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Behind The Scenes (Https://log.Frame
(Https://Blog.Frame.Io/Category/Behind-The-Scenes/Interviews/)   14 MIN READ   18, 2019

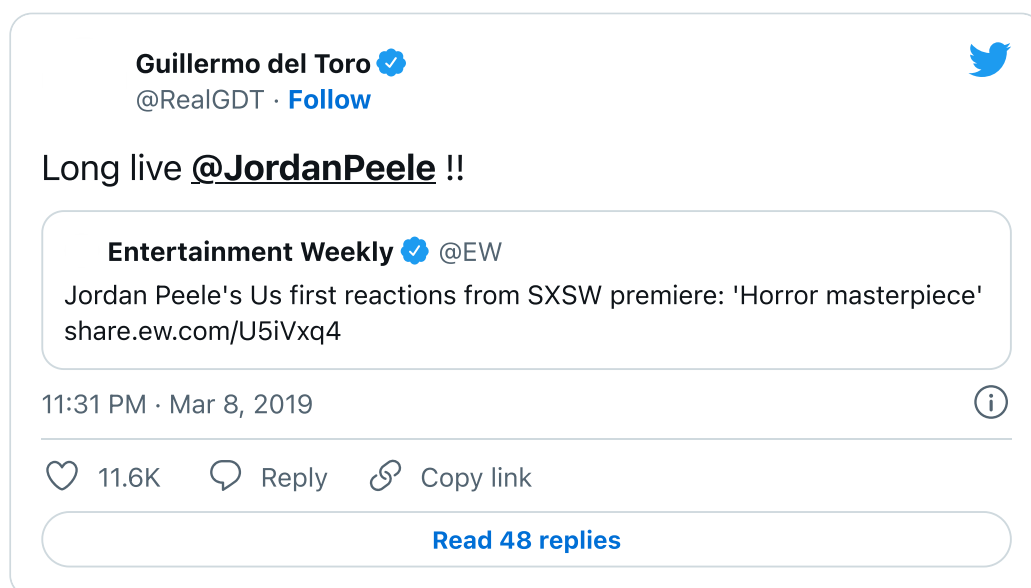# How "Us" Editor Nicholas Monsour Works with Jordan Peele

Lisa McNamara (Https://Blog.Frame.Io/Author/Lisamcnamara/)

Highlights:

- Creating a modern horror masterpiece involves employing familiar storytelling conventions to create far-out ideas.
- Jordan Peele and Nicholas Monsour are another director-editor team whose close collaboration allows them to try the wrong ideas in search of the right ones.
- Involving the editor in the storyboarding and pre-visualization phases for VFX-intensive movies gives you more room for fine-tuning later in the process.

- A small but multi-skilled editorial team pushed the technology to its limits to create the multitude of
  tempscomps for a cast of doubles.

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- Horror movies rely heavily on sound effects and scores–and having a music background can make
  you a better picture editor.
- Working with the composer and sound mixer early in the editorial process helps ensure that your
  temp tracks will be closer to the final.

If you've ever watched *Key and Peele* or *Keanu* or *Get Out*, you understand Jordan Peele's brand
of highly accessible entertainment with less-than-entirely subtle underpinnings of social
commentary. With accolades from the likes of Guillermo del Toro and a 100% Fresh rating on
Rotten Tomatoes, Peele's latest film, *Us*, has had the internet buzzing with speculation about
whether it confronts racial issues in the way that *Get Out* did, and eager viewers are dissecting
the symbols contained within the trailers to excavate hidden messages or meanings.

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Long live **@JordanPeele** !!

Entertainment Weekly ☑ @EW

Jordan Peele's Us first reactions from SXSW premiere: 'Horror masterpiece'
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In the spirit of full disclosure, this article won't give you any clues about the film's content. But
Peele's frequent collaborator, editor Nicholas Monsour, takes us behind the techniques and
thought processes that go into making what is being hailed as a horror masterpiece by the "next
Alfred Hitchcock (https://twitter.com/blackmon/status/1104236187328409600)."

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US Trailer (2019)

Honing his interests

Nicholas's father was both a documentary cinematographer and a film/video technology developer. From him, Nicholas developed an early love of films, and "an omnivorous appetite for watching them." His father often took to him along to various sets and there he observed and learned, finding it rather unglamorous yet fascinating in terms of the problem-solving aspect of filmmaking. With all sorts of accessible technology at home, he learned early on how to use editing software: Media 100, Final Cut, Director, Premiere, and Flash.

