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Spaces in Black Horror

An Examination of Spaces in *Get Out* and *Us*

In horror films, physical spaces are prominent storytelling tools, cuing audiences when to be afraid, when to feel safe, or when to feel trapped. Spaces in horror films are often essential to the disorientation, isolation, and evil that takes place. In Black Horror, spaces not only take on the same role, but they also reflect the marginalization, surveillance, and displacement present in reality. For Black Horror in particular, spaces hold memories, provide commentary on the way different places are viewed, and symbolize larger structures and systems within society. *Get Out* (2017), a horror film presenting an “unsettling metaphor for the sweep of black and white relations in the United States” (Dargis), and *Us* (2019), a horror film telling the story of Adelaide Wilson and her family as they are stalked and attacked by evil doppelgangers of themselves, both written and directed by Jordan Peele, show how recent Black Horror films use spaces to demonstrate larger themes. These films reveal how spaces—the Armitage Estate in *Get Out* and the underground tunnels in *Us*—are used as apparatuses of concealment and subjugation. *Get Out* and *Us* use physical spaces in various ways to explore how racism and class disparities act in modern settings.

History of Spaces in Black Horror

Throughout the history of the Black Horror genre, space and place have been important aspects of film. A Black Horror film which stands out for its use of space and place is

Candyman. Both the 1992 and 2021 versions provide insight into understanding Black Horror's treatment of space and place. *Candyman*'s use of Cabrini Green emphasizes the discussion of gentrification within the horror realm, revealing the importance of places in Black Horror. In his article on *Candyman*'s reclamation of the history of Cabrini Green, Chow demonstrates that while the original *Candyman* depicts Cabrini Green as a place of fear, the new version separates the monster from the community in order to more accurately represent the real experience of living in Cabrini Green; Chow explains that "For decades, local and national media told stories of murders, rapes, gangs, drugs and poverty run rampant, making it one of the most feared places in America. But many of the residents who actually lived there felt differently." Filmmaker Nia DaCosta said that the original film fed into the fear of the Black community, so in her rendition, she wanted to show that "This is a community that was chronically underserved for a very long time." As the area is now gentrified, the film works to reclaim the history of Cabrini Green by telling the real story of erasure (Chow).

Another conversation of space within the Black Horror genre is the right to fear as an emotional property. Briefel and Ngai discuss how horror or Gothic narratives, specifically Bernard Rose's *Candyman*, "establish anxiety as a form of emotional property." They argue that in horror films, the privilege of fear is exclusively granted to those with proprietorship. Briefel and Ngai explain that horror films' representation of fear suggests that being frightened is "paradoxically a sign of empowerment," and they add that being hunted signals that being in a state of fear is not normal.

Wallace's article "Don't Go in the Basement" also explores the importance of space in *Candyman*, discussing the new *Candyman* in comparison to the original 1992 version and also horror films in general. Wallace argues that the tendency for characters in horror films to "go in

the basement,” even though there is clear danger, is a racialized tendency, as white people “obviously don’t have enough to be afraid of in real life, so they go around looking for dangerous situations.” Wallace explains that because the popular liberal view of the Black experience focuses on pain, the recent *Candyman*’s divergence from this narrative marks a change in the horror genre. Wallace reveals how the new version of *Candyman* tells the story through a more thoughtful, accurate perspective through its use of interactions between characters and spaces.

While the places written into the plot are essential to understanding why space is important to Black Horror, it is also helpful to investigate the space of the horror film itself. Black Horror calls to question who is allowed to be casted in the space of horror films. In “Introduction: Studying Blacks and Horror Films,” Coleman discusses the historical tendency of the horror genre to exclude Black characters, subjecting them to background roles, making them the first to die, or simply not including them at all. Coleman also explores the intentions of Black filmmakers and how they have used Black Horror to create change in society by inviting Black characters into the space of the horror film. Coleman’s article demonstrates the privilege within movies and casting, revealing the impact of the film space on society.

Spaces in *Get Out*

Get Out uses physical spaces and atmospheres to demonstrate feelings of isolation and confinement. When Chris visits Rose’s family, the audience quickly finds out how secluded the Armitage estate is. There is also a sense of isolation created by the Armitage family’s strange and uncomfortable treatment of Chris, which is amplified by the isolated nature of the house. When Chris is hypnotized and taken to the Sunken Place, he is isolated even more by forcefully being placed into a dark, terrifying space. Though it is his consciousness, not his body (which is also

confined), there is an overpowering sense of confinement created. At the Armitage party later in the film, the sense of isolation is continued when the party guests single Chris out for being Black, commenting on his body in unsettling ways. At this point in the film, Chris is still under the impression that he has the option to get out, but he is confined by his sense of obligation to Rose. Eventually, he is physically trapped. The moment Chris is strapped in the chair creates a horrifying feeling of confinement and isolation, symbolizing a greater “trapped” feeling experienced by individuals stuck in situations due to things they have no control over. This example mirrors the way Black individuals are confined within society, trapped by racist structures and situations. Ultimately, *Get Out* is about reclaiming the power to leave trapped spaces. Though tackling systemic racism is not as simple as leaving a physical space (though this was not simple for Chris at all), the film exposes issues surrounding the treatment of Black individuals in the United States.

