'Nope' Editor And Sound Designer Talk The Craft Of Spacecraft

Dani Di Placido Senior Contributor ⓘ

I write about film, television, pop culture, and other fun stuff.

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Jordan Peele's "Nope" stars a memorable movie monster.   MONKEYPAW PRODUCTIONS

Jordan Peele's *Nope* is a strikingly original take on a familiar sci-fi staple, masterfully edited and boasting a haunting sound design.

Editor Nicholas Monsour has been collaborating with Peele since the days of *Key and Peele*, and the supervising sound editor, sound designer and re-recording mixer, Johnnie Burn, caught Peele's eye after his work on the sci-fi film *Under The Skin;* both took the time to talk to me about their memorable contributions to *Nope*.

Nope has been compared to *Jaws*, in the sense that many of the most traumatic scenes use sound to communicate what's happening, as opposed to gore (for example, the sound of Gordy's rampage). What is the process behind creating the sound of violence?

JB: If you close your eyes and I tell you a story, the images are yours, and if it's a horror story, then your brain is going to go with the image you personally fear the most. In the

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Gordy attack sequence, much is hidden from view with clever blocking. There are really only a few sounds in the Gordy attack, seeds of imagination, and most of them are made with friendly wet vegetables.

Conversely, I often read reviews where people have quoted the film as having hyperbolic sound that, in reality, they made up themselves. In the case of *Jaws* I think it's common knowledge that it was a problem that the special effect shark was so unusable that picture editor Verna Fields cut many of the shark shots out, which let the audience in, and won herself an Oscar in the process.

Jordan and I loved the idea that once we had established the misread of whistling of wind and people screaming in mortal terror, then the innocent sound of wind whistling would become like the barrel floating in Jaws - it would let you know the monster is coming! The great thing is you have to work it out, making it much more of an experience.

Twitter reckons that some of Gordy's cries were a stock chimp sound, is that correct? If so, what was the intention behind that choice?

JB: I love that this was picked up on, that sound effect is like the Wilhelm Scream of the animal world! There is a lot that is self-referential about this film, but no animals were harmed, it works so very well, and honestly, we did actually try a lot of other sounds, both human and animal - my own impersonation being vaulted indefinitely.

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Perhaps Twitter would like to make a new Gordy attack scream in time for the sequel?

The Gordy scene did a great job of conveying the tremendous violence committed by the ape, without showing much. Was there a more graphic version you considered? Was the upright shoe always so prominent in that scene?

NM: No, and yes. Both decisions in the edit came naturally from Jordan's approach to writing and filming the scene, focusing on the subjective experience of going through a confusing and traumatic incident — the way we hold on to seemingly out-of-place details, or the way we edit through our memories and process the events of our personal lives through the prism of culture. He is also just incredibly gifted at creating simple, iconic and disturbing images out of the seemingly mundane — an upright shoe, a teacup, brass scissors.

There was more filmed, but it was very clear from the script and how it was performed where the areas of focus would be, so that particular section did not change much from the first edit. I had to do my part to time the intuitive emotional moments to cut to young Jupe's face, or to try initial sound and music elements, but because I understood the ethos, it was fairly straightforward.

The alien, Jean Jacket, is associated with the sound of wind; was there ever a moment where you considered giving the creature an animalistic cry?

JB: The sound of the alien changes throughout the film, all as it wishes. Act 1, it's a predator, and we are really only hearing how it disturbs the environment - the shifting winds or movement of the grass. Act 2 we start to hear what is contained within - people and animals screaming, or is it just wind? By act 3, there's no need for Jean Jacket to hide anymore, quite the opposite, it wants to be looked at, and goes full "peacock."

Within that, we do actually subtly hear forms of vocalization; Jean Jacket trying to cough out the fake horse allows us for the first time to hear a really wild close-encounter-meets-kazoo which sets a tone, into which we added some character. Like, when OJ has just put his head back in the car after leaning out to look at the monster above his truck - we hear Jean Jacket's bass rumble, almost like a laugh, mocking him.

But the main thing was, why would this beast make a noise if it was trying to sneak up on people? Once we had freedom from that, we discovered it was actually way more exciting to say the sound of Jean Jacket is the sound of its victims.

Is there a similarity between editing horror and comedy, as in the anticipation? What's the similarity, and the difference?

NM: I think the terms "horror" and "comedy" connote constellations of atavistic conventions used by filmmakers to deal with social or physical anxieties. The way editing techniques work has everything to do with the power dynamic between cultural producers and the audience. Something "official" — with enough resources to appear in an American

multiplex — provides a foil for the audience to collectively mock, endorse or ignore through laughter, engrossment, or disinterest.

