

#ExploitYourTrauma: The Media Spectacle of a Tragedy

Marteena Mendelssohn

FM2091 Film Topics: Horror

The American University of Paris

4 May 2024

In the age of digital media, our fascination with tragedies has taken on new dimensions. The internet, with its boundless capacity to disseminate information instantaneously, has transformed the way we engage with the world's misfortunes. Yet, amidst the flurry of clicks, likes, and shares lies, a disconcerting reality: The commodification of tragedies. Navigating the vast expanse of cyberspace, screens become portals to a world where tragedy is not merely observed, but consumed, packaged, and sold for mass consumption. The entertainment industry, with its insatiable appetite for sensationalism, capitalizes on human suffering, transforming it into a commodity for profit. Jordan Peele's film *Nope* (2022) delves deep into this dark underbelly of modern society, challenging viewers to confront the uncomfortable truth that they, too, are implicated in this cycle of exploitation.

Underscoring the pivotal role played by spectators, the film amplifies the trade of mass media spectacles. As passive consumers of tragedy, we contribute to its proliferation by virtue of our attention alone. Our incessant scrolling, our endless stream of reactions and comments, serve to fuel the very mechanisms that perpetuate the commodification of human suffering. Therefore, one must ask the question, how does the internet, and especially, the entertainment industry, perpetuate the commodification of tragedies, and in what ways do spectators play a role in the reproduction and amplification of mass media spectacles?

In "*Nope*" (2022), directed by Jordan Peele, the Haywood siblings, OJ and Em, find themselves entangled in a web of tragedy and mystery. After the death of their father from a freak accident involving falling objects, they struggle to make ends meet by selling horses to



Ricky "Jupe" Park, owner of a Western theme park. Their lives take a sinister turn when they discover a UFO preying on their horses. This creature, named "Jean Jacket" by OJ, turns out to be a predatory organism that attacks those who directly gaze at it. As they attempt to document and confront Jean Jacket, they become

embroiled in a dangerous game of survival. Peele uses the backdrop of Hollywood and the

commodification of tragedy to explore themes of exploitation and the pursuit of wealth and fame at any cost.

At the opening of the film, there is a slate that reads: “I will cast abominable filth upon you, Make you vile, And make you a spectacle” (Nahum 3:6). In this verse, which is shown at the opening of the film, the prophet Nahum is delivering a message of judgment against the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The passage describes a prophecy detailing the destruction and punishment that awaits Nineveh due to its oppression, violence, and idolatry. Images and representations dominate, often overshadowing reality, and in the biblical context, God himself. “That last word, “spectacle,” is crucial; it sets the stage for Peele’s inquiry into the business of exploiting Mother Nature’s creations — be they chimp or horse — for the purposes of mass entertainment. But it also suggests another kind of spectacle, the kind that transforms casual observers into camera-wielding obsessives, driving them to risk their lives and minds to prove that otherworldly phenomena exist” (Chang). By emphasizing the consequences of living in a society obsessed with appearances and image, the passage highlights the emptiness and moral decay that result from prioritizing spectacle over substance.

Using the entertainment industry as a lens to explore the way people profit from a spectacle, The first scene where the siblings reunite is on a Hollywood movie set, preparing the cast and crew to work with wild animals. OJ and Em’s horse is eventually fired from the set after their horse, “Lucky”, reacts violently to its own reflection in a chrome ball utilized for visual effects. With the crew looking down on the animal and his inability to focus, they view the animal, and thus the Haywood’s as disposable in industry. There will always be another horse and there will always be another show. The idea of sight and observing is twisted by the crew of the movie looking down on the horses or animals. Let’s call them the “feel-bad viewers.” These are observants who make the object they are observing feel bad. When an accident happens, a feel bad viewer blames the victim of the event, rather than the circumstance. OJ then drives to Jupe’s theme park, “Jupiter’s Claim,” sells the horse, and heads to his meeting with Jupe, as Em



