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The Uncanny Gaze: *Nope*’s Feminine Hero and Monster

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Abstract: Jordan Peele’s *Nope* is a recent addition to the horror film genre that is jam packed with symbolism and metaphor, but the main attraction, as with many horror films, is the monster Jean Jacket. *Nope* is a spoof on the UFO/alien invasion story, with Jean Jacket standing in as the twist; he is an airborne alien monster that has the flat, round shape of a flying saucer, but otherwise mostly resembles a vagina. *Nope*’s protagonists are set up against and obsessed with Jean Jacket, their main objective over the course of the narrative is to capture him on film. In other words, they wish to capture him with their gaze. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey argues that women in film serve as visual objects for the pleasure of the male gaze of both the audience and male characters (1998, 62). While Jean Jacket is gendered as masculine by the film’s characters, there is no getting around his uncanny vaginal resemblance (which the characters never comment on). Regardless of the he/his/him pronouns given to him, he is a (literal) giant representation of a woman’s genitals and becomes an object of fixation for the gaze of the mostly male characters and for the audience. On the other hand, Em (*Nope*’s one female protagonist) has the opposite experience throughout the film. Em is never made an object to be looked at; she is an active participant in the plans to capture Jean Jacket and she is not sexualized at any point in the narrative. In fact, Em feels almost like a stance against Mulvey and the final girl trope that is featured in so many horror movies.

Keywords: *Nope*; film; feminist theory; psychoanalysis; gender studies; Jordan Peele.

The focus of my article will be the differences in how Em and Jean Jacket are presented throughout *Nope*’s narrative, Em being the opposite of everything Mulvey says a woman on screen is, while Jean Jacket falls under much of Mulvey’s argument, though through fear more than sexualization. To do so I will be looking at Freud’s concept of the uncanny, which he describes as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (2003, 124), alongside several critics who consider film. Steven Schneider aids in understanding horror movie monsters in relation to Freud, marking how fictional monsters evoke a reconfirmation of surmounted infantile beliefs (Schneider 1999). Cynthia Freeland offers her own framework for giving feminist readings of horror films that “would emphasize the structure of horror films and place special weight on their gender ideologies” (1996, 204). Like Freeland, Barbara Creed looks at horror films through a feminist lens, but she focuses more on how the feminine is made monstrous within the genre. A significant portion of her book, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, focuses on how “[I]n many films the monster commits her or his dreadful acts in a
location which resembles the womb” (1993, 53). Jean Jacket may not represent the womb specifically, but he does represent the entrance to the womb.

In The Uncanny Freud explicates a long excerpt from a German text on the terms heimlich and unheimlich. The connection between these two words interests him because while heimlich relates to both what is comfortable and known, as well as what is kept hidden and secret, unheimlich only relates to the latter two ideas (2003, 132). Freud concludes that “the uncanny… is in some way a species of the familiar” (2003, 134). The uncanny can induce fear or unease since it comes from what was once familiar but has been repressed. Freud breaks that down into two categories of repressed infantile wishes and surmounted infantile beliefs. Schneider focuses on the latter in his discourse regarding horror movie monsters, writing, “What makes horror film monsters at least potentially horrifying…is the fact that they metaphorically embody surmounted beliefs; to the extent that they actually succeed in horrifying viewers, however, it is because the manner in which they embody surmounted beliefs is invested with cultural relevance” (Schneider 1999). Creatures like zombies, vampires, ghosts, aliens, and more remind us of fantastical beliefs we held as children, such as the possibility of the dead being reanimated. However, their ability to truly terrify an audience is dependent on how relevant a particular horror monster or concept is to society during any given time period, which is why horror films (like any genre) have evolved over time. Schneider refers to older horror tales, like Dracula and Frankenstein, as “R-rated fairy tales” before stating that, “our overfamiliarity with the fictional worlds these monsters inhabit has rendered ineffective their efforts to horrify, since they no longer engender in us the requisite conflict of judgment” (Schneider 1999). He goes on to say that recent horror films (as of the early 2000s) have made attempts to move on from monsters that audiences are overfamiliar with.