At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Nicholas detoured into less conventional and more experimental art, music, theater, and filmmaking, and became a dedicated scholar of film theory. Citing a range of influences from filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard, Leo Carax, and Walter Murch to social theorist Anthony Giddens and philosopher Gilles Deleuze, he approaches his craft with deep intellectual incisiveness.

A post-graduation foray into making and editing documentaries and films for non-profits led to his break as an editor for *Witness*, an HBO documentary series whose creator was seeking someone from a more artistic, and less commercial, background. "I was always very drawn to the visual, aesthetic, and stylistic components of filmmaking—the art-making side of it," Nicholas says.

Sharpening his skills

Nicholas calls his experience on *Witness* his "editing for TV boot camp" and once he had some TV credits under his belt, he was recommended for a stint on Comedy Central's *Drunk History*. The formula of hilarious reenactments of historically accurate events suited his serious documentary background and experimental sensibilities.

That opportunity led him to *Key and Peele*, and he's worked with Peele on numerous projects since. "It was eye-opening, in that it was one of the most creative and sane workplaces I had come across in this business, but also where the discussions around what could be considered

fairly juvenile comedy dipped deeply into philosophy, politics, and social issues," Nicholas says. "You could tell immediately that Jordan, who wrote a large share of the sketches, was full of ideas across many styles and genres. So it wasn't really a surprise to me when he said that he was interested in directing, specifically in the horror genre."

The next time Nicholas worked with him was on *Keanu*, written and produced by Peele and directed by Peter Atencio. "Those two experiences really developed our rapport, and I got to know a fair bit about how he works." After that came season one of *The Last O.G.* It was during that time that Nicholas feels that he and the increasingly busy Peele fine-tuned their communications. "He was able to transmit his ideas to me," Nicholas says, "and then I would work with the other editors to make them happen."

Carving out a unique niche

"I was pretty unsubtle about wanting to be considered for anything Jordan was going to be involved with," Nicholas says. Which apparently worked, because Peele asked him to cut *Us*, his second horror film.

If *Get Out* cost $5 million to make and grossed $255 million worldwide, *Us*, budgeted at a still relatively lean $20 million, seems like another sure bet for success. Earning Peele an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay and a 98% Fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes, *Get Out* obviously scored with audiences craving movies that were both scary and funny while containing sharp social observations and commentary.

As a creative partner with Peele, Nicholas talks about the importance of working on projects that "attempt to keep developing the medium." He feels that given the sophistication of today's audiences, it's "important to work with people who are extremely literate, who know what's happening and take that into account with what they produce. "

A trim workflow

To that end, Nicholas got involved early in the creative process of *Us*, approximately six weeks before principal photography began. "I was at the first production meetings, reading all the script updates, and Jordan was very open to my giving him thoughts and notes," Nicholas says. "As a director, he has an amazing respect for the other artists he works with, and is as open as any director I've seen to new ideas. If they're better, then everyone's on board to make it happen —even if it wasn't originally the plan—because everyone is so creatively engaged and able to make suggestions themselves."

Cinematographer Mike Gioulakis (who recently shot M. Night Shyamalan's Glass) approached this film as primarily a single-camera shoot, using a second camera only for particular shots or where it was necessary for the visual effects (no spoilers here, but if you've seen the trailers, you'll know that doubling the characters is one of the film's central conceits). "Single-camera coverage is unusual for me," Nicholas says, "but I love it because if filmmakers know what they want and they get it, I'm happy."

Footage was shot at 3.4K ARRIRAW at true 24 fps, non-anamorphic. They cut on Avid at DNxHD 115, 1920×1080 (16:9)—which they matted in order to properly view or reposition for the 2.40 final delivery.

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During principal photography, 42 days over approximately two months, Technicolor supplied dailies to the cutting room via physical drives and sent dailies to the production via PIX. They also had an open Aspera channel, which they used to turnover material to Industrial Light & Magic for the visual effects shots. (Just as a fun aside, Nicholas is an enthusiastic Frame.io (https://frame.io/) user and hopes to be able to do future films that incorporate it into the workflow.)

