we learned that Adelaide's family are not the only ones being targeted by their doubles, but every person in America is also hunted and killed by their own doubles.

Evidently, this film is fitted to be categorized as dystopian considering the definition of dystopia itself according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary [16] is "an imagined society in which people lead wretched, dehumanized, fearful lives." The definition is particularly true for the film because it paints a condition where people's lives are continuously disrupted by the ongoing attack of the monstrous Tethered. As the story unfolds, it is revealed through the explanation of Adelaide's double, Red, about the motifs behind their act of mass violence as well as their origins. In a scene where Adelaide meets her double for the first time, Red explains:

"How it must have been to grow up with the sky. To feel the sun, the wind, the trees. But your people took it for granted. We're human, too, you know. Eyes, teeth, hands, blood. Exactly like you. And yet it was humans that built this place. I believe they figured out how to make a copy of the body, but not the soul. The soul remains one, shared by two. They created the Tethered so they could use them to control the ones above. Like puppets. But they failed, and they abandoned the Tethered. For generations, the Tethered continued without direction. They all went mad down here."

From the above monologue in [1:35:56], it is revealed that the doubles, or the Tethered, were created by the American government as a means of control. Through the creation of the Tethered, although only implied, the American government envisioned a country where each citizen would have a duplicate of themselves placed below ground that the government could use to control its ordinary citizens above ground. In other words, the government wanted to exert dominance upon its own people. However, the experiment failed and the Tethered were imprisoned in the tunnels for years where they were denied their own free will and doomed to mimic every

movement of their doubles above ground. According to Grandinetti [17], the depiction of the dystopian society includes the images of a futuristic world gone wrong that functions as a warning about the crisis of the current social and political condition. In this sense, the violence of the Tethered is a part of a larger movement that seeks revenge and justice from the people above.

The creation of the Tethered is based on the premise that exploitation breeds social inequality because it operates under a system that justifies perpetual slavery of the lower class. The Tethered are the result of a failed scientific experiment done by the government who failed to replicate the human soul. Accordingly, the Tethered are just empty containers with animalistic behavior: they grunt, shouts, and eat rabbits. Without the presence of one important Tethered that inspires the rest to start an uprising, these Tethered would most likely be just broken and abandoned creatures. The most significant thing here is that Red is actually the only one underground who did not begin her life as a Tethered, but as fully human. In the film's final moments, it turns out that Adelaide and Red switched places when they were children. Thus, it makes sense that Red is the only Tethered that can speak and she is determined to start the rebellion in order to take back her life. As the original Adelaide, Red was forced to live under constant anxiety and resentment in the tunnels, whereas Adelaide managed to escape the tunnels and assimilate herself into the society above. Being imprisoned for almost thirty years, Red has shown how she is deeply affected by the new environment and begins to adopt monstrous characteristics like that of the Tethered. Feelings of resentment and suppression eventually lead her to plan an uprising by instructing the others to kill their above ground copies.

Under such brutal circumstances, the Tethered are indeed in a position of constant anxiety and crisis due to their existing social condition. Relating to the dystopian concept, dystopian films set out to create a world that serves as an allegory, predictor, or warning of a future [17]. As such, dystopian films have been appropriated by other areas, namely "urban crisis and capitalism in crisis" [18], therefore, such emphasis on the threats and crisis within a specific area in the dystopian world provides a study to the mirrored cultural anxieties. The cultural anxieties reflected in this context is the struggle of the lower class, represented by the Tethered, to escape impoverished conditions caused by the dominant rule. The Tethered being forced to endure a significant amount of oppression due to their situation fits into the typical narrative structure of dystopia; in addition to the portrayal of Red as the monstrous character who refuses the dominant system. It is precisely in such capacity that creates the possibility for social change in a dystopian text.

