



**CG GARAGE PODCAST #273
ALBERTO MIELGO
DIRECTOR, LD+R'S "THE WITNESS"**

Examining "The Witness:" Director Alberto Mielgo on making one of "Love, Death & Robots" most memorable episodes – and his dreams of animated Oscar success.

Among the many pleasures of *Love, Death & Robots*, "The Witness" was a particular standout: Its mind-bending story and vivid art style combined to create a unique and challenging short film. In this inspirational podcast, director Alberto Mielgo breaks down the making of the project.

Warning: This podcast contains explicit language.

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Chris Nichols Normally we'll do them in person, but this is what I have to do. Even though you're in LA. You're in LA now, right?

Alberto M I'm in LA now, yes.

Chris Nichols What are you doing in LA? Just living here?

Alberto M Yeah, I've been here for 10 years, it's just that for the last maybe three years I've been going back and forth between Spain and here. I happened to find a really cool team of people in Spain, so most of my latest projects, I produce them there.

Chris Nichols Well, that is really cool. The first time I met you was at THU, which was a lot of fun. I always go to that. It's my mecca. I go there every year.

Alberto M Oh wow. Nice.

Chris Nichols But your talk was very, very good. It was very, very funny because that's the kind of person you are.

Alberto M I'm older now. I'm older now.

Chris Nichols But I think you also have a really good perspective on creativity and the realities of creativity and how to make the most out of yourself creatively speaking. But what would be really cool is to... some people know of your work, obviously. It's been very big recently, which is great, but some people may not necessarily know about you and how you got to be the person that you are and the passions that you have in your painting and all that stuff. Can you tell people a little bit about how you started, how you sort of figured out your creative role and what made you the person you are today?

Alberto M It's a very long story. I don't know if we have the time.

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Alberto M I can make it short. I remember I was very young. I was maybe... I didn't even know how to read, and my father was reading these comic books that I actually happened to win in some sort of a drawing contest or something like that. And they gave me this little comic book from *Tintin*. I'm not too sure how you guys pronounce it. Which happened to be one of my very favorite comics ever, and I grew up with it. And I remember that day my father was pointing out each panel and telling me what was happening in the panels. Basically reading out loud.

Chris Nichols He was reading it for you, yeah, yeah, yeah.

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- Alberto M So, I remember I didn't know how to read. That was kind of like the clue that told me, "Okay, you don't know how to read," at that time. And I remember back then deciding like, "Wow, I want to do comic books myself." I had it that clear. And then since then, I was basically just drawing.
- Alberto M But it's been really like a whole rollercoaster, like this industry goes up and down, and I've been going through a lot of companies, a lot of cool times, difficult times, but always with a passion of doing what I like to do basically.
- Chris Nichols Right now actually it's very tough. We don't really know where things are going.
- Alberto M We don't know. We don't know. It's true.
- Chris Nichols We don't know.
- Alberto M Let's put a historical context. We are in the middle of a pandemic disaster. Yeah. It's pretty dramatic obviously for a lot of people, and it's very confusing for the ones that are not that dramatic. It's a really strange time.
- Chris Nichols It's true, but I think also this is a time where there is going to be a lot of the idea of storytelling and content is not going to go away.
- Alberto M It's not. It's not. It's true. It's true. Especially I have to talk for animation. We are now, I'm in the middle of preparing the next project and we are starting in the cloud. So we are basically working, and we always are anyway. Even if I have a base, a studio in Madrid, maybe let's say like 40% of the crew is elsewhere. Canada there are a lot of people, or sometimes even in Australia. It's just like animation is that flexible, fortunately.
- Chris Nichols That's actually a really good thing. So we're going to talk a little bit about the technology, but let's talk a little bit about your animation and your passion for animation. Obviously, you mentioned comic books as one thing. And when we look at ["The Witness,"](#) for example, we can definitely see an influence in comic books that happens in your style, and obviously a lot of the other work that you've done, but how did you get involved in animation and what's your idea of animation?
- Alberto M Well, animation, I think that the same passion that I had with comic books, it happened to me when I started watching all those Disney classics like... even though a lot of people, they told me that I'm sort of like an anti-Disney or whatever, which is not true. What happened is that my style perhaps is a little bit more targeted, the audience is more adult, and Disney is not. But I love Disney. The history of Disney for me is where it keeps me... is the reason why I'm here as well.