I agree with Schneider, Dracula is almost a trope in contemporary storytelling and horror filmmakers have consistently been moving away from traditional scares toward more creative terrifying concepts, such as Ari Aster’s disturbing Midsommar, which takes place almost entirely in daylight.

Jean Jacket is also a new type of horror movie monster, Peele’s clever alteration of the UFO. He is a good example of a monster “whose sheer novelty is supposed to overcome the conventionality of the fictional worlds they inhabit” (Schneider 1999). When it comes to the uncanny in fiction, Freud claims that it needs to be considered separately as instances in fiction that would be considered uncanny in the real world are not uncanny in the fictional world where they occur (2003, 155-56). I disagree with this point. Uncanny instances in fiction can be just as uncanny in the fictional worlds where they occur as they would be in the real world, which is the situation in Nope. The world in which the film takes place is seemingly just like real life; outside of Jean Jacket there are no fantasy or science fiction elements to the narrative. The other characters are even caught off guard by Jean Jacket’s existence. They expect to see an alien spacecraft before he is revealed to be a flying monster. Jean Jacket is clearly not a normal occurrence in the fictional world of the narrative, he is as uncanny to the film’s human characters as he is to the audience. The source of his uncanniness (other than his being
a flying alien monster) is in what he resembles: a woman’s genitals. *Nope*’s male protagonists (and Em) develop a fascination with Jean Jacket. All of them become fixated on him one way or another, mostly in the form of seeing him as a commodity. Freud writes, “neurotic men state that to them there is something uncanny about the female genitals. But what they find uncanny… is actually the entrance to man’s ‘old home’, the place where everyone once lived” (2003, 151). For *Nope*’s cast, and the audience, Jean Jacket serves as an unconscious reminder of their place of origin, which is their mother’s vagina/womb. Mulvey argues that in cinema a woman on screen serves as an object for both male characters and male spectators to look at, unifying the two views without breaking the narrative (1998, 62). In looking at Jean Jacket, the characters and audience become one in being reminded of where they originated from.

There is a level of respect, almost reverence, that some of the human characters have for Jean Jacket. They are not even trying to kill him throughout the narrative (though he does die in the end), just capture footage of him. Two characters have the most respect for Jean Jacket: Em’s brother, OJ, and a renowned cinematographer they convince to help them in their endeavor, Antlers Holst. OJ is a rancher who trains Hollywood horses for movies and we see Holst contemplating what is presumably his own footage of animal predators fighting in the wild. They both recognize that Jean Jacket is a part of the natural or animal world, which is a world they both interact with. Even Jean Jacket’s name originates from OJ’s experiences with animals. The original Jean Jacket was one of the Haywoods’ horses from before the events of the film. Em was supposed to train him when she was younger, but the horse was taken to be used on a movie set before she could. OJ names the flying vagina/womb Jean Jacket after the horse, marking the vagina/womb as another to-be-trained animal.

When it comes to the womb being represented in horror films, Creed states that it is normally shown in a couple different fashions, one of which she calls “intra-uterine settings.” She writes, “These intra-uterine settings consist of dark, narrow, winding passages leading to a central room, cellar or other symbolic place of birth” (1993, 53). At one point in *Nope* we do see numerous people inside of Jean Jacket. It is fleshy, claustrophobic, and does physically resemble the interior of the womb, though Jean Jacket’s victims do not end up in any kind of chamber; they remain in a uterine-like tube that eventually crushes them to death. In regard to representation of the womb in horror films, Creed also states:

The womb is terrifying per se and within patriarchal discourses it has been used to represent woman’s body as marked, impure and a part of the natural/animal world… Representations of the birth scenario in these films point to the split between the natural world of the mother and the paternal symbolic which is regulated by a completely different set of rules, rules that reinforce proper civilized codes of behavior. (1993, 49)

