



## TWO FORMS OF FETISHISM: FROM THE COMMODITY TO REVOLUTION IN «US»

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### Abstract

This essay contends that Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) connects the psychic operation of fetishistic disavowal to the existence of class division. By exploring the role that fetishistic disavowal plays in commodity fetishism, the film makes clear how the psychic disposition of the ruling class perpetuates the suffering of an underclass that lives beneath the surface. *Us* reveals the connection between two forms of fetishism just as it reveals the inseparability of the psyche from politics. What separates *Us* from the typical Marxist critique of bourgeois individualism is the connection that it establishes between the psychic disposition of the individual and the social situation in which the individual exists. Without the necessary psychic response to the situation, class inequality would quickly become unsustainable. Through the nature of the revolt the film depicts, Peele attempts to illustrate how the psychic disorders of individuals ensconced within capitalist society make possible the sustained existence of its inegalitarian structure.

### Keywords

*Us*, psychoanalysis, gaze, voice, paranoia, politics, revolution, class struggle, commodity fetishism, fetishistic disavowal



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## 1. THE LEPORINE SYNECDOCHE

The great achievement of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) is the clear link that it forges between psychic and political structures. The politics of the film is easy enough to identify: through its depiction of an oppressed population living out a barren existence beneath the earth's surface in contrast with those living in comfort above, the film makes a clear, if somewhat typical, political statement: the prosperity of some depends on ignoring the poverty of others, which we should be made to see. Making visible this poverty is itself a political act. But *Us* goes well beyond this seeming straightforward politics by emphasizing how the psychic disposition of those living above the surface has a connection to the condition of those below not just through the invisible tether that connects them but through the fetishism of those on the surface. Peele constructs a film that links a critique of the psychic process of fetishistic disavowal to the oppressive political situation that commodity fetishism produces. *Us* reveals the connection between two forms of fetishism just as it reveals the inseparability of the psyche from politics.

The film recounts a vast underworld population tethered to the movements of those living above the surface. While the tethered beings formally mirror the actions of their doppelgängers, they do so without any of the material content that makes the lives of the people above pleasurable. The form of their lives is the same, but the content is radically different. Those above have a rich content to obscure the empty form of their lives, while those below have an empty content that exposes the empty form. The narrative of *Us* depicts Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o), Gabe (Winston Duke), Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph), and Jason (Evan Alex) Wilson vacationing to Santa Cruz, California, just before the entirety of the tethered population comes to the surface to attack their doppelgängers and stage a massive political demonstration. The film concludes with the Wilson family successfully fending off their doppelgängers and with Adelaide discovering that she herself is really one of the tethered who switched identities as a child. The child she abducted became Red (also Lupita Nyong'o). Taken from the surface to live out a horrible existence below ground, Red became the leader of the revolt of the tethered. Although Adelaide ultimately kills Red, Red's death does not block the success of the political act she organizes, an event that makes public the existence of the hidden underclass. While we see the conclusion of this act at the end of the film, Adelaide remembers what she has hitherto repressed — that she abducted and changed places with the young Adelaide, which means that she herself is



one of the tethered. Her own personal revelation about her underworld past coincides with the revelation of the underworld to everyone on the surface.

How the film envisions the link between the individual and the collective becomes apparent in the opening credit sequence. *Us* begins with a prelude that depicts the moments that lead to young Adelaide's abduction. Young Adelaide enters a hall of mirrors called "Shaman's Vision Quest." While inside, she encounters her doppelgänger, and immediately afterward we see a close-up of her shocked reaction. The prelude ends with a cut to an extreme close-up of a white rabbit. The cut itself forges a link between the horror of Adelaide confronting her doppelgänger and the rabbit, between the condition of an individual character and the political situation (which, it later becomes clear, the rabbit represents). This dramatic cut also creates a gap in our knowledge as spectators: we don't know what happens to Adelaide until the end of the film, when a flashback shows the abduction. The gap in our knowledge that the cut enacts constitutes the narrative structure of the film. We cannot overcome this gap, not even through the flashback that fills in what the cut has elided. This gap in our knowledge produces the structure of the film, just like the lack in subjectivity constitutes the subject.

The credit sequence that follows consists on a long reverse tracking shot back from the single rabbit to a vast wall of caged rabbits. The slow tracking shot itself reveals the falsity of what we first see. As it gradually expands our view of the situation, we recognize that we cannot look at the individual rabbit in isolation, that we must take into account the collectivity in which the rabbit exists.

In this sense, the credit sequence tracking shot functions like a classic Marxian critique of bourgeois individualism<sup>1</sup>. It moves from individualism to the point of view of the collective, providing a critique of our first look. The individualistic perspective that begins the shot conceals the collectivity in which that individual is ensconced and constituted. When considering the individual, one can imagine a world of complete freedom, but once one takes up the perspective of the collectivity in which one exists, such freedom disappears within the mechanisms of ideological control. Similarly, the extreme close-up of the rabbit obfuscates the cage that imprisons the rabbit. It is only during the reverse tracking shot that exposes

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<sup>1</sup> The critique of the illusions of individualism is a constant in Marx's own thought. In *The Holy Family*, he and Engels state, "Precisely the slavery of civil society is in appearance the greatest freedom because it is in appearance the fully developed independence of the individual, who considers as his own freedom the uncurbed movement, no longer bound by a common bond or by man, of the estranged elements of his life, such as property, industry, religion, etc., whereas actually this is his fully developed slavery and inhumanity." (Marx & Engels, 1975, pp. 144-145). As Marx and Engels see here, the individualistic perspective necessarily conceals the social forces that render it utterly fantasmatic.



the collectivity of rabbits that the bars of the cage become evident. Similarly, the holistic perspective of an approach such as Marxism makes us aware of the prisonhouse of ideology.

The individualistic perspective creates not just the illusion of freedom but also a blindness to the horrors that surround the individual. This is what the tracking shot explodes in *Us*. In the isolation of the close-up, the rabbit appears like a cute pet, perhaps of Adelaide herself. It's only when the shot tracks backward, however, that we see the actual status of the rabbit: far from being a cute pet, it has no individuality at all but is just an anonymous one of many trapped in cages to be used, we might imagine at this point, for scientific experimentation. (The truth — that they serve as raw meat for the tethered — is even worse.) The tracking shot transforms the rabbit from a suggestive fantasy object alluding to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Jefferson Airplane's* "White Rabbit" into a symbol for humanity's exploitation of the animal world and the horrors of the world of exploited humans. During the film's credits alone, we see the comforts of our fantasy life turn into the horrors that the fantasy initially conceals<sup>1</sup>.