In addition to Nicholas, the small editorial crew included Matt Absher, who functioned as post supervisor and first assistant. "He has an incredible set of skills for knowing how to communicate and track across vendors and departments," Nicholas says. He also sought out assistant Jorge Diaz, who has worked as a VFX editor and played an essential part in creating the graphics and temp composites. Both came on prior to production to establish and test the workflow.

One of the most challenging aspects of the editorial process was the need to do extensive pre-comps in order to choose selects. The team "pushed Avid as far as it'll go in the graphics direction" and used After Effects, Photoshop, and Illustrator. "Because there are so many shots that need to be composited in order to find the correct material, we had to make it look not distractingly rough for Jordan and the producers so they could actually make decisions," Nicholas explains.

"The doubling of the characters required deviating from how I might normally edit a scene," Nicholas says. "Creatively and technically, there's so much to explore in terms of how you choose which angle to use and how you present characters that look the same but are different. Whether you express those differences or similarities through treatment of voice or visual effects or practically—all of those decisions were so challenging and interesting."

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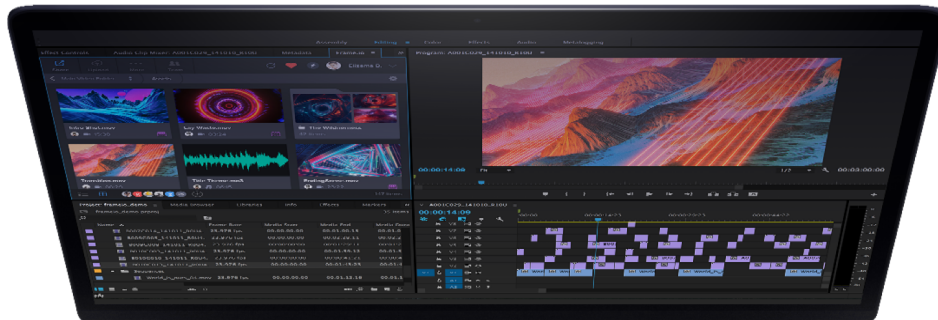
But, he points out, the high quality of the cast meant that he was able to freely choose from all the material that was there. "We could explore almost any possibility in a scene, which is a unique opportunity."

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Shaping the film

While some productions find it necessary to have an editor on the set, **Nicholas stayed in the cutting room for much of the production. For one thing, he likes being able to let the film speak for itself.** "Especially in terms of geography," Nicholas says. "Imagine, for example, we're talking about the layout of a house and I know what it's supposed to be. But if it isn't there in the footage, then my knowledge isn't doing the audience any favors. So in that regard, I like to look at it in an unbiased way."

Nicholas did go to the set on occasion, however, to share preliminary assemblies with Peele. Because different directors work differently in terms of how much they want to see—and to share—with producers, Nicholas says, "I was very heartened that even early on during shooting, Jordan was comfortable showing them to others on set."

His editorial strategy is to attempt to have a watchable cut of the movie within a couple of days of wrapping principal photography. "Of course, what usually happens is that the last week is full of the most complicated footage, so there can be a delay. But if the communication is good up front with storyboard artists and pre-viz, it's more a process of editing and leaving placeholders and then dropping in the scenes right at the end."

Once they wrapped, Peele relocated the editorial team from the Universal lot to a "lovely" house in Hollywood. "One of the things I appreciate most about working with him is that he's here as much as is helpful, and when he *is* here it's not to micromanage. It doesn't create an environment in which I'm afraid to try potentially terrible ideas in front of him," Nicholas says. "He understands the process enough to know that you have to go through the wrong ideas to get to the right ones, quite often."

The two started on the director's cut right after production (in mid-September 2018) and approximately halfway through the process they invited the producers to "widen the discussion." With a premiere on the opening night of SXSW on March 8, 2019, efficiency in post was important—as was the preparation and planning.

"Jordan and all of the department heads seem to have a common process of being as prepared as possible so that you have time to experiment," Nicholas says. "I feel like on this film it's been more about experimenting and honing and polishing, rather than putting out fires. It's a dance of planning and structure with an environment that allows for new ideas to be brought in."

The importance of the score

Nicholas has a musical background and is passionate about the importance of the music composition and sound design. "Working on story and character and tonal issues through sound design and scoring is one of the most creatively engaging and enjoyable aspects of the process for me," he says. It is, in fact, the aspect of post-production that Nicholas feels gets rushed in many cases.

