

SXSW Film Review: 'Open Windows'

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The camera stays glued to one guy's computer screen in this gimmicky but audacious exercise in neo-Hitchcockian suspense.

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A fiendishly inventive thriller built around an audacious if unsustainable gimmick, "Open Windows" elevates Hitchcockian suspense to jittery new levels of mayhem and paranoia. Essentially conceived as a technologically sophisticated mash-up of "Rear Window" and "Rope," this latest mind-bender from Spanish genre trickster Nacho Vigalondo ("Timecrimes," "Extraterrestrial") unfolds entirely in one carefully manipulated "shot," with the camera glued to the lead character's computer screen,

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employing desktop videos, images and pop-ups to tell its lurid tale of celebrity obsession, stalking, hacking, surveillance, blackmail and murder. Barely maintaining coherence if not plausibility, the compulsively watchable result should enjoy a vigorous fest and VOD life; fitting as it might be to stream it on your laptop, its complex visual layers and blink-and-you-miss-'em plot turns are best suited to the bigscreen.

One of former adult star Sasha Grey's higher-profile vehicles since her mainstream debut in Steven Soderbergh's "The Girlfriend Experience," "Open Windows" also plays like a companion piece of sorts to Eugenio Mira's "Grand Piano," another recent thriller in which a justifiably freaked-out Elijah Wood found himself at the mercy of a menacingly disembodied voice. If that film suggested an ivory-tickling riff on Brian De Palma, then Vigalondo's picture feels like a high-tech Hitch homage on speed, one that exerts a strong narrative grip for about an hour before tumbling down a discomfiting series of rabbit holes that strain credulity and internal logic to the breaking point.

The opening minutes play like scenes from a fairly routine-looking action-thriller, but these turn out to be clips from a new movie starring Jill Goddard (Grey), a red-hot young actress whose sordid off-camera activities have made her major tabloid fodder. We're watching this footage through the eyes of Nick Chambers (Wood), who's working on his laptop in a hotel room overlooking downtown Austin; he's come to town to have dinner with Jill, his celebrity crush — a prize he won in an online contest. It's typical of the film's formal resourcefulness that this setup is conveyed without conventional exposition, and without the camera ever once cutting or moving away from the computer screen: Aiming a webcam at himself, nervous young Nick records a short video bio, introducing himself to the contest operators and to the audience whose company he will be sharing for the next 100 or so minutes.

As it turns out, the contest is merely the pretext for an altogether more diabolical purpose, and before long Nick is receiving strange instructions from a voice on his computer whose owner identifies himself as Chord (the voice belongs to British actor Neil Maskell, sounding like a menacing Michael Caine). An all-knowing, all-seeing presence with advanced degrees in hacking and surveillance, Chord proceeds to open various windows on Nick's desktop, teasingly granting him access to the contents of Jill's phone, and even offering

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him a direct line of sight into the hotel room where the actress is planning to meet a lover. That this room is located in the same hotel where Nick is staying is hardly a coincidence, and it's not long before Chord is able to coerce the young man into being not just a passive observer, but an active, even violent participant in the proceedings.

Nick, who runs a Jill Goddard fansite, may be a slightly pathetic, pants-creaming sort, but he's not a bad guy, and he's noticeably uncomfortable with this criminal invasion of Jill's privacy, as well as his own. What Hitchcock left as elegantly unnerving subtext in "Rear Window" (admit it, you like to watch), Vigalondo serves up with a malevolent grin and the latest in state-of-the-art spy craft, as Chord openly, tauntingly encourages Nick and the viewer to indulge their private fantasies — to take out their sexual frustrations on a widely coveted lust object who, multimillionaire and prima donna that she is, clearly deserves all the humiliation she gets. (As written and performed, Jill can't help but evoke any number of talents who have found themselves in an unflattering celebrity spotlight, from Kristen Stewart to Miley Cyrus.) This all comes to the fore in the film's most ethically complicated (and questionable) scene, in which Nick is forced to order Jill to perform an online striptease for his private benefit, lest she come to grievous bodily harm at Chord's hands.

It's a queasy-making scene that might have been more effective with a more skillful actress than Grey in front of the camera; trembling with mock fear and loathing in a partially open bathrobe, she could be enacting a more-twisted-than-usual bondage-porn scenario. Yet because of the way the scene has been conceived and shot, provocative questions are inevitably raised: Is the film condemning the spectacle of Jill's degradation or participating in it? Are we implicated or titillated? Does the fact that Grey has already presented her body (and much more of it) for public consumption make this particular instance any less objectionable? Is the point Vigalondo is trying to make — that we live in a screen-addicted, Web-obsessed society where the notion of privacy is a joke and Hollywood is basically a human meat market — penetrating or insightful enough to justify this admittedly virtuosic but over-rigged parlor trick of a movie?

The answers are both, both, maybe and not really. That individuals can now be tracked, monitored, harassed and sexually assaulted via computers is no great e-piphany, and in trying to stuff as many such forms of exploitation as possible into its 100-minute running time, "Open Windows" often plays more like a compendium of reckless technological

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abuses than a coherent piece of storytelling. Yet even when the narrative begins to self-destruct — as the tense Nick-Jill-Chord dynamic gives way to a frantic multi-vehicle pursuit, a subplot involving a team of renegade French hackers (led by Adam Quintero), and a series of identity reversals that defy first-viewing comprehension — the picture remains continually fascinating as an exercise in form, as well as an example of a work that could not have existed in the pre-digital-cinema age.

Vigalondo's approach is gleefully, shamelessly manipulative: While the computer screen remains the film's focus from first frame to last, the director is always playfully adjusting our perspective, zooming in on those applications that are of greatest narrative significance at any given moment, while relegating less important windows to mere desktop clutter. At times it doesn't feel like direction so much as choreography, testing the viewer's capacity for split-screen storytelling and narrative overload. But to the filmmakers' credit, the rigorous visual design rarely feels hectic or cluttered, and Vigalondo keeps the images moving long enough to avoid the sort of eyestrain that generally accompanies prolonged computer exposure. Jorge Magaz's score reps one necessary non-diegetic component of the picture's dense, precisely calibrated sound mix.

Having played heroes under extreme duress (here and in "Grand Piano") and a vicious serial killer (2012's "Maniac" remake), Wood's taste in material has been unusually adventurous and dark of late, and his sympathetic presence here is crucial in providing a sustained human element in a movie as software-dominated as the world it depicts.