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- Alberto M I remember when I was watching *The Aristocats* or *101 Dalmatians*, I was like, "Geez, what the f*ck is this?" And I wanted to know how to do it, and I was doing a lot of failure attempts at home. Like I was just trying to basically... Oh, actually, I also have this machine that it was, in Spain it was called [inaudible], which it was like an orange box that you put a tape in, and then you roll it. I don't know what you guys call it in America. But it was also very nice because it has Disney pieces there, and you can see frame by frame because you can actually decide the speed that you want it. And you project it on the wall.
- Chris Nichols So, it was basically like a manual projector.
- Alberto M It's a manual projector and you have different cassettes that you put there and it has like little Disney shorts.
- Chris Nichols I remember those things.
- Alberto M That was amazing. And I guess that that gave me a little bit of like a sense of frames and a sense of speed. So, I remember that I was playing a lot like going further and going backwards because you can actually do that. And it was so, so amazing to have that.
- Alberto M And then I jumped into cinema and my obsession with cinema in general, and I've been watching a lot of films from everywhere. And then I apply film to animation. I don't apply animation into animation. I think that I have a little bit more knowledge in cinema in general, and I think... Sorry. Let me just correct myself. I think I apply more live action and cinema in general than animation itself.
- Chris Nichols Why is that?
- Alberto M I feel that there are better examples that I like in the world of cinema, live action, than in the world of animation. I have a lot of-
- Chris Nichols Is it because of the stories that are being told? Is it-
- Alberto M Yeah, stories, and cameras, and the-
- Chris Nichols But there's no reason why you can't have stories that are live-action stories in animation.
- Alberto M No, there is not. Nowadays we are improving that, and I think that we are having more and more specific and target stories, like we can do horror films, we can do dramas, we can do films about war. Everything. We are very flexible. We can do everything.
- Alberto M Now for some reason, I guess it's because the Pixar and Disney formula was very successful, and it kind of very much... it took the entire industry. It was so

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successful that it was... it's even difficult sometimes for the general audience to differentiate what is a Disney or what is a Pixar or what is a DreamWorks in terms of the story and in terms of the look. And I think that it is now time that the audience is ready to actually explore different storytellings and also different looks.

Alberto M It's sad that a technology that is so flexible and a technology that can depict so much, which is 3D. You can invent-

Chris Nichols It's become pigeonholed into one story type.

Alberto M Exactly. It's almost like all the rabbits, they look like the same rabbit, and all their deer, they look like the same deer. It's just a little bit frustrating. But it makes sense. It was a very successful business, so why change it?

Animation for adults and kids

Chris Nichols But it's also, it was always... This has been going on since the '40s or '30s. It was always, they were called cartoons, right? They were for the kids.

Alberto M It's true.

Chris Nichols And there was no reason why it needed to be for the kids, but that's what they saw, like, "Oh, kids like to draw. They like drawings. We'll make moving drawings." That's the animation. And it became the stereotype forever, and obviously there've been... Well, obviously *Heavy Metal* was one of the first ones that sort of showed that it could do something a little more adult. But even-

Alberto M Oh, but even before, you have... What was the name? The first cartoons were not strictly for kids and some of them were very adult. Like if you look at the original *Popeye* or even *Betty Boop*?

Chris Nichols *Betty Boop*... Yeah.

Alberto M Definitely that was not for kids.

Chris Nichols Pretty racy.

Alberto M I know, but it was very sexual, and a very sexy character, that it was very much trying to arouse. And so, it was not, originally it was not created for kids, I think. I think it was just like a... It was successful at some point, and I have to say something that is different from the movies back in the time and the movies

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nowadays. I don't have kids, but I see parents that they take their kids to the movies nowadays, and then they have their kid obsessed with the toys and they want to own every single toy and every single piece of merchandising. If I have a kid and I take my kid to the cinema and after the movie my kid is, "Oh, nah no, nah no, I want this merchandising. I want this toy." I will be very suspicious. I will be like, "This is weird and this is manipulation. This is strange." Because in the previous movies, I remember *101 Dalmatians* or *The Aristocats*, or other kinds of movies where kids, you want to be them or you want to be with them, with those cartoons, but you don't want to own them. There is not this feeling of possession I think that exists nowadays in these movies. And I don't know what it is. It's a strange manipulation, a weird maneuver.

Chris Nichols But it's also with adults.

Alberto M Yes.

Chris Nichols They're seeing it... and especially now, especially starting with the gen X, adults were still willing to buy merchandise of... you know? You don't see that in obviously... the baby boomers are not going out there and buying the latest *Hellboy* figurine, right?

Alberto M No, that's true.

Chris Nichols But we are. Gen X people. You go to any animator's desk and it's filled with toys a lot of times.

Alberto M It's true. It's true. We are so weird. We are.

Chris Nichols We are. And it's this collectible thing, and I don't under- Yeah, it's not me. I don't necessarily have a bunch of collectibles. I like T-shirts. For some reason, T-shirts are okay with me.

Alberto M Nice.

Chris Nichols But I don't, yeah. It's interesting. It's not... It's true though. You're right. There is a merchandise and an aspect of it, a commercial aspect to animation that's very different. And it's true that it's mostly in animation, in comic book content. You're not seeing a *Sophie's Choice* figurine, right?

Alberto M No. Exactly. That's actually something that I really would like to do. I would like to take animation into that level, into a level that doesn't need to be merchandised, doesn't need to be collectible. I would like to make... My dream is to make a film that can be... an animation film that can be considered best picture in of-

Chris Nichols Best picture.

