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Universal’s attempt at creating a cinematic universe around its roster of classic monsters has been a mess.At the time of 2014’s Dracula Untold, there was talk that it would be the inaugural entry in Universal’s so-called Dark Universe. While technically profitable—grossing \$217 million against a \$70 million budget—the film was ultimately forgettable, with paltry reviews. Not quite the resounding box office hit the studio was banking on. So in 2017, Universal unveiled its “official” slate of Dark Universe films, with Tom Cruise in The Mummy leading the pack. But it was dead on arrival, both at the box office and with critics.And with that, it seemed that Universal’s famous monsters would forever be relegated to their crypt.But with director Leigh Whannell’s interpretation of The Invisible Man, which opens in theaters today, Universal may have found what it has been looking for all along: a reboot that reframes a classic villain in a modern context that feels not only culturally relevant but important.The Invisible Man stars Elisabeth Moss as Cecilia, a woman who escapes an abusive relationship with her boyfriend Adrian (Oliver Jackson-Cohen). While in hiding with family and friends, she gets word that Adrian killed himself in distress of her leaving him. Her feeling of finally being safe quickly dissipates when supernatural events that she can’t explain to herself, least of all to those closest to her, start happening. Everyone tells her that she’s just been traumatized by her toxic relationship, but Cecilia is convinced that Adrian isn’t really dead and is on a mission to prove it and reclaim her life.The Invisible Man is an urgent meditation on the toxic relationships that women in particular are so often subjected to. It’s also, surprisingly enough, a damn cool near-tech film.“The first thing I wanted to do was to set it in our world. I didn’t want to do anything that was outlandish, anything that could be slotted into a fantasy category,” Whannell says. “I didn’t want to set it in 1800s London—there’s a version of this movie that could have taken place back then that would’ve been devoted to [H.G. Wells’s original novel]. But I didn’t want to do that.”What Whannell wanted to make was what he calls the “Gone Girl version” of The Invisible Man.“During that process of figuring out how to make it feel very modern and very grounded and real,” he says, “I realized that tech was my best friend.”Whannell is no stranger to tech-based narratives. His 2018 film Upgrade told the story of a man who goes on a revenge spree after a mugging incident left him paralyzed and his wife dead. Aided by a chip implanted in his spinal cord, he tears his way through his assailants, uncovering a greater conspiracy afoot—and the fact that the chip is taking over his mind.“I do have this suspicion and anxiety of tech,” Whannell says. “A lot of the themes in Upgrade and in Invisible Man, I didn’t originally think of them as companion films. But now with a little bit of hindsight, there are so many similarities between the two of them.”To dig into exactly what makes The Invisible Man a fascinating take on tech, a key plot point will be discussed. So, SPOILERS AHEAD!Photo: courtesy of Universal StudiosA high-tech disappearing actIn Wells’s original novel, a scientist discovers a pharmaceutical cocktail that successfully (and irreversibly) turns him invisible. In Whannell’s version, Adrian is a tech whizkid who made his fortune in optics and has constructed an invisibility suit made of a hexagonal constellation of tiny cameras that could, theoretically, exist.“The idea was a suit made of hundreds of small cameras, all filming what’s around them whilst also producing a hologram of what’s behind the suit wearer,” says Alex Holmes, The Invisible Man’s production designer. “So a camera on the suit’s back is filming backwards, but the image it is filming is appearing on the front of the suit as a hologram, as a layer over the iris of each camera. All cameras and holograms combined, the theory went, would then produce the effect of invisibility because an image of whatever is behind the suit wearer at any one time was being projected on the front of the suit.”Initially, Holmes was toying with the concept of a suit that could bend light—i.e., making an object appear invisible because there’s no light reflecting back at the observer. Although this approach is more in line with where current “invisibility” technology is, it wasn’t filmic. “There was no neat way to ‘show’ this visually,” Holmes says. “It wasn’t going to be comprehensible enough for an audience. Instead, we came up with the idea of using an optics philosophy and methodology.”Holmes and his team consulted with professors and leaders in the space at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia’s national science research agency, to ensure that they were in step with Whannell’s vision of keeping the tech as close to feasible as possible.