



Nope Editor Nicholas Monsour On Deleted Scenes, Avoiding The Obvious, And More [Spoiler Interview]



BY JACK GIROUX / JULY 27, 2022 5:02 PM EDT

Editor Nicholas Monsour should teach a class about "Nope." He jokes that he gives long answers, but really, it's more that he gives a tremendous amount of thought to what he's doing. After speaking with the editor for almost an hour about his latest collaboration with filmmaker Jordan Peele, I still had endless questions about the film. Not only in regards to *What does it all mean, man?*, but also about the nuts and bolts behind it all.



During our conversation with Monsour, who previously worked on "Us" and "Keanu," we tried to balance discussing technical facts and fun theories about the summer adventure film. "Nope" raises more questions than answers and walks a fine line between ambiguity and vagueness. The editor didn't want to reveal the magician's tricks of how the filmmakers pulled it off, but he was more than game to discuss the film's questions, awe-inspiring sequences, and crafting the big picture.

Note: This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

'It's actually a hybrid of infrared video and 70mm film'



In terms of the editing workflow, I think there was an obvious change from digital cameras, which is, there's a delay when they have to get the dailies processed and then we have to digitize them and put them on — there's a little bit more work involved in setting the looks for the different scenes because there's a little bit of variety in the chemical process. To make sure we're giving the director and the filmmakers the best version to look at, the camera department takes care of most of that, but we're constantly screening in a way that maybe you don't need to in a digital workflow.

Once it's in digital form, we worked that way the whole time. Some filmmakers when they shoot film do more of the process in film, but it was really captured on film and then we worked digitally. And then, it was a matter of making sure the right material got scanned and triple checking it before it goes to visual effects or any other hands that need to work on it.

There is also a very interesting and innovative technique that they used in shooting the extraordinary nighttime scenes. It's actually a hybrid of



meant that our dailies looked pretty different from the final. [There] was a little bit more imagination involved in knowing that we will have a lot of choices to make once we get into the final finishing of the film, with the scanning and the color correction, that aren't reflected in our dailies.

The film looked a little bit more like infrared when we were working with it, so that we could see what was there. And then eventually it was all dialed into this really uncanny blend of seeing out into the night. And there was a little bit more temp color correction as we went to make sure, you know, when you're trying to judge an edit, that it's flowing, that there isn't a bump when you're watching that because of some technical difference because of the film.

Mostly, it's just a few more steps of quality control and bookkeeping. Once it's all digitized, it was pretty easy to work with. There's also the fact that the IMAX and the 65 mil have different aspect ratios, so it's just a lot more checking and looking at things in different ways to make sure the visual effects work in the different aspect ratios. Really, it's trying to honor the photography and the excellent, amazing work they did. They were really paying attention to the details on set and in the lab so that we didn't have to worry about it too much in the edit.

Did you have any some beautiful discoveries in post, shots of film that turned out even better than expected?

Jordan was really excited and interested in the things that emerged from the film process, whether it was dust or grain or flares or light leaks or a little bit of gate weave, or all these things that come with the medium. Because the film, in a lot of ways, really acknowledges the history and the



He was really interested in when the medium asserted itself into the image. I think he maintained a lot of that all the way through to what you see on the screen. Obviously, what you do see there is intentional and that's there for a reason, not just a mistake, but I think he was interested in that. Our on-screen titles were filmed with IMAX cameras just to keep an organic film quality from beginning to end in the image, and make it really intentional.

You touched on one of the themes of the story, which is, what meaning do images have now? When I spoke with [composer] Michael Abels, he said themes and metaphors influenced his music. Did they inspire how you cut the film at all?

I love Michael and his approach. It's always fascinating to see what he makes of the material when we're working on it. I do think we think a lot about, not necessarily always in metaphorical terms, but the different layers. First and foremost, I guess just the different layers of what an audience might be thinking about or feeling when watching it, which might be some of the layers of meaning behind certain imagery or a certain film technique or a certain choice in the way a character or a scene is presented, and that might be metaphorical.