A woman’s body, and by extension the womb, is a part of the animal world that has its own rules that are separate from those of civilization. While the human characters are coordinating their plan to draw Jean Jacket out to be filmed, OJ says, “Every animal
got rules.” OJ works with animals every day, so he recognizes that nature and every creature in it has a set of stipulations to follow, from horses to flying vaginal monsters. He sees that Jean Jacket – the womb – has a role in nature, he understands the rules, and follows those rules. One of Jean Jacket’s rules is that if you do not look him in the eye then he will not eat you. There is perhaps a Freudian argument here about avoiding reminders of the repressed and averting the gaze away from the uncanny. Holst, however, stares at his origin head on. During the climax of the film, when the plan to capture Jean Jacket on film is in full swing, Holst steps out from cover to get the impossible shot. The light is perfect as Holst aims both his eyes and camera upward directly at Jean Jacket, holding his gaze as he is eaten. Holst’s career and artistry revolves around his gaze. He has to look, but is not exploitive about it. At this point Holst understands the shot will cost him his life. All that matters to him is that he is in the perfect time and place to capture the perfect shot. Otherwise, he knows he has no control over what he is filming, all he can do is watch. The cinematographer appreciates what he sees and willingly accepts the return to his place of origin.

Another would-be cameraman arrives on the scene of Jean Jacket’s capture who is exploitive in his gaze. As the protagonists are getting prepared, a man on a motorcycle with a mirrored helmet appears; this character goes unnamed in the film but is credited as Ryder Muybridge. Em identifies him as a TMZ paparazzi and he immediately shoves a camera in her face. In a review of *Nope*, Raiann Bu addresses both Ryder and Holst’s fatal gazes:

> As the TMZ reporter drives into the ranch, his face is completely obscured by a mirrored helmet, only reflecting what he is trying to film, and he dies anonymously. Filmmaker Antlers Holst dreams of the perfect shot, which he pays the ultimate price for. Much of the plot is driven by the prospect of winning big and capitalizing on natural phenomena. It questions how much humanity we have lost through chasing the next big thing, the spectacle. (Bu 2022)

While Holst films his subject head on and with some degree of respect, Ryder is only characterized by his gaze. His helmet reflects everything around him that can be potentially gawked at, he has no face outside of what he can see. Ryder is eaten by Jean Jacket like Holst, but as he is being sucked up into the alien’s body, he repeatedly screams for someone to get him his camera. For Ryder the moment is a scoop, it is a spectacle as Bu mentions. Jean Jacket, the womb and its place in nature, is an object to be gazed at in the way that Mulvey describes. With his mirrored helmet and need to look, Ryder is the embodiment of the unification of character gaze and audience gaze. Mulvey says, “The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect” (1998, 60). Similarly, in regards to horror cinema specifically, Creed says, “Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator’s seat)” (1993, 10). Mulvey’s use of the term *scopophilia* expresses an erotic sense of...
viewing. While I would not go that far in describing general film viewing, I do agree that there can be a base level of perverse pleasure that comes in watching cinema, especially horror films. As Creed points out there is an odd thrill that comes with confronting terror from the safety of the audience. In a 2015 reflection on her original argument, Mulvey states how she as a viewer now has more control over a film’s action than any male hero because of the advent of digital viewing technology (Mulvey). Thanks to streaming and the ability to pause, rewind, or fast forward, any audience member has some degree of control over what they see happening on screen. Ryder represents the thrill Creed mentions in his embodiment of the gazes, but he also represents the potential desire for viewer control over what is being viewed. His gaze is his power. While he does not view from the safety of the audience, he does perform his viewing with an air of perverted joy and desires to be in control of his viewership.

