



Nacho Vigalondo on Balancing Human Life and Kaiju Rampages in *Colossal*

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Over four features and countless shorts, Spanish director Nacho Vigalondo has cemented his status as a director who mixes genre elements with surprisingly personal stories and playful narrative trickery. His mind-bending first feature *Timecrimes* (2007) starts off as a horror movie, then turns into a time-travel tale and finally the tender story of a marriage — all with just three locations and four actors. 2011's *Extraterrestrial* was a twisted romantic comedy set during an alien invasion in which we never see any aliens. (That one only had five actors.)

Vigalondo's latest, *Colossal*, is his most ambitious yet. It features Anne Hathaway as a messed-up writer who heads

back home to her small town, only to discover that she can control the movements of a giant kaiju that just happens to be terrorizing Seoul. In its irreverent mix of monster movie and rom-com, and its eagerness to then undercut both genres, the film is very much Vigalondo's work. He sat down with us recently to talk about *Colossal*, audience expectations and just where these crazy ideas come from.

All your films mix genres, but *Colossal* feels like the first one in which the genre element can be read as a metaphor for the central, more personal story — where Anne Hathaway and Jason Sudeikis' relationship is echoed by the kaiju attacks going on in Seoul.

I think the difference is that *Colossal* is more generous when it comes to explaining itself. In *Extraterrestrial*, the mix of the genre stuff and the much more emotional story was like a puzzle to solve: Why were these elements together? What was the symbolic game we were playing? But here, I wanted to make a much more transparent movie. In fact, I don't know if I agree when people talk about the metaphors in the film. Because they're not really metaphors — the movie's pretty explicit about what it's about. Characters are openly talking about these things.

There is another interesting reversal with *Extraterrestrial*. In that film, we're watching a man who deceives a woman during a global crisis in order to be with her, and we see it from his point of view. In *Colossal*, another male character does something similar, but this time, we see it from the perspective of the woman.

It's funny. Anne is clearly the point of view of the movie, but the man's arc is bigger, which is strange for an antagonist. He has the level of transformation of a main character. It's like we're watching a superhero film, but we took a lot of extra care explaining the villain. Instead of just being some guy who pushes a wrong button and becomes a villain, or someone who is awful from the beginning — we understand Oscar, step by step.

It's also a subversion of a cliché. In so many of these romantic comedies about a woman going back to her hometown, there's a guy there who used to know her and who really loves her — and he's usually the down-to-earth type she ends up with. Here, he turns out to be a giant shit.

When I got the chance to work with people like Anne Hathaway and Jason Sudeikis and Dan Stevens, I was really excited — not just because they're great actors with well-known names, but also because it said something about the kind of movie we were making. I felt like it was a best-case scenario. Audience expectation is part of the show, and this cast really adds a lot to the show. On the poster, when you see those names, it's clear we're commenting on another kind of film: We are not your basic romantic comedy. In those movies, being possessive or being aggressive usually has a reward at the end; the stalker winds up being the good guy. I mean, they can interrupt a wedding!



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I have to be honest: I've never been a big fan of Jason Sudeikis, who has always seemed to me a more smarmy presence than the Everyman types he's often called on to play. You're the first filmmaker to really get a great performance out of him.

I love Jason, but for me, there's something dark about comedians — Bill Murray, Robin Williams, some of the biggest comedians that we love. Even when they're playing characters that we like, you can smell the evil — and I love that. Comedians are the most surprising people, in that sense. You know who you never hear bad stories about? Horror filmmakers. They're so nice.

There are two big metaphors — or, if you will, readings — in *Colossal*. We see a man manipulate and effectively entrap the woman he's obsessed with. But then there's also something being said about the way the West is alienated from the effects of its actions — about how we wage war in other parts of the world and are sheltered from the suffering of others. Were you concerned that these elements would overpower one another?