Alberto M Yeah, for example-

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Chris Nichols Overall.

Alberto M Overall. Like you don't say best black-and-white film or best color film, so I would like to do a film that is so good that people are like, "Wow. I don't care about the technique. This is visually incredible and the story's really nice and engaging."

Chris Nichols Right. Yeah, but obviously there's a... In the Western culture, it still takes a long time to overcome that stigma, but obviously with Miyasaki, even films like Akira back in the day, these are films that are very powerful, very strong, that were very interesting as well. Do you think that there's something that we can learn from that type of content or those types of stories?

Alberto M Yeah. Personally, they... In Satoshi Kon, there are a number of movies coming from Japan and even from Korea in animation that are like masterpieces and they take animation into a very serious level that in the Western world, we are starting to take now. But in... the thing is that sometimes they are not very easy to translate, not in the language, I mean also the attitude and-

Chris Nichols The culture.

Alberto M ... the culture. Even when you watch... I love the films of Wong Kar-wai, for example. But it's for specific people that they like cinema or that they like that kind of film. But for the general audience, it's a different rhythm. The way that they talk is different, even the stories that they tell feel like they come from a different world. Which is what I find fascinating, but perhaps that's why anime, unless you are a big fan of anime, anime is not reaching out to as many people as, for example, a Pixar or something like that. But actually, sorry, for your question, if we have something to learn, yeah, I think mostly their respect for cinema and their respect for animation is something that definitely these guys take super far.

Chris Nichols Now, what's also interesting, because I have been talking to Tim Miller for years about this, and he's been on the podcast several times, actually, and we discussed it. And I remember the very first podcast I did with him was probably... five or six years ago. He was in the middle of post-production on *Deadpool*, and that was a film that would never have gotten made because of that stigma, superhero films are not R-rated. He said, "Well, I'm going to prove you wrong," and he did, obviously. Now, there's a lot of R-rated super films.

Chris Nichols But then he was telling me at that time, he was like, "I've... " The same conversation we're just having, he's like, "I don't know why we can't make animation that's geared for adults, R-rated content." And so, he had the idea of *Love, Death & Robots* for years, and it wasn't until the success of *Deadpool* that Netflix said, "Go for it." I think he found some really great content and really good people to do it, and I really love the variety, the variety of stuff that you got out of that, and styles, and comedy and drama and all these different things. But... and

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there's obviously a lot of people talking about "The Witness." There's a lot of stuff about it.

Chris Nichols It's a beautiful piece. It's a beautiful execution. It's a great story. It's a great style. But I know that a lot of people are going to sit here, and there's been stories about it, but I'd have you say it on the podcast: How? How did you do that?

Chris Nichols First of all, let's talk about what the story is and where that idea came from. But then you have to tell people about how it was done, how it was pulled off.

Alberto M Well, the story is very much a relationship in a way. It's a relationship that I was at the time involved in, and is one of those relationships that they're like really stormy, really dramatic, and that everybody's had them, those relationships where you, maybe it's very much based on sex and temptation, and you should leave it. You see red lights everywhere. This is not going anywhere. Stop it. And then both characters, they end up being a victim.

Alberto M So, it's a constant loop. You come back to those relationships again, and then you f*ck again, or you... or whatever. You come back somehow. And then you harm yourself and you harm the other person. So very much, it was "The Witness" is that. That's why there is like this interesting nightclub that is very sexual. That's why the girl is wearing this very long dress, because she's kind of representing the snake and the scene, which is basically the biggest representation of temptation for humans.

Alberto M And in fact, when we were doing the animation reference, I was asking the dancer, the girl that was doing the reference, like, "Don't take the dress with your hands." Like, "Wrap yourself as a snake is changing her skin." So when she's dancing, she's not using the hands ever. She's basically wrapping herself in the sofa in order to take the dress out. Which ends up being a very arousing experience. It was so personal that I think that people felt it.

Alberto M So, that's very much what the story is about. But it's a thriller, so for a lot of people-

Chris Nichols Oh yeah.

Alberto M ... it's basically a thriller, but I like to... It's funny because a lot of people, they say, "I don't like to explain..." I don't remember who it was. It's a very big director, somebody says, "I don't like to explain my movies because I think that it is like an obscene thing," or whatever. But sometimes it's nice to explain. I think it's good to give your own vision and your own take on the story.

Chris Nichols Sure. Sure.

Building "The Witness's" world

Alberto M How is it done? Well, to be honest, it's more simple as people think. It's basically-

Chris Nichols I think that's what's so cool about it.

Alberto M It's the same way that Bambi was done. It's basically a painting and a character running on top of it. So, we were doing a lot of paintings, so a lot of it is not 3D. We live in a world of 3D where people generate everything in 3D. They generate environments. They generate windows, doors, floors, and for this film, we only did three full 3D scenes. They were not even 3D. They were basically paintings, sort of like in a collage displayed in angles so we could move cameras there. But most of the-

Chris Nichols So, it's projected of some kind, or just planes, right?