Mulvey focuses heavily on how women are viewed in the type of exploitative gaze that Ryder uses. She states that the male gaze projects a fantasy on to the figure of women who are styled in a way meant for erotic impact. Of film in particular, Mulvey says, “The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative” (1998, 62). Women’s traditional role in cinema is to be a visual object, but many modern filmmakers are thankfully moving beyond such a view, Peele being one of them. In Nope, neither Em nor Jean Jacket stop the flow of the narrative, in fact they are both instrumental in keeping it moving. Em is never made an object and outside of a single line of dialogue in which she comments on her sex life she is never sexualized or depicted in an erotic fashion. Jean Jacket on the other hand is treated as an object, though not exactly in the way Mulvey describes. Instead of being a feminine visual object of erotic desire or sexualization, Jean Jacket is a feminine object of fear, which stems from his vaginal resemblance. Creed spends a chapter discussing the vagina dentata (the mythical toothed vagina) and male fears of women’s genitals being a trap or black hole that could swallow them and eviscerate them (1993, 106). In relation to horror films, she states:

The vagina dentata is particularly relevant to the iconography of the horror film, which abounds with images that play on the fear of castration and dismemberment… The horror film offers many images of a general nature which suggest dismemberment. Victims rarely die cleanly or quickly. Rather, victims die agonizing messy deaths – flesh is cut, bodies violated, limbs torn asunder. In films like Jaws, Tremors, Alien, and Aliens, where the monster is a devouring creature, victims are ripped apart or eaten alive. (1993, 107)

If Nope had existed when Creed wrote her book I have no doubt it would be included in the short list of films she provides above. Jean Jacket is a devouring creature. Beyond that, he is a devouring vagina, the very horrific trap of men’s fears that Creed mentions. Two points from the film come to mind when contemplating Creed’s argument. The first being that Jean Jacket is depicted and recognized as a predator.
OJ remarks as much when the human characters’ plan is being discussed, saying he is a territorial predator. When asked how to get Jean Jacket to reveal himself, OJ says, “Ring the dinner bell.” OJ knows they need to bait him out into the open with the temptation of a potential meal. Nope’s human characters, and by extension the audience, come to fear Jean Jacket—the vagina—as a carnivore.

The second point is a scene I referenced earlier, which is when the audience sees a number of victims inside of Jean Jacket. This scene illustrates Creed’s argument in a number of ways, the first being that a giant flying vagina literally becomes a devouring trap that brutalizes people. Second, as Creed mentions with many horror films, the people inside of Jean Jacket die a horrible death. When we see Jean Jacket’s interior there are numerous people trapped inside screaming as they are pushed further in while the camera pans upward, going deeper with them. After several moments the topmost person reaches a blockage, one of the Haywoods’ horses that was eaten earlier and looks to be partially digested. Several scenes later the people’s screams we can hear emanating from inside of Jean Jacket suddenly stop as he contracts and everyone inside is crushed. The entire sequence involves several horrific visuals and sounds, but it is immediately followed up by something just as severe. Creed states that, “Menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman’s life which have placed her on the side of the abject. It is woman’s fertilizable body which aligns her with nature and threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order” (1993, 50). Jean Jacket being a flying vagina places him on the side of the abject, as Creed would say, and his reverse birth method of devouring people even more so since it aligns him with the womb that can be or is being fertilized. The final nail in the coffin is Jean Jacket’s menstruation. After he has crushed the people he has eaten, Jean Jacket hovers over the Haywood house. Em and Fry’s Electronics employee, Angel, are hiding inside the house when they start to see things clattering to the ground outside. Then they see blood dripping down the windows. Outside, Jean Jacket is releasing the inedible detritus and blood of his victims from his vaginal opening. We are shown an impressive shot of him raining blood down upon the house; the vagina menstruating as a vision of horror. It is as close to a literal representation of Creed’s point about the vagina/womb as a horror movie monster as we could get.

