

The Cloverfield Paradox should have been a comedy – and almost is one

Spoiler warning: this review largely avoids specific plot spoilers for *The Cloverfield Paradox*, but it does discuss some things that *don't* happen in the movie, which might be considered a form of spoiler too.

The best horror movies work because they evoke the things that scare us most – not specifically monsters or murderers, but universal fears like helplessness, isolation, violence, and the unknown. The smartest horror movies, though, the ones that stick with us longest, also work because their stories hold together. At the core of every great horror movie is some meaningful conflict that explains why bad things are happening, and that adds fears deeper and richer than just bump-in-the-night. *Alien* has its inimical corporation, willing to sacrifice its workers for profit and power. *Psycho* has the mysterious workings of other people's minds, the feeling that you can never really know what someone else is thinking. And more recently, *Get Out* has the entire history of American racism underwriting the story and tension.

Then there are bad horror movies like *The Cloverfield Paradox*, the third movie in the extremely loose trilogy that began with Matt Reeves' *Cloverfield* in 2008. Like Dan Trachtenberg's *10 Cloverfield Lane* in 2016, it was originally written as an unrelated, standalone movie, and brought into the Cloververse with some script-tweaking. But unlike the first two films in the series, *Cloverfield Paradox* doesn't stand on its own as a horror movie, or even as a standalone story. There's no central idea, no governing principle, and more to the point, virtually nothing frightening about it. No one involved in creating this movie seemed to have any clue what kind of tale

it's telling from one minute to the next.

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The film's baffling lack of direction or clarity may explain why Paramount sold the film's distribution rights, switching from a rumored April theatrical run to an abrupt Netflix-only release, announced during the 2018 Super Bowl. Seen without context, the move seems surprising and daring, a grand experiment in throwing a major action-horror release full of familiar Hollywood names directly to the audience, with none of the costly, questionably effective marketing buildup around Netflix events like *Bright* or *Altered Carbon*. But after watching the film, it feels more like Paramount knew it had a dud on its hands, and dumped it in the most cost-effective way possible on another distributor – who then rushed to get it to viewers before word could spread about what an unqualified, incoherent stinker it really is.

The protagonist, NASA comm officer Ava Hamilton, is played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw, the star of *Belle* and *Beyond the Lights*, though she's probably more familiar to Netflix viewers as half the central couple in *Black Mirror*'s "San Junipero" episode. Hamilton is one of a crew of seven aboard the Cloverfield space station, Earth's last-ditch effort to fix its cataclysmic energy shortage by firing up a dangerously high-powered particle accelerator in space for infinite free energy. (Don't sweat any of the scientific details here; writer Oren Uziel and director Julius Onah certainly didn't.) The crew – Kiel (David Oyelowo), Schmidt (Daniel Brühl), Tam (Zhang Ziyi), Volkov (Aksel Hennie), Mundy (Chris O'Dowd) and Monk (John Ortiz) have been in space for nearly two years, but Schmidt and Tam haven't been able to get the Shepard Particle Accelerator to run successfully, and wars are breaking out on Earth over the last of the oil reserves.



Scott Garfield / Netflix

This raises tensions among the crew, who were apparently promised they might only be in space for six months. Volkov suspects Schmidt of taking secret orders from Germany to sabotage the station, and mission leader Kiel has his hands full keeping them apart. Hamilton, meanwhile, longs to be back home with her husband Michael (Roger Davies, who gets his own, barely related storyline down on Earth). Then the crew happens to tune into an Earth news broadcast, where an alarmist author (Donal Logue) is being interviewed about the dangers the Shepard accelerator poses to the world. "That accelerator is a thousand times more powerful than any ever built," he says. "Every time they test it, they risk ripping open the membrane of space-time, smashing together multiple dimensions, shattering reality. And not just on that station. Everywhere!"

His fears that the accelerator might release "monsters, demons, beasts from the sea!" mimic real-life fears over the Large Hadron Collider, and long before that, fears that the first atomic bomb tests might set Earth's atmosphere on fire. (They also unfortunately echo the classic *Ghostbusters* warning scene about "cats and dogs living together, mass hysteria!") But here, they're just foreshadowing. Before terrible events can take place, the audience has to be warned just how terrible things could get. It's a smart move, meant to get the audience thinking ahead of the story, and dreading all the eerie possibilities.