Although the Tethered might provide social transformative possibility, it is still paradoxical to other dystopian texts with more compelling revolutionary narratives. In *the Hunger Games* trilogy, for example, it focuses on an uprising against a repressive regime under

President Snow. In the *First Purge* (2018), viewers also get to see a similar uprising in which lower class citizens of Staten Island protest the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA) for allowing the legalization of all crimes for twelve hours annually [11], [14]. The aforementioned typical dystopian narratives identify the causes of an unjust situation that are rooted in the ruling of a corrupted system. *Us*, however, does not have such luxury. Those who are responsible in creating the Tethered are only briefly mentioned by Red with no further explanation. The absence of an accountable entity, like the regime of President Snow or the NFFA, that allows such injustice to occur can distort the real threat of systemic oppression.

Despite the film's attempts at making the ruling power to be unknown, one might perceive such phenomenon as a social reflection of the current capitalist reality. Wood [19] addressed this lack of ability in identifying a single primary enemy in the fight against capitalism. Some identify the enemy to be the general market economy, while others, following Marx, rooted in the exploitative relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat [19]. Nonetheless, it is common ground that those who criticize capitalism are criticizing the systemic barriers that allow structured inequality to prevail. Thus, the attack of the Tethered can be seen as superficial for the sources of their exploitation lies in a higher and hidden force.

At a glance, *Us* remains faithful to the typical dystopian structure by presenting an imagined society in which every element of it is under crisis. However, the dilemma with horror genre adopting dystopian narratives lies in the way modern horror tends to develop genre clichés that are seen as necessary to be adopted; such as depicting extreme images of murders [4]. Although one might consider obscuring the presence of the ruling power is reflective of our capitalist reality, the film inhibits the revolution against the prevailing system to be seen as something that has clear political motivations, but it is instead an inevitable act of monstrosity to fulfil the film's horror cliché.

## **2.2. The Monster as the Alienated Labor: A Marxist Criticism**

Monstrous stories throughout history govern allegorical narratives used to explore socioeconomic life in society. Having integrated some kind of technology into its body, the Tethered are physically marked as monstrous robots who are programmed and manufactured to serve a specific purpose. In this sense, the Tethered are lower class laborers whose life purpose was to perform intensive labor. Studies about monstrosity elements in films are generally looked at from psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives, however, Newitz [20] argues that an analysis of economic life must as well be synthesized in order to see how monsters are defined in the American popular culture. A Marxist analysis of capitalism sees the exploitation of labor by

those who hold capital, in which gender plays no part. The factors of race and gender are often left unresolved because both categories of oppression do not necessarily adhere into a model based on class relations in a capitalistic society [21]. However, Barrett [22] in *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* explores the possibility of a reconciliation between Marxism and feminism. As the title of the book suggests, Barrett provides an insight about the construction of gender as a product of capitalist development. While it is true that an analysis of economic life is crucial to be looked at in understanding the metaphor of the monsters in horror films, it is in this context that we should consider the questions of gender and its place in the Marxist theory. As a means to give a better understanding about the notion of capitalism dealt in the film *Us*, applying Marxist theory offers a way to understand the conveyed meaning of the monster metaphor existing in the film. However, it is important to note that such theory is not the only framework that is used in this research, but rather I provide an opportunity for feminist analysis in which earlier versions of Marxism have denied.

Understandably, the creation of the Tethered has provided us a context for socioeconomic crisis since they offer alternate models of class and oppression. The founders of Marxism were 19th century political theorists and philosophers Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), who jointly wrote one of the most important political manuscripts in history, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). The aim of Marxism is to create a classless and egalitarian society. For Marx, the lowest social class, the proletariat, is exploited by the owning one, who are those who have capital or the bourgeoisie [23]. The exploitation of one social class by the other results in alienation that involves the execution of repetitive tasks and thus, the "workers are bereft of their full humanity" [23]. Evidently, the Tethered symbolizes the alienated worker in a way that the Tethered are portrayed as mindless, detached beings that work only to mimic their doubles above ground.