The path of the tracking shot from individual to collective also lays out the trajectory beyond the horror film that *Us* will take. Most horror films focus on the family or on a small familial group. From *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and *The Wolf Man* (George Waggner, 1941) to *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) to *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007) and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), almost every horror film takes a familial group, if not the nuclear family, as its subject matter. Horror films document the threat to this group from external forces that threaten to undermine it. The best entries in the genre reveal that this threat, which appears as an external danger, is actually the manifestation of the psychic conflicts within the familial group itself. But even in these cases, exemplified by Kubrick's *The Shining*, the genre cannot formulate that the problem is a collective one rather than one that besets a small familial group.

The fundamental limitation of horror as a filmic genre is its myopia. By centering the drama on a threat to a familial group, horror films nurture a fear of the dangerous outsider. Although *Us* begins as a horror film (even a particular type, the home invasion film), it does not remain confined to this genre. While the spectator continues to fear for the lives of the Wilsons, questions about the political movement that Red leads come to the fore and trump the concerns associated with the horror film. In the end, the survival of the Wilsons appears beside the point, as the country-wide

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<sup>1</sup> If one follows any fantasy to its end point, one inevitably encounters the trauma that the fantasy is organized around. In this sense, fantasy provides a respite only insofar as we don't take it seriously.



political demonstration — what Gabe dismisses as “fucked up performance art” — takes center stage.

The film clearly contrasts individualistic rebellion against one’s class status with a collective revolt. In the pre-credit sequence, we see the result of underworld Adelaide’s rebellion, even though we don’t learn about this rebellion until the end of the film. She comes to the surface and replaces the girl who would subsequently become Red. This rebellion enables her to live a pleasant life on the surface while condemning Red to the brutal life below that she escapes. But it does nothing to upend the overriding class divide. Adelaide’s social mobility keeps everything as it was<sup>1</sup>.

Red’s revolt provides a telling contrast. Rather than simply trying to gain her rightful place back from Adelaide, Red leads the entire class of the tethered to the surface with a disciplined plan of action. In this sense, the color that she wears and her lack of a proper name — “Red” is given only in the credits — bespeak her implicit allegiance to communism. While she does authorize the slaughter of all the doppelgängers on the surface, her aim is not to take over their lives. It is instead to make a political statement that will change existence for everyone, not just for her. This is why the film ceases to be a horror film as it goes along.

The individualistic or familial structure of the horror film gives way in *Us* to a critique of class society. But Peele does not just content himself with lamenting inequalities. What separates *Us* from the typical Marxist critique of bourgeois individualism is the connection that it establishes between the psychic disposition of the individual and the social situation in which the individual exists. Without the necessary psychic response to the situation, class inequality would quickly become unsustainable. Through the nature of the revolt the film depicts, Peele attempts to illustrate how the psychic disorders of individuals ensconced within capitalist society make possible the perpetuation of its inegalitarian structure.

## 2. WHY ANTI-CAPITALIST POLITICS REQUIRES SCISSORS

The most ludicrous aspect of *Us* is the weapon of choice for the tethered. Various interpreters of the film have noted the inefficiency of this weapon when compared with others and the impossibility of the tethered being able to manufacture so many large pairs of scissors. But this is a case

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Grundrisse*, Marx points out the inherent problem such individual act of social climbing: the structure of capitalism prohibits them from being anything but exceptions. He writes, “An individual worker can be industrious above the average, more than he has to be in order to live as a worker, only because another lies below the average, is lazier; he can save only because and if another wastes.” (Marx, 1993, p. 286). In *Us*, the underworld Adelaide is akin to the industrious individual worker that Marx imagines here. She changes things for herself but keeps everything the same in the system.



where the inutility of the object signifies its thematic importance. Besides providing a clear allusion to Kenneth Branagh's *Dead Again* (1990), the ubiquity of the scissors among the tethered offers an invaluable clue for understanding what produced the tethered in the first place, which is one of the central questions of the film. They bring scissors to the surface to attack their doppelgängers because they exist below through the collective refusal of symbolic castration by those above. The surface dwellers disavow any lack and live their lives through the commodity's promise of plenitude. Just as the film enacts a cut on the spectator, the tethered introduce a cut into the disavowal of castration of those on the surface. They represent not a return of the repressed but a return of the disavowed.

Although the ostensible function of the scissors is to cut the invisible tether binding the doppelgänger to its partner, such a cut doesn't ever occur in the film, not even metaphorically. Instead, the tethered use the scissors to stab those above to death. But by using scissors in the assault on their doppelgängers, they make evident that they are bringing the cut of castration to those who have disavowed it. There is no indication of lack in those from the surface. They live connected to commodities that feeds their disavowal of castration, and in turn, this disavowal of castration nourishes their investment in the commodity.

Us illustrates the link between the fetishistic disavowal of castration and commodity fetishism, between the psychic rejection of lack and the political attachment to the commodity. Fetishistic disavowal functions through a fetish object, which enables the subject to believe in a non-lacking Other that could secure the subject's identity. As Freud puts it, the fetish "remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (Freud, 1961, p. 154) Fetishistic disavowal enables the subject to know and not to know about symbolic castration at the same time. If fetishistic disavowal has become increasingly widespread, this is undoubtedly because the optimal fetish object turns out to be the commodity.

Capitalism uses the commodity as a fetish to obscure the labor that produces it so that consumers can enjoy this labor without confronting its existence. But the commodity appeals to capitalist subjects not just because it hides labor but because it promises respite from constitutive lack. Commodities function like this most evidently when we see others apparently enjoying them. The other enjoying a commodity that we don't have displays an image of non-lacking enjoyment. The illusory nature of this enjoyment becomes clear once I acquire the commodity for myself, at the point when it necessarily fails to deliver on the promise it has when



someone else has it. As a fetish, the commodity always promises more than it can deliver.