I think I definitely start that way when I'm reading the script, I'm always immediately trying to pull it apart and think about all the ramifications as well. What does it mean? Gosh, it's so hard because there are so many layers in it, but what is our relationship with animals? How are these characters addressing that? What is that saying about social relations and exploitation? And then what does this remind me of in terms of other stories I've heard and other movies and other myths? And yeah, there are a



pack it full of the things that inspire him and he's interested in, without giving you a direct answer of what it's about, necessarily.

We're talking about that all the time. In fact, that's probably naturally how I work and then I have to make sure to pay attention to the plot and the literal aspects as well, because I find all the other layers of what's going on in the imagery and the sound and the music really compelling. The kinds of projects I like working on the most are when the director I'm working with is as into that as I am, or more.

'Do I treat this like an animal or do I treat it like a threat?'

Universal

I do want to get into the more literal aspects, but I want to hear your take on the ending. On the one hand, the siblings get revenge in the



how did you read it?

Right. Well, I've always loved that experience above probably any other in film or fiction, when something gets my attention and is so thoughtful that it makes me want to understand and think about it, but I don't get told exactly how. Immediately it made me think of some of my favorite anime that have some really unusual and unanswerable questions. It made me think of the monolith in "2001." It made me think of a lot of things.

I agree with you that there is definitely something very central in "Nope" about ... to me, it's more about being critical about power relationships between people, species, and between humans and nature. Why we are drawn to certain representations of animals or each other or nature and how we exploit that. More than there being just sort of a rule laid down, a commandment that thou must respect nature, it's really a series of moral situations that these characters go through, [and] based on their specific needs and backgrounds, they navigate it the way people do. It's fascinating to watch, because you go from very mundane, real situations we find ourselves in to cosmic, mythological, otherworldly encounters that heighten those moral — or spiritual, even — stakes of why we do what we do and how we relate to each other.

The brother and sister story really brings a lot of that out. I mean, if you think of the complexity of all of the character relationships in this movie, whether it's coworkers in a film set or on a sitcom stage, or brother and sister, children and their parents, there's such a richness of relationships. And then between the horses and their trainers and between all of the different creatures in the film. What better foil to make you really question



do I treat this like an animal or do I treat it like a threat? Or like a predator, or like another person?

You don't get an easy answer, and I think that's where some of the most interesting moral studies come from. Somehow Jordan does all that while making it incredible fun, so that's the good news — we don't really have to force it in. It's there on a granular level, in the setting and the social relationships and the dialogue. I know the production designer Ruth [De Jong] and the costume designer, everybody is bringing those layers in so that by the time I get the footage, it's there and it's mostly up to us to carry it through to the end and make sure that it's presented in the way that maintains all of that richness.

There's the question of, is it even a triumphant ending, destroying this creature? How did the ending and its meaning evolve in the editing room?

Well, I mean, Jordan is fascinating. It's an amazing privilege to work with somebody who has really earned their right to work at a really high level of collaboration and marshaling big, big resources and big budgets, and rightfully so. And yet who also really has the creative impulse to be generating his own original ideas and never settling. So the process from beginning to end is, Jordan is always thinking about it creatively. It's never set in stone.

Things like the ending continue to morph for the whole process. Maybe not wildly, but in subtle ways that do affect the way you read it. The specificity that he and the VFX team and Johnnie Burn, our sound designer, got into with the exact quality of certain exhaust plumes and dust clouds and



As a storyteller, Jordan doesn't hold hands too much and often jumps from point A to point C. He skips over traditional, verbal exposition, but in the editing room, are you both constantly questioning, "How much do we need to say here?"

For sure. I think Jordan gives his audience a ton of credit, and I think rightfully so, because we watch a lot these days. We don't need a lot explained to us, how much visual information we all digest every day. I think he gives people a lot of credit, and I really like that. And it is a visual medium, which is really exceptional for someone whose background is — a lot of it's in writing and he's a writer. Sometimes, when writers direct, it can be really all about the words.

One of the reasons that I think that the actors and the performances can be so grounded and real and organic is that they don't have to sit there explaining a bunch, because it's been worked in visually in a lot of ways. I always think the beginning of "Nope" is so beautiful. There's a place for using archetypal characters, and there's aspects of these characters that you could say are universal, but I think the specifics of the setting of this horse ranch in Santa Clarita with a brother and sister, and the sister who's a bit estranged from the family and hasn't been involved in the business and this sort of larger-than-life father, Otis Senior... Just down to the — I mean the doorknobs on the ranch and the costume design and the logos on their shirts, it's all giving you this cultural, social information, and setting all these themes in motion before a word's even uttered.