When we laugh or get scared together in a theater we've paid to enter, there is a communication going on within the audience about how we feel about the things we are seeing. It can feel reassuring to be scared in the safety of a group, or to have your worldview reinforced by the laughter of those around you. It can also feel alienating or coercive when you don't share those reactions.

If we laugh or get scared alone when engaging with video, we intuit the physically absent social response through our awareness of the video's relative success — box office, hits, likes, awards. In contemporary culture, "comedy" and "horror" films — by functioning subconsciously while sidestepping the more easily dismissed sentimental manipulation of melodrama — retain immense potential subversive and regressive power. I often think about an edit in terms of how we communicate the filmmakers' role within this power dynamic — ironic distance, conservative acceptance, or radical intervention.

If you can effectively communicate a self-awareness of the social dynamics that circumscribe your film or video — demystify it — you can attempt to become an honest player in the conversation the audience is having. That can be done in marketing, in the public narrative of the film's production, or in the film itself by attenuating the adherence of the edit to expected patterns, and — in our extremely visually literate culture — subtle tonal amplifications and disruptions. In the cinematography and editing of film you learn how to imply the subjectivity of the viewer — classically through the choice of angle.

Traditionally, slapstick and atrocity are often presented in a wide angle — the viewer's subjectivity left safely distanced to mock or cower — while closer angles allow the viewer to relate with a specific character's role within a scene of humorous social disruption or disturbing psychological implication. But the breaking with traditional film language is itself a well-worn tradition.

Within cinema's proscribed settings, as viewers and producers, our techniques and reactions are only ever rehearsals of a real-life drama — one in which we both hope for, and fear, change. "Comedy" and "horror" are names we give to intertwined forms of social experiment, where *the shock i*s the task of the progressive or the reactionary filmmaker, depending on the context and intent. When editing film, you can only provide a simulated shock — a jump scare or punch line — if you can create familiarity on the one hand, while anticipating and subverting the expectations of the viewer.

The ship stays almost out of sight for most of the runtime, but we get a glorious look during the finale. How do you time the reveal, so the audience doesn't feel frustrated?

NM: I believe this was something that was at the core of Jordan's initial impulse to tackle a UFO film, and part of made me excited to work on it. I think he had stored up a lot of experiences — as I have — of watching films with UFOs or similar entities in them, and had carefully logged the way he always wanted to see it done.

Again, most of this became clear to me intuitively when reading the script, or seeing the storyboards and the pre-vis — but he continued to finesse the beats where we see the UFO with me and the VFX team up until the last minute of post-production, to get it as close to his initial idea as he could.

Obviously, when dealing with the unseen, sound becomes increasingly important, and we had many discussions about the approach to the sound. I spent a lot of time in the edit mocking up the sound to find out when it was more interesting or exciting to see something unheard or hear something unseen, and how we interpret inexplicable sounds.

Regardless of the rest of the plot, hearing a horse scream from the clouds is a type of indelible poetic moment that I was excited to help craft, and it felt crucial that all of the moments leading up to the more spectacular revelations of the story had their own intrinsic creepiness.

What was the most memorable or challenging sound in the film to engineer? And what was the most creative or unusual solution you came up with?

JB: The first time we hear a big blast from Jean Jacket during Jupes presentation really stands out for me. Honestly, we spent months developing that, and many other key sounds, before even the shoot happened. We needed to get the big tickets sorted before the shoot so that I'd have a fighting chance of sculpting a detailed soundscape once the picture got put together.

So, that sound is a sophisticated mix of some really interesting pieces curated to invoke serious tones of sci-fi, anthropomorphism, menace, otherworldly and so on. I was so proud, and then literally a couple of days before we finished, Jordan said: "hey Johnnie, can you throw a kazoo in there too, nice and loud?" And he was right, it's brilliant now.

The screams of the victims inside the creature were genuinely haunting. Also sounded a bit like a roller coaster ride. Were the screams enhanced/altered in some way to make them sound uncanny?

JB: I'm glad you picked up on the roller coaster. We loved the idea that you might hear it as pain one minute, joy the next, and therefore, be thrown into doubt the next time you are anywhere near Six Flags - it's the kind of sound that your brain often parses out.

So, yes, we spent a long time choosing winds that sounded like screams, and making screams that sounded like winds. Dhyana Carlton-Tims, who was editing the dialogue, made some fantastic contributions to the "screamscape!"

