



# INVADER



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**A FILM BY MICKEY KEATING**

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70 mins. / Horror, Thriller / United States / English and Spanish / 2024

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## **LOGLINE**

A young woman arrives in the Chicago suburbs and begins to suspect that something terrible has happened to her missing cousin in this lean, mean home-invasion horror from director Mickey Keating and producer Joe Swanberg.

## **SUMMARY**

Ana (Vero Maynez) is a long way from home, but eager to visit her cousin Camila in the Chicago suburbs. After Ana's bus gets delayed, she arrives very late and begins to fear the worst when she can't get ahold of Camila. Accompanied by Carlo (Colin Huerta), one of Camila's co-workers, Ana decides to venture on foot to search for her cousin, encountering ominous signs, hostile locals, and the punishingly empty expanse of suburban America. When they arrive at Camila's house, the night spirals into chaos when Ana and Carlo realize the bizarre and jaw-dropping truth. A lean, mean jolt of unsettling home invasion horror from director Mickey Keating and producer Joe Swanberg, INVADER will keep your skin crawling long after the credits roll.







## **Q&A WITH DIRECTOR MICKEY KEATING**

### **BY PAUL RISKER FOR EYE FOR FILM**

Mickey Keating's latest film, *Invader*, is a disquieting home invasion that strips back its narrative to instead offer a vision of terror in the Chicago suburbs. Joe Swanberg, who stars as *Invader*, is a primal tour de force in a film that has a distinct dystopian vibe, and yet deliberately distances itself from this sub-genre. It's a raw embodiment of Keating's interest in moments or scenarios, and its disquieting effect stems from the lack of answers Keating is willing to give his audience.

*Invader* is Keating's seventh feature film, not counting *Ultra Violence*, which the director has tried to have removed from his IMDB page. His other films include *POD* (2015), which revolves around a family intervention complicated by a monster trapped in the cabin's basement, and his psychological horror *Darling* (2015), which stars Lauren Ashley Carter as the caretaker of an old house, whose predecessor committed suicide by throwing herself off the balcony. Under her stewardship, the death toll mounts. In the psychedelic horror, *Psychopaths* (2017), a group of serial killers happen to cross paths one night, while his supernatural horror *Offseason* (2021), sees a woman return home after receiving news that her mother's grave has been vandalised, only to find herself trapped on the offshore island.

In conversation with *Eye For Film*, Keating references Michael Haneke and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, discusses *Invader*'s political and metaphorical undertones, reflects on his disinterest in writing a commercial hit-the-beats type of movie and recalls a weird experience when art imitated life.

#### **Invader is likely to be a divisive film. In a world that is so fractured and divided, why make this type of film?**

I'm not sure. It's a reflection, and we wanted to make a very American movie in that regard. We wanted to hold up a mirror to what was going on in society, but whenever you make a movie, and you're trying to please everybody, then you're screwed. So, it was a fun effort to present this to the audience, and say to them, "Look, this is what we wanted to do, this is how we wanted to make it. If you don't like it, then that's okay."

#### **Do you perceive *Invader* to be a political film, and more broadly speaking, would you agree that all art is political? Or does it depend on the audience's point of view as much as the filmmaker's intention?**

I hate it when you can tell a film intentionally has a motive and ideology that the filmmakers are trying to enforce. My takeaway about everything being political would be that art and film are so reactionary to what's going on, and is dictated by politics and how the world is. You certainly see that in the Seventies with American cinema and post-Vietnam, and then in the early 2000s with French extremism and American horror films, which became so violent because that's what we were seeing and were exposed to on the news. So, you see that reaction in cinema.

The intentions of some films are very clear, but you want to make a movie hoping that everyone, regardless of where they stand politically, can see the film and take something away from it. And, in the same way, *Invader* was that too. It's not a political right-wing or left-wing movie per se, but it is a reaction to what was going on in America at that time.

**Initially the film feels like it's set in Trump's America, only to then reveal it's set during the twilight of the Obama presidency. *Invader* is a reminder that Trump is a manifestation of older ideas, how his election was a backlash towards Obama, and how you can't talk about one America without talking about the other.**

It was something we tried to do, and the radio news reports were from the Sixties and the Seventies. The idea was, it would be crass to give the middle finger to Donald Trump's America because this stuff has been slowly incubating.

It was interesting to see it come out of the woodwork in a mainstream way when Trump was elected. It felt like it was okay to be flagrant about things that would have normally been kept under wraps, and on Twitter, people were given permission to say things that would normally be extraordinarily divisive. It's an effort to acknowledge that, no, this has been going on for a long time, and without spoiling the film, it ain't over.

**From our previous conversations, I know you're driven by moments, and how one bleeds into the next. *Invader* feels like it may be an escalation of this approach.**

Yeah, I always say that I'm more interested and excited by situations than overall stories, and it's also exciting getting to work with Joe Swanberg, who doesn't script his movies.