**Figure 2** A couple eating at a carnival



**Figure 3** Duplicates of the couple mimicking their movements below ground

As can be observed from Figure 2 in [1:38:31], a couple is seen enjoying their food at a carnival. At the same time, their clones underground in figure 3 are also seen mimicking how the couple above ground eat the food. The film's use of what Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith [24] would term as graphic cut is therefore established when the editing between two different objects and spaces in the two shots are graphically matched with one another. Graphic cut is often used to signal a strong continuity of action in order to link the two shots metaphorically. The shots consisting of the man and the woman on the left (Figure 2) and both of the Tethered on the right (Figure 3) are precisely matched graphically for they are placed in the same area of each shot. In a home invasion scene where the Tethered attack Adelaide's family, Red explains, "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" [44:45]. This further describes the fact that whenever a person above ground does something, the Tethered underground does a crude imitation of the action using one of the few items available to them. Similar to the workers, the Tethered are alienated because they have been mindlessly following the tasks which are given to them. This is represented by their repetitive task which is to mimic every movement of their doubles above ground as well as their inability to form emotions and feelings. In this sense, the Tethered have lost any sense of control over their labor activity and thus, their existence can be read as an objectification of labor.

Research findings show that the reality of the Tethered represents Marxist alienation of labor that can be observed in different points of views. Previously, we have seen one aspect of alienation as the result of the Tethered's lack of control over the labor activity that forces them to execute repetitive tasks. Moreover, the fact that the Tethered are incapable of developing emotions and communicating clearly with each other represents their alienation from the self and others. In the Marxian analysis of capitalism, society are alienated due to the sufferings of their social condition. The laborer's alienation is therefore made complete when the dominant relations produce separation from each other. This is strengthened further by Marx when he stated, "capital is dead labor" in which the execution of capitalist work implies a symbolic death of individual freedom to achieve pleasurable and rewarding life.

Aside from understanding alienation as merely a feeling that the Tethered may experience, Marx's conception of alienation is also manifested in the way the film depicts one aspect of the setting. The film indicates that inside the tunnels, a place in which the Tethered have been placed to live in, have spaces that appear to be classrooms despite the fact that it is located below ground. Starting from [1:41:13], the scene takes the audience to further explore these tunnels.



**Figure 4** Red inside one of the classrooms. Screenshot from: Us (2019). [Video file].

Pictured in Figure 4 is one of the classrooms where the Tethered are depicted doing their activities, such as eating raw rabbits and working to mimic the people above ground. With the creation of classrooms inside the tunnels, it represents how the Tethered are being prepared by the American government to be objects of control and thus, fulfilling the needs of the dominant through their labor. Although the Tethered are perceived as having much less fortunate lives than those living above ground, for them, such unjust circumstances are natural for they do not know any better. From the many explanations of the Marxian alienation concept, Gereluk [25] stated that it was possible to redefine such concepts in regard to school institutions. He asserted that alienation practice begins early in schooling years where students were obligated to obey certain standards and rules that prepared them to be laborers. The task of schooling, as he noted, would be the initiation of the learners that prepared them into the dominant social form which fulfils the expectations of the market. In the context of Marxian alienation in the schooling system, the task is to pass on the knowledge and skills needed to "ensure production at its economically-appropriate level." [25]. As already indicated, the very essence of capitalist society lies in the way people are required to be placed under a structure in which they are forced to obey the established standards and rules. Under these structures, people are led to believe that their circumstances are natural and just. For this reason, Marx believed that the conception of alienation is not only used to indicate the worker's state of mind, but also the objective structure that separates workers from their labor activity, sense of self, and other people.

However, a central question that might arise in the discourse of horror films is perhaps the need for logic about the details. In the film, there are gaps in the details that manage to exist without any explanation. Logistical

questions like: do every single American have a Tether? Do they reproduce to create the same children? How did the Tethered get their red uniforms and golden scissors? While it is imperative to recognize that *Us* is logically imperfect, these fallacies must be understood holistically. Vorobej [26] recognizes this defect in horror films about the way the genre introduces the alien, or the enemy, within informal logic. “Fallacies must be understood holistically as a reflection of the troubled, tortured, and ambivalent nature of the human condition.” [26]

Indeed, applying Marxist theory paves the way for an analysis of monster stories to be something more than sheer entertaining spectacle, but rather a discussion of both cinematic appreciation and cultural criticism. Capitalism, as we have seen from the everyday lives of the Tethered, makes the labor experience to be a reflection of social alienation. As has been described by Marx, alienation is the sensation of being brutalized and deadened by having to be someone else’s commodity. Understandably, when such theory is incorporated in the way we read monstrous narratives in the horror genre, although one might encounter fallacies in the process, it offers nuances on what it means to live under an oppressive system. In an attempt to mend the wounds of alienation, it might be justifiable for the Tethered to develop an urge to escape their misery in a destructive way.

