SOLATION AND confinement have often served as a device for directors to study characters pushed to the breaking point. Whether it’s cabin fever, the solitude of unforeseen circumstances, forced captivity or being trapped by evil forces, these scenarios usually act as exercises of will power and ingenuity. At a time when self-quarantining has tested the spirit of citizens the world over, these kinds of films have struck a personal chord with viewers as of late, and challenged directors intent on ratcheting up the tension and dramatizing the resolve of their protagonists.

Fincher embraced the idea of doing what he called “a nail-biter” movie set in a single location, where a divorced mother and her adolescent daughter are trapped by a trio of burglars expecting an empty house and no resistance. “I thought it would be an amped-up stage play, like Wait Until Dark, something imminently controllable,” said the director for the DVD’s commentary. But the shoot was much more complicated than he bargained for. Eighteen days into production, Nicole Kidman suffered a hairline fracture in her leg and had to be replaced by Jodie Foster (Kristen Stewart, who reminded Fincher of a young Foster, played the daughter), requiring significant reshoots. As usual with Fincher’s work, the technical wizardry looks seamless, with a roving camera that appears to float through keyholes, air ducts and even the handle of a coffee pot. “It’s not the theatricality of it as much as you’re going to be granted all-access backstage passes to everything that you could possibly see,” said Fincher. “So it’s kind of a visual theme in the photography of the movie, to come up with a way—to let the audience know the camera can go anywhere, that the camera is free of the constraints that the characters in the movie have to deal with.”
ROBERT ZEMECKIS

"We don't function well as human beings when we're in isolation."

—ROBERT ZEMECKIS

ROB REINER

1992

Reiner was attracted to the highly personal theme of Stephen King's novel, which is "the difficulty of breaking away from your own success." The film's protagonist, played by James Caan, a successful writer of Victorian romance novels who, chopped by a car accident, ends up trapped in the home of a deranged fan (Kathy Bates, in an Oscar-winning turn) who objects to the new direction he's taking in his work. Long was reluctant to cast him, but King persuaded him to do the part. The writer's imprisonment is both literal and figurative, exemplified by one shot (Barry Sonnenfeld was the DP) through bed rails that translate into a shot through the trees outside, intimating a jail cell. Reiner could also relate to Caan's character, since he felt compelled to leave "Me" behind and build sets to the actual specifications of a Soviet nuclear submarine. "We didn't cut corners," Reiner told the L.A. Times. "There are few situations more suffocating than being submerged deep underwater in a close-quartered vessel."

KATHRYN BIGELOW

2009

Reduced to its most basic plot elements, Us is a home invasion movie with flashes of horror and the supernatural. But for director Jordan Peele, the story—like his triumphant directorial debut Get Out (2017)—represents so much more: It's about the haves and have-nots, about what it means to be black in America, about facing your own worst fears and insecurities. "The duality of 'us' means there is a 'them,' right? So that is what this movie is about to me. Whatever your 'us' is, we turn 'them' into the enemy, and maybe 'we' are our own worst enemy." As such, the Wilson family is attacked in their lakeside vacation house by their dopplegangers, which suggests a funhouse mirror effect of the most horrific kind, because it is a reflection of ourselves.
Humphrey Bogart’s Army vet Frank McCloud, held hostage by gangsters at a waterfront hotel in the Florida Keys, represents the flip side of the outlaws he played in *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and *The Desperate Hours* (1955), in which he’s the ringleader holding others hostage. Huston, with his co-writer Richard Brooks, departed from the Maxwell Anderson play on which the film is based by molding McCloud into a soldier who served in the WWII battle of San Pietro, which Huston chronicled in his 1945 documentary, *San Pietro*. Huston would end up shooting most of the film in soundstages and on the back lot of Warner Bros., including the studio’s huge indoor water tank, after studio chief Harry Warner complained about the location costs of Huston’s previous film with Bogart, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, also released in 1948. Huston would guide Claire Trevor to her Oscar-winning performance as Gaye Dawn, the alcoholic moll of Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson). In a scene in which she’s required to literally sing for her next drink, Huston didn’t inform the actress that he was going to shoot the scene until the day of, resulting in her nervous, halting rendition of “Moanin’ Low.”

**STANLEY KUBRICK**

*The Shining*

Kubrick adapted the Stephen King horror novel—about a writer and his family enlisted as winter caretakers at a grand hotel in the Colorado Rockies where things go horribly wrong—as a way of examining humanity’s inherent dark side. Kubrick also wanted to avoid certain tropes associated with the ghost genre. “In a story of this kind, establishing believability is the most important matter,” he said, “which is why I tried to establish a matter-of-fact visual style. We shot in what looks like existing light; no elongated shadows or melodramatic highlights. It’s just the story of one man’s family going insane together.” Kubrick being Kubrick, that naturalistic style required massive wattages of artificial light to duplicate sunlight streaming through the windows of the Overlook Hotel, causing temperatures to soar above 100 degrees on the film’s EMI-Elstree Studio set. Much has been written about the paces Kubrick put his cast through, with 50 takes de rigueur, and more than 100 not unimaginable. He also took advantage of the then relatively new Steadicam technology, for which he used its inventor, Garrett Brown, as his camera operator—most memorably tracking the young actor Danny Lloyd through the hotel’s myriad hallways where he confronts two of the hotel’s ghosts: twin sisters whose eerie presence is seemingly inspired by the work of Diane Arbus, who reportedly mentored the young Kubrick in his early New York photographer days.

**JOHN HUSTON**

*Key Largo*

Humphrey Bogart’s Army vet Frank McCloud, held hostage by gangsters at a waterfront hotel in the Florida Keys, represents the flip side of the outlaws he played in *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and *The Desperate Hours* (1955), in which he’s the ringleader holding others hostage. Huston, with his co-writer Richard Brooks, departed from the Maxwell Anderson play on which the film is based by molding McCloud into a soldier who served in the WWII battle of San Pietro, which Huston chronicled in his 1945 documentary, *San Pietro*. Huston would end up shooting most of the film in soundstages and on the back lot of Warner Bros., including the studio’s huge indoor water tank, after studio chief Harry Warner complained about the location costs of Huston’s previous film with Bogart, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, also released in 1948. Huston would guide Claire Trevor to her Oscar-winning performance as Gaye Dawn, the alcoholic moll of Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson). In a scene in which she’s required to literally sing for her next drink, Huston didn’t inform the actress that he was going to shoot the scene until the day of, resulting in her nervous, halting rendition of “Moanin’ Low.”

**RIDLEY SCOTT**

*The Martian*

Partly known for such nightmarish sci-fi visions as *Blade Runner* and *Alien*, Scott leaned toward science fact with this story about an astronaut left for dead on Mars by his crewmates. It’s the Robinson Crusoe story in deep space, where the marooned Mark Watney (Matt Damon), a whip-smart botanist, decides he’s going to “science the hell” out of his predicament, creating his own artificial ecosystem to survive and not succumb to despair. Scott doesn’t allow things to get too confining for the viewer. “If we ever get tired of a man by himself, I’ve got somewhere to go to give him a break as it were, because I’ve got the universe of NASA, the universe on board the ship that has gone home and don’t know that he’s alive, and the universe of JPL,” he said. Inspired by Kubrick’s 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, Scott left no stone unturned in his attention to detail, with real dust, the scale of the world’s largest spacecraft just outside Budapest for the rest, and huge computers (which Kubrick also used) that could make your eyes go in a million directions without even thinking your way through all kinds of obstacles and problems,” said Scott. “And unless you can do that, you’re just going to die.”