You're always concerned when you're dealing with tough subjects. In telling the story from Anne's point of view, that means the Korean people are always being seen from a distance. We do not allow the movie to emphasize enough with the victims of tragedy, because we are sticking to her perspective. So, how can we solve this problem? At some point, you have to carry the contradictions of the film. But I also knew I needed to have that last sequence where she would have a conversation with a Korean character — when she walks into that bar and speaks to that woman. Some might say that it is not enough.

On the other hand, I am also making a movie that details with domestic violence, which is a big thing in Spain. But we also have a lot of jokes, and VFX, and giant creatures. What if the movie is damaging, instead of being enlightening? There's a way you can live with that: The movies that are alive are the ones you can talk about. That's what I love about Damien Chazelle's films — *La La Land* and *Whiplash* — because people can discuss those. Some don't like them. Some find elements that are really troubling. But those movies are alive. Movies that have those kinds of tensions sometimes describe their times in a much more faithful way than movies that are universally praised and have no conflict at all. So I'm not afraid of some possible contradictions in the film.

A lot of people will say that your films are odd in the way they use genre, but I find them very emotionally honest. When I saw *Extraterrestrial*, which has people using an alien invasion for their own petty ends, I was reminded of people I knew who, in the wake of 9/11, used tragedy as an excuse to try and get back together with their exes.

I've made two kinds of films so far. *Open Windows* and *Timecrimes* are fascinated with form, and with structure. Even if they reach an emotional peak at some point, they are movies that are fascinated with the mechanics of narrative, instead of the emotional core. *Extraterrestrial* and *Colossal* are sort of the opposite. For me, the most extreme is *Extraterrestrial*. Because the viewer takes for granted that there will be a sci-fi payoff in the film ... and it never happens. That is the most aggressive thing I've ever done in my life, and it is the reason why so many people were angry with the film. They were waiting for me to reveal who the alien was.

But we thought, "Let's show all the tropes we are used to with this kind of film, but instead of involving the aliens, they're going to involve the humans." So we have an action set piece at the end where we have this machine, and somebody's throwing fire, and it's like a science-fiction combat ... but they are two regular guys, and one of them is inside a giant coffee cup! And that's a dangerous game. I totally understand that people want to see movies that match their expectations. When you watch *Jaws*, you want the end of the movie to be about the guy killing the shark.



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Are you worried people expecting a monster movie might be disappointed with *Colossal*? A couple of years ago, people were upset that *Godzilla* didn't have enough *Godzilla* in it — and that was a pretty straightforward monster movie.

Godzilla movies are really all about people. The characters hold the movie. It's more legitimate to complain that Bryan Cranston doesn't have enough screen time in front of the camera than *Godzilla*! [Laughs]

When I wrote *Colossal*, without knowing what cast I would have, I tried to find a way to make a plausible *kaiju eiga* for me. Since I did not have a guaranteed budget, I tried to think of devices ... “What if we see *Godzilla* only through a TV?” “What if we show just the people affected by this thing happening on the other side of the world?” And the movie could work without having the monster in front of the camera. The devil inside me is really happy that there are parts of the movie in which the conversations are about all this other stuff. We have two guys sitting in a bar talking about something completely different than monsters. Even if I understand that some people can get really angry, I cannot stop playing those games.

You said *Timecrimes* and *Open Windows* were about the mechanics of narrative. These are impossibly intricate stories. Do you sit down beforehand and plan everything out, so it all fundamentally makes sense?

All filmmakers come from a point, and try to get to another point. People who are pure visual craftsmen might

conquer the script. Some people are all about the script, and they conquer the image. Some people are pure abstract artists, and they conquer the rational. Some people start with the rational, and they conquer poetry. We never come from a place of pure filmmaking. When I was pretty young, I never thought I could be a filmmaker. I wasn't one of those people who were totally into *Star Wars*.

In the small town in Spain where I was living, deciding to be a filmmaker was a fantasy. So I started writing, and writing in a specific way in which everything was carefully crafted. And there are some traces of that in *Colossal*. If a character does something with a teabag, I need to set up a casual conversation earlier where he's asking for a teabag. I like to include elements like that, but not in an annoying way. I don't want to use the complexity of the script against the emotional element.