Obviously, there is always a challenge once you put all these things together into an assembly and then you start the long process of, "Well,



all the accidents and all the natural things and the performances put together, how does it feel? And what do we get from it?"

Jordan has developed so many skills and has so many skills as a director. He's in a place now where he can know he has a real solid story and idea, and then when he's filming, if there's opportunities to add to it or grab more or try new things, he does so. Which means that by the time we get in the edit, there's stuff that nobody's really visualized until we put it together, because maybe there's an improv take or maybe there's something he and the camera department decided to do on the day that wasn't in the pre-viz necessarily. Or maybe when they're shooting a scene, it feels like the right time to reveal some information, so we have it in two scenes and we're now debating which one is the right one.

All I know is you just have to have an intuition as a lover of movies when you're watching it of what feels more interesting and engaging than the other thing. I'm wary of rules about that, because I think you can always try and pregame it. I always know that when we're assembling and working on scenes, we're trying our best to imagine how it will fit into the whole. But once you sit and press play on a whole edit, that's when I know I learn what's really working or not working.

Most of the time I think Jordan and I agree and I think I understand what he's going for, and he's incredibly generous of bringing me in real early to tell me his thoughts on the script [or] why he's casting this or that person, all these layers that I'm already loaded up with by the time we start cutting. Inevitably, there's times where I think one thing makes sense and he thinks it makes sense another way. Usually that's a chance for me to learn, and



wasn't thinking of yet.

There's all these tools that you have to use. Yeah, there's no rules that I'm aware of other than experimenting and trusting that initial feeling you had when you first read it or first saw the footage, and how you felt about it.

'Our first edit was twice as long as the current movie'

Universal

Steven Yeun's character is a good example of what you're talking about. In his first scene, he's buying the horse, his wife says a big show is coming up, and we see alien masks fairly early on. In any other movie, we'd see his first encounter, maybe him getting the idea for this show. Does Jordan even write exposition like that and just cuts it?



as a performer and an observer of human nature, has an intuitive sense of how to embed exposition in things people would actually do and say, or in a tone that matches the reality of the movie. So most of the time, no, he doesn't.

You're maybe not seeing, like you're saying, the obvious scene. Let me think about a good example. You know, we see a tragedy unfold in the beginning of the movie and then we jump ahead in time, and there's a lot not explained about how OJ, our character, reacted to the tragedy or what exactly is going on, and we're left to put it together for the next part of the film as we meet the sister and as we see him at work now without his dad. There were scenes shot that maybe fill in some of these gaps, so by and large, what Jordan does by choosing the screen time that he does, rather than filling it with exposition, he lets you figure it out in certain parts. It gives an audience a clue that there's much more going on than just the plot.

There are other layers that aren't necessarily about the plot, exactly. I'm always thinking about that when we're thinking about which angle to use for a scene. You're thinking about whose subjectivity you're in and which character is highlighted. You have this view as an editor of just the weight you're giving different characters, the weight you're giving different scenes relative to each other, and then that primacy of place, of how much you feature a certain moment or a certain detail or plot point. I think all those things convey importance of intent from the filmmaker to the audience: "How much does the filmmaker want me to be thinking about this or that?"



does cue you in to think about the mysteries behind the character's motivations, literally behind the scenes of these locations, the film sets and family houses.

How much room was there to restructure? For example, the Gordy storyline, was it always where it was in the story?

It's a really interesting one because it's a mixture of both the most changed and most unchanged in that the core of it was really decided very early. I'd say there's a good five minute chunk in there of the flashback to the 'Gordy's Home' set that is very, very similar to one of the first assemblies, because I'll send Jordan the first version and then he uses that as a way to think about if there's any pickups needed, if there's anything he left out, and sometimes they'll go back for a little bit more. But within a short amount of time, we get a scene together.