Alberto M Exactly. Some sort of projection. Some stuff, there's some scenes that I did by myself in After Effects and they're in similar scenes that a friend of mine, which is artistic, it's called Heavypoly. He did it himself as well with his painting. Like in a way of... it's not even projection. It's basically you just get the painting and then put it in an angle, and that's it.

Chris Nichols Wow.

Alberto M And that's for the environment.

Chris Nichols That's for the environment.

Alberto M We obviously-

Chris Nichols But you painted all the stuff yourself, all the environments yourself? Or you had a team of people?

Alberto M Oh, well, I painted a big amount of them. I painted them up, but we were three people painting. Actually, we ended up having the help of two more people. So, let's say that we were five artists painting the environments.

Chris Nichols Wow. That's pretty amazing.

Alberto M Yeah, it was pretty cool. So, the way that I did it, I went to Hong Kong. And then I spent five days, it was like a whole marathon of photos going up, down, getting inside buildings. Like Hong Kong is open. You can actually access almost everything, and I was like sneaking in places.

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- Alberto M And I have a very crazy story that is a little bit long but it's a crazy story about what happened in Hong Kong. But anyway, I was taking a lot of reference, and then we were painting based on the reference. So, I went there. I was planning the shots. I was planning the action in the location. And that's something that I like to do always. I was working in this commercial that is also based in London and I did the same. I went there, and then it's cool to go on location because you can figure out the action. You can place your cameras, and then basically do a lot of painting.
- Alberto M And then for the 3D, we were doing the animation, so we were doing a lot of reference with several cameras, and we gave it to the animators, and then we have this incredible team of animators that are into realism and that's the way that they like to work. And that's the animation that I like as well. Something like what you can see also in going back to *Aristocats* or how they-
- Chris Nichols But you didn't... But they used reference. So, they used some kind of rotomation of some kind, right?
- Alberto M We use two camera references, so the artist could see different angles of how the body moves. It's basically what the Nine Old Men perhaps they were doing back in the time in Disney. So, it's basically how animators, they animate-
- Chris Nichols *Snow White* was-
- Alberto M Not in *Snow White*. I mean more like... I've seen a lot of videos, so animation references like Emile Cohl and all these... or the Nine Old Men, they were animating pretty realistically, but in a way they were having the freedom of animation, that you can exaggerate parts and you can be a little bit more free.
- Alberto M But it's very much the same way that all my friends at Disney or my friends in DreamWorks, that's how they animate. They take a lot of reference of themselves. They act in front of the camera. The thing that I think tricked the mind for a lot of people is that when you see a good animation in a Pixar film or in a Disney film, it's almost like, "Oh my God. That rabbit is talking so realistic. It cries, like the rabbit really means what he's saying. He's really like... The animator did such a good job." In "The Witness," the difference is that we actually use realistic proportions, so then all of a sudden, it becomes extra real.
- Alberto M So, I guess that perhaps is that... and the cloth. I think that the cloth also did a lot.
- Chris Nichols The cloth. Right. So, there's a couple things I want to get into. Because obviously, what's interesting about it is that... you are representing humans and you are showing humans. And they are people that, you know, expressing et cetera, et cetera. You're not shading them realistically. You're shading them in a different way that matches the style of your paintings and your backgrounds. And I'm

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assuming you used special shaders for that to give it the look to match everything to do correctly.

Chris Nichols But what's interesting is that while it's very, very realistic, somehow you were right on the... you could have been in the uncanny valley, but somehow something that you did, whether... What do you think helped you avoid it? Obviously, the realism of the animation is really good, but it's really hard for people to make humans look real, otherwise we would see more of it, but we don't, right? So, what do you think are some of the successes that allowed you to do it? I know your animators are extremely good, and clearly they are, but you must have some other things that help you make sure not to really get into the uncanny valley there. What do you think some of those things are?

Alberto M Well, I think that they obviously have the style. Even though the proportions, they were realistic, the characters as you are saying, they were much more... the shading was much more graphic. But the same as the painting. One of the rules that I have in the show, and I told the animators, I told the artists that they were also doing paintings, even to the modeler, we were saying, "Let's think about impersonation."

Alberto M Impersonation, basically, if you define it very quick is what your eye can... what you can see with the hint of an eye. Does it sound okay, or... ?

Chris Nichols Yeah.

Alberto M So, you look at something fast and that's what you're going to represent.

Alberto M My painting and my art is always based on that. So, if you get closer into the paintings, you can see that it is not so detailed. It's very abstract in fact. So, the eye doesn't need all that information. We don't need all that information in order to complete an image. Because when we are... Right now I am looking at this video that we have in front of us and I'm not looking at the window. I'm not looking at everything. Probably I'm not looking entirely at you. Sometimes I'm looking at your right eye or sometimes at your left eye. That means that all the information that I am not actually looking at is almost useless. And it can be represented in a very graphic and simple way.