Spaces in *Us*

Us uses physical spaces to comment on privilege and class disparities in the United States. In one of the opening scenes, the audience is introduced to the Wilson family as they drive in their car to go on vacation. The car symbolizes the privilege to move in and out of spaces. The space of the vacation home (Adelaide’s childhood home) the Wilsons arrive at also symbolizes privilege (as they have the privilege to go on vacation). Through these spaces, Peele makes it clear that the family is comfortable financially and emotionally (other than Adelaide’s paranoia). The Tyler family (friends to the Wilsons) is also depicted as privileged because the space of their home exhibits wealth and comfort. On the other hand, the space of the tunnels represents what happens to those left behind by the capitalist system in the United States (America relies on the power imbalances created by capitalism to extract the labor of lower class

individuals to benefit the 1%¹). The space of the tunnels is depicted as confining, sorrowful, and horrifying, which is symbolic of the marginalization those without privilege in the capitalist system experience. The doubles represent the invisible laboring class, mirroring the privileged group they share an identity with but do not share the same opportunity with.

Us also explores the duality of spaces to comment on class. In the funhouse, for example, when Adalaide sees “herself” (she is actually seeing her double) in the mirror, Peele shows how two people can be the same, but live completely different and unequal lives due to social inequality. Peele also demonstrates this exact idea with the duality of living above/below the tunnels. The doubles living below, in the tunnels, are inherently the same as those who live above ground, but have been subjected to a life of misery. This example reveals how social inequality resulting from capitalist structures and class disparities leads to an unjust society.

Comparing Spaces in *Get Out* and *Us*

Sunken spaces represent the places where marginalized communities are repressed and subjugated. The literal repression occurring in these spaces in the films represents modern society’s sunken space adjacent structures. The Sunken Place in *Get Out* is a space where the consciousness goes, while the tunnels in *Us* are a physical space of concealment and suppression; however, they are both just as powerful. The Sunken Place is fueled by racism and white supremacy, while the underground tunnels are mainly powered by classism and the power imbalances of the capitalist system, but both represent the oppression of marginalized populations.

Privileged but deceiving spaces demonstrate superficial safeness; nowhere is safe when racism and classism persist in our society. In *Get Out*, the Armitage estate represents the privilege and wealth the family has, but audiences learn that underneath, privilege and wealth do

¹ Idea explained by Professor Tinnin-Gadson

not always mean safety. While it is Chris who is not safe, and the Armitage family has the upper hand, their privilege still does not protect them in the end. In *Us*, the Wilsons and Tylers occupy a similar space of privilege, and just like in *Get Out*, their privilege does not guarantee them safety. Through these two examples, Peele shows that in an unfair society, nobody is safe.

Both films demonstrate how fear is unevenly distributed. In *Us*, the privileged Wilsons are startled by violence that their doubles are accustomed to, reflecting Briefel and Ngai's theory of fear as emotional property. When their doubles attack, they are surprised and confused, as fear is not a normal state for them. Peele questions who has the right to fear as audiences learn more about the doubles' backstory. To the doubles, fear is a normalized state of being because they have been surrounded by fear and despair for their whole lives. By displaying two versions of the family who are inherently the same but completely different due to their privilege disparities, the film calls to question who has the right to fear. In *Get Out*, when Chris visits the Armitage estate, he constantly feels unsettled, but his fears are invalidated. By dismissing his feelings, Rose strips him of his right to interpret his own fear as valid. This example nods to a larger theme of Black individuals being denied the right to fear. When their fear is not treated as credible emotional property, they are expected to suppress it. Additionally, the Sunken Place represents fear without power. Chris is afraid, but his ability to act is taken away. This is a metaphor for marginalized communities who are afraid, but unable to act because their fears are ignored.

Finally, the films explore Blackness in the space of film. Roth points out how Peele stated that *Us* "proves a very valid and different point than *Get Out*, which is, not everything is about race." However, the film not being about race provides commentary on the depiction of race in the space of film, exposing the tendency of audiences to assume the film will be about race if it features Black characters, and illustrating the discursive power of Peele's treatment of Blackness

in *Us*. Roth also mentions other instances where race comes into play, such as Gabe (Adelaide's husband) making "a joke about the whiteness of hide-a-keys" and wearing a Howard sweatshirt throughout the film, a character making a joke about O.J. Simpson, and the Wilsons meeting up with the Tylers, their family friends who are white and appear to be wealthier than them. Roth suggests that these elements draw attention to race in a way that criticizes the audience's tendency to project "what they take any film centered on a black family, or made by a black filmmaker, to be about." Roth's analysis aligns with Coleman's idea of "Blacks in horror" (Coleman defines "Blacks in horror" as films depicting "Blacks and Blackness in the context of horror, even if the horror film is not wholly or substantially focused on either one") by showing how, in not being centered around Blackness, the film presents a type of discourse around Blackness. On the other hand, *Get Out* centers Blackness in the space of film, as race is paramount to its plot. Thus, Peele shows different ways to represent Blackness in the space of film. Ultimately, by centering Black characters both as lead roles and the final survivors, Peele veers away from the history of horror which places Black characters on the sidelines and makes them the first to die.

Conclusion

Spaces are a powerful element of horror films, and especially in the Black Horror genre, they are instruments of profound symbolism and insightful commentary on society. In *Get Out*, spaces represent isolation and confinement experienced by Black individuals, while in *Us*, spaces represent the social inequality resulting from privilege and class disparities. Both films use spaces to uncover the repression of marginalized communities and the results of privilege imbalances. These films encourage audiences to understand that we are all the same and must leave the problematic systems we currently occupy. By centering Black characters in the space of

horror films, Peele reframes the space of film both physically and symbolically, reshaping horror as a space for change.

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