tags along. After Em's distracting inspection of his office, Jupe reveals a hidden room to the siblings where he kept pictures from his TV show "Gordy's Home." He recounts his experience on the TV show where one day, out of the blue, one of the chimpanzees that play Gordy went crazy for 6 minutes and 13 seconds killing most of the cast members and disfiguring another. Jupe goes surprisingly untouched. To which later the audience learns was due to a reflective table cloth that allowed the chimpanzee to see himself reflected, not Jupe hiding. Jupe says, "The network tried to bury it, but it was a spectacle. People were obsessed." He goes on to say there is still a "Gordy's fan club" and a Dutch couple paid Jupe \$50,000 to spend the night in his hidden room. Despite the traumatic nature of the incident, it becomes a spectacle that captures the public's imagination, perpetuated by media coverage and the creation of memorabilia. Let's call these types of viewers, "sadistic voyeurs." They enjoy watching the pain of others and they feel a cathartic release from the repulsive. Peele even trickles this into the mindset of its audience with the names of one of the lead characters. Otis Junior is nicknamed "OJ," evocative of the infamous OJ Simpson case which was a tragic murder that became the spectacle of the 90s. Though the film is not reality, it exists in a way to replicate a false reality to engage audiences in the same sadistic way. The public's fascination with the sensational aspects of the event overrides any consideration for the real human suffering involved. "Peele wants to use a Hollywood genre template to mount a critique of Hollywood barbarism... And because the audience plays its part in this vicious cycle, Peele means to complicate the very act of watching, to suggest that it can have its moral costs as well as its undeniable pleasures" (Chang). Tragedy, whether it comes in the form of a news article, a viral video on YouTube, or through a film, becomes a form of entertainment, a narrative to be consumed and dissected by the masses, epitomizing society's voyeuristic tendencies when it comes to a disaster.

On an individual level, psychological factors such as greed, narcissism, and a lack of empathy can drive people to exploit others for personal gain. On a cultural and societal level, exploitation is glamorized for the "devestation factor". When the Haywoods first capture the photograph of Jean Jacket, Em decides it is within their best interest to capture a photo of the entity in the sky and sell it to Cyber Dominion, a website for UFO sightings and photographs, where they could make 100 thousand dollars and be set for life. All they have to do is get the "Oprah Shot." This shot is a photo they can publicize and profit from. From this point on, the Haywoods move from passive Observants to actionized spectators.

But spectatorship is a bad thing. Being a spectator means looking at a spectacle. And looking is a bad thing, for two reasons. First, looking is deemed the opposite of knowing. It means standing before an appearance without knowing the conditions which produced that appearance or the reality that lies behind it. Second, looking is deemed the opposite of acting. He who looks at the spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention. Being a spectator means being passive. The spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as he is separated from the possibility of acting (Renancier).

They don't dare imagine the consequences of disturbing the alien, they just want what they can commodify. The photo or rather, the spectacle "can subject human beings to themselves because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers" (Debord 5). In other words, from finding the object to capture, to deliberately and effectively taking the photo, to selling and distributing it, creates an industrial cycle of falseness. "*Nope* is a movie about the challenge of getting the perfect shot, an aim that Peele shares on a practical and artistic level — there's no shortage of well-framed, jaw-dropping images — even as he cautions against it in the abstract" (Chang). Through the production and glamorization of the unidentified object in the sky, both siblings become oppressors within the media spectacle of society.

Oftentimes, victims of an event are unable to recall through memory directly, but through the representation in the media or what they want to believe has happened. "The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual excess produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, that has become an objective reality" (Debord 2). Being a pawn within his own trauma, Jupe doesn't live in his reality, but a deluded fantasy. Em asks what happened on the set of "Gordy's Home", and instead of giving his first-hand recount, he talks about the SNL sketch that replicated his trauma, with a three-second flashback of him as a child, hiding under a table from Gordy. He finishes his recount by saying, "It was legendary, legendary shit." Jupe's tragedy was a spectacle that he recalls only through *images* of reality, not



the actual memory. “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Debord 2). In this case, with the use of cameras and mass media as a way of identifying an event, the event itself becomes a representation of a memory that may or may not be accurate. Its images are molded to one specific perspective of society that is utilized to enjoy or make interesting, not to make factual. Looking toward the philosopher Guy Debord to understand this doctrine, in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, he says, “Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the result and the project of the present mode of production... In all of its particular manifestations, news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment, the spectacle is the model of the prevailing way of life”(Debord 3). In this sense, Jupe lives in the limelight of the manifestation of his trauma rather than the reality of what was when the trauma occurred.