“They told us that in theory what we were proposing could be done,” Holmes says. “But there were some extremely complicated challenges to solve from an optics point of view. And it wasn’t achievable without years and years of costly development. That, for us, was perfect. We needed this to feel like tech that was just out of reach of today, but still believable.”A cinematic suit—hold the MarvelHaving a suit made of cameras proved to be a wellspring of inspiration for larger themes Whannell wanted to explore. “It’s about surveillance. The method of invisibility is all about cameras—you’re being watched and recorded at all times,” Whannell says. “And for me that was a really conscious thing about how surveilled we are now and how trackable we are. You can’t disappear anymore. So I felt like that would be a good, literal way to represent this hardcore surveillance of every single thing you do.”But the question became what does a suit of cameras look like?Photo: courtesy of Universal StudiosHolmes says Whannell was open to ideas with one clear mandate: that nothing would look like it could live in the Marvel Universe.“He wanted something slick [and] minimalistic, without lots of pointless techy design elements—cutting edge, but real and functional. Not sci-fi,” Holmes says. “We both felt this film needed to be approached like drama or a thriller, not as a sci-fi film or horror. So even if the suit needed to be something that had a sinister presence, we were very conscious of not wanting to lean into the classic visual tropes [of] sci-fi or horror.”One of the early designs of the suit featured noticeable size variations of the cameras. But, in the end, less was more.“It was reminiscent of something you might design for Transformers. It looked cool, but very designed and very sci-fi,” Holmes says. “In the end, we decided to keep the variations very subtle so that the overall feeling of the suit was very uniform, simple, and functional. But we found that it was this simplicity and minimalism that helped it feel ominous and sinister. It made it feel disturbing somehow.”This version of The Invisible Man works because within the framework of the original tale, Whannell has constructed a layered story that’s as much about toxic men and the women who survive them as it is about challenging the technology that is increasingly governing our existence.“We’re living in the tech evolution where every day some new tech development lands in our lives, and very quickly we absorb it,” Whannell says. “What was science fiction when I was growing up is now just part of our daily lives. And so I realized that I could use that to the film’s advantage.”The Invisible Man is in theaters February 28. I’m going to write a bit about the recent move by our school district to reject our state’s mandate on policies regarding its transgender students. I know this can be a hot spot for some and I know that my thoughts do not always match up with the rest of the world, BUT, we’ve gotten through this before. “This” being where I write something that doesn’t match up with the rest of the world and then we talk nicely to each other. As I’ve said in previous blogs on the topic: my opinions are formed in direct relation to my personal experience. They are related to the happenings within my home. My opinions have been formed via years of riding an emotional roller coaster. I am always happy to chat and I absolutely do not consider my opinion to be gospel. Lawd knows, my husband and I question ourselves on the daily as to whether we are adulting correctly. The policy in question set by the Virginia Department of Education said schools must allow the use of name and gender pronouns students identify with, and allows students to use restrooms and locker rooms that correspond with their gender identity. The guidelines also say schools should let students participate in gender-specific programs or activities — such as physical education, overnight field trips and intramural sports — that correspond with their gender identities. Last week, the only holdout district in our state opted again to reject this mandate. This is always the district in which my children passed/are passing through. I was asked by a few folks how I felt when our district rejected the above mandate. I know that some were hoping that I would blast the county for being phobic, but that wasn’t what I felt at all. What I felt first was relief. Relief. And then I felt like I should definitely not tell anyone that. What I felt first was relief. I knew I would not be popular in admitting this feeling. However, I suspected that most of those who would lash out at me would not have lived through the confusion of having a child suddenly request different pronouns, a different name, and to forget the person they were the previous day. We have lived through it. We are still living through it. Years ago, when my child first adopted a new version of themself, we were chastised by the school for not standing up immediately to wave a Pride flag. My sense of relief came because I felt, finally, that our school district was putting on some much needed brakes. The relief came because the rejection would potentially give parents time to become more involved and knowledgeable about what their child is going through. We did not have that luxury. The truth is, in our house, we will likely never know whether our child is actually transgender because we were never given a choice or a chance or a minute to digest what we were hearing. We wanted to investigate and collect research and offer our child everything we could in figuring out why they felt so uncomfortable in their own skin that their young teen answer was a blanket statement of I am not who I am supposed to be. But we couldn’t. Our only choice, as laid out by the unkind words from our child’s teachers and administration, was