These screams are extra awful too because they mean 'the monster is coming.' In some horror films you would have big, stomping footsteps; here, we could actually use quiet subtle winds or, more effective, actual terrified screams to let us know things are gonna get really bad!

In your mind, does the creature have the ability to "record" sounds and repeat them? For example, was it playing the sound of those screams?

JB: You know, I think Jean Jacket might well have that avian quality of mimicry. Jordan and I spent much time developing ideas, and when we were done, we went and made the film drawing upon the various theories we had had.

We also liked the idea that, similar to how Jean Jacket would let out a blast of steam to lower the hem of the cloud, so to speak, Jean Jacket could also let out a covering whistle of wind if the people inside got too noisy.

I had a library of naturally melodic wind whistles from Scotland that I would then have my kids mimic screams, in order to put the cart before the horse.

So much of the story of this film is communicated visually. Are there scenes that were shot that provide more exposition, and discarded later in the editing process? How much of the process is spontaneous rather than planned?

NM: There's an immense amount of planning, but planning in a way that allows for later experimentation. It seems to me that [Jordan Peele] first builds a world, a set of characters and some evocative images and situations, and then figures out the plot that organically highlights the artistic, social and moral themes he is interested in — while always being fun or exciting in the way he wants it to be.

I try to store my original emotional and creative responses to the script and our early discussions, then I also break down the script, storyboards and schedule a few different ways to gain a rough sense of how the plot, character arcs and themes will track. In the edit, I've internalized the various breakdowns and structures, so I start by responding to the filmed material intuitively myself and building something that I feel organically emerges from it and from the ethos of the project — which can sometimes be very different than how it was described in the script.

Regarding exposition, I think the finished versions of Jordan's films match his approach in his scripts — at least in spirit if not in the letter. I think we enjoy, as viewers, to sometimes be confused, when we are also engaged enough for the confusion to lead us to ask questions that expose deeper layers of meaning, or the themes of a film.

Hopefully, there is an added layer of enjoyment for the audience in *Nope* in going along for the very deliberate ride that he puts them on to, for instance, understand how the initial flashes of the Gordy incident relate to the characters and the themes of the film — and ideally still be left with interesting questions to think about after the film is over.

Were there any sequences that proved unexpectedly complex or time-consuming?

NM: Jordan is amazingly deft at making his scripts seem organic and real, which means you often don't notice when there are big story gears turning beneath the surface. The final act of the film is deceptively complicated from a production and post-production point of view, because the actual material is of four actors in different locations shot on different days meant to be reacting to something that isn't really there simultaneously.

While it took a lot of time and work, it was not necessarily the trickiest, because the tone of the film really merges into a single, unstoppable force at that point. The trickiest section was probably around a third of the way through the film, after the chapter marker "Clover". OJ and Em are at the ranch at night when weird things start happening in the stables, OJ investigates, and it culminates with OJ having to run for his life and Em seeing the UFO for the first time.

These events are, in many ways, the real inciting incidents in the plot — but it is also peppered with jump scares, comedic relief with Angel, Jupe's kids, Sour Patch Kids, and a lot of complicated visual and practical effects. It took a lot of organization and focus to put together all of the seemingly tonally disparate pieces in a way that creates a fluid, surprising and fun watch. It also took imagination and trust, knowing that the VFX, sound and music teams would really make the finished version work.

The scene with the children dressed as aliens was one of the most tense - how much did the sound design contribute to that tension?

JB: Film is such a complex bake of writing and people's effort, skills and ideas, that it's hard to say in a few words why a scene works so well. But I can speak to the sound use. When Jordan filmed that scene in the barn, the water sprinklers were on to help it look right, mist the air, and suggest an abnormal event, but having tried a more traditional route, we eventually really leaned into the reality and used the rhythm of the sprinklers to provide an unusual (alien!) alarming tension.

I mean they are such a stressful, scything sound when you think about it. A big thing that is going on here is that, unlike a film that might lead you with score, here, like many moments in *Nope*, we are experiencing sound and visual horror reality in real time alongside our hero, and that huge truth brings about a very deep immersion.

There's other really successful places in the film too where Michael so skillfully knew to make space in the music for a beat to allow us, for example, 'to hear what OJ is hearing' before launching us back in the journey.

The film gives the impression that there's a lot going out outside of what we see - was there a significant amount of footage that never made the final cut? Were there any scenes that were particularly difficult to remove?