But virtually none of those possibilities manifest, and the meant-to-be-scary part of the movie doesn't hold together in any way. There's a long history of horror stories about hubristic scientists playing God and suffering the consequences, but that's not what's going on here. No one is defying the laws of nature – these are just a bunch of desperate people, trying to save humanity by supplying it with power. No one on board is playing selfish personal games with the mission, or bringing dangerous assumptions into it. The

characters are all painfully sincere – but they're also generic, bland, and barely developed. When they inevitably start dying, there's no sense of loss, either for the audience or the crew. The remaining characters barely seem to notice their losses.



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And maybe that's because those losses are so random, arbitrary, and ridiculous. The author's prediction of monsters and demons turns out to be optimistic. There's no antagonist whatsoever in *Cloverfield Paradox*, not even an abstract one, like the sun in Danny Boyle's *Sunshine*, or the merciless void of space in *Gravity*. There are just a bunch of extremely random and ridiculous events, with no logical connecting narrative thread. There's an "explanation" that explains nothing, a solution that's sheer nonsense, and the kind of physics-ignoring occurrences that a horror movie normally uses to signal the presence of a supernatural force. Except there isn't one, unless you count the screenwriter, cackling as he bumps people off in unlikely ways.

It's hard to fight the sense throughout *The Cloverfield Paradox* that this film should probably have been a comedy. Certain elements of it are certainly laughable – when Chris O'Dowd's character has a non-fatal encounter with the unknown, he winds up subject to some incredibly silly-looking special effects that make it hard to take any of it seriously. He's left mutilated, but instead of being devastated, he takes his wounds with a goofy, upbeat attitude and some lines that are probably meant to be dramatic, but that come across as whimsical and straight-faced-surreal, in a mode familiar from the classic British science-fiction series *Red Dwarf*.





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The arbitrary, scattershot nature of the film's events wouldn't matter as much in a comedy, which could operate from laugh to laugh, and surprise to surprise. But in a horror movie, tonal breaks and confusing "Wait, *what* now?" moments are deadly. The film never works up a momentum, or even a baseline feeling of dread, because nothing about the story makes any sense. It winds up feeling deliberately satirical, because it's so laughably self-important, yet at the same time so unbelievable and irrational. It's easy to giggle at what the film winds up doing, because it's too easy to see the grimmer, more emotional things it's trying and failing to do instead.

Granted, aside from O'Dowd (whose slaphappy, "whatever, man!" attitude vaguely recalls his beloved slacker role in *The IT Crowd*), the cast is more suited for drama than comedy. Mbatha-Raw excels at bringing across silent, repressed pain. Oyelowo has a grim gravitas that makes it easy to see him as the

strained leader of a disintegrating crew. Brühl is tremendous at evoking the cornered, angry nerd, when he's given a role significant enough to sink his teeth into. But nothing in the script suggests the filmmakers cared about any of these characters enough to establish even baseline characteristics for them. Even the remarkably similar recent space-horror story *Life* took time to give its cannon-fodder crew at least one backstory element apiece. *Cloverfield Paradox* sees them strictly as targets which will eventually be punctured by its random arrows.

Ultimately, that's because there's nothing holding together *Cloverfield Paradox's* events – not even the sense of a connection to the previous films. There are Easter eggs here and there for fans to paw over: a bobblehead with a cup of Slusho, a trip into a bomb shelter that evokes *10 Cloverfield Lane*, and one big CGI moment that's so heavily foreshadowed, it doesn't even count as a surprise. But while this new movie obfuscates *Cloverfield's* lingering mysteries more than it supports them, it hardly matters.

Cloverfield Paradox's primary job was to tap into viewers' fears and tell a frightening story about something. Anything. And it doesn't. It could have been a comedy, or it could have used its tropes to say something unnerving about the genuinely scary looming energy crisis. Failing that, with even a little more tweaking, it could have been a story about how prone people are to tribalism, to seeing "their" people as the only people worth saving. Instead, it isn't any of these things. It isn't much of anything at all, except a momentary PR blitz for Netflix, and a major bullet dodged for Paramount.

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