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## 'Us' Nails Its Doppelgänger Horror With Unique 'Mirror Cutting' Editing Techniques

Editor Nicholas Monsour helped take Jordan Peele to a higher level of social commentary and abstract imagery built around the evil twin concept.



**Bill Desowitz**

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**"Us"**

Universal

*[Editor's note: Spoilers ahead for "Us," including of its ending.]*



racial appropriation with his distinct brand of subversive storytelling. It played like a feature-length “Twilight Zone” episode for the 21st century (which is why his Rod Serling reboot is now so appropriate).

With “Us,” however, Peele goes even further. He uses a home invasion plot, and the age-old doppelgänger theme in horror fiction, to turn inward and experiment with even more abstract ideas. This was fertile material for editor Nicholas Monsour to help construct a provocative narrative about a black family confronted with a darker mirror image of itself as an extension of a divided America, resulting in the brutal fight for survival. But Monsour, who previously cut “Keanu” and “Key and Peele,” was in perfect sync with Peele’s ambitious vision. Here the comedy is more subtle and the terror more visceral.

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“Jordan will start with an idea to anger or confuse people and then earn their trust and appreciation and enjoyment,” said Monsour. “And I would think about that when editing: how to draw you in and make you feel involved. He didn’t prescribe too much. But once I started getting footage, it was actually a relief. We did our homework about dealing with the actors [playing both sets of characters with the help of stunt and body doubles], and I forgot about the doppelgänger aspect and cut the scenes normally by treating the cast as



Indeed, handling the doubling component for a cast that included Lupita Nyong'o, Winston Duke, Shahadi Wright Joseph, Evan Alex, Elisabeth Moss, and Tim Heidecker was a technical hurdle. But ILM handled it with savvy head-and-face replacement along with other digital adjustments and clean-up. But the primary focus was the complex power struggle between Adelaide and her evil twin, Red, who first meet as children in a Santa Cruz boardwalk fun house, and then later as adults when Red seeks total destruction of Adelaide and her family as part of a greater plan to liberate her "Tethered" brethren from their underground imprisonment. Both characters are played by Nyong'o, distinguished by the awkward naturalism of Adelaide and the creepy stylization of Red.

"The doubling was this other layer of psychology that we could bring to it," Monsour said. "We talked about match cutting as a technique but we did a lot of what I call 'mirror cutting' to an inverted action or an inverted emotion or an uncanny replica of something. The underground dance/fight at the end was the purest form of musical, psychological, and artistic editing."



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In the beautifully choreographed sequence, timed to “The Nutcracker” ballet (adapted by composer Michael Abels), Monsour got to experiment with inverted imagery, mise-en-scene, and persistence of vision. It helped that the setting was surreal, an environment created by production designer Ruth De Jong and inspired by North Korean shopping malls from the '80s, with concrete walls, tile floors, and muted beige colors.



that these two characters come from and how they relate through dance would be neatly dealt with in conventional films, but this is much more abstract.” For his part, the editor also leaned into his admiration for the transcendental cinema of Ozu, Bresson, and Tarkovsky to punctuate the sequence with symbolic imagery and polyrhythmic sounds. Yet it would’ve been incoherent without Nyong’o’s remarkable performances. While Red displays extraordinary balletic abilities, Adelaide appears paralyzed. But this wouldn’t be a Peale movie without a few surprises to undermine our expectations.

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“By design, it asks people to fill in much of the world and the mythology, but what we’re dealing with is childhood trauma,” Monsour said. “And that was one way we tried to think about making sure we retained what Lupita had given us and presented it in that journey of a character, dealing with that trauma and figuring out how to overcome it, even when that trauma becomes literal and manifests physically.”



sympathize so much with the villains of this movie, Monsour said. Maybe it's more from a Marxist de-colonization perspective, but one side has clearly had it better than the other. And the fact that you're dealing with a monster and there's a reason people act monstrously. It's such a fascinating move for a horror movie. And I think Jordan got there first, in a way, with the idea of home invasion and the zombie sub-genre always being the manifestation of a societal fear. And looking squarely in the face that we have a responsibility now for the things that are happening to us that feel unfair."

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