NM: Jordan has a seemingly endless supply of unique visual and story ideas, and he put a lot into the world of *Nope* — Haywood Ranch, Jupiter's Claim, Gordy's Home, Copperpot's Cove, Jean Jacket, etc — but much of it was sort of always intended to be reshaped or cut down eventually. I don't think he could go into the production treating those sections as expendable, however, because it all had to feel as intentional as the rest of the story — but it wasn't a struggle in the edit to get it into the shape that made sense to Jordan for the finished film.

Everyone who worked on *Nope* has things we particularly miss or responded to from the shoot that didn't make the cut, but not much that we think *should have* made the cut.

Retaining the sense of mystery and of a world that extends well past the end of the frame was more crucial to the overall experience of the movie. As with his other films, he could always decide to go back and continue expanding these worlds.

Were there any challenges unique to this film that you didn't expect?

NM: I suppose the most unique challenge of working on a Jordan Peele film is that it is "a Jordan Peele film". There is a set of expectations from his audience based on his previous films that is unique and sort of unpredictable until you approach the time and context of the release. Every week in the news and the culture, there was some shift in the discourse of how people are dealing with the economy, how we share and process gruesome or beautiful spectacles, and also new artistic output to consider.

That all built up to the moment that the film was going to drop, which meant staying focused on the timeless aspects of the story and filmmaking while being aware and engaged enough to anticipate the audience's potential frame of mind in the historical moment. It sounds heady, but really it just means that working on the film Jordan decided to make after *Get Out* and *Us* is different than working on any other movie, because it's a different audience and a different conversation.

I didn't really expect the world to be like it is in 2022 back when we first started discussing the project in 2019, and hopefully, we stayed true to the original story while making something that is relevant to people right now.

Is there ever a point where you need an outside opinion on the edit? Do you ever do screenings of rough cuts, just to get some audience feedback?

NM: Absolutely. I believe Jordan's three films to date are as much about the discussions they lead to and their place within mass culture as they are independent, artistic objects. Jordan is absurdly prescient at locking onto ideas and images that feel absent from the current cultural landscape as well as fitting right into it.

In the edit bay, that is evident in his ability to anticipate an audience's reactions — laughs, jumps, moments of wonder or skepticism, or just deciding it's too crazy and saying "nope!"I try to help him from the technical and craft side, but we definitely also rely on feedback from trusted colleagues and strangers; watching the film with people who know nothing about it always unlocks a new perspective.

Preview screenings can partially address the problem of the filmmaker's potential lack of objectivity that comes from having to work very quickly in commercial film, due to how expensive the process is — but you have to be thoughtful in how you interpret the responses. Often people in preview screenings will tell you they loved something, but they are worried someone *else* might not get it — which could be nothing more than an expression of the endemic and, I think, incorrect idea that audiences aren't smart, or they could be pinpointing something that is preventing viewers from really investing their emotions or thoughts into the film.

You have to know what questions you want the audience to walk away with, and which ones you want to have answered.

Under the Skin and _Nope_ both understand the power of silence. Is there a point where the process becomes about stripping away layers of sound, leaving only what's necessary?

JB: It's all about redaction; overloading the viewer with sound is a rookie move. I work with a fantastic team and one of our weekly maxims on this very long project has been to look at the sounds you have been working on that week and ask yourself "how is that sound serving the film? Do I need all of it? How much can I remove until it is doing less emotionally or narratively?"

Once you get into late stage, mixing the film always gets better the more you take out. Literally all I want to do the last week of a mix is loop a scene and take stuff out. Having said all that, I do put pineapple on a pizza, now and then.

You and Jordan Peele have been collaborating for a long time. Why do you gel so well?

NM: I'm not really sure — and I can't speak for Jordan — but I immediately think of the many giddy moments we share in the edit when we are in excited disbelief that we get to do this for a living. Maybe we share the combination in our personalities of trying to stay grounded and involved in what is happening in the real world while also shamelessly indulging our fascination with the fantastical and the absurd.

He really treats his collaborators — who respect the fact that he has created these amazing projects and opportunities for us — as creative individuals in their own right, which is an approach I greatly admire and appreciate. He inspires loyalty in his team because he really invests in his creative relationships, and he has our backs in this strange industry and city. He's recommended me for other big jobs that would have taken me away from his upcoming projects.

When I was arrested in 2020 for protesting the destruction of an unhoused person's home by the LAPD, he took the time to write me a character reference to help get the charge dropped. So, obviously, I try to have his back for any cinematic shenanigans he wants to get up to.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity

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Dani Di Placido

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I'm fascinated by all forms of storytelling; movies, television, mythology, fairy tales, and urban legends.

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