

Reading ‘Us’ Through Its T-shirts

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With its star, Lupita Nyong'o, in awards contention this season, a look at the clothes that helped tell the story.



From left, Lupita Nyong'o, Evan Alex, Shahadi Wright Joseph and Winston Duke in “Us.” Credit...Claudette Barius/Universal Pictures

By Mekado Murphy

You could watch [Jordan Peele’s “Us”](#) a dozen times and still not catch all of the symbolism, references and ideas tucked in it. Yes, scissors are clearly a thing, but what’s with that tuxedo T-shirt?

The movie, ostensibly about a family, the Wilsons, hunted by its doppelgängers, is something of an awards contender. Its star, Lupita Nyong'o, is up for a Screen Actors Guild Award on Jan. 19 for her haunting portrayal of a mother with a painful past and a demented double [speaking in a creepy voice](#). But performance is only one piece in this cinematic puzzle ([now streaming on HBO](#)). If you look closely, you’ll see that some of the narrative threads are woven right into the costumes — the tops in particular.

In an interview, Peele, who wrote and directed “Us,” said the choice of T-shirts “represents one of the central themes, which is the identity, the outward-facing branding that we present to the world.” But he also said the shirts were an opportunity to incorporate “little Easter eggs and coincidences, which are a major theme for the movie as well.”

Here is a look at a handful of the clothing choices in “Us,” with Peele explaining what they mean to the film.



Alex in that tuxedo T-shirt.Credit...Universal Pictures

Tuxedo Shirt

The Wilsons' son, Jason (played by Evan Alex), is seen in a long-sleeve shirt with a tuxedo print on the front. It's a fun look for a character who is a bit of a performer and enjoys magic tricks, but there's more to the boy. "I always thought of him as the mage of the group," Peele said. "He's young, but he has a wisdom. He sees and understands things that other people in his family don't."

Visually, Peele wanted a shirt for him that would contrast with the "Jaws" top Jason also wears. It's like an arrow facing downward, as opposed to "Jaws," an arrow facing upward. "This reflects the central battle between the monster rising up and those going down," he said.



The “Jaws” image had to be approved by that movie’s director, Steven Spielberg. Credit...Claudette Barius/Universal Pictures

‘Jaws’

Jason wears a “Jaws” shirt in one key scene partly because of Peele’s admiration for Steven Spielberg’s 1975 thriller.

“It could always be an argument for the best movie ever made,” he said. “One of the reasons it resonates is because it’s able to scare us, with this great feeling. It doesn’t bum you out, but it’s terrifying. To find that combination is special.”

He wanted to conjure that emotion for a beach sequence while paying tribute to the earlier film in several ways throughout “Us.”

Peele said that the shirt is a perfect representation of the theme of darkness rising from below, a shadow that can’t be seen at first but is imminent.

He had to get Spielberg’s permission to use the image. “He gave me his blessing and specified the design that he wanted for it,” Peele said.



From left, Joseph, Noelle Sheldon and Cali Sheldon in “Us.” Credit...Claudette Barius/Universal Pictures

Black Flag

Shirts from the influential American punk band Black Flag show up more than once. The first time is in an early boardwalk scene that takes place in 1986. Then later, in a present-day sequence, one of the Wilsons’ twin neighbors wears the band’s tee as a cutoff. But the shirts aren’t just a celebration of punk.

“The revolution against the country that the Black Flag iconography suggests was appropriate,” Peele said. “But also the logo is four lines in a row that make this flag. That contributed to the recurring theme of 11:11 in my film” — a reference to the Bible verse Jeremiah 11:11, about a reckoning from God — “as well as the image of four shadowy figures.”

“It’s this idea that all these pieces of the puzzle are on this strange line between coincidence and fate.”

Those Rabbits, Tho



There are several rabbit references in the clothing choices for Zora (Joseph). Credit...Universal Pictures

Rabbits keep popping (hopping?) up in the movie. The opening credits play over a shot of cages full of rabbits against the wall of what looks like a classroom. And rabbit motifs adorn the apparel of the Wilsons' daughter, Zora, played by Shahadi Wright Joseph. Why?

Partly because she's a competitive runner, but that's not the only reason. "There's something about this movie I always thought of as an Easter story, sort of an Easter horror story," Peele said. "It's a return from the cave of a messiah, of sorts."

Zora also wears a green short-sleeve hoodie that just says "tho" on it.

"There's something about the word 'tho' as it translates into our culture that has a sort of teenage text connotation," Peele said. But he also said "tho" can be used to mean rabbit in Vietnamese. "I just figured that anyone who speaks Vietnamese is getting an extra little Easter egg."

Peele also mentioned there's a symbolic connection with Jason and how a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat.

"We went a little rabbit crazy," he said.