Nope is not a film that is about gender roles, but with the combination of Jean Jacket’s form and viewing the film with Mulvey’s argument in mind, gender roles do hang over the narrative. Critics like Creed also remind us that in many films in the horror genre young women are usually the primary victims of killers or monsters. Freeland directly responds to Mulvey and Creed in her essay “Feminist Frameworks.” She first frames Mulvey specifically around horror films stating that women are typically visual objects sacrificed to a film’s monster for the audience’s sake of understanding said monster before a male investigator comes in to complete the story (1996, 96). However, Freeland goes on to describe her own suggested framework for feminist readings of horror films, writing:

My proposal for producing feminist readings or interpretations of horror films is that we should focus on their representational contents and on the nature of their representational practices, so
as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between sexes. I suggest that feminist readings of horror film proceed by looking at various crucial sorts of film elements. Some of these elements concern the representation of women and monsters within films. (1996, 204)

As opposed to Mulvey, Freeland wishes to treat each individual horror film viewed as its own artifact and parse its particular representational concepts, instead of looking at cinema in general terms. If it is not evident by now, I agree with Freeland’s framework. Her suggestion above is to focus on a film’s representational components (a technique that seems unavoidable when parsing any film as an individual artifact), which I have done throughout my reading of Nope in regard to the film’s representations of women, monsters, and gaze. Creed also contemplates horror films individually, giving readings of numerous films in her book. However, she and Freeland have differing views when it comes to gender depictions. Creed takes a psychoanalytic approach to her criticism of horror films and of gender she states that in some films, “the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not” (1993, 11). Freeland pushes back against feminist film readings framed through psychoanalysis. One of her objections is that such theories rely on gendered notions of male and female that feminism finds problematic (1996, 204). I agree with Freeland’s point of view on gender, especially in regard to Nope, my reason being Jean Jacket. What is Jean Jacket’s gender role? He is gendered by the film’s other characters as masculine, but his form is definitively feminine. Moreover, what makes him monstrous has nothing to do with his gender role.

An additional layer in discussing Nope’s gender ideologies stems from Mulvey’s views on male versus female agency in film. Mulvey’s argument is that male characters in film are active while female characters are passive. She writes, “An active/passive heterosexual division of labor has similarly controlled narrative structure... Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one forwarding the story, making things happen” (1998, 63). Everything I have discussed regarding Jean Jacket thus far already complicates this viewpoint, but if we look at him solely as a masculine identified character then Jean Jacket does fall into the active male slot. His presence and actions play a major role in moving the narrative forward, though he is the antagonist and not a protagonist. Em (who is feminine in both form and identification) easily falls under Mulvey’s updated view of “more-nuanced images of gender and more-complex concepts of narrative” (2015) in film while standing against Mulvey’s original argument based on the male gaze as she is neither a visual object nor an inactive character. Although we do hear about Em’s sexual relationship in passing (and in doing so even learn that she is queer), she is never sexualized. We never see her dress in a provocative way, take part in a sex scene, or even be leered at by any of the male characters. At no point is she made an object of erotic gazing. And at no point is she inactive. Em is arguably the most active of Nope’s protagonists, which is highlighted through her relationship with OJ. During the scene when Em is introduced, we see OJ reluctantly starting a safety meeting on a commercial shoot. He is reserved, quiet,
and maybe a little awkward; he is more of an animal person than a people person. Then Em comes in with an abundance of charismatic energy, delivering a rehearsed business spiel and advertising her own resume with no hesitation. She even earns an applause from the crew. Further, after OJ and Em realize that there is something occupying the skies above their ranch, it is Em who does all of the research on UFOs and how much money good footage of a UFO can earn. She sparks the entire hunt for Jean Jacket. When OJ is first threatened by Jean Jacket he does not run until Em yells at him to do so and it is her idea to contact Holst for help, taking the lead on the initial phone conversation with him. Finally, it is Em’s actions that kill Jean Jacket by the film’s conclusion. Freeland states that her framework asks several questions about the film being read, one being, “How do the film’s structures of narrative, point of view, and plot construction operate in effecting a depiction of gender roles and relations” (1993, 205)? Answering that question for *Nope* we see a film that depicts multiple points of view from men and women alike in a narrative that is pushed forward in a major way by a female protagonist who has as much agency as her male counterparts. The male protagonists are active and OJ specifically becomes more active as the narrative continues, but it comes from all his sister’s prompting. Em is the reverse of what Mulvey sees as a woman’s role in cinema, or rather she fills the man’s role that Mulvey describes.

