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"THERE'S A MYSTERIOUS WIZARD-LIKE QUALITY TO IT."

THE INVERSE INTERVIEW

'NOPE' EDITOR NICK MONSOUR REVEALS THE SECRETS BEHIND JORDAN PEELE'S SCI-FI MONSTER

NICHOLAS MONSOUR has been right beside Jordan Peele to witness his transformation from TV sketch comedian to Academy Award-winning filmmaker. The two collaborated on Comedy Central's *Key & Peele* and worked together on *Us*, Peele's 2019 horror flick about murderous doppelgangers. Over the years, the filmmakers have developed a shorthand that enables them to fuse their respective talents as cinematic conductor and surgeon for the greater good of the project.

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Most recently, the pair teamed up for this summer's sci-fi banger *Nope*, a film Monsour says is about "why we're obsessed with images and trying to own them and be in them." *Inverse* spoke with Monsour to learn about how the accomplished editor cut *Nope* to enhance the film's themes and tone, the intricacies of Peele's development process, and his take on the origins of the unidentified flying object that terrorizes the Haywood horse farm.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity. Warning: Spoilers ahead!

INVERSE: **What got you most excited about working again with Jordan Peele on *Nope*?**

NICHOLAS MONSOUR: I love things that don't give me easy answers, and that's something that working with Jordan has always provided. There's a very specific world of questions and ideas that the movie encapsulates and presents. And they're usually questions that I've never seen in another big-budget studio movie.

What is Peele's process from pre-production to post-production, and when do you come in?

There's a mysterious wizard-like quality to it. He'll work with a storyboard artist [in pre-production] and I think that helps him continue to build his thoughts about how he'll shoot. That helps create a shorthand about the action that's happening in a sequence or the types of angles he might be interested in [once filming starts].

Then, he and his director of photography and the actors will block it and shoot while making sure that the VFX supervisor and production designer are also there to think through the ramifications. Then, I get the footage. I'll mock it up, and we'll look at a rough cut as quickly as possible after shooting it. So he'll think, "Okay, the fact that I didn't do a wide-shot there means the next time in that location I'll probably get that." He'll continually adapt and adjust using all of these tools.

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Daniel Kaluuya and Jordan Peele on the set of 'Nope.' Glen Wilson/Universal Pictures

How did you and Peele decide on *Nope's* distinct rhythm, pace and editorial style?

There are elements of film language from a few genres that we have to use when we're building suspense or when there's a complicated multi-viewer action sequence. We have to use these techniques of intercutting and building suspense, but there wasn't necessarily a map for that to begin with.

I do certain things to help myself when building scenes for the first time. I'll break down a script by scene number and page count and do my own timing of sitting and saying the dialogue. To understand roughly that, even if the whole thing continues to accordion and expand and contract, this is probably the middle, [that] there's this pattern to characters introduced, and that seems integral to the experience of it as I'm reading it in Jordan's core idea.

So I come up with these relatively fixed points and then I have an idea of the type of pace and the stakes in that scene so when I go into it I can interpret the footage in that way, rather than treating every scene the same. That means, once I've done a full pass, we have a movie that's more watchable and that can be judged in terms of movie structure rather than the "assembly."

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I also knew from talking to Jordan and reading the script and from his other projects that he's operating on a storyteller with recurring symbols and Easter eggs and unspoken backstories of the characters that you have to feel and intuit. That meant we were often looking at how the edit could help point the audience toward some of those other, non-plot-related themes.

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Nick Monsour

Can you name any touchstone films you and Peele used as an inspirational compass?

We were looking at everything from the history of big spectacle alien and creature movies, from *Alien* and *Jurassic Park* to *Close Encounters* and the original *King Kong*. As well as stuff I like to bring: a larger, more experimental set of editing tools from films that I love that capture some of the wonder and awe of psychological horror or monsters, like *Spirit of the Beehive* or *Come and See* or *I'm Not Scared*. Some unusual techniques that do come in useful for the surreal or absurd layers of subtext in the movie.

Jordan has a confidence with his own instincts that doesn't necessarily refer to how it was done in something else. If anything, what we're doing is acknowledging that the audience is coming preloaded with an idea. Like, they've probably seen *Jaws* or *Alien* or *Close Encounters*. So there are moments in *Nope* where you have to express that you know about it.

I think of the background music playing in the scene at Jupiter's Claim where the Star Lasso Experience starts. It's very *Jurassic Park*-like. That's a way we can say that we, like the characters in the movie, are aware of this style of thing. Ideally, it helps us be on the same playing field as the audience. We're all loaded with the same cultural information and you don't have to tune that out.