Although Freud does not comment on Marx when conceiving of fetishistic disavowal nor does Marx consider the subject's lack when theorizing commodity fetishism, both forms of fetishism actually mutually reinforce each other. If we don't see the labor in the commodity because of commodity fetishism, we don't see the lack in the other, which what fetishistic disavowal aims to avoid. Furthermore, commodity fetishism assists the process of disavowal by providing the subject with an image of its own completion in the figure of the commodity. Commodities sell because they offer to relieve the subject buying them of its lack and to provide wholeness. But at the same time, we believe in their fetishistic power because the disavowal of castration makes their magic conceivable. Fetishistic disavowal is integral to capitalist relations of production and the belief in the salutary power of the commodity that accompanies these relations.

Through the foregrounding of scissors as the weapon of choice, *Us* highlights the connection between commodity fetishism and fetishistic disavowal. The depiction of the situation of the tethered and the form of their revolt make it clear that capitalism doesn't rely only on the fetishism of commodities (which obscures the labor that produces them) but also on the fetishistic disavowal of castration. This disavowal enables subjects to act as if lack represents a temporary setback that they can overcome through the acquisition of the proper commodity or through the acquisition of enough commodities. I can invest myself in the sublime power of the commodity to fully satisfy me unless I first disavow the constitutive status of lack. This is why disavowal is much more essential to capitalist society than repression<sup>1</sup>.

Symbolic castration is the lack that constitutes subjectivity. Through an inaugural cut that puts the subject at odds with itself, the subject emerges. This self-division, which is another name for what Freud calls castration, gives the subject something to desire by forging a loss. On the basis of this loss, the subject can relate to itself and to others. One who has lost nothing would remain perfectly whole and closed off from any relationships. But the loss is a loss of nothing. It is nothing but a split of the subject from itself.

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<sup>1</sup> The most famous slogan of May 1968 in Paris — “Jouir sans entraves” [“Enjoy without bounds”] — bespeaks the relationship between repression and disavowal that typifies the spirit of revolt in the 1960s. To enjoy without bounds is to bypass repression but, at the same time, such a possibility suggests a complete disavowal of castration. Here, the only boundary to full enjoyment is repressive society, not the constitutive role that lack plays in the formation of subjectivity. Perhaps this is the reason why capitalist society was able to integrate this revolt and function even more effectively than before.



Loss or self-division enables the subject to desire and find enjoyment not through attaining what it has lost (because it has lost nothing) but through repeating the process of loss that allows it to experience its lost object as an absence. One enjoys one's lost object in the act of losing it, not in the act of finding it. The pleasure of finding the object one desires is always fleeting because one soon discovers that the object one can have is never the object that animates one's desire. In contrast to this fleeting pleasure, our enjoyment of the object as lost has a necessarily traumatic character because it can't escape its dependence on loss. One cannot enjoy by attaining the object but must sustain its status as lost in order to enjoy it<sup>1</sup>.

The basis of capitalism is a retreat from the necessary loss that accompanies all enjoyment. Capitalism promises respite from loss through the commodity form. The commodity form has a religious function within capitalism because it offers the subject a path to the transcendence of its own self-division and that of every figure of authority. This is what Marx is getting at when he claims that the commodity "is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (Marx, 1976, p. 163). As much as Christianity, the commodity form seduces the subject with the complete satisfaction that derives from overcoming its lack. But this is a promise that it cannot keep. The more one accumulates commodities or takes on the commodity form oneself, the more one finds oneself bereft of the enjoyment that the commodity form promises. The investment in this promise requires the fetishistic disavowal of castration because if I accept the fact of castration, the commodity will have no power over me. As a result, fetishistic disavowal is the response to subjectivity that characterizes the capitalist epoch.

As the psychic basis for commodity fetishism, fetishistic disavowal does not just affect the fetishists themselves. Their disavowal of lack requires the existence of a laboring underworld that produces the commodities fueling their disavowal. While commodity fetishism blinds consumers to labor, their fetishistic disavowal requires this labor to produce the commodities that make the disavowal sustainable. This is how fetishistic disavowal and commodity fetishism work hand-in-hand within the capitalist system.

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<sup>1</sup> A concrete example of enjoyment through what is absent is the enjoyment in a romantic relationship. What one enjoys about the partner is not what fits into one's expectations or fantasy structure but precisely that aspect of the other that resists being reduced to the fantasy.



### 3. SUNK BY THE BOAT

In the universe of those who dwell above the surface in *Us*, the logic of the commodity predominates. The two families that the film depicts have separate summer homes where they vacation. They own SUVs and boats, while amusing themselves with their smartphones, large-screen televisions, and a home virtual assistant named Ophelia<sup>1</sup>. Peele shows the extent to which the people above the surface take refuge in the promise of the commodity on multiple occasions.

The intertwining of commodity fetishism and fetishistic disavowal becomes most evident in the case of the Tylers — Josh (Tim Heidecker), Kitty (Kate Moss), and their twin daughters, Becca (Cali Sheldon) and Lindsey (Noelle Sheldon). Josh and Kitty ensconce themselves in a variety of commodities, including a new car, a luxurious boat, an extravagant house, and plenty of alcohol. When we first see Josh and Kitty on the beach, Josh mocks Gabe for his new boat, which he believes cannot compete with his own. Kitty exhibits a similar fetishism, proudly showing off the results of her recent plastic surgery and proclaiming, “I think I could have been a movie star.” For Josh and Kitty, there is nothing but the commodity because it is the vehicle through which they disavow castration<sup>2</sup>.

Gabe’s relationship to Josh shows just how commodity fetishism works with fetishistic disavowal. Gabe associates Josh’s acquisition of commodities with a non-lacking enjoyment that contrasts with his own lack. He repeatedly expresses the sentiment that Josh always seems to outdo him in terms of consumption. But Josh’s commodities are the vehicles through which Gabe disavows castration. This is why he laments that Josh has purchased a new car and why he himself buys a boat. By obtaining a boat, Gabe hopes to attain what Josh has. But Peele highlights the failure of the commodity to provide what he hopes it will provide.