It's also part of why, during the early part of production, Nicholas made a point of meeting with composer Michael Abels and sound mixers Doug Hemphill and Ron Bartlett. "I wanted their ideas in order to plan what to work with for temp music and sound effects so that I wouldn't turn something over to them that was radically different from where they wanted it to go."

Nicholas and Michael shared a love of non-Western choral music and avant-garde soundtracks, as well. "Horror has always been ahead of the curve in terms of looking into experimental soundtracks and music, and Michael's definitely continuing in that tradition. He's a fantastic composer and we really had fun geeking out over obscure twentieth century composers like Penderecki and Morton Feldman. All that crazy post-war stuff where nobody knew what the world meant."

Likewise, in our present climate of social divisiveness and uncertainty, it stands to reason that a soundtrack that bows to those composers and techniques would be the right kind of accompaniment to a film that Nicholas describes as "one of the richest and most complicated takes on current American political culture that I've seen attempted in something that's also an incredible amount of fun to watch."

At the time when we spoke, the studio had already held two test screenings with the temp sound mixes and, according to Nicholas, "they went great. The audience's reactions to Jordan's films are some of the best."

While those reactions are partly a result of the scary-but-funny factor with which Peele imbues his films, it's also partly because neither he nor Nicholas underestimates the sophistication of the audience. **"Audiences have become so literate in conventions and tropes—and even the technology—around the things they're viewing that I think it's up to us as filmmakers to keep up,"** Nicholas says.

Gaining a creative edge

As someone who had access to movie sets and technology from a young age, Nicholas acknowledges how lucky he was to be able to have so many of the necessary skills onboard before he was a professional. But that doesn't mean that he didn't have to earn his way into the rarified air of cutting with one of the busiest and most successful filmmakers working today.

In his opinion, it's important for young filmmakers to explore as many different roles in the industry as possible. **"Shoot films yourself. Try recording the sound and mixing it, do the graphics yourself, edit it yourself," Nicholas says.** "It's important to becoming a better collaborator with others who perform those roles as you continue in your career."

He credits his directing experimental films with his current ability to collaborate well with directors. "I think one of the reasons certain directors appreciate my input is that I'm very often thinking about their point of view. What were they trying to accomplish? How can I continue to help that through the edit? Rather than just thinking, 'Oh, I have to deal with this footage.'"

Not surprisingly, Nicholas also recommends that editors, in particular, have some kind of appreciation or knowledge of music. "It doesn't necessarily mean you have to be a great musician, but at least a knowledge of approaches and, certainly, a healthy, active listening to all

kinds of film and non-film music is, I think, so crucial to the process."

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Finally, Nicholas advocates that those who want to edit practice cutting. Like other editors we've interviewed, he agrees that it's not always easy for an assistant to do creative cutting during the course of a film. Assistants stay plenty busy doing what they're responsible for. But, as we learned from the crew of (https://blog.frame.io/2018/07/30/inside-mission-impossible-fallout/)*Mission: Impossible – Fallout (https://blog.frame.io/2018/07/30/inside-mission-impossible-fallout/)*, doing outside projects can be essential.

Nicholas recalls that as he was building his career, he sought out friends who were making films and offered his services. And while he never supports doing work for free (https://blog.frame.io/2017/09/18/5-reasons-to-work-for-free/) that seems exploitative, he found good opportunities by working on projects for socially conscious non-profits that aligned with his values.

The final cut

Filmmaking is difficult work, no matter the project or director. But what energizes Nicholas in his work with Peele is that **"literally, being in the room with Jordan is some of the most fun I've had."** And drawing on his experimental film background helps him work with a well-known genre in

which Peele is combining the "very deft use of storytelling conventions" to insert some "pretty far-out and unusual ideas" (https://blog.frame.io/)

"I'm incredibly heartened to see directors like Jordan getting attention and acclaim for his work. I think we're in the middle of an important time in film, where the audience is ready and willing to go places with filmmakers who have substantial things to say," Nicholas says.

Although I tried to get Nicholas to confirm my interpretation of *Us* based on the trailers, he tells me that he'd rather not talk about it. **"The best experience of Jordan's work is what you bring to it, without being told,"** he says.

It's fitting that the poster graphics are designed to look like Rorschach-style ink blots, teasing the idea that there are many ways to interpret what you think you're seeing. In other words, when you go to see a Jordan Peele film, expect the unexpected.

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Photography by Irina Logra

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Thank you to Lisa McNamara for contributing this article.

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