A lot of *Invader* was improvised because we were working purposefully with almost a documentary-sized crew. Even though we didn't have permits, we could decide to go film in a subway tunnel. Each day we were coming up with new things, and we could just get into a van and drive. That was thrilling, and at this point, I was making my seventh feature, so you can lean on instinct, and it was freeing to not have a story or a shot list. Instead, we just figured it out because this was its DNA, and it was always going to be that way.

**Speaking with Vincenzo Natali about how viewing habits and accessibility have changed across the decades, he identified a "flattening of culture" which he subscribes to giving the focus on giving the consumer what they want. But he says, "... as we well know, the consumer does not know what they want. In fact, it's usually best when they're introduced to things that they don't know they want, but they need." However, it's easier to play around with the cinematic form in the independent space, which *Invader* is an example of.**

Absolutely, and it has just become more flagrant. To me there's nothing more disappointing than watching a movie and thinking, 'Okay, I know it's 15 minutes in, so this is going to happen.' Sometimes it works, and it pulls on your heart strings, and nobody does that better than Pixar, right? But I'm fascinated when a film has an idiosyncratic structure, and I can't get my footing — that's what really excites me.

Structurally for this film, a studio note would have been to constantly intercut her story with Invader's story, and every ten pages to see Invader doing something else that makes him Invader. That's just boring to me and that's why we decided to dovetail a film with his storyline. And at this point, I can write a very commercial, 95-page hit the beats movie, but I'm less drawn to things like that [laughs].

We found this idea of not explaining so much of his intentions to be fun. Without spoiling it, I wanted the audience to project onto this home invader their greatest fear. What would he do to my house? What would he find of mine that he'd take with him? Why did he find the suit and orthodontist camera fascinating? I don't know, but there's something of mine he'd take, and I'd be a souvenir.

**Ambiguity's value lies in how it niggles at our obsessive need to know why and to understand.**

That's the most frightening element of any true crime. The things that stick with you the most are the ones where you don't know why. [...] We can project and try to find breadcrumb trails, but the overall explanation is a question mark, and that's more terrifying than a manifesto.

**It strikes me that the basis of the film and the character is driven by the primal. Also, there's an Alien-esque side to the film. Looking at Invader's violent and destructive behaviour, he's actually creating a nest. He has to destroy order and civility because whatever is going on inside of him is so alien to the outside world, that he needs to create chaos.**

Even down to a micro level, we said he's a virus. He goes into a place, and he breaks it down until there's nothing left, and then he moves on. I'm sure Covid had a subconscious effect on Invader, but it did totally make sense. He overtakes a host and when the host is dead, he's gone. I like the Alien narrative too, because there is an element of a bodysnatcher-esque thing. Invader is able to be that bodysnatcher who navigates the real world, and his private life is what you see in the film.

**Can you see a dream logic in the construction of this film?**

Certain films I've made, absolutely. I always say the interpretation of my films is as important to me as my intention, so, if that's something that's projected, then yes.

**I only ask because, in the train station scene, the camera makes a sudden movement that compelled me to question its point of view. Invader can also be interpreted as the dream or nightmare of someone unknown to us.**

The surreal nature of film has always infiltrated my work and when we spoke about the camera, it was about how it could have this interactive presence. A lot of times, the camera is the other character that journeys with her, and with Invader in a way. And especially in the opening scene, the camera is kind of complicit in the destruction of the house. So, that was the intention of it, but if the dreaminess comes through, then that's great as well.

**One of the striking things about the film is how loud and abrasive the music is in a specific moment. Combined with the handheld camera, I felt a loss of spatial awareness despite having been introduced to the space. This loud abrasiveness is an extension of Invader's world, which is aggressive and often disorientating.**

There was an effort to project the idea of being in a place that you're so unfamiliar with that everything seems abrasive. Personally, when I get into situations and I'm overwhelmed, like an airport I'm not familiar with, every major sound startles me — especially when there's a level of urgency. It could be that I have to get somewhere or, if the ultimate goal is that I need to get home or to a place that is familiar, then things seem so much more overwhelming.

When you go to somebody's house or if you stay over at night and you wake up and need to use the bathroom, even though you've been there for a few hours, there's still the question of which door is it, and where do I go? That is what we wanted to sell in this film, even though we'd established the space.

When we were shooting the movie, what was so wild was the place I was staying in had a balcony that overlooked the train tracks. A train would go by every 15 minutes. It was like their apartment in *Se7en* (1995) that rattles — it was deafening. The first couple of nights I was there it would jolt me out of a horrible sleep. Then one night, the train was so loud, and the wind blew the doors of the balcony open — the panic I felt that someone could be in the room. So, I'm stumbling through the dark, and I was the characters in *Invader*. It was very much art imitating life.



**What was the thought process behind choosing to go handheld? It triggered memories of Tony Scott's Man On Fire (2004) for me — a movie in perpetual motion aside from maybe one scene. Also, what are your thoughts on the use of handheld cinematography and why it can either be jarring for audiences or fail to be effective?**

I'm 100% percent of the opinion that if you're going to go for an aesthetic, then you have to go all the way. If you only partly use it, then it's an unbalanced film. So, from the get-go, coming off Offseason, which was militant about composition, and lighting, and blocking, and creating these tableaux, the intention was to go in the opposite direction.