The Gordy scene stayed pretty consistent. That said, how it happens in the movie and what happens right before it, right after it, we changed over and over and over again. I do feel like I know some of the magician's tricks when it comes to Jordan. I don't want to break the magic circle. One thing that was not scripted but was all Jordan's intuition was to put the flashes of Gordy at the beginning of the film. Again, that's such an important place in a movie, obviously, the first few images you see. I think it gives you, when viewing the movie, a real clear sense of the importance of that storyline to the meaning of the whole movie. Also, it sets the tone and creeps you out quite a bit.

Part of the reason we had to nail that scene down early and paid a lot of attention to it early is because of its incredibly complicated visual effects



then if we have to go in and change it at the end, we can, but mostly it's been worked out. The Gordy sequence, most of it is as-is, but there is a lot more to it that — like a lot of sequences in the film, there's an embarrassment of riches. So the core of it's the same, but our first edit was twice as long as the current movie. The shots weren't longer, it was just a lot more shots and a lot more content that wasn't necessarily crucial to the experience. But a lot of it you don't know until you start combining it in the edit.

I'm guessing the theatrical cut is the director's cut, but at what length did you and Jordan first agree that the movie was working?

I am a bit of a masochist in that I don't really make, I guess, what some people call assemblies. If I'm working with Jordan I know that if he can, he's not going to force it if it's impractical or impossible or our time is better spent elsewhere, but if he is judging the music and the sound and the picture organically together, as early as possible, he would like to.

I will present rough assembly options when we are in the room and trying ideas very quickly, but my goal on a film is always — and this was the longest shoot of a feature that I've ever worked on — is always to present something at the end of the shooting or as soon after the end of shooting that is a watchable version of the film. This just happened to be a very long film because I wanted him to see a watchable version of all the scenes that they shot. That makes it harder in some ways.

You get to really see more of the potential of all of these things that you end up having to cut, but some directors really don't like working that way and it clouds their vision. It doesn't really affect Jordan. I'd say there's a lot



those ideas then transfer over, where it's like, "Well, that thing we did in the scene that we cut, we could do here," and you wouldn't have known that if you hadn't done that. As much as time permits and we are able to do so, we're really pushing everything to its best form, even if we know not all of it can stay. I'd say it was quite a while before we made some of the bigger lifts. So I don't know, the edit lasted a little over a year. Rightfully so, because of the richness of the material and how much they were able to capture.

I think we all knew roughly where it would end up, maybe there was some debate over ... it's tricky for me, because I think this movie earns a little bit more time, potentially, at least on paper. It's only when you watch it and feel it that you're like, "Actually, let's take it down a little bit," or "We don't need that part, it's distracting." So yeah, there's always painful parts. I'd say we were hovering between two hours and 45 minutes and two hours and 15 minutes for the majority of the edit.

'When you're in the reality of a movie, not all of the exact rules of physics apply'



Universal

Of course, kill your darlings, but what was painful to cut?

Let me think about how to say this. It really does feel like being part of a magic trick. I'd say, if we all want it enough, there might be more coming.

Really?

But only Jordan knows the future of that. To be less vague, there's a genius and madness on the set of Jordan and his team. I mean, there is a logic to some of that craziness of shooting and making that much more movie, even though you know it's not going to be in the movie. It really can affect the whole understanding of the actors and the crew for what they are making. Even if you know you're shooting a five minute shot that you're only going to pull five seconds from, it changes that five seconds immensely.

There are much longer versions of the scenes where, in maybe a more neorealist version of the movie, your attention would be drawn to all the atmospheres and environments that the scenes take place in, to really delve into deeper and deeper levels of the social messages. What you find is that I get it without that, to a certain extent.

That third act, which, to me ... I'm really happy with how it ended up, and amazed by the stunt work and the visual effects and how exciting it is and the music, there is a lot more there. In terms of the whole undertaking of filming, trying to get a shot, trying to get the Oprah shot. They tried a lot



I appreciate you giving me good answers without revealing the magician's tricks.

