

Film Reviews

Like Dogs, Dir. Randy Van Dyke. Screenplay by Randy Van Dyke. Perf. Annabel Barrett and Ignacyo Matynia. Terror Film, 2021.

What does it mean to be treated “like a dog?” What usually comes to mind is the idea that whoever is being treated “like a dog” is not equal, they are less than. This idea is explored in writer-director Randy Van Dyke’s psychological thriller, *Like Dogs*. A kidnapped Lisa (Annabel Barrett) wakes up chained to a 4x4 kennel with only a dirty dog bed for comfort. She is fed gruel from people in hazmat suits which quickly informs the audience that she is part of a behavioral experiment of some sort. Yet the film is not about Lisa’s capture and escape; it is instead about research integrity and what could happen if human subjects are not protected. It must be noted here that this review contains spoilers that reveal some of the film’s twists.

The audience enters the movie on Lisa’s side, watching as she is upgraded to a choke collar, shocked, and drugged. However, the film takes some turns that are just as twisted as the experiment itself. It is revealed that Lisa is the one in charge of the experiment. Her jailers all consented to assist with the experiment, but fellow captive Adam (Ignacyo Matynia) did not. Lisa is risking her academic career and prison all because of a crush. She is not the only one, though; George, Lisa’s research assistant played by Ryan Tran, takes things much further as he goes over Lisa’s head for an experiment of his own.

As these revelations unfold, it is implied that the other participants initially objected to this study and that the experiment puts the human subjects at great risk of harm. Lisa devised the experiment to manipulate Adam so he would fall in love with her. Meanwhile, George tortures and kills the other participants, all of whom happen to be men that Lisa previously dated, to prove to Lisa that he is the best choice for her even though he drugs and rapes her.

Though fictional, *Like Dogs* is a very real reminder of why ethics committees such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) are in place. Indeed, the sadistic liberties taken by these researchers would not have received IRB approval. The film, of course, plays up the horror to keep audiences engaged, but modern researchers can take this film as a cautionary tale of “what not to do” when it comes to our own research. This horror film takes much of its inspiration from the Stanford Prison Experiment to dive into what an extreme, life or death, unethical experiment

could look like (Zimbardo). Writer-Director Randy Van Dyke said he wanted to accomplish something similar:

Basically, it took place in 1971 at Stanford University, and they recruited a bunch of students to role play, some as prisoners and some as guards in a mock prison scenario. It was supposed to last for two weeks but it only lasted for six days before they started getting physically violent with each other. The people that were role playing as prisoners were being so emotionally brutalized by the guards that it was starting to really cause some trauma, so they had to cancel the experiment... I wanted to kind of do something similar but, you know, be even more demeaning where people are being treated and conditioned and trained essentially like animals, like dogs. (Shiller)

Even though the actions in this film are extreme, they are no more extreme than experiments conducted by the Nazis during World War II or the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, both of which contributed to the establishment of IRB, (The National WW2 Museum; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services).

The question of whether humanity triumphs over evil that is asked in each of these examples is also addressed in the film. Ultimately for Lisa and George, evil triumphs over their humanity as their romantic endeavors get the better of them and results in the carnage. Both Lisa and George lose sight of why they were conducting the experiment, which, by the end of the film, I remain unconvinced that it had legitimate scientific backing from the start. The only indicator that it did was their faculty advisor's willingness to allow it to go forward, but she was very hands off and died as soon as George's and Lisa's agendas began to unfold. *Like Dogs* also points out that once people start crossing lines, things can easily escalate to a point of no return, which is where Lisa finds herself toward the film's end when she realizes that what she thought was a harmless bending of the rules may have led to the creation of a monster.

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Nope. Dir. Jordan Peele. Screenplay by Jordan Peele. Perf. Keke Palmer, Daniel Kaluuya, Michael Wincott, and Steven Yeun. Universal Pictures, 2022.

Jordan Peele made his directorial debut with the widely acclaimed *Get Out* (2017), thereby cementing his place in the hearts of smart-horror lovers everywhere. He continued this sociopolitical tendency with *Us* (2019), which he also wrote and directed, and with *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021), for which he penned the screenplay. Since his transition from sketch comedy to what many consider to be serious horror, Peele has been credited with, according to Van R. Newkirk II, “giving the genre new dimensions and new power as social commentary.” For audiences, reviewers, and academics alike, Peele’s filmmaking, as noted by Joshua Ryan, “thrives off the truth” and, as observed by Monica Castillo, “melds comedy, horror, and social commentary,” thereby “almost single-handedly trigger[ing] a new wave of American horror films” (Wynter 3). These, then, are the expectations set up for Peele’s newest and altogether excellent film *Nope* (2022).