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<sup>1</sup> Josh and Kitty have a virtual assistant; Gabe and Adelaide do not. This is one way that we see the effect of structural racism within the universe of those invested in it. Although Gabe and Adelaide appear more well-educated and thoughtful than Josh and Kitty, they are perpetually behind in the game of commodity acquisition. The racist structure tilts the playing field so that Josh is able to stay one commodity ahead of Gabe.

<sup>2</sup> This is especially clear when we see the prominent role that alcohol plays for them. It is not simply an indication of their sociability but a commodity that promises to make lack disappear. On the beach, Josh refers to a drink as Kitty’s medicine, and as they go to leave, Kitty announces, “It’s vodka o’clock.” Later, as the tethered begin their assault on the house, Kitty tries to rouse Josh to investigate the sounds she has heard. Although he is just sitting in a chair drinking, Josh proclaims, “I’m busy.” While it might be tempting to view this as an obvious lie given that he is clearly doing nothing at all, he is actually busy with the commodity and its logic. He cannot break from it until Kitty shows that she will not stop insisting. Peele includes this exaggerated contrast between the visual field and the dialogue in this scene to make the effect of commodity fetishism unmistakable.



Gabe's boat is obviously lacking: not only is it smaller than Josh's, but he must hit the motor with a hammer whenever it periodically stops working.

In a key moment on the beach, Gabe tells Josh about his new commodity in order to verify that he has overcome all lack. Josh immediately begins questioning whether or not Gabe has all the necessary accessories, searching for the one thing that Gabe doesn't have. With each item, Gabe confidently assures Josh that he has it until Josh comes to the flare gun, which Gabe does not have (but that Josh has on his boat). The flare gun is the essential commodity that proves Josh's status as non-lacking and Gabe's status as lacking. It is the fetish object through which Gabe disavows the other's castration.

But Peele nicely shows the failure of this commodity later in the film. While his doppelgänger Abraham pursues him, Gabe hides out in Josh's boat. As they confront each other, Gabe fires Josh's flare gun at Abraham. Rather than injuring or even killing him, the flare gun proves worthless: the flare goes harmlessly awry, doing nothing at all to fend off Abraham. In this scene, both Gabe and the spectator experience the failure of the commodity that appeared to assure the absence of any lack. By forcing Gabe to confront the failure of the flare (and the commodity as such), the revolt of the tethered perpetuates a return of disavowed castration.

The film's exposure of commodity fetishism comes to a head in the attack on the Tylers. The attack by the Tyler doppelgängers occurs with the song "Good Vibrations" by the Beach Boys blaring on the home sound system. The fact that the vicious killings occur with the accompaniment of this upbeat song is one of the film's comic ironies, but what follows is even more revelatory. Just after the death of Josh and the twins, Kitty crawls along the floor bleeding profusely. She gathers herself in order to call out to the commodity for help, saying, "Ophelia, Ophelia, call the police." Rather than calling the police, however, Ophelia, itself a commodity, provides yet another commodity as it mishears Kitty's request. Ophelia responds, "Sure, playing 'Fuck the Police' by NWA." Although the actual police would not have been able to save her, Kitty dies on the floor without ever being able to call for help because of the dominance of the commodity. The commodity form places her in an insulated world that ultimately leaves her alone to die. It mediates every relationship that she has and even presides over her death.

The song "Fuck the Police" serves as an appropriate anthem for the tethered, however. It is a protest song against oppressive police violence. The lyrics portend a violent turning of the tables, akin to what the tethered are able to perpetuate in the film. They proclaim, "It's going to be a bloodbath of cops." What ensues when the tethered come to the surface is a



bloodbath of those who exist in open luxury while the tethered must dwell in an underground chamber of horrors.

Although they escape the fate of the Tylers, the Wilsons, especially Gabe and Zora, are in no way free from an investment in the commodity and its logic. Zora's commodity fetishism is visible through her relationship with her phone. When Adelaide tells Zora to put away her phone for the evening and go to sleep, Zora agrees and turns it off while pulling the blanket over her head. But after Adelaide closes the bedroom door, Peele continues the shot, allowing us to see a light illuminate under the blanket from underneath, indicating that Zora continues to watch her phone<sup>1</sup>. This type of dependence develops because this commodity enables her to encounter an other that seem not to be lacking. The phone obfuscates the absence in the other and thus nourishes the process of fetishistic disavowal.

Gabe's investment in the commodity is even more extreme than his daughter's. This becomes apparent not just through Gabe's efforts to keep up with Josh's purchases but also in his response to Red's attack on them. After Red lines them up on the couch and makes her speech describing the horrors that she has lived through under the surface, Gabe immediately begins to offer commodities to appease her.

In a stunning series of attempts at solving the problem of what Red wants from them, he evinces his inability to recognize a fundamental challenge to the regime of the commodity. He says to Red, "What do you want? You can have my wallet. You can have my car. You have my boat for all I care." He pauses after each offer, thinking that it might serve to quell Red's insistence. But Adelaide quickly sees that Gabe is responding on the wrong register and warns him against this line of thought. Red's response reveals exactly what she wants, as she threatens to cut something off Gabe. She and the rest of the tethered want to introduce castration to those who disavow it. This disavowal through commodity fetishism on the part of those on the surface is what sustains the unlivable underworld that those below have just fled.

*Us* shows the damage that commodity fetishism does both to those who succumb to it and to those it renders invisible. The subjects of commodity fetishism find themselves in utterly vacant lives where they feel a constant imperative to have the next commodity. Gabe's purchase of a boat to equal Josh and Josh's purchase of a new car to surpass Gabe are

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<sup>1</sup> The weapons that Adelaide, Gabe, and Zora use against the attack from the tethered highlights the involvement in the commodity form. While the tethered arm themselves with scissors, Zora uses a golf club, Adelaide uses a fire poker, and Gabe uses a baseball bat (and also a boat). Just as the weapons of the tethered are significant, so are these.



two instances of the effect of this imperative in the film. Whatever satisfaction these subjects can register quickly evaporates as they find that there is a new commodity that they have yet to possess and enjoy. The subjects of commodity fetishism experience a series of fleeting pleasures without grasping how they satisfy themselves. In this sense, they pay the price for the brief pleasure that the commodity provides through their separation from their own mode of satisfaction.