Furthermore, his represented reality is projected when he reveals his spectacle of the alien, to which he calls, “the Viewers.”

What if I told you that in about an hour, you’ll leave here different? See, every Friday for the last six months, right here in this spot, my family and I have bore witness to an absolute spectacle. One you’re gonna see today. So if I can just take you back to that first night. I had come over to gather what we call a straggler: A chestnut horse named “Trigger.” Now I can barely see my hand in front of my face for the fog. But I swear on my wife and children’s lives at 6:13 pm I see a flying saucer descend through the mist. Ol’ Trigger takes off straight into the gulch. Well... It’s like he was goin’ home. Now to be clear, what we saw was a flying saucer, no doubt about that, slightly flatter in front with a circular hole in the bottom two school bus lengths wide. Ladies and gentlemen, I kid you not. We are being surveilled by an alien species I call the “Viewers.” Though they’ve yet to emerge from their ship, I believe they trust me. If they didn’t I’m not sure any of us would be here right now. And so, as I said, in just under an hour, “The Star Lasso Experience” is gonna change you.



While OJ and Em name the alien Jean Jacket– inspired by their wild horse– Jupe names the alien the “Viewers.” The Haywoods view the alien for what it is, a wild animal. Amber, Jupe’s wife, says, “Bear with us now, trained animals can be unpredictable.” Jupe and his family included, don’t see the danger within the

entity. They see the alien as an audience, waiting for a show. Paradoxically, the alien is the main event for the show, thus being a viewer and a viewee. Once the alien is revealed to the masses, it

wreaks havoc. Because Jupe believed that he was saved because he possessed the ability to domesticate the feral, he exploited this gift to exploit other animals. This delusion allows him to reclaim a sense of agency and control in the face of overwhelming chaos, providing him with a semblance of purpose and meaning in an otherwise senseless world. In Jupe's twisted worldview, the horrors of random violence are reframed as acts of divine providence, serving to reinforce his sense of superiority and entitlement. Yet, for all his bluster and bravado, Jupe remains haunted by the specter of his past, his god-like facade crumbling in the face of his insecurities and doubts.

The repetition of 6:13 where he saw the alien, and the 6 minutes and 13 seconds of the “Gordy’s Home” tragedy reflects the coincidence, or rather, punishment of being a victim of a spectator. “In a world that has been turned upside down, the true is a moment of the false” (Debord 4). The alien exists as a manifestation of the trauma and tragedy, which are also being capitalized on by the other characters in the film. The alien sustains himself in the society as it becomes an iconography that depends on the spectatorship. It is the trauma of Jupe that creates a repetition of images and ideas that replicate his fate. What was once a random act of coincidence to survive Gordy’s Home becomes his demise in which he represents the same events with the alien. This is further proven in the scene when Em and OJ notice the alien. OJ asks Em, “What’s a bad miracle? They got a word for that?” Em answers simply “Nope.” Miracles are perceived as events that are inexplicable and defy the laws of nature and science. A bad miracle would be an inexplicable occurrence that works against nature, a false reality, or a paradox. “As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain necessary. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep” (Debord 7). If the spectacle is a bad dream, then OJ’s bad miracle is simply the punishment for living in that dream. One can say that OJ himself is the only one who does not want to capitalize off of the spectacle, but maintain the equilibrium in which the spectacle does not cause harm. In the end, Jupe's downfall is not the result of any external force or malevolent entity, but rather the inevitable consequence of his hubris and self-delusion. The desire to not only exploit the spectacle but refuse to see his



true reality leads to his demise. His belief in his divine providence blinds him to the true nature of the world around him, leaving him vulnerable to the very forces he seeks to control.

