

The Suburban Home: Race and Class Power Struggles in *The People Under the Stairs*

In his film, *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), director Wes Craven deconstructs the Reagan-Era's nuclear family. This film follows the character of Fool, a thirteen-year-old African American boy, who turns to criminality to prevent foreclosure of his home and to provide for his dying mother. Craven's film explores his 'house' as a representation of economic and social power (Siegel 75). Using Barry Keith Grant's ideas on urban areas being 'horrifying', and Bernice M. Murphy's exploration of the suburban family, the ways in which the Robeson household reflects American ideologies regarding race and class structures are examined.

In Barry Keith Grant's essay, 'Rich and Strange: The Yuppie Horror Film Author(s)', he explains that there are a certain fear and paranoia that the middle-class have regarding living among those of lower-class and stature (Grant 5). Grant explains that urban areas are seen and often depicted as 'horrifying' (Grant 6). This is evident in the film, as the 'house' that Fool lives in, is shown to be run-down and filthy. *The People Under the Stairs* plays into this ideology, as 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' are depicted to believe that they are the victims of the 'horrifying' intruders within their community. This is prevalent in the scene where Fool calls the police to report child abuse, and Mommy's response is "it's as though we're the prisoners and the criminals roam free" (Mommy, *The People Under the Stairs*).

In her essay 'Children misbehaving in the walls!', Bernice M. Murphy explores Craven's critiques of 'the suburban family unit'. Murphy explains that the notion of the suburbs being 'safe' for children and teenagers is undermined, through Craven's depiction of the monstrous figures of 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' within the middle-class, suburban setting. (Murphy 82). Murphy also explains that racial politics are prevalent in the film, through Craven's juxtaposing

imagery: The lower-class black families who reside in grim remnants of houses, compared to the white, middle-class suburban setting, where the Robeson's home is *seemingly* clean and well-kept (Murphy 88).

Murphy compares this film to Craven's other 1972 film, *The Last House on the Left*. She recognizes that Craven pushes the boundaries, as usually the person breaking into the house is depicted as the monster (Murphy 82). However, this is not the case in *The People Under the Stairs*. Although Fool's initial intentions were malicious, as the film progresses, the audience's sympathy is directed purely toward Fool and the others trapped in the house. The homeowners, on the other hand, who trap and kill children, are the villains. (Murphy 89) The Robeson's neglect of morality portrays society, at the time, as the starving kids in the basement represent the lower-class, oppressed by the greedy upper-class (the Landlords), who in this case, literally eat them for dinner.

Drawing on Grant's ideas of Yuppies in horror, Craven's portrayal of the Robeson's being monstrous is unorthodox to the horror genre. In *The People Under the Stairs*, instead of the monsters roaming around and killing aimlessly, they are depicted as the family next door, the least expected. (Grant 12) At first glance, the Robeson's appear to be 'normal' suburban citizens, however, the more that Fool interacts with them, the darker their characters become. 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' are increasingly depicted as parodies of Ronald and Nancy Reagan (Siegel 75). Their house mimics this perfectly, as the deeper into the walls Fool manages to go, the more secrets are unveiled, playing into the idea of Reaganomics (Siegel 75).

Towards the end of the film, Alice is finally free from the chains of her 'parents' after she stabs her 'mother' (Murphy 89). In this scene, 'Mommy' tries to stab Alice with a knife, but in

the end, Alice gets the final words, “you’re not my mother”, before stabbing Ms. Robeson in the stomach. This is similar to the kitchen scene in Brian De Palma’s *Carrie*, 1976. In Craven’s version, once Alice’s ‘parents’ die, she is free to leave the prison she was forced to live in. The death of the Robeson’s represents the lower-class taking their power back and reclaiming what is truly theirs.

The title of *The People Under the Stairs* not only refers to the children imprisoned by ‘Mommy’ and ‘Daddy’ in the basement, but also refers to everyone they have exploited, including Alice and Fool. Craven’s use of satire throughout the film creates a playful commentary on the issues surrounding race and class during the 90’s. The casting of a young black actor as the protagonist also adds another layer to the conception of the film, as it creates a necessary onscreen representation, especially during that period of time. Not only is he the main character, but he also survives and is depicted as the hero.

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