### ***2.3. Violent Monsters: An Allegory to the Working-Class Rebellion***

The perspective that will be used to analyze the violence of the Tethered lies in the way they formed an organized way of rebellion. The purpose of this section is, therefore, to explore how the Tethered complicates the relationship between revolution and violence. Previous discussions have shown how the everyday sufferings that the Tethered experience is a reflection of what Marx would call alienation, those are: alienation from the activity of labor, alienation from the self, and lastly, alienation from other people and society. Understandably, it has led profound changes in the overall American society as citizens are left with a crisis-driven situation caused by their killer doubles. The destruction in which the Tethered has conducted serves as a kind of violent revenge upon the oppression and injustice that the ruling class has caused them. Moreover, it has been argued that there is a philosophical basis within Marxism that regards the bourgeoisie as deserving for the violence they receive from the proletariat with the reason that they perpetuate the violence themselves [27]. In such context, the violence of the Tethered is a necessary instrument in conducting revolution for it serves as a means of achieving a just and moral transformation in the socioeconomic condition of the society.

In order to bring transformations to their condition, the Tethered rebellion must be done in ways that clearly represent the brutal and clear expression of their class

struggle. In many ways, the Tethered possess characteristics that are monstrous and inhuman; in which such characteristics have been repeatedly used in monstrous narratives to signify the brutalization of the lower class [20], [1], [28]. They communicate through grunts, shouts, and rigid gestures. The depiction of the Tethered seems to be rooted from the reinterpretation of the old monstrous narratives, such as combining elements of demonic and slasher horror. Moreover, the Tethered themselves are rich with working-class signifiers, namely their red jumpsuit uniform and leather work gloves. Although each of the Tethered is an identical copy to someone who lives above the surface, they do not forge any emotional connections over their shared actions. Brayton [1] pointed out that monsters are emblematic of the dehumanization of the workforce created by capitalism. The Tethered who lives below ground is symbolic to those of the lower class, driven insane by poverty and deprivation, whereas those who live above ground are the upper-middle class. The Tethered have spent their entire lives below ground eating raw rabbits and working only to mimic the movements of their doubles above. Although both shared the same body, the soul remains in the possession of the ‘real’ human above ground, literalizing the idea that the Tethered are the dehumanized beings.

Monsters may be the bearers of stories, but they are also protagonists in a way that they are propelled by social circumstances they cannot control [20]. In *Us*, we see how the dominant rule helps to create merciless monsters who are destructive of human life. Newitz stated that such violence offered an intensely raw expression of what it meant to live through class warfare, economic turmoil, and even everyday work routines. These extreme images of violence and misery surrounding the Tethered rebellion demonstrates their struggle to join the upper class as well as their “uncensored fears of capitalism” [20]. The fact that capitalism, as the Tethered has told us more or less explicitly, gets the working-class to willingly sacrifice their own lives simply for money, is the dark side of our economic system.



**Figure 5** The Tethered rebellion in a form of mass violence. Screenshot from: *Us* (2019). [Video file].

As has been described previously, the film presents the audience a dystopian condition where every American is being targeted and attacked by their own

doubles. In Figure 5, specifically in [1:18:04], it is made clear that Adelaide's family is not the only people who are targeted by their doubles. A news media reportage indicates that people above the surface are also being targeted and killed by their doubles from below ground. It is important to note that the Tethered do not just target random people they see on the street, but they only hunt down their own doubles from above ground. This notion of death and violence suggests the idea that one has to die in order for the other to live. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx [29] famously writes:

“Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman—in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

From the above quote, Marx asserted that as long as class-based society persisted, that is the relations between domination and subordination, mechanism of oppression and exploitation that put the two classes against each other would also be persisted. This is being literalized by the very substance of violent action conducted by the Tethered towards their human doubles. As long as their human doubles are still alive, the Tethered would always be ‘tethered’ to them, mimicking their every move and thus deprived of their own freedom. In this sense, killing their above ground doubles serves as an act of liberation that is freed from their oppressors. In [1:40:25], Red explains:

“I began to prepare. It took years to plan. Everything had to be perfect. I didn't just need to kill you. I needed to make a statement that the whole world would see. It's our time now. It's our time up there.”