But *Us* also exposes the burden of those who must have nothing so that those who have commodities can take pleasure in them. Commodity fetishism performs a double function: it enables subjects to believe in the power of the commodity and not to see the labor that creates its value. When I purchase a new boat, I see only the bright shiny object and the price I must pay for it. Within the capitalist system, I cannot see, for structural reasons, the labor that went into the construction of the boat. The fetishism of the commodity doesn't hide a presence but an absence — the labor that has already been expended in the creation of the commodity.

As the victims of the reign of the commodity, the tethered must live out a completely impoverished life — no sunlight, no medical care, no freedom, and nothing but raw rabbit to eat. Although Peele spends less time on the situation of those oppressed by commodity fetishism, it is clear that their situation is much worse than that of those engaged in fetishistic disavowal on the surface, which is why Red is able to lead them in a mass revolt. They have little to lose.

The reign of the commodity form — the epoch of capitalism — leaves no one capable of discovering how they are satisfied. Instead, those on both sides of the class struggle seek some form of deliverance. Those on the surface hope to find it in the newest commodity, while those below look for it in their revolutionary action. Each side is doomed to failure because there is no possibility of realizing the complete satisfaction that each strives for. If the revolution succeeds, it cannot bring paradise but only a common lacking existence. One must avow the lack and discover satisfaction within one's failure and in what is absent, which is precisely what commodity fetishism militates so strongly against.

#### **4. A CUT IN THE HAND**

The primary way that the ruling class wins the class struggle is to render this struggle invisible, so that no one knows a battle is going on. An image of the social order as a whole rather than as a divided structure is crucial in this regard. As a result, the first act of any radical movement whatsoever is almost always creating awareness of a divide within the



image of wholeness. Ideology strives, in contrast, to sustain the invisibility of all antagonistic cuts.

The act that Red conceives in *Us* transforms what was originally an ideological event into a radical cut. In 1986, the Hands Across America project attempted to assert the wholeness of America, despite the massive inequality of the time, exacerbated by more than five years of Ronald Reagan's conservative presidency. The project encouraged individuals to participate in a mass movement of joining hands at the same time in order to form a human chain across the entire country. But the unity expressed by this chain was only an imaginary unity.

Red takes Hands Across America as paradigmatic for the political act of the tethered from happenstance. When the future Adelaide abducts her in the hall of mirrors, she is wearing her Hands Across America t-shirt (beneath a *Thriller* t-shirt that her doppelgänger steals in order to pass herself off as Adelaide). Furthermore, in the film's opening shot, we see an advertisement for Hands Across America playing on a television set that the future Red watches. After another commercial comes on, the young girl, prompted by her father, turns off the television in order to go to the Santa Cruz boardwalk, where the tethered Adelaide will kidnap her and take her place. Hands Across America represents the residue of the surface in Red's underworld existence.

But while the decision to use this particular form of political action is contingent, it nevertheless undergoes a transformation in valence when employed by the tethered during the time of the film. The earlier demonstration was a propaganda effort designed to create the illusion of wholeness, but the new version of Hands Across America introduces a cut into the whole by literally dividing the country in two with the human chain. The difference is stark: the earlier demonstration signified imaginary healing; the later one signified the existence of a real wound within the social order.

It is not coincidental that the original Hands Across America actually had large gaps within it, so that some people were holding on to nothing with one hand. This indicates that the purported wholeness was not just imaginary in the sense of creating a comforting image. It was also imaginary in the sense that it did not accomplish what it professed to accomplish. Again, the difference in the current version provides an instructive contrast. The new demonstration does not have gaps but instead creates a gap in the social order, something that the social order cannot account for. Its marking of a cut in the country shows that national wholeness obscures the antagonism of the class divide.



After Red's death, the movement seems unlikely to have much direction, since no one else can even speak. But the bare existence of the demonstration already indicates that the future must be different. The point is simply making the cut visible and thus disrupting the disavowal that obscures it. One cannot imagine the tethered being put back in their place, but Peele leaves things open. Perhaps disavowal will continue even after the demonstration makes evident its cost.

## 5. THE MISSING LINK

*Us* provides a coherent explanation for all the events in the film, save one. While it is clear what enables Red to lead the revolt — coming from the surface, she knows how to speak — it is less clear what enables her tethered doppelgänger to come to the surface and replace her in the first place. When we see this sequence in flashback just before the end of the film as Adelaide begins to remember her past, her young self walks to the surface while the rest of the tethered mindlessly play out their parallel existence to those on the surface. One cannot even deduce that the fact that the hall of mirrors functions as a portal to the underworld makes possible the switched identities, even though it clearly plays a role in the switch. The problem is that we see no evidence of others being abducted here: the film suggests that Red is the only one among the tethered who can speak. No one else in the underworld speaks, and she is alone in planning the revolt. Thus, the condition of possibility for the future Adelaide's act is simply left obscure in the film.

While an ungenerous spectator might be tempted to chalk this up to an oversight on the part of Jordan Peele, this seems unlikely, given that this is the decisive action of the film (at least until Red's collective revolt). Nonetheless, from what we know of the situation of the tethered, the action of the doppelgänger who would replace Adelaide should be impossible. The tethered are stuck mirroring all the actions of their doppelgängers on the surface while remaining stuck in completely impoverished and terrifying conditions. There is no explanation for how either version of Adelaide might break from this mirroring, except the inability of any symbolic structure to function perfectly. The impossible can happen because the structure that creates possibilities also creates impossibilities, but these impossibilities remain impossible only as long as one remains invested in the structure. The identity switch perpetuated on Adelaide is a moment when the impossible happens.

It might be that the engine for the switch comes from the surface version of Adelaide as she walks away from her father. In the opening



sequence on the boardwalk, she shows her relative lack of interest in the attractions of the commodity. When her father wins a prize at the milk bottle game, she opts for a medium-level prize — the *Thriller* t-shirt — rather than accepting his offer to try for a better one by playing more. Just afterward, she strays on her own to the beach. She is drawn to the hall of mirrors entitled, “Shaman’s Vision Quest,” with the imperative written above the door, “Find Yourself.” After a shot of this entrance, Peele cuts to a reverse shot of Adelaide looking as she holds a candy apple. Registering what she sees, she drops the apple and proceeds to move to the door. A torrential rain begins as she is right in front of the door, and it seems to drive her inside, where she will encounter her doppelgänger and subsequently be thrust into the horrifying underworld.