Alberto M So, if you can do that with painting, you can also do that with characters. Yes, get rid of things that are not important like veins, pores, skin details, very detailed hairs, eyelashes. There are a lot of things that are really not important in a graphic impressionistic way, in the world. And the same for modeling. Less. I was always constantly referring to mannequins or to Barbies. Like, "Let's go for a simple surface, that can catch light in a softer way." I think that that's the goal always. And then when everything is cohesive, when things are not so complex in detail, then it's a gentle experience for the eye, I believe.

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Chris Nichols Well, yeah. I agree. I just want to hear what you had to say. I've been obsessed with digital humans for a long time, and I was sort of like, "This is very interesting," because there's always these different levels of how you can see things. And I always kind of remind people that there are two sides to the uncanny valley. When you have to get super hardcore realistic just to make sure that people are convinced, but then you can be just on the other side and it still be very compelling. And so, what you're doing is you're removing so much of the detail but you're keeping all the other realism in other ways. The realism comes from the proportions, it comes from the motion, it comes from the... all of the other things, and you don't need the microskin detail that you get from a physical scan of a person.

Alberto M Correct. Correct. You don't need it.

Chris Nichols So, I think... yeah. My video keeps going in and out, but you don't see any of my pores here, right?

Alberto M No.

Chris Nichols But what it can do is it, you represent other things that are very interesting. So, I found it fascinating that you got a lot of those details of the humans and proportions.

Chris Nichols You mentioned the cloth. The cloth was amazing. So, did you guys do the cloth? And obviously, cloth is almost a character in this story, which I also found amazing, especially her trying to escape in that situation and her vulnerability through that cloth is so thin. And so, the thing that... did you guys do cloth simulations from it? Did you use reference? How did you do that?

Alberto M For years, I have sewn... I love fashion and I personally think that when you do character design, you need to think about what this character is wearing and why she or he is choosing to wear these clothes because that defines the character. And I've seen in many... In the industry, I've always seen a lack of fashion and a lack of love for the cloth used, and most of the time, and don't... let's be fair, it's because it's a technology that hasn't been explored and it usually gives a lot of problems. Cloth simulation is usually very problematic.

Alberto M And a long time ago, even much before "The Witness," I remember seeing the first Marvelous Designer... videos and sort of like simulations online, and I was like, "Sh*t, that's cool." There was also-

Chris Nichols But it was also designed for the fashion industry, right? Or wasn't it?

Alberto M It was designed exclusively for fashion, but their dynamics and the physics that they put behind it were so good that people, like me for example, they say like,

"F*ck. Let's just start doing something," and apply it into animation. But a lot of people did it before me anyway, so I was, yes, I was basically inspired.

Exploring the uncanny valley

Alberto M And I also experienced that in animation, we always have a lot of problems with rigging how an elbow bends, how a shoulder deforms. There are a lot of corrective shapes that we can apply nowadays, but it's always been a problem. It's like all these muscles, we are such a complex... Speaking about realism and the uncanny valley, the eye is so picky and so perfectionist and when we see that something is working as slightly different to how we usually expect humans to behave, we catch it very, very, very, very soon. So, in-

Chris Nichols Yes. That's our defense mechanism, actually.

Alberto M Is it?

Chris Nichols Yeah. Because... I have a whole talk about this. I've done many talks about visual humans.

Alberto M Oh wow.

Chris Nichols When you're a child, when you're a baby, the first thing... Like when my daughter was born, the first thing she does is stare at me in the face. So, she studies the face. That's the first thing you learn as an infant. You look at your mother, your father. You just look for two eyes and a nose. And that's how you understand the face. And you learn the face and what a normal face looks like. If something doesn't look normal or slightly off, that is when babies cry because they're scared of death. So that's when they look at... That's why people always go... like this to babies because they won't want them to be scared. But if you went like this to a baby, it would freak out.

Chris Nichols So that progresses later in life to become like your survival thing. And speaking of coronavirus, if someone looks slightly sick, you are like, "Stay away."

Alberto M Yeah, of course.

Chris Nichols So, the uncanny valley is exactly that. If something looks not quite alive, your mind goes, "Ah, death, sickness, zombie," whatever. So, that's what causes the repulsion; because you think something is not quite right. Especially if it's close enough to human that it should be human, but if it's not, then you don't have to

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worry about it, because, "Well, I don't buy that as... you know, so don't worry about it."

Alberto M Wow. So yeah, that's one of the things that when you see an elbow, that it bends strange, you are like, "Oh, that looks very weird."

Chris Nichols Yup, that it looks weird.

Alberto M So, combining these two things, my love for fashion, my love of like... I actually realize that I am obsessed about how cloth moves in general. Like I'm very much into dynamics right now, not only for clothes, but like any sort of dynamic, I find it fascinating.