Through an organized form of rebellion, the Tethered aim to reconstruct society on a basis that they would no longer be under such an oppressive system. Their rebellion is organized and structured in a way that the Tethered would wear matching red jumpsuits with leather work gloves, using golden scissors as their weapon. Marx's normative theory concerning violence provides a further understanding about the Tethered rebellion in a way that violence is regarded as a necessary part of a “successful, materially progressive revolutions” [27]. The literal battle to the death depicts their willingness to escape impoverished conditions to achieve better lives. Thus, the fight towards an improved life that entails violence is not only justified, but also unavoidable [27]. Within this concept, the violent act of the Tethered can be read in political ways as the rebellion of the repressed, which in this case is the dehumanized working-class. As has been asserted by Brayton [1], “the monster often doubles as a cautionary tale against capitalist exploitation, on the one hand, and a proletarian uprising, on the other.”

Prior analysis has shown us that stressing the role of social class is perhaps necessary in an attempt to make sense of the Tethered's violent behavior. For the

Tethered, their violent rebellion is a double-edged sword where there is a possible hope for justice and recognition, but there is also the possibility of self-destruction and violence. We have seen how the violence of the Tethered is allegorical to what Marx would describe as the justification of revolutionary violence where it involves a kind of war between contending parties; thus, violence in this sense is justified as a means to achieve justice for those who initiate it. Social class as the starting point in the analysis of oppression has helped to reinforce class relations to be the main factor in describing the working-class experience. However, studies who have contributed to the construction of this theory have been ignorant of the way other groups experience oppression, in other words, it works to keep women from seeing other structures of oppression.

#### **2.4. *Rebelling under Patriarchy: Female Monsters as the ‘Othered’ Women***

While the stories of chaos and fear are generally told from Adelaide's point of view, this section covers how Red and Dahlia as the vengeful lower-class monsters who strike terror in the hearts of the upper class reflect the perspectives of the marginalized, especially women, who seek a better life. A somewhat progressive depiction of female monsters who have developed enough awareness and class consciousness to resist as well as criticize the dominant system is therefore present in the film. The purpose of feminism in the discourse of Marxist criticism, as Barrett [22] reminds us, is to emphasize on the relations of gender; precisely on the oppression of women by men, that Marxism has tended to pass over in silence. Feminists have raised questions about Marxism by noting the continued existence of patriarchal relations in capitalist societies. A Marxist feminist approach in this context will involve an emphasis towards the relations between capitalism and the oppression of women.

Previous discussions have talked about how the rebellion of the Tethered are motivated by feelings of suppression and deprivation to escape impoverished conditions. Wood [28] reminds us that rebellion demonstrates the innate desires of society to liberate themselves and release their repressions. However, these repressions oftentimes are still within the constraints of patriarchy. In this regard, the concept of patriarchy is perhaps crucial and has been used extensively in the discussion of women's liberation movement. The term has its own resonance with feminism, which Kate Millett puts it in *Sexual Politics*, is in the way that patriarchy is an overarching category of male dominance. She points out that patriarchy is the rule of women by men that is “more rigorous than class stratification.” [30]. Millett [30] further argues that the political power which men hold over women amounts to the fundamental political division in society. To put it differently, she implies that class divisions are only relevant to men and that significant class differences do not necessarily exist between women.

In order to understand how the film positions the female monster, the scene where Adelaide encounters a Tethered called Dahlia will be first looked at. Arriving at their friends' house to seek refuge, they discover that Josh and Kitty Tyler, along with their children, have been murdered by their own Tethered. This leaves Adelaide's family in no other position than to fight off their friends' evil doubles; in which eventually all of them succeeded in doing so. Almost killing the entire family of the Tethered, Adelaide is left in chains by Dahlia, who is Kitty Tyler's clone. While in chains, Adelaide sees Dahlia start putting on make-up which can be seen in Figure 6 specifically in [01:11:42].