Nope tells the story of Otis “OJ” Haywood (Daniel Kaluuya) and his sister Emerald “Em” Haywood (Keke Palmer) as they try to make sense of strange sightings and phenomena around their horse ranch in Agua Dulce in inland California. After one of these phenomena kills their father, Otis Haywood Sr. (Keith David), OJ and Em are left responsible for the company their father built, Haywood Hollywood Horses, the only black-owned horse training ranch in the business. Six months after the death of their father, OJ and Em become increasingly obsessed with trying to capture the strange object hovering above their ranch on film – a scheme to rescue their failing family business. With the help of Angel Torres

(Brandon Perea), a lovelorn tech from a local electronics store, and Antlers Holst (Michael Wincott), a melodramatic and famous cinematographer on a personal mission to shoot the unfilmable, OJ and Em discover that the thing hiding in the clouds is more than the usual UFO.

All this happens in a beautiful, desert landscape reminiscent of old western films; this intentional connection is shown through a subplot that hinges on Jupiter's Claim, a nearby, western-themed amusement park run by Ricky "Jupe" Park (Steven Yeun), a former child actor who, when he was young, survived an onset tragedy in which a trained chimpanzee was frightened by a popped balloon and maimed several actors. It is this setting that begins the social commentary Peele injects in *Nope*; the audience is given ample opportunity to gaze on the low, rolling hills in which the horse ranch is nestled, which recalls White Settler Colonialism and westward expansion, especially when the main "threat" of the film is revealed for what it is. Indeed, I would argue that "gaze" is the film's main theme, specifically that of the "white gaze," a "Fanonian concept" that reveals "deeply embedded presumptions and attitudes regarding race" (Bloodsworth-Lugo 6) and that "functions similarly to panoptic surveillance" (Nielsen 368). It is this theme of the white gaze that brings together the seemingly disparate and strange elements of the film. The setting, the various mentions of and allusions to lines of sight, the subplot of the onset chimp attack, the main plot of the attempt to photograph the UFO, and even the design of the object itself all point toward a deep and disturbing manifestation of the destructive nature of the normative assumptions implicit in the white gaze. In this context, then, *Nope* is a film not only about the pain and suffering caused by the white gaze but also a tribute to resistance against it.

On another level, however, this is a film about spectacle, and *Nope* is indeed an impressive spectacle to behold. The nuanced character portrayals by the actors, the sound design and production, and the metered and restrained use (until the end that is) of special effects all come together to create an experience reminiscent of blockbuster masterpieces like *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Alien* (1976) just to name a couple. Like those films, there is an element of ecohorror to *Nope* as well; see Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles' *Fear and Nature* (2021) for more on this genre. As the Jupiter's Claim subplot and the main arc of the film both make clear, Peele is concerned not only with rendering the viewer's experience of the spectacle special – which he does, to my mind – but is thinking also about the value and nature of spectacle itself. Peele cut his teeth in the limelight, and much of his early success was predicated on making a spectacle of himself (do not all comedians

engage in this?). His turn to social commentary and political horror used spectacle to make the horrors of the African American experience difficult to ignore; in this context, and given the emphasis in *Nope* on the white gaze – which may be related to the audience’s gaze more generally – it is hard to resist the interpretation that Peele is beginning to ask serious questions about the value of cinema and spectacle in the search for meaning and paths of action in a world full of injustice and oppression.

Nope has been interpreted by Abe Beame as not “overtly political” and as “‘just’ entertainment,” and, surely, it operates on this level as well as on the levels described above. Perhaps this is what makes this film different from – and possibly better than – Peele’s previous efforts. In some ways, *Get Out* and *Us* are closer to fables or morality plays than anything else; they each feed the audience the story’s meaning in a way that *Nope* refuses to do. To me, this is a sign of growth in a filmmaker who has begun to realize that there is as much meaning, good and bad, in both the medium he has chosen and its history as in the stories he tells. While still political, *Nope* is a film that even those fatigued by the politicization of everyday life can enjoy. It is the film’s successful mobilization of multiple levels of meaning – from pure enjoyment to the deeply social – that is sure to make *Nope* a lasting classic of the ever-expanding horror genre.

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