***Open Windows* is a striking example of that. It's all happening on a computer screen, with so many windows open on the screen — each with different characters and a different story thread. It's impossible to follow, and yet I found it all very gripping.**

If I watched *Open Windows* through the eyes of other people, would I be able to go through the labyrinth? Or would I be able to enjoy the chaos, as one does with *Primer*? (By the way, whenever somebody tells you they know what's happening in *Primer*, they are lying, because it's a movie about being lost in the thing.) I will tell you that with *Open Windows*, I'm afraid the rhythm of the movie was too demanding for the audience. It wasn't like a traditional film; it was more like a stream of information. That was the craziest, most complicated thing I ever did in my life. I'm never going to do something that complicated again.

We made a whole previsualization of the film with ourselves, to see if things would work. And it was really hard for the actors, who were really limited by the logistics. Everything had to be planned — where to look, the timing, the pauses. That was the worst for me; the actors didn't have the chance to behave like their normal selves. If I had a chance to work more with it — to open the cut and change it — I would make it more relaxed. I don't want actors rushing the dialogue, or giving the lines really quick. I want to see the actors breathing. When I see that on camera, that's the best.



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I've noticed that you have a fascination with the spaces your characters inhabit. The apartment in *Extraterrestrial* becomes like another character. *Open Spaces* and *Timecrimes* could be described as a conflict among different spaces. And in *Colossal*, too, there's a lot of care given to establishing the emptiness of Anne Hathaway's house — whereas Jason Sudeikis' character, we discover, is something of a hoarder, someone who clings to the past.

When I write, I love to play long sequences in single locations. I want to explore the location in a film, again and again. My favorite part of the process is before shooting. I love going to a location with my notebook and staying there for a day, finding what to do and how to play with the camera — how to use this place to our advantage. When you design a set, the set is not going to surprise you. If something exists beforehand, life is given to you — you're inspired in a different way. When I wrote *Colossal*, I was pretty sure that it had to be mainly her empty house, the bar and the park.

Watching *Timecrimes* again recently, I was struck by how well it works as a metaphor for the audience. The protagonist sits down, he sees a dead girl and a mysterious bandaged man. He enters into that space. Then he thinks he's become the victim, when in fact he is also the killer. It's like how the audience always identifies with the victim, when it's our bloodlust and our voyeuristic fantasies that power the narrative.

Exactly! And something that I wanted to be really clear about is that the girl, the erotic film he's watching, is inside

the device — the binoculars. Later he steps into the space, of course. But until he goes there, everything is in the binoculars — inside what is essentially a machine. So it's like he's going into the device.

Do you look to other films for influence, or inspiration?

All the time. The initial Charlie Kaufman scripts, like *Adaptation* and *Being John Malkovich* — those are the kinds of films whose influence you can't escape from. Anyone playing with these kinds of comedic/existential devices is clearly being influenced by him, even if you don't want to. There are films that are behind this new film, like *Big Man Japan*, by Hitoshi Matsumoto, or the Jason Reitman film *Young Adult*. Or *Signs*, the Shyamalan film, in which we see a big-scale alien invasion film through a TV. That's not so different from *Colossal*. Influences are most of the time not something you're aware of. It was only when I saw *Signs* recently that I thought, "Okay, I took so many things from this film!" But I love Shyamalan. He is one of the few filmmakers whose language you can love, even if you don't care for the plot of the films or the actors. He's a classic filmmaker in that sense.

There's a classicism to your approach as well. A very careful use of visual grammar, using it to pull the viewer into the narrative, even before we understand exactly what's going on.

That is for me the ultimate acknowledgement. If the movie works it's got to be because of how the camera works. A big chunk of the merits of any film are going to be because of the language. At the same time, 95% of reviews when they talk about films, they talk about the scenes, the actors, the script, and sometimes the effects. Very few people writing about films approach it that way!

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