Peele leaves the agent behind this entrance into the underworld completely ambiguous. Perhaps Adelaide’s disinterest in commodities and concern for the unknown drives her to confront what has been disavowed. Perhaps she encounters an opening within the symbolic structure indicating that disavowal can never be fully complete. The ambiguity suggests that this encounter is itself a point of impossibility. It doesn’t fit within the logic of the world depicted, and yet it occurs.

It is the status of this event as impossible that triggers its repression in both Adelaide and Red. Despite her role as the agent of the switch, Adelaide has no conscious memory of it. Her unease with coming to the Santa Cruz beach indicates an unconscious awareness, but it is only at the end of the film that this event comes to consciousness. Red never has a similar awakening. Although she leads a revolt against the surface people, Red doesn’t consciously remember that she was once one of them. The shared repression of Adelaide and Red makes sense only when we recognize the impossible position that the identity switch occupies within each of their worlds.

The impossible happens, but we repress impossibility by recreating a new symbolic world of possibilities after the fact. This repression hides the possibility of impossibility and thereby gives our world a coherence that it doesn’t have. The point where the impossible happens becomes repressed after it occurs so that social existence can stabilize itself without confronting its own immanent tension. As she recognizes that she herself was once a tethered at the end of the film, Adelaide enters into a new relationship with structural impossibility. She knows now that nothing distinguishes her from that which would destroy her world, that the security of her world can never be assured. Although Adelaide has killed Red, Red has transformed her by politicizing her. Adelaide can no longer think in



terms of a barrier between us and them that sustains her world's consistency. She now knows that they are us.

## 6. BEYOND THE MIRROR

*Us* is a film of doppelgängers. But it is not a film of mirror images. The doppelgänger in *Us* does not confront characters with their mirror image but with what they cannot see about themselves — their own opacity to themselves. This appears in *Us* in two forms: the encounter with the back of the doppelgänger rather than the face and the encounter with the doppelgänger's voice. In each of these forms, characters, especially Adelaide, see their own strangeness to themselves manifested in an object.

The back of the doppelgänger and Red's way of speaking function in the film as moments of the gaze and the voice as extimate objects. They are external but embody the disavowed lack of the character who experiences them. In his *Seminar XI*, Jacques Lacan distinguishes the gaze and voice as two versions of what he calls the objet a — an object that is constitutively absent but nonetheless disturbs the field of perception because it marks the inflection of the subject's own desire in that field. Through the encounter with this object as an absence, one can see and hear the distortion that one's desire creates in what one sees and hears (Lacan, 1978).

This distortion of the field of perception occurs throughout *Us*. When the surface version of Adelaide first sees her doppelgänger, she enters into a hall of mirrors. The film suggests to the spectator that the trauma will lie in the confrontation with the mirror image. Soon after her entrance into this mirror maze, she tries to leave and ends up surrounded by mirror images with no clear path out. But importantly, this is not the moment of trauma. She whistles the tune of "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and hears someone else whistling along with her<sup>1</sup>. Following the sound, she escapes from the mirror maze into hallway where a door opens behind her. As she turns around, she sees the back of a girl who looks just like her. The film cuts from the back of the doppelgänger to a reverse shot of Adelaide's scared look as the girl turns around. Peele doesn't include a subsequent shot of Adelaide's mirror image but instead cuts to an extreme close-up of a white rabbit, which begins the credit sequence. The gaze does not occur when Adelaide looks directly on her mirror image but when she sees the back of her doppelgänger. The gaze is what we cannot see about ourselves — the unconscious desire that holds the key to our subjectivity but that we can

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<sup>1</sup> One of the first hints that we have that Adelaide has switched place occurs when she looks with interest on a spider crawling across a table while she lies on the couch. The spider seems to suggest something to her, which turns out to be the exchange of identities.



know only through the encounter with an external object that distorts and ultimately shatters our perceptual field.

*Us* explores the relationship between the mirror image and the gaze as an object manifesting desire. The mirror performs a domesticating operation on the gaze and transforms the trauma of the gaze into the consolation of the face<sup>1</sup>. In the gaze, we must endure the demonstration of our own lack as a distorting absence. The gaze is traumatic because it brings us back to our status as constitutively lacking beings by eliminating the distance between us and what we see. The face, in contrast, even if it is the face of the other, provides the comfort of wholeness. The face is not lacking but instead fills in lack with expressiveness. The confrontation with the back or with the absence of a face, like that of the family of doppelgängers in darkness in the Wilson driveway earlier in the film, doesn't give us an expression to identify with. When seeing the absence of the face, one sees what is lacking in the other and thus in oneself. The opacity in the other makes evident one's own opacity to oneself.

The relationship between the face and the gaze becomes clearest in *Us* when Adelaide recounts her childhood experience of the hall of mirrors to Gabe. Their conversation is one between the trauma of the gaze and the consolation of the face. As they settle in to the summer home early in the film, Adelaide tells Gabe how uncomfortable being in Santa Cruz makes her. She says, "I don't feel like myself." Gabe immediately responds with an appeal to her image, asserting, "You look like yourself." Then, Adelaide tells him the story of her experience in Shaman's Vision Quest. Rather than crediting Adelaide's account of meeting her doppelgänger there, Gabe begins to refer to this figure as the "mirror girl," assuming that Adelaide's encounter with the gaze was nothing but an instance of seeing her own reflection. He can recognize only the mirror image and the face. He is blind to the gaze and the trauma it embodies because he is ensconced in fetishistic disavowal in a way that Adelaide is not<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Through its depiction of the face as a domestication of the gaze, *Us* provides a counterpoint to Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is the philosopher of the face. For Levinas, the other's face calls us to our absolute ethical responsibility for the other, a responsibility that brooks no compromise with other considerations. Levinas states, "there arises, awakened before the face of the other, a responsibility for the other to whom I was committed before any committing, before being present to myself or coming back to self". (Levinas, 1999, pp. 30-31). But rather than calling me to responsibility, the face enables me to believe in the wholeness of the other and of myself, as *Us* makes clear.