Chris Nichols Right.

Alberto M And it's a cool way of covering a lot of mistakes. Like if you put a little bit of cloth on top and it moves nice and moves organically. So, we were trying several options. We were trying end cloth. We were trying... I don't even remember, but back in the time we were trying some things and we were actually trying a very complicated shot that everybody was telling me, "That's going to be impossible," which is when the girl... Sorry. There is a helicopter.

Chris Nichols That's okay.

Alberto M It's going to be recorded. That's fine, right?

Chris Nichols That's fine. Everyone knows we're dealing with hard times. We can deal with a helicopter.

Alberto M Well, LA has helicopters even in the happiest times.

Chris Nichols That's true.

Alberto M But there is this scene where the girl actually dresses with the jacket in the corridor. She actually pulls the jacket in.

Chris Nichols Oh, yeah, yeah.

Alberto M And that's one of the most difficult things to do in 3D. And we were trying and trying and it was impossible, impossible. So, I always wanted to do Marvelous Designer, and I wanted to push for Marvelous Designer. And I had so many people telling me like, "No. It's not going to work. The body of work that you want to do is not going to work." So, I wanted to push, I wanted to push. And my friend, Hidetaka, at the time, he was... the head of characters. He was doing all the rigging. We were doing some tests with Marvelous Designer. We were always getting stuck in the part where the girl was getting the sleeve inside, but we-

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- Chris Nichols That's like the classic problem of cloth sim is like putting a shirt on is like impossible.
- Alberto M Impossible. But we did it.
- Chris Nichols Yeah, you did it.
- Alberto M We did it, but the thing is that we were trying and trying and then at some point, we needed help, so... our friend, Fernando, he was head of layout, he had a friend who is called Diego Conte, who is the brain behind the Marvelous Designer in my projects now. And we brought him in, and he's a very talented kid, and he didn't know too much about the program at the time, or at least as much as he knew. And we more or less explained to him what we were doing, and he took like a week to speed up and to understand the program and everything, and then he came up with a system, and we did it. And now, I keep working with Diego and we were doing another of my shorts, "The Windshield Wiper," which he handled. So, Diego and his team, they were doing it, and also a commercial that we just finished, like a four-minute commercial. And we were basically doing very complex cloth simulation there as well with a lot of fashion and things.
- Alberto M So, I'm going to keep doing it because I love it. I think that it looks very nice and we can design amazing clothes. You can even bring, imagine, like a brand.
- Chris Nichols Right. Well, so that was the thing. The thing that's amazing to me about the short is that you used the tools that you had and you can get as analog or as technical as possible. You went from just painting abstract environments to full-cloth simulation at the highest, most complicated level, all shoved into the same content, all while telling a story that is completely compelling. It's quite a feat. It's quite a feat.
- Alberto M Wow.
- Chris Nichols I was really, really impressed. And people still talk to me about it to this day, and it's like, "How did they do it?" I was like, "You know, I think there was a lot of just getting it done. Just get it done."
- Alberto M Yes, yes.
- Chris Nichols But also, you weren't over-analyzing things. You used a technology when it was appropriate, and then you just kept going with the rest of it as you needed to. That's the way it seems to me.
- Alberto M Yeah, absolutely. And there's a lot of mistakes. That cloth, there were like, for example, like, "Oh my God. It was a f*ck up," and it was not working, and then I repainted frame-by-frame on many occasions because we have problems with the hair exploding, or like doing a lot of things, and it's like, what are you going to

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do? Are you going to re-render things? Or you're going to erase? There's a lot of things that you can do. You can manipulate frames. It's almost like an obsession of making everything in 3D from scratch. But there are a lot of things that you can mix. You can cheat. You can... Animation is an illusion, is what it's supposed to be. I think that the 3D is breaking a little with that. We're still doing the frame-by-frame illusion. It's this amazing book, *The Illusion of Life*, Disney, the super-thick book. And that's it. It's a trick. It needs to be a trick.

Chris Nichols And I think it's okay to paint.

Alberto M Absolutely.

Chris Nichols And I think it...

Alberto M Absolutely.

Chris Nichols I think you're right. I think you're absolutely right. It's okay to paint. It's okay to composite. I think this is interesting. I had a podcast that I recorded recently. It's not out yet, but it will be out soon with my friend, Esdras Varagnolo who's over at... he was at Pixar, and he was like, "It took years to convince Pixar that they could composite something." Because they would... "Oh, the highlight is not right there. Re-render everything." He was like... you know?

Alberto M Well, they can't spend that money.

Chris Nichols Well, I don't know. I just think it's a little different. But I think it's fascinating what you're doing. So, now that you've done what you've done, and Tim [Miller] has done what he's done and proven that after years and years of convincing people now that we've done *Love, Death & Robots* and that's happened, do you feel that the world of animation has new opportunities and new types of content?