Figure 6 Kitty's double Dahlia wearing a lipstick



Figure 7 Dahlia is seen cutting down her face

In the scene, Dahlia was once seem satisfied with the result of her lipstick. However, as she stares at herself in the mirror even longer, her facial expressions immediately turned into disappointment and hatred. Unhappy with how she looks, as shown in figure 7, Dahlia starts cutting her own face and that is when she begins showing expressions of satisfaction and pleasure as blood starts dripping down her face. However, Dahlia is too caught up with how she looks in the mirror and thus, unaware that Zora, Adelaide's daughter, was ready to attack her from behind, allowing Adelaide to kill her afterwards.

Throughout the film, Kitty has confessed to being obsessed with getting multiple plastic surgeries, so Dahlia tried to mock that behavior by cutting her own face. By ruining her face, Dahlia positions herself as an object of disgust, rather than desire. She makes fun of Kitty's idea of beauty by making herself deliberately hideous to criticize the patriarchal expectations of women that locates their bodies in a constructed notion of beauty. As Naomi Wolf famously writes in *Beauty Myth*, the

origins of women's obsession towards appearance has nothing to do with women, but rather the masculine institution and institutional power [31]. This perspective is particularly critical in seeing how the notions of what constitutes beauty and attractiveness is rooted in patriarchal domination and expectation towards women. In this sense, Dahlia is depicted not only being able to liberate herself from her oppressor, but also to criticize the dominant force. However, Dahlia's attempt to challenge the dominant system is made counterproductive when she is eventually killed by the human protagonist. The film, therefore, still locates the monstrous feminine in an inferior position to their human counterparts precisely because her monstrosity has physically marked her as the 'Other'. This is relevant in the ways of how the horror genre has developed clichés that are deemed as necessary for it to be identified as a genre piece; this includes justifying the act of killing the monstrous figure for they possess characteristics that are evil, violent, and non-human. In the end, the film once again remains faithful to its genre by portraying the monstrosity of the Tethered as a mere tool to complete the horror cliché.

The notion of women as the 'Other' is thus an interesting subject to delve into as the film further strengthens this idea by portraying Red in a similar horrific fate as Dahlia. As the monstrous female character, Red is depicted at the forefront of a rebellion that resists the dominant system. The film positions Red in a visibly monstrous style of femininity that would describe her as violent, ruthless, and powerful. Us also presents a set of values through its use of the double as the monster; a portrayal that has typically appeared in Gothic narratives that emphasizes the otherness of the monster [32]. The doppelganger imagery is used to highlight the opposition between positive and negative attitudes that follows Jung and Freud's theories about the division within the self and how it "exposes an uncontrollable side of the individual" [32]. In this context, Red is depicted as Adelaide's dark side and because of her monstrosity, she is also considered as the Other.

The contrast between the human and the monster, or the good and the evil, is questioned further as the film approaches its ending. It has been previously addressed that the final twist of the story is that the seemingly well-off protagonist Adelaide is actually the one who is directly responsible for the oppression of her monstrous double Red. The film reveals that when Adelaide was a child, she was originally one of the Tethered living below ground until she escaped to seize her human double above ground. Making Adelaide to be the 'copy', whereas Red is the 'original'.



**Figure 8** Red and Adelaide. Screenshot from: *Us* (2019). [Video file].

Near the end of the film in [01:42:00], Red's monstrous act reaches its peak when she and Adelaide are met in a final battle that evokes shocking and horrific images. However, Red is eventually killed in the fight between her and Adelaide. Identity is therefore a matter of discussion when the film exposes that Adelaide, the character in which the audience mostly empathizes with, is not necessarily purer and more righteous than the monster. The representations of Adelaide and Red establish the dividing line between the human and the monstrous that can be perceived as a mere construction. The concept of identity and what constitutes human nature has been challenged by many scholars. In the context of horror fiction, monsters are not evil by itself and the same is true for other supernatural creatures as well as natural creatures, such as the human [32]. It is not their nature as human or inhuman that defines their characters, rather it is their behavior and attitudes that define them. Newitz [20] also takes on a similar perspective by asserting the construction of monsters in which they are made monstrous rather than born monstrous underscores their connection to human-made institutions like the economy. The creation of monsters and its relation to human agency demonstrates the degree to which identity constructed under capitalism can lead to destruction. The film portrays these different categories to be able to coexist in a world where the dichotomy of the human and the monster no longer persists.

