

## CRITIC'S PICK

# Nope' Review: Hell Yes

Jordan Peele's genre-melting third feature stars Daniel Kaluuya and Keke Palmer as brother-and-sister horse wranglers defending the family ranch from an extraterrestrial threat.



By A.O. Scott

Published July 20, 2022 Updated Aug. 5, 2022

**Nope** | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Jordan Peele | Horror, Mystery, Sci-Fi, Thriller | R | 2h 15m

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The trailers for Jordan Peele's "Nope," one of the most feverishly anticipated movies of the summer, have raised some intriguing questions. Is it a western? A horror film? Science fiction? Satire? Will it fulfill the expectations raised by Peele's first two mind-bending, zeitgeist-surfing features, "Get Out" and "Us," or confound them?

I can now report that the answer to all of those questions is: Yup. Which is to say that there are some fascinating internal tensions within the movie, along with impeccably managed suspense, sharp jokes and a beguiling, unnerving atmosphere of all-around weirdness.

"Nope" feels less polemically pointed than "Us" or "Get Out," more at home in its idiosyncrasies and flights of imagination even as it follows, in the end, a more conventional narrative path. This might be cause for some disappointment, since Peele's keen dialectical perspective on our collective American pathologies has been a bright spot in an era of franchised corporate wish fulfillment. At the same time, he's an artist with the freedom and confidence to do whatever he wants to, and one who knows how to challenge audiences without alienating them.



From left, Daniel Kaluuya, Keke Palmer and Brandon Perea in “Nope,” the latest feature from the director Jordan Peele. Universal Pictures

In any case, it would be inaccurate to claim that the social allegory has been scrubbed away: Every genre Peele invokes is a flytrap for social meanings, and you can’t watch this cowboys-and-aliens monster movie without entertaining some deep thoughts about race, ecology, labor and the toxic, enchanting power of modern popular culture.

“Nope” addresses such matters in a mood that feels more ruminant than argumentative. The main target of its critique is also the principal object of its affection, which we might call — using a name that has lately become something of a fighting word — cinema.

Peele’s movie love runs wide and deep. There are sequences here that nod to past masters, from Hitchcock to Spielberg to Shyamalan, and shots that revel in the sheer ecstasy of moviemaking. A sketch-comedy genius before he turned to directing, Peele never takes his performers for granted, giving everyone space to explore quirks and nuances of character. He also shows an appetite, and an impressive knack, for big effects. The climactic scenes aim for — and very nearly achieve — the kind of old-fashioned sublimity that packs wonder, terror and slack-jawed admiration into a single sensation.

Movies can be scary, enchanting, funny and strange. Sometimes they can be all those things at once. What they never are is innocent. While this movie can fairly be described as Spielbergian, it turns on an emphatic and explicit debunking of Spielberg’s most characteristic visual trope: the awe-struck upward gaze.

“Nope” starts with a cautionary text, drawn from the Old Testament Book of Nahum, which describes God’s threatened punishment on the wicked city of Nineveh: “I will make a spectacle of you.” Our beloved spectacles — like most of the other artifacts of our fallen world — are built on cruelty, exploitation and erasure, and “Nope” is partly about how we incorporate knowledge of that fact into our enjoyment of them. In the first scene, a chimpanzee goes berserk on the set of a sitcom, a moment of absurd, bloody terror that becomes a motif and a thematic key. The ape is a wild animal behaving according to its nature even though it has been tamed and trained for human uses.

The same can be said for the horses who serve as Peele’s totems of movie tradition. He invokes what is thought to be the very first moving image, captured by the 19th-century inventor and adventurer Eadweard Muybridge, of a man on horseback. Emerald (Keke Palmer) and O.J. (Daniel Kaluuya) claim the rider as their ancestor. They

honor his legacy by holding onto the business started by their father, Otis Haywood (Keith David), a ranch that supplies horses for television and movies.

O.J. — it's short for Otis Jr. — is the main wrangler, a laconic, sad-eyed cowboy more comfortable around horses than people. His sister is more outgoing, and one of the offhand delights of “Nope” is how credibly Kaluuya and Palmer convey the prickly understanding that holds siblings together and sometimes threatens to drive them apart.

Strange things are happening on the ranch. The power cuts out, a mysterious cloud lurks on the horizon, and freakish storms drop detritus from the sky. A horse's flank is pierced by a falling house key, and Otis Sr. takes an improbable projectile in the eye. Is there a flying saucer haunting the valley? Emerald and O.J. suspect as much, and so does their neighbor, an entrepreneur known as Jupe (Steven Yeun) who has turned his corner of the valley into a Wild West-themed tourist trap.



Steven Yeun plays a child actor turned entrepreneur who runs a Wild West theme park. Universal Pictures

The possible U.F.O. hovers around the edges of the action for a good while, kind of like the shark in “Jaws” — or the spaceship in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” — adding an element of danger that throws human interactions into comical and dramatic relief. As in “Jaws,” a fractious posse forms to deal with the threat, including Angel (Brandon Perea), an anxious techie, and Antlers (Michael Wincott), a visionary cinematographer who shows up at the ranch with a hand-cranked IMAX camera. Jupe, whose back story as a child actor connects him to that wayward chimp, is a bit like the mayor of Amity — less a villain than the representative of a clueless, self-serving status quo.

He's also a showman, and as such an avatar of the film's ambivalence about the business of spectacle. Emerald, O.J., Antlers and Angel, by contrast, are craftspeople, absorbed in matters of technique and concerned with the workaday ethics of image-making. This is the place to note Guillaume Rocheron's haunting, eye-popping special effects, Hoyte van Hoytema's lucid-dream cinematography and Nicholas Monsour's sharp editing, and to encourage you to think about the hard work and deep skill represented by all the names in the final credits.

Peele, of course, is both craftsman and showman. He's too rigorous a thinker to fall back on facile antagonisms between art and commerce, and too generous an entertainer to saddle a zigzagging shaggy-dog story with didacticism. Instead, he revels in paradoxes. The moral of “Nope” is “look away,” but you can't take your eyes off it. The title accentuates the negative, but how can you refuse?

### **Nope**

Rated R. Scares and swears. Running time: 2 hours 15 minutes. In theaters.