Alberto M Yeah, it is happening. The only thing is that animation unfortunately takes a while. So, the things that we are doing now are going to take a while to watch. That's the only problem. But all the networks, most of the networks, they have like an adult side that is as big as the children now. Everybody's looking into that. I'm constantly having meetings and talking to people, and everybody's interested about how adult this is and how cool it can be. Right now we are in a place that actually two years ago, two years ago it was impossible. And two years ago you cannot go to a network and say, or three years ago, you cannot go to a network and say, "Hey, I have this cool animation film. There is cocaine in there. There are like guns. There is shooting." "Cool. Let's do it." And it's going to happen.

Chris Nichols It did exist in Western culture, but it was very small and very niche. So there was Cartoon Network. There used to be their session that they did, After Hours. So, it was after 10:00 or whatever. They called it Adult Swim. And Adult Swim was definitely for adults, right?

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Alberto M Yeah, but that's comedy. It's different.

Chris Nichols That was humor. It was comedy-

Alberto M It's different.

Chris Nichols ... and that's what I was trying to get at.

Alberto M It's different.

Chris Nichols Comedy... Yeah, because obviously *Family Guy* is not geared for kids, right, but it is-

Alberto M Or *Simpsons*. Right.

Chris Nichols *Simpsons*. Right? Right. So, what is the distinction? Do you think comedy, but drama is the thing that suddenly was not allowed, right?

Alberto M Yeah. I think so. I think so, and fiction in general. That is not adventures or fantasy for kids is the thing that it hasn't been explored. Anything that is comedic like you have a feature film of *South Park* years ago, you have... I don't remember the name of this other movie. Also the *South Park* people did it with the little... with the toys.

Chris Nichols Oh, the puppets.

Alberto M Exactly. So, you can have those very-

Chris Nichols Oh, *Team America*. Is that what it was?

The need for dramatic animation

Alberto M There you go. Super extreme, funny, good writing, but it was always with the comedy thing. I'm personally... Comedy is probably the most difficult thing. I think that comedy's super, super difficult. But what I'm saying is that in animation, we didn't explore drama. We haven't explored fully, fully like drama, horror, thriller, any kind of film that does not necessarily need to have fantasy levels or pets or sh*t like that.

Alberto M And not only that, with decent and good budgets. Because that's also very important. You could always have people doing independent films, killing themselves for no money, and then all of a sudden they do a movie that it kind of

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like opens in Cannes, for example, or in Venice, or in a very niche festival, but now we have people willing to put money on it. Decent budgets. And that's where we can all win.

Chris Nichols It's cool. And I also think that the streaming networks are helping as well right now. Because the streaming networks are making it that they feel like they can provide content that goes in a bucket, and then when people want to drink from that bucket, they can drink whenever they want. They don't have to sit there and worry about what time slot they are going to be airing this or whatever, you know what I mean? Or how many people are going to go to the movie theater to see this? It's a very different approach to things, and I think it's successful because when... especially with that type of content, that you have to be ready to digest it. You have to be like, "Okay. I'm ready to see this content." When you do it on your own time and your own choices, that is very powerful, and I think you have a lot of content.

Chris Nichols And I'm seeing it more and more, what was the... Did you see *Undone* on... I think it's on Amazon Prime? Did you see *Undone*?

Alberto M No, no, no. I haven't seen it. I barely have time to do anything else.

Chris Nichols I know. But I was thinking of you when I saw that because it was a lot of very similar concepts and ideas that were going on into *Undone*, and again, that is an animation done much more like *A Scanner Darkly*, so it's much more rotomation.

Alberto M Yeah, I saw it. I mean I saw some of the trailer and the video-

Chris Nichols The style, yeah.

Alberto M ... it looks very amazing and the story looks very interesting.

Chris Nichols And all the backgrounds were oil paintings.

Alberto M I know. I know. I heard about that.

Chris Nichols But I think it was really beautiful to think about that stuff, and that this content is possible and these stories are possible. And it was also interesting when I saw that is when it becomes a question, well, why bother with animation? Right? But what was really cool about that one, and it's similar to what you did in "The Witness" is that you can make a visual that is richer, more interesting. And I think that styles are much better to interpret in animation because you can draw it and you can literally represent that drawing as an animation, as opposed to, "Here's a drawing. Now recreate that in live action." It doesn't always translate as well as the drawing does, right?

Alberto M Yeah. And if you think about it, historically painting has been around much longer than the real image. The cinema and photography very much, they have like a

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century, it's a century-years old. And we have been used to seeing painting and the depiction of reality in a graphic way, painterly from even the caves to all the medieval paintings, the Renaissance, and up to the modern painting. So, I think that humans are craving for graphic representations because photography and video and film was sort of like a new thing. Everything went into that direction. But I think that we can mix both and humans probably are happy to see painting back into the screens and how we can put it there.

Alberto M It's so cool how animation is a mix of every single art. If you think about it, there is no art that is out there that is not in a movie. There's like, it's drawing, painting, writing, and storytelling, acting, music. Nowadays with 3D, you have also sculpting and like modeling.