Revisiting the ways in which female monstrosity is depicted in the horror genre, Red and Dahlia as female monsters are portrayed in two ways: as a terrifying figure and as a victim. On the surface, the presence of the monstrous feminine seeks to challenge the common reading of female characters in horror films in a way that they are able to transgress beyond patriarchal boundaries. However, the representations of Red and Dahlia as the 'othered' female monsters who are eventually killed by the human protagonist undermine the film's potential to construct female subjectivity that has the power to subvert normative gendered positioning. In the case of Adelaide, she was initially one of the Tethered who had lived below ground until she managed to ascend the class ladder to achieve a better life. It is again a metaphor of the capitalist notion about social mobility where one has to die in order for the other to live.

A general problem that might arise with how the film depicts the female monster is the way it suggests that when women are placed outside the normative system, they either have to be killed, or cleansed out of their monstrosity and otherness in order to survive. To challenge the capitalist ideology by presenting the female monster being capable of resisting the dominant rule, the film, however, still reaffirms the existing notion about how the capitalist patriarchy locates women, especially those who are considered the Other, in a position of oppression. These findings, therefore, refocuses our attention back on the ways patriarchy and capitalism are two structures that exist side by side whose consequences can be more rigorous and more enduring than class stratification.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

*Us* (2019) explores an imagined society where marginalized communities are in constant oppression and crisis due to their existing social condition. The film visualizes such sufferings through the portrayal of the monstrous Tethered whose sole purpose is to perform intensive labor under the capitalist system. The depiction of the Tethered that are cold-blooded and detached to the outside world are also synonymous with Marx's concept of alienation in a way that they are deprived of their full humanity because of their constant labor. Eventually, the need to escape situations of injustice become the catalyst for their attempts at liberation. In narrating these narratives for liberation, the film portrays Red and Dahlia at the forefront of the Tethered rebellion. It is also found that the depiction of the female monsters reaffirms the way capitalist patriarchy locates marginalized women; in constant oppression and their stories erased. Although the film puts more depth in the ways they portray women laborers as the one who developed class consciousness that serve as a basis for their rebellion, it is unfortunate that the film undermines this potential of having progressive depiction of marginalized women by having their stories of oppression strengthened and attempts at liberation neglected.

A question that might arise is then, what makes *Us* especially significant? To position the film to a larger context, one can find that it is important to provide a way to articulate the effects of capitalism as the dominant system that is most violent among the lower, working-class. Moreover, to imagine how the liberation of women can be achieved under a capitalist system, it is perhaps crucial to have a comprehensive synthesis of capitalism and gender in the process. Because under the system of capitalist patriarchy, marginalized women and their sense of freedom are still limited by essential factors: their lower-class status and their gender. We see that the oppression of women laborers is not only confined to their struggles against capitalist exploitation, but also against patriarchal oppression. It is perhaps deemed necessary to identify these struggles that women from marginalized communities experience and treat them as two independent and equal struggles.

Through film, Peele has put depth in an exploration of capitalism as the ideological force that works as a dehumanizing and alienating system. This study, therefore, has shown how the dominant ideology can be confronted and challenged in narrative films. As a product of popular culture, certain films might once seem to be critical of dominant positions, but eventually still reaffirm the system it was first trying to oppose. Thus, it is not enough to think of mainstream genre films, like *Us*, working solely to challenge capitalism as the dominant ideology, but conversations of how other structures of oppression within the boundaries of ideology should as well be articulated.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Amira Jati Sari and Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Amira Jati Sari and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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