A flying saucer lands in in a field in 'Nope.'   Universal Pictures

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Is there one particular thematic element in *Nope* that resonated with you that the audience may have overlooked?

One late discovery in the process that I really love, and it feels like it communicates what's special and iconic about the movie, is the title sequence, which I put together as a pitch.

Combining the Muybridge footage with this image of the green square. And this idea of the green square is one that Jordan kept coming back to that's echoed with green screens in the movie, monitors that are green, a box of presents that's green. This recurring image of a green square that kind of erases reality.

To start the movie that way, you feel like you're looking through the iris of a camera, a digital image sensor, or an eye of some kind. There's all these things it makes you think of. But, without telling you which one it is, you get to create something really interesting in your own head, which is backed up with a lot of research and thinking.

How did shooting *Nope* in 65mm and IMAX formats affect your editorial decisions?

This is my first time working with IMAX film and 65mm film. We were still cutting digitally, which means much of the process through the bulk of the edit isn't terribly different. But being aware that we're releasing the thing in three different aspect ratios in theaters means there's more time taken to watch it to check the action, mise en scène, and the VFX in different formats. We'd go up to the big IMAX theater at City Walk for visual effects reviews to understand how it works in that [format], and how it works in our 4K screening room.

It was also really exciting because there are like eight formats the movie was captured in. The majority of it being 65mm and IMAX, but there's hand-cranked 35mm, the 35mm of the sitcom set, home camcorders, iPhones, phone cameras. There's quite a grab bag of stuff in there.

Because the movie is about capturing images and why we're obsessed with images and trying to own them and be in them, there's a materiality to all of those formats that affects the feel of the scene. The way the 35mm feels in the sitcom, or the way the 65mm feels, and then what emotionally the switch to the IMAX does and how it relates to this theme of bigger and bigger spectacles. It was all there to work

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with from the beginning, we didn't have to add it in using all the tricks you do in digital where you're doing the grain or manipulating the frame.

Do you have a favorite scene in *Nope* that you're especially proud of, and was there anything left on the cutting room floor that you fought for that might be on a Blu-ray release?

There's this big meta-textual aspect to *Nope* that is fascinating and Jordan is very much involved in that. I think that will continue to evolve and extended things will come out. Just over the weekend of the release, he tweeted out the full credit sequence of the *Gordy's Home* sitcom, which is an element we had built early because it was used as a playback element on set. We created these in-movie edits of title sequences and commercials that would be used as real playback for the actors.

Daniel Kaluuya, Keke Palmer, and a horse in 'Nope.' Universal Pictures

For stuff that I missed, there's a lot that I think is beautiful, and I hope Jordan does pursue putting it out in the world that continues to add to the mythology. But I do appreciate how economical he was in the end in the edit to create this sort of center being this two-hour-and-ten-minute thing you got to watch

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in a theater. He wrote a much bigger script and they shot a much bigger movie. A lot of that was by design to add to the universe as they were making it so the actors got to delve into some of their backstories. The production designer did have to visualize other spaces that surround the ones we're in.

And I think that makes the world feel more lived in and real and rich in the condensed version. I can't say that I think any of it should have been in the theatrical cut, but I do hope some of it gets out there.

Another thing we talked about was how fun it would be to watch the "no digital effects" edit of the movie because seeing the lengths they went to practically is incredible. And Terry Notary's performance as Gordy should be seen at some point. It's a different system than standard motion capture. MPC, the visual effects company, surrounds the actor with reference video cameras, capturing the performance from every angle. Then, the artists use a lot of actual chimpanzee footage to build the textures and micro-gestures and movements. It ends up being a more living, artistic end result, where you can rely

too much on the mathematical information you're getting from motion capture rather than trying to interpret what feels like a chimpanzee.

One of the biggest ambiguities in *Nope* is the origin of the aerial entity hiding among the clouds. What can you tell us about Peele's weird, predatory monster and how it might be interpreted?

That is one of those things that I wouldn't want somebody to know more than what is in the film and what Jordan is leaking out there. He really does put an immense amount of thought into that. In a really generous way, he's trying to give the audience the kind of experience he most enjoys with films where he does get to figure some of that out. That said, he does an incredible amount of research and creative work to load the imagery you do see with a reality that he's constructed.

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We had Zoom discussions with biologists and scientists who have discovered new species of animals and what that process is like: How do you write the paper, and what kind of evidence do you need to distinguish something as a different species? What makes them a different phylum or a different genus?

He really got into the specifics: How do animals communicate and how do humans communicate with animals? Part of the most fun we had is when we did get into this conversation and were talking about, "Hey, what if we did show where the entity comes from?" But it's much more fun not knowing!

NOPE IS CURRENTLY PLAYING IN THEATERS.

The final trailer for 'Nope.'

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