<sup>2</sup> In the universe of *Us*, there are two characters that show themselves less prone to the massive fetishistic disavowal that marks everyone else — Adelaide and Jason. It is thus not coincidental that Adelaide is originally tethered (though she has repressed this) and that Jason is the closest to her. Both Adelaide and Jason evince much less attachment to the disavowal of lack through the commodity. Neither has a phone, nor does the film show them eagerly consuming, unlike Gabe and Zora, not to speak of Josh, Kitty, and their daughters. *Us* presents Adelaide and Jason as subjects more in touch with their lack, which contrasts them with every other character on the surface that we see. Jason's engagement with lack is visible primarily through his constant use of the werewolf mask and his repeated failure to light the flame on his



By confronting the subject with its own lack, the army of the tethered shows the subject the point at which it cannot see itself. No one can look in a mirror to see the back of one's own head. This opacity is what subjects disavow through the fetish. Fetishism enables one to believe in the non-lacking other and thereby avoid seeing one's own constitutive lack as well. But in *Us* we confront what our capitalist society has disavowed through the fetishism of the commodity.

The film also uses the voice in a parallel way. Because Red has not spoken for decades, her voice is gravelly and distorted. What she says is barely audible. A lack of use for over twenty years has damaged her vocal cords and given her voice an inhuman sound. But this inhuman voice is the voice as an object for Adelaide. It is Adelaide's own voice stripped of all the refinement and tonality that comes from making oneself understood by others. Red's voice is loss itself as it confronts those who have disavow loss through the fetish.

The spectator experiences this voice as traumatic insofar as it embodies absence and thus portends the destruction of those who have disavowed any absence. The loss inhering in the voice does not fit within the world of the commodity but rather marks the annihilation of this world. Only the voice as an object that distorts the perceptual field can articulate the horrors that the fetishism of commodities produces for those in the underworld. A clearly articulated neutral account would fail to indicate the involvement of those on the surface in these horrors. But because the distorted voice is Adelaide's own voice and yet is missing something, it makes manifest the relationship between those on the surface and the existence of the tethered.

This is possible because the voice is akin to one's back. Just as one cannot look on one's own back, one cannot hear one's own voice. The alien status of the voice becomes apparent in audio recordings: one hears

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magic trick. In Jason's case, a mask testifies to an awareness of lack because it doesn't hide anything. Everyone who sees him knows that it's he beneath the mask. By hiding nothing, the mask displays castration. Furthermore, by wearing the mask, Jason becomes explicitly aligned with his doppelgänger in a way that none of the other characters is. (This connection to Pluto is what enables Jason to coax him into walking backward into the flames toward the end of the film. Pluto mimics Jason's movements because Jason has not fully disavowed his relationship to lack.) But the crucial detail about Jason concerns the activity that defines him — performing an act again and again that fails to work properly but enjoying the repetition itself. This is precisely the form of enjoyment associated with castration rather than with its disavowal. Whereas Abraham and Umbrae try to kill Gabe and Zora, Jason's doppelgänger Pluto takes up a different relation with him, wanting to play with him rather than to destroy him. This is not just because Pluto is younger than Abraham and Umbrae but because Jason is more in touch with his own status as a lacking subject. Pluto can enjoy along with Jason because they enjoy similarly. The connection between Jason and Adelaide is responsible for many internet theories about his provenance, which he appears to share with his mother. There is evidence for this theory, but it requires postulating events that appear prior to the diegetic time of the film without any ground for doing so. For one version of this theory, see (Alter, 2019). For a debunking of the theory, see (Abad-Santos & Romano, 2019)



something much different from what one hears while speaking. The difference is the measure of our strangeness to ourselves — the lack inherent in subjectivity — and it is this strangeness that disavowal rejects. The rejection involved in fetishistic disavowal allows subjects to turn a blind eye to the horrors that the logic of the commodity perpetuates. Red's revolt confronts those who embrace disavowal with exactly what they have tried not to see and hear. But this does not mean we should trust Red's account of the situation wholeheartedly.

## 7. WHY WE SHOULD BE SKEPTICAL OF PARANOIA

Red's account of how the tethered come about is steeped in paranoia. In this sense, it is not an atypical reaction to the capitalist system. Capitalism inherently produces conspiracy theories and paranoia about how its system of control operates. Because it is a system that functions with no one, not even an invisible hand, pulling the strings, it has no clear site of culpability for the system. Although political leaders bear responsibility for the legal order that supports the capitalist system, the legal and political order is not ultimately determinative. Not every political order under capitalism is the same, but each must respond to the exigencies of capitalist relations of production that condition it, which creates the impression that the political order is a theater of shadows, behind which the real authority lies.

One can question whether or not this same dynamic holds for earlier economic systems. It seems doubtful. But at least in the capitalist universe, Marx's claim about the primacy of economic relations of production has the status of a self-evident truth. In the famous Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx claims, "The totality of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure" (Marx, 1970, p. 20). Even if it does not follow directly from their foundation, the political order cannot achieve autonomy from how the capitalist system shapes the entire society. While we should be wary of Marx's conclusion that interventions in the superstructure will ultimately prove ineffectual at dislodging the capitalist system itself, we have to acknowledge the strictly secondary position of the political order in relation to the capitalist socioeconomic structure. This structure is a serpent without a head.

As a result, capitalism produces conspiracy theories that obfuscate the open conspiracy of capitalism itself. These theories give agency to a secret cabal of political actors because they cannot recognize that the socioeconomic system is actually pulling the strings. Conspiracy theories



translate the capitalist system into a structure of hidden domination. In this way, they allow us to believe that we are not implicated in our own unfreedom through our investment in capitalism.

*Us* depicts two different conspiracy theories. The first, articulated by Zora, concerns governmental control of individuals. The second, proffered by Red, explains the origin of the world of the tethered. It is significant that Zora's obviously false conspiracy theory comes first. Peele's inclusion of Zora's dubious conspiracy theory about fluoridation provides the background for Red's articulation of a similar conspiracy theory. We know to be skeptical about Red's theory because we know that Zora's similar theory is false.