The camera framing in the film plays a crucial role in capturing the dichotomy between the vast open space of the ranch and the suffocating isolation experienced by its inhabitants. Peele utilizes wide shots to emphasize the sheer scale of the Haywood property, showcasing the sprawling landscape that surrounds them. These wide shots serve to underscore the sense of isolation that pervades the film, highlighting the Haywoods' physical and emotional distance from the outside world. Yet, despite the seemingly boundless expanse of their surroundings, Peele also employs tight shots to convey the claustrophobic atmosphere that envelops the family. These tight shots focus on the characters' faces, capturing the fear and uncertainty etched upon their features as they confront each situation they face with both the alien and Jupe. The framing of the film is similar to that of a traditional Hollywood Western. Wide open shots of the American West contrast, and possibly create a more terrifying scenario of isolation. While *The Wild West* has one hero and one villain—perhaps a group of unified villains—this film records multiple spectators, who may neither play villain or hero, or both at once. The Haywoods are spectators of the alien life and also bystanders of Jupe's show. Considering the film's genre mixing, entertainment journalist Clint Worthington says, "Peele's made a thrilling, exciting blockbuster that also touches on the nature of spectacle, and the ways artists get chewed up and spat out (in some cases, literally) by their work. But to do that while also weaving in the rhythms of the Western, the monster movie, the alien conspiracy picture, and tales of showbiz trauma and to make it all work in his spectacular brand of maximalism." Thus, the genre, though seemingly chaotic, brings forth a new aesthetic both visually interesting and masterfully constructed.

The question of who truly embodies the monstrous emerges is a central theme within *Nope* (2022). While the film presents both wild animals and a mysterious alien entity as potential candidates for this role, a deeper analysis reveals that it is those who exploit and voyeuristically watch these creatures who epitomize true monstrosity. The portrayal of wild animals as potential monsters is evident throughout the film, with their menacing presence serving as a source of fear and uncertainty for the characters. However, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is not the animals themselves who are the true threat, but rather the humans who exploit them for profit and entertainment. "Nope, whether it's about the Haywood horses, the chimp, or the thing in the

sky our heroes are desperate to survive and profit from, is just as much about the folly of man trying to conquer the primal nature of beasts. Look 'em in the eye, and they might kick you; but if you pull it off, you've won over nature. It's the thing that binds all of our characters — the spectacle that we're drawn to and repulsed by, and the thing that can swallow us whole if we're not looking" (Worthington). By subjecting these creatures to captivity and spectacle, the characters reveal their monstrous nature, driven by a callous disregard for the well-being of sentient beings. Against the backdrop of a digital landscape dominated by viral content and sensational headlines, *Nope* (2022) asks its audience to interrogate their own role in this unsettling narrative of watching and being watched, being exploited and, exploiting other people. "The spectacle inherits the weakness of the Western philosophical project, which attempted to understand activity employing the categories of vision, and it is based on the relentless development of the particular technical rationality that grew out of that form of thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality, reducing everyone's concrete life to a universe of speculation" (Debord 6). Through its thought-provoking narrative and self-reflexive analysis, the film compels us to confront the uncomfortable truths lurking beneath the surface of our media-saturated existence. In a world where tragedy has become just another commodity, individuals must pause to consider the ethical implications of their consumption and the profound impact it has on the lives of those whose stories they so casually consume.

Works Cited

Chang, Justin. "Review: Say yup to Jordan Peele's 'Nope,' the rare thriller Hollywood can

look up to." Los Angeles Times. July 20, 2022. Date Accessed 4 May 2024.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2022-07-20/nope-review-jordan-peeke-keke-palmer-daniel-kaluuya>

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Ken Knabb, Zone Books, 1995.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. 2008. Date Accessed 1 May 2024.

<https://www.artforum.com/features/the-emancipated-spectator-175248/>.

Worthington, Clinton. *Jordan Peele's Nope Is Dazzling, Self-Reflective Horror Blockbuster Spectacle: Review*. Yahoo Entertainment. 20 July 2022. Date Accessed 1 May 2024.

https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/jordan-peeel-nope-dazzling-self-160032877.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAACyICoJNzV399XEKFS8cS866GIA7AvEGeFMcNoLO9C_ykHIBT-i_Tqi78wDFKZJnjMncZCwWtn4PtJaol6-pMAVIGCGK1CdykgEuKdn1SC6Vk39SigXdh1Gz2S6VBkR-fmr-giuV_EqsPTFAVnlYoAnMO2ORCiWAZs8egv8lsL-8