[Laughs] Okay, I'll give a few things away that are not there because I believe they are, as far as I'm aware, getting released with the home video release. There's some beautiful and really revealing, interesting stuff about Emerald's character, her daily hustle. What she's been up to when she hasn't been working with OJ on the ranch down on Hollywood Boulevard and making videos on the internet and couch surfing in a kind of precarious lifestyle, seeking some kind of fame or recognition. There's some beautiful stuff there that just ended up not being needed or feeling right, but really, it was great that they filmed because it adds all this layer for Keke to explore. And the same is true for Michael Wincott's character, there's a lot more of what that guy does at home.

He's fantastic.

He's a brilliant character, and I mean, he gave such a beautiful performance of a real amazing combination of braggadocio and vulnerability.

And comedy.

And comedy, yeah. Amazing straight man and maniac. There's a lot more of what that guy gets up to on his own, but then it became clear that the mystery of that character is as interesting as knowing about him. And yet, it's quite possible that Jordan will be giving some more to his fans who, after experiencing the edit as he felt it was best, can delve deeper into



Earlier, you talked about deciding which point-of-view is best for a scene. During the rainy night incident, with OJ in the car and Emerald in the house, how'd you time that just right, cutting between them and their experiences?

It's really interesting, because you think on paper and then when you see the material you have a hunch of what will be easier or more difficult. And then again, once you watch it in context, you have a whole other set of problems that you couldn't 100 percent predict. And that one is one that actually happened pretty quickly.

Jordan had the amazing on-set insight, paired with Daniel Kaluuya's performance intuition and talent to know just how long to wait and be silent and when to move his eyes and these things. I think it was a discovery on the set, I'm not sure whose, but it was in later takes that after leaning out the truck door and seeing the last thing you would ever want to see above you, Daniel decides to just lock his truck door in a completely feeble gesture of trying to feel safe. I think that was an on-set discovery.

Honestly, it was actually the beginning of that sequence that I kind of convinced Jordan at one point to let me go back in and say, "This is working, but I have a feeling that we're close to another thing that might excite us more." So basically everything before the entity — I'm not sure what we're calling it in print these days — but the UFO shows up over the house. There's a section before that at nighttime where you have a feeling something bad is coming, and that was one that I went back into to try and find the exact moments and only the exact moments that gave you an increasing sense of dread.



his sister and they probably need to get the hell out of there. He hops in his truck while trying to call her, and right on the door close we cut to Angel, the technician, getting into his car. It's this way in which you feel that they're all in the same situation and one action is bleeding into the next. That was a fun crunching down of that section that was really a rhythmic, musical thing, almost. I think it set you up for what comes afterwards.

It was also a late discovery of Jordan after filming — here is maybe a scoop — the shots inside of the entity were something that were not planned. Jordan discovered and investigated with his VFX team after photography. So that's an interesting thing that got added into that section is when we get a glimpse of what's going on that we're hearing down below, and we get these dark glimpses of what's happening up there. That's a great thing Jordan thought of that just added to that section feeling completely out of control.

Jordan has said before, even if something isn't logical, go where the best entertainment is. Similar to Spielberg, people told him the tank wouldn't explode at the end of "Jaws," but he knew the audience would love it, so who cares? So, say when "Sunglasses at Night" somehow keeps going or the camera's amazing depth of field at the end, do you and Jordan discuss how to pace it just right to earn the audience's suspension of disbelief?

Well, we did talk about that. We talked about it a lot. Actually during the script phase, that was one of my first questions. My dad worked in the film business for decades as a cinematographer and then as a film playback and computer technician guy doing like 24 playback sync, so I know way



I think Jordan did have an approach like what you're saying, which is when you're in the reality of a movie, not all of the exact rules of physics apply, necessarily. It's an experiential thing and it's what draws you in, what takes you out, what feels correct, even if you're cheating a little bit. Great pains were taken to create a physics-accurate reality in this world, which then he would bend when it was more effective. I think that one example, I think it could be a tape player in the van. In which case, it might wind down like the record player. So... [Laughs]

[Laughs] Whatever the case, character and thematic logic, that's what's most important, right?

Absolutely, yeah.

Thank you again for all your time. You should give a Masterclass on this movie at some point.

[Laughs] I would love to. I don't really get tired of talking about it. For a year, we kept pinching ourselves while working on it because we all know we don't get to work on films this unique and exciting.

"Nope" is now playing in theaters.

RECOMMENDED
