

Nope

Victoria Carl



Nope. Directed by Jordan Peele. Monkeypaw Productions and Universal Pictures, 2022.

Nope is, at first glance, a classic alien invasion/abduction movie. Jordan Peele, in an interview with GQ, described his intent as being to create a “summer blockbuster spectacle film” that reflected his perspective on the genre (Kennedy). While *Nope*’s critical and commercial success qualify it as a blockbuster, its categorization as an “alien invasion,” “alien abduction,” or even just an *alien* movie is less straightforward. *Nope* draws on tropes from these SF subgenres, consciously engaging with prior alien works and themes, but resists categorization as such a movie, subverting expectations by revealing its alien icons as artifice and deception—costumes whose similarity to the SF conceptualization of the alien is exploited by the movie’s characters for the sake of spectacle. In doing this, Peele builds out of the legacy set by prior SF works and criticism but defines a new space for *Nope*. It’s a movie with the aesthetic of an alien invasion narrative, but with the plot of a creature feature flick.



Nope is Jordan Peele’s third film as director, released in the summer of 2022. There are three POV characters: Otis Jr (OJ) and Emerald (Em) Haywood, played by Daniel Kaluuya and Keke Palmer respectively, who have inherited the family business, Haywood Hollywood Horses, after their father’s untimely death; and Ricky “Jupe” Park, a traumatized child star turned mini-theme park owner portrayed by Steven Yeun. There are two storylines: the primary plot follows OJ and Em in their attempts to capture compelling footage of a UFO—specifically one that OJ has witnessed—to sell for fame and fortune and stabilize Haywood Hollywood Horses. The secondary plot is much shorter and features Jupe—first, as a child aboard the set of sitcom *Gordy’s Home*, on the day that one of the chimps who played Gordy, snapped and attacked the rest of the cast; and second, in the present day, as he unveils a new, special show called the “Star Lasso Experience” at the mini-theme park he owns, Jupiter’s Claim.

In general, *Nope* is a movie that’s very conscious about alien tropes and its place in science fiction. Only, in *Nope*, these familiar icons are never what most audiences would be expecting; they’re always something else, wearing the familiar SF icon as a deception. The movie wants its audience to think they’re watching another alien invasion or alien abduction movie, something so known as to now be tameable, and then it twists that expectation back on the viewer. The

“little green men” in the movie are only Jupe’s sons, dressed in costumes. The flying saucer is not a spaceship, nor is it piloted by an “alien species...call[ed] the Viewers” as Jupe is convinced. Instead, it is a creature, an animal, as we can tell from the way the *Gordy’s Home* subplot parallels the current-day encounter between the Haywoods and Jean Jacket. Both the characters and the movie recontextualize that UFO icon as animal, like Gordy, rather than alien.

Themes of exploitation and spectacle are also central to *Nope*, and this self-consciousness of genre allows the movie to meditate on how these familiar SF icons have been exploited and reduced to mere spectacle over time. It would make for an interesting study of how SF tropes came to be, and how our views of these tropes have changed over time, especially paired with *War of the Worlds*—especially the original novel and its 1953 and 2005 film adaptations—and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. These movie pairings provide a way into contemporary perspectives of the alien, the monstrous, and colonialism/postcolonialism. *Nope* provides a clear example of contemporary Western culture reckoning with these tropes and their histories, attempting to contextualize and revision them into something new and useful for the post-Internet, post-COVID world.

Animal studies scholars and monster theorists would also find interesting fruit here. Joan Gordon wrote about the potential for greater collaboration between animal studies and SF studies in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, and *Nope* is well-situated to consider the relationship between monster, “creature,” and “animal” in SF more broadly. Jean Jacket is a fictional creature, dressed to look like an alien spaceship, explicitly contextualized as behaving like an animal. Jupe and Holst both refuse to see Jean Jacket *as an animal* instead of *as an alien* or, even better, *as a spectacle*, and that fact gets them both killed. On the other hand, Em and OJ survive and succeed because they recognize Jean Jacket’s behaviors as animalistic and adjust accordingly; this dichotomy could be seen as the movie endorsing Em and OJ’s behavior and condemning Jupe and Holst’s. Of course, they *are* still using Jean Jacket, exploiting its novelty and resemblance to SF conceptions of UFOs and aliens for their own benefit, i.e., for spectacle. The movie ends before it can explore the consequences, if any, of this last exploitation. *Nope*’s interrogation and representation of the “alien” creature is complex and ambitious and presents interesting avenues for further research to those interested in the intersection between the Alien, the Animal, and the Other in SF.

The critical takeaways from *Nope* aren’t as clear cut as those from *War of the Worlds* or *Get Out*, but the movie is nonetheless rich with meaning to mine for. It’s not “just another alien invasion movie,” and its reflective take on both the alien and the Alien will appeal to scholars across science fiction studies.

Works Cited

Gordon, Joan. "Animal Studies." In *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, Routledge, 2009, pp. 331-340.

Kennedy, Gerrick D. "Jordan Peele and Keke Palmer Look to the Sky." *GQ*, 20 July 2022, www.gq.com/story/gq-hype-jordan-peeel-and-keke-palmer. Accessed 21 April 2024.