to either affirm everything we were hearing or to sit the hell down and, essentially, let the school (and the internet) take over parenting. No-one wanted to hear our concerns. No-one respected our wish to work through this as a family and from inside our own walls. No-one cared what we, who had known this child longer than any, thought might be going on in their head. Our child had been through the wringer in the years prior to that first proclamation of dysphoria. The idea that there wouldn’t be some sort of mental fallout never crossed our minds. We thought we were prepared for most anything that bubbled up from those years of trauma, but the wrench of transgender was the one thing we were not expecting. Hell, we’d never even heard of it. We were, therefore, behind the eight ball before we even started. The school yelled “AFIRM!” at the top of its lungs. We felt that our child was treated a bit like a novelty and gave the school a chance to showcase its ability to accept. It was like we’d presented the school with a brand new certification to hoist up as a benchmark to show just how woke it was. There were no letters home to ask about a name change. There were no phone calls asking about bathroom preferences. There were no requests for conferences to discuss how our child was being treated by the other students (we found out later, it was poorly). There was only silence. Mostly. We did get a call from the high school principal one year into this journey asking that we discourage our child from serving on the homecoming court and riding in the accompanying parade. Evidently, the school had open arms as long as it didn’t involve anything icky like potential protests and news crews. We were, by then, trying really hard to go with the flow so we were a bit surprised to receive that call. We were stunned to hear the voice of the school’s leader mention that it “just wasn’t a good look for the school.” Had we not still felt like we were just barely keeping our heads above the water, we’d have put up a much better fight. Instead, we followed the school’s guidance (again) only to have serious regrets later (again). We went back to sticking to what our hearts were telling us. It had nothing to do with a lack of love for our child and everything to do with providing that child every opportunity and resource we could to find happiness within their own skin. Over the course of my child’s high school tenure, I had teachers message me to tell me that they were ashamed of me. I was embarrassed. I tried to explain. I’d ask what they would do if their child came home on a random Tuesday and insisted that they were now left-handed. No big deal, right? But what would they do if their child then insisted that they be allowed to have their right hand amputated because they felt so incredibly uncomfortable having it attached to their body now that they had realized they were left handed? The things we were being asked to approve had permanent consequences, both physically and mentally. We were less concerned with the day to day-ness of it all and more concerned with the fallout down the road. Still, we were isolated as other parents looked away. Each year a new batch of teachers attempted to be a breakthrough for us in finally accepting our child. Each year with zero knowledge about our home life and the work we were doing as a family. Each year without asking us, the parents, how we were handling all of this. The mandate? Yes, we are relieved. We feel like someone has finally allowed a slow down on a gender identity uptick that is so sudden and drastic that it is (yes, I’ll say it) not likely possible. It has nothing to do with whether or not I think that transgender is real or unreal (I think it is). It has everything to do with the chance for our family to discover together where our child sits on that gender spectrum being taken away from us. Parents need to be allowed to parent. We would have loved to have been able to learn and discover and work through this process together, as a family. Instead our educators were affirming our child with a side dish of we understand you...and we’re so sorry your family does not. My hope is that, by putting on the brakes, no other family will be pushed into submission by the county or the state or the country or the government. My hope is that parents and children will be encouraged to have open conversations and work together to build stronger relationships, rather than allowing mandates to pull them apart. My least favorite buzz phrase from the last half decade is if your child believes it, then it is true. It reeks of self-diagnosis and of handing the prescription pad to tiny humans with brains that should have a “still a work in progress” warning label. We try not to spend too much time wondering how things could have been different if we’d just been given space and support by our child’s school. Perhaps the giant cavern between our child and us would never have formed. Perhaps we wouldn’t still sit in a web of stress that was born from that one declaration five years ago. Perhaps we wouldn’t be dealing with that mental fallout to this very day. I am not phobic. I am a parent. This post comes from the TODAY Parenting Team community, where all members are welcome to post and discuss parenting solutions. Learn more and join us! Because we’re all in this together.

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