In the first conversation, I said I wanted to create an ugly and abrasive movie. But I feel like handheld has become such an easy crutch for filmmakers, because it used to be that it was amazing. [Jean-Luc] Godard could walk down the street with a newsreel camera and shoot a movie, and it would be like, "It's incredible, and it's going to change cinema." Now it's so easy for filmmakers to spray down scenes from multiple angles and lighting set-ups don't take as long. So, we wanted to get as far away from that as we could, to make people recognise the camerawork again, instead of being so conditioned to be like, 'Oh, it's just another handheld shot because they didn't want to set up dolly tracks.' [Laughs].

And it's the same as black and white. It gives the audience an out pretty quickly if they know they're not into this aesthetic. They can choose not to watch the film, because nothing is worse than an audience feeling that they've been duped into watching something. That's why the first three or four shots say this is what it's going to be. If you're not into it, you can leave the theatre, and it's fine, but films should be challenging in some way.

Hopefully, you get lured in. You're watching a guy absolutely murder a house and if we started it off with 15 minutes of someone ploughing a field, I feel it would be easier to want to escape [laughs].

**Picking up on your point about murdering the house, can the film be seen as a metaphor for the housing market situation?**

I keep thinking about what Haneke said about The Seventh Continent (1989) — that in such a shocking and horrible story, the most taboo and violent, almost pornographic thing that he could film was the characters tearing up the money and flushing it down the toilet. That idea is so utterly bizarre to audiences because we've been conditioned to worship money — it's as essential as air and water.



On *Invader*, we talked about the notion, and especially in the United States, where the idea of homeownership for the next generation is such a dream now. You have these companies that are able to mass-purchase houses and up-charge it to the point that the average person can't compete with that. So, the idea that you can one day own a home only to watch someone murder it and break it apart from the inside, is as violently taboo as you could get, other than watching someone being killed.

And it is so funny that that house we destroyed was not a set, it was a real house. Joe wanted to try as hard as possible to get through the floor with the sledgehammer. When he started breaking through the walls, seeing how easy it was for him to punch through the dry wall, you quickly realize what I'm putting a 30-year mortgage is something that can be so effortlessly torn apart. And so that was really fun.

Going back to the idea of improvisation, that was not the opening of the movie that I had thought of. Halfway through the shoot, the producer, Edwin Linker, said, "Oh, I've got a friend who is going to bulldoze this house. Would you guys like to do anything with it? Even shoot another movie there?" I was like, "No, tomorrow let's go destroy it with a sledgehammer", and that became the start of the film.

**Where does *Invader* sit in your filmography? I can see possible connections to *Darling* and *Psychopaths*, and maybe even *Offseason*. But it also has a lone wolf-type presence.**

It's so funny because my favorite quote is Fassbinder saying he wants to build a house with his films. Some might be the basement, some might be the bedroom, but they all make the same house.

Contextually, it's hard for me to think about the movie and my filmography as a whole, because it's too personal — I'm too immersed in it. But I do feel as though what I've accomplished with all of my films is that there's no outside source dictating how we should be telling, shooting or editing it. So, it does come from that very pure place with a consistency at least.



# CAST

**Ana** Vero Maynez  
**Carlo** Colin Huerta  
**Camila** Ruby Vallejo

# CREW

**Directed by** Mickey Keating  
**Written by** Mickey Keating  
**Produced by** Eric Ashworth ... executive producer  
Amanda Brinton ... producer  
Edwin Linker ... producer  
Joe Swanberg ... producer  
**Music by** James Schafer  
**Cinematography by** Mac Fisken  
**Editing by** Valerie Krulfeifer  
**Hair Department Head / Makeup Department Head** Maegan Rebecca  
**Re-Recording Mixer / Sound Designer** Shawn Duffy  
**Wardrobe** Abby Cottier  
**Colorist** Marc Bach  
**First Assistant Camera** David Bostrom





### **MICKEY KEATING (DIRECTOR, WRITER)**

Mickey Keating is a filmmaker based out of Los Angeles whose work includes *Offseason*, *Carnage Park*, and *Darling*. He is also the host of *The Core*, a horror-themed talk show on AMC Networks' streaming service Shudder.



### **JOE SWANBERG (PRODUCER)**

Joe Swanberg is the writer and director of over 20 features including *DRINKING BUDDIES*, *HAPPY CHRISTMAS* and *NIGHTS AND WEEKENDS*, which he co-directed and starred in with Greta Gerwig. He produced, wrote, directed and edited all 25 episodes of his 3 season Netflix Original Series *EASY* and has directed episodes of television for HBO, Netflix and Disney. He directed and acted in segments of the original cult horror film *V/H/S* and has starred in films for Adam Wingard (*YOU'RE NEXT*), Ti West (*THE SACRAMENT*), Josephine Decker (*THOU WAST MILD AND LOVELY*) and Mickey Keating (*OFFSEASON*), in addition to supporting roles in dozens of films. He lives in Chicago, IL.



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