There is one aspect of Mulvey’s argument that does apply to both Jean Jacket and Em, especially the two’s relationship. Mulvey remarks on how the look is inherent to film viewing. She writes, “It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, strip-tease, theater, shows, etc. Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (1998, 67). The look or gaze is contemplated throughout much of *Nope* in the attempted visual capture of Jean Jacket, his rules of engagement, how different characters look at him, and in viewing spectacle in general. Even Em comes close to becoming an object during the safety meeting when she makes herself a spectacle by delivering an oral resume in an attempt to commodify herself to the gathered film industry personnel for potential employment, though that is by her own choice. Jean Jacket does not get a choice. He is made a visual object by Jupe (who uses the Haywoods’ horses to lure Jean Jacket to his amusement park as part of a show he hopes will draw big crowds), he is made an object by the Haywoods and company who hope to profit from footage of his visage, and his made an object by Ryder, who cannot film him, but demands the means to do so. This objectification is the main difference between Em and Jean Jacket and by the film’s end it is Em’s gaze that does Jean Jacket in. Em uses a large helium balloon in the shape of a cowboy Jupe to distract Jean Jacket’s gaze, undoing the inflatable’s tethers so it can float into the sky. As Jean Jacket goes after it, Em takes numerous photos with a manual crank camera pointed upward in a desperate final effort to get the footage she and OJ want. She gets the photo, but Jean Jacket dies in the effort, attempting to devour the balloon, which causes both it and him to explode. Jean Jacket’s death by exploitation perhaps runs parallel to Mulvey’s argument of women in cinema. Multiple
gazes (including the gaze of men) make the vagina/womb (Jean Jacket) a monstrous visual object, though it is not the gaze of a man that kills the monstrous vagina/womb but the gaze of a woman. If Nope were a “traditional” horror film that fell within Mulvey’s argument, then a male character, such as OJ or Angel, would swoop in to get the picture and kill the monster. Mulvey’s argument is flipped on its head as Em, the female protagonist, performs those actions instead. She gets the footage and kills the monster in the process, destroying Jean Jacket by enacting her gaze.

Looking and the gaze are as integral to Nope as the film’s characters. So much so that some discourse surrounding the film claims Jean Jacket is not a vagina but an eye. Regardless of either reading of Jean Jacket, Nope is a film about Hollywood, showmanship, and the hunt for spectacle. Bu comments how Nope “explores humanity’s ongoing battle between nature and domestication… ‘Nope’ strikes at the twisted, intertwined nature of capitalism and domestication. In each case where nature is brought to be subjugated, there is an underlying capitalist incentive that requires the disregard of nature’s law” (2022). All of the film’s main human characters chase after the natural phenomenon that is Jean Jacket and most of them break his natural rules in an attempt to objectify him, experiencing fatal ends as a result. He is put under a scrutinizing gaze by most people who see him, the kind of gaze Mulvey expects women to be on the receiving end of whenever they appear on screen. Yet none of the women in Nope are subjected to such exploitative looking. Only the animals that appear in the film are looked at as visual objects: Jean Jacket, Gordy the chimpanzee, and the Haywoods’ horses.

Peele’s main message through Nope is that nature (including the vagina/womb) cannot be domesticated into becoming personalized entertainment. Every animal has rules regardless of who is looking. If you try to break those rules, then all you end up with is what the Haywoods would call a bad miracle.

Notes on Author: Ryan is pursuing his MA in English at Bridgewater State University. His essay was completed in fall 2022 under the mentorship of Dr. Halina Adams during her critical theory course. Ryan plans to continue working towards his MA with the hopes of completing more works akin to his essay on Nope.

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