During the drive of the Wilson family to their summer cottage in Santa Cruz, California, we see the ramifications of capitalism's tendency to produce conspiracy theories. This revelation provides a significant key for understanding how we should interpret Red's history of the underworld later in the film. In the fascinating sequence in the car, Zora gathers knowledge about a government conspiracy from her phone and tells it to the family. She credulously accepts a contemporary conspiracy theory about government mind control, saying, "Did you know that there's fluoride in the water that the government uses to control our minds?" It's clear that Zora has read this conspiracy theory somewhere online while looking at her phone and finds it completely convincing. What immediately stands out about this is where she directs her suspicions. She readily suspects the government of perpetuating a covert mind-control program through drinking water, and yet she has no suspicions about the internet sources that provide her the information about this program — or about the phone as the form through which she learns about it. Although the film doesn't explicitly link this theory to Red's later one, the structural similarity is unmistakable.

Red's first extended explanation of the world of the tethered does not rely on conspiracy. Red has two monologues in the film, both delivered with her raspy damaged voice. In the first, she recounts the horrors of life below the surface. After chaining Adelaide to coffee table and assembling both families face to face, she begins, "Once upon a time, there was girl, and the girl had a shadow. The two were connected, tethered together. When the girl ate, her food was given to her warm and tasty, but when the shadow was hungry, she had to eat rabbit, raw and bloody." She goes on to explain how the formation of Adelaide's family led to a series of traumas for her. In each case, Red experienced the same form of event but with a brutal and terrifying content. This account doesn't provide an explanation but simply describes the horror of life beneath the surface in contrast with



life above. But she ends this description with a claim about her calling that should raise the spectator's suspicions. She concludes, "So you see, the shadow hated the girl so much for so long, until one day the shadow realized she was being tested by God." Whatever we might think about the situation of the tethered, the idea that God was testing them surely cannot be correct. Not only that, but it provides a clue about Red's paranoia.

In her second monologue, Red lays out her conspiracy theory about the origin of the underworld. While articulating this theory, she admits that the idea of a conspiracy is actually nothing but her own postulation. The final battle toward the end of the film between Red and Adelaide that occurs beneath the surface provides the backdrop for her explanation for this world's existence. In her monologue to Adelaide, she says, "I believe it was humans that built this place.... They created a tether so that they can 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, and then there was us." Red's monologue sees the creation of the tethered as part of a failed conspiracy designed to control those on the surface.

The problem with Red's conspiracy theory is that the film provides no visual evidence to support it and there is no way that she could possibly know of it. Since none of the other tethered subjects can talk, they could not have communicated the program to her. In addition, the existence of the tethered predates her arrival among them (as we find out when Adelaide remembers that she was originally a tethered), so she could not have experienced this original attempt at manipulation herself.

In this speech, she makes paranoid references to God. When Adelaide dances as a young girl, this spurs rebellion in Red (undoubtedly because it recalls life on the surface to her). Red tells Adelaide, "The miracle happened. That's when I saw God, and he showed me my path. You felt it too. At the end of our dance, the tethered saw that I was different, that I would deliver them from this misery. I found my faith and began to prepare." If we accept Red's account of humans building the underworld in order to manipulate those on the surface, we have to credence her belief that God called her as well. It makes no sense to accept one and dismiss the other since both belong to the same paranoid delusion.

Red's theory about humans creating the tethered, like all conspiracy theories, deprives everyone involved of agency and transforms the responsibility for the social order into the culpability of a few villains. With this theory, Red actually lets Adelaide (and all those who dwell unknowingly on the surface) off the hook. It is not their fetishism that



sustains the underworld but the evil of a cabal trying to exert control over the rest of humanity.

## 8. AFTER FETISHISM

By exhibiting the link between commodity fetishism and fetishistic disavowal of castration, *Us* makes evident the clear political consequences of our psychic activity. The existence of class division has a direct relationship with the disavowal of castration that engenders and fuels it. If one believes that constitutive lack is avoidable, one will invest oneself in the fetishism of the commodity that obscures the exploited labor necessary to produce the commodity. The commodity is the promise of a non-lacking other. In this sense, fetishistic disavowal represents the origin of capitalism.

The production of a horrific underworld has not ceased with the development of capitalism. Today, laborers do exist in underground caves where they mine the minerals necessary for our privileged commodity — the phone. The underworld of the tethered has a real world correlate in children mining minerals such as cobalt in the Congo and elsewhere. The horrific conditions in which these children labor is not separate from the commodity fetishism that renders their labor invisible. Commodity fetishism allows those who enjoy the products of this labor to avoid seeing it. But it is only the disavowal of castration that enables one to believe in the promise of the commodity. Without this disavowal, commodity fetishism would lose its appeal.

This situation cannot change through individuals coming to consciousness about it and deciding to give up a certain number of commodities or consuming more conscientiously. Only an event that makes publicly evident the cut — both within each subject and in the social order itself — can make a difference. *Us* charts the path from fetishism to the political act, but it stops with the public articulation of the cut in the form of the mass demonstration. Whether we choose to remain in touch with this cut or return to a new form of fetishism is an open question. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that the fate of universal equality depends on how we respond to the ending of *Us*.

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## ДВЕ ФОРМЫ ФЕТИШИЗМА: ОТ ТОВАРА К РЕВОЛЮЦИИ В «МЫ»

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### Аннотация

В этом эссе утверждается, что «Мы» Джордана Пила (2019) связывает психическую операцию фетишистского отрицания с существованием классового разделения. Изучая роль, которую фетишистское отрицание играет в товарном фетишизме, фильм проясняет, как психическое настроение правящего класса увековечивает страдания низшего класса, который живет под поверхностью. «Мы» показывает связь между двумя формами фетишизма так же, как демонстрирует неотделимость психики от политики. Что отличает «Мы» от типичной марксистской критики буржуазного индивидуализма, так это связь, которую он устанавливает между психической диспозицией индивида и социальной ситуацией, в которой он существует. Без необходимой психической реакции на ситуацию классовое неравенство быстро стало бы неустойчивым. Посредством характера восстания, которое показывает фильм, Пил пытается проиллюстрировать, как психические расстройства индивидов в капиталистическом обществе делают возможным устойчивое существование его неэгалитарной структуры.

### Ключевые слова

Мы, психоанализ, взгляд, голос, паранойя, политика, революция, классовая борьба, товарный фетишизм, фетишистское отрицание



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