Chris Nichols Every fine art is represented there, right.

Alberto M Everything. Everything, in one five-minute piece to an 80-minute piece to a 300-minute TV show; every single art is there and a lot of artists. So, I think it's such a crafted medium. I love it the most. If people tell me, like, "What do you prefer, painting or animation?" I will say, "Animation 100%."

Chris Nichols Because you still get to paint.

Alberto M I still get to paint, plus I tell stories, and I don't have to think about let's just do one piece and just leave it there.

Chris Nichols So, you mentioned earlier, it was like you would love to make a piece that's an animation that would be considered for best picture as an Oscar, right?

Alberto M Oh, any festival. Any...

Chris Nichols So, your kind of stories... Oh, I understand. I'm just saying that as an example, though. Right? Because it makes an impression. But what kind of story would you like to tell?

Alberto M Well, I have several. I'm actually... funny, like right now is the time and everybody's kind of in contact, and I'm having a lot of conversations about it. And I'm in the works of actually three feature films right now which I'm working on the stories and writing. I guess that that says that I cannot talk about it.

Chris Nichols I know you can't talk about it. You can't talk about it.

Alberto M But sort of a story? Okay-

Chris Nichols But let's say, what's the genre? What's the thing that most compels you? What's the thing that drives you to write? What kind of stories?

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- Alberto M Well, I would say that the films that maybe I love... I obviously love, for example, say *Blade Runner*. What I like about *Blade Runner*, for example, apart from historically the world... I'm not saying that I want to do that, okay? But I'm saying if the films that I like, I like from *Blade Runner*, for example, French cinema, what was the name? I was just recently checking... very obsessed about a lot of relationships ... Éric Rohmer.
- Chris Nichols Oh, yeah, yeah.
- Alberto M It's like... So, if you say these two films, anything in the middle I like. But, for example, what I really like about *Blade Runner* is the humanity of that film, like how human it is, how deep it is. Take all the science fiction away, which I like, but you take the science fiction away and the thing that I like the best is the human part. And that's what I feel that that other films are lacking now. They're lacking humanity. They're lacking... because everything is about a hero. Everything is about a guy that is able to save the world, and those usually... like I feel that they don't connect as much with myself as the story of a person that perhaps he's a loser, or instead of a superhero, he's a super loser. Things like that, they usually are more interesting for me. And those are the stories that I would like to tell. I would like to make films that are more about human relationships or human struggles within the context of action, within the context of science fiction, whatever. But it needs to be a nice, pure human element.
- Chris Nichols Well, that's true. I think that's interesting. But I also think it's great that you're looking at when you're considering your animation and you're considering your stories, you're getting inspired by live action.
- Alberto M 100%, yes.
- Chris Nichols Or movies that would traditionally be live action. And I think that if you continue with the idea of creating an animation that could have been live action, and then instead, you gave it another level of personality through animation, is actually really amazing.
- Alberto M 100%. Yeah. In mind, you do transporting in animation. It could be pretty fun. Why not?
- Chris Nichols Right. Why not?
- Alberto M And right now we are in that situation. In fact, a lot of the meetings that I'm having, when I'm talking with the networks and people they are sending me scripts for a while they're sending me something that's funny because usually they send me stuff that it has something from Hong Kong because I did "The Witness," and something that has fantasy because it's animation, and it takes a while to tell the people like, "No, yeah send me any script that is good, a good writing, that is meant to be for live action." Like, "I'll do it in animation. I interpret it

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in animation, but I want to see something that is not meant to be for animation. I want to read that kind of thing." And that's what I'm trying to do.

Chris Nichols I think it's hilarious because what you're doing is you're reverse-Disneying this again because Disney right now is doing all these animations and making live action versions of them, and what you want to do-

Alberto M It's actually the opposite.

Chris Nichols ... is to take something that's the absolute opposite. You want to take something that was meant for live action and turn that into animation.

Alberto M Absolutely.

Chris Nichols And I think that's wonderful. Yeah. Wonderful.

Alberto M That's my driving right now and basically my dream, which is kind of like happening, which is great.

Chris Nichols That's awesome. That's awesome. Well, I think this is really cool. I think that you're going to be, I know you are already very successful and we can't wait to see how you're going to be able to change the face of animation. I know that you've already done that in many ways, and I'm very excited about the world of animation because people like you are pushing the boundaries of what people expect and that we're all so-

Alberto M Thank you so much.

Chris Nichols Thank you for doing that. Yeah. Thanks for doing that.

Chris Nichols Listen, we're going to end it here, but if possible, I want you to stay on because I have to... the audio has to upload-

Alberto M Of course.

Chris Nichols ... so, I'll just keep you on, but anyway. But thanks for doing this, man.

Alberto M Thank you so much, man. I appreciate a lot of your time as well because it's nice to reach out to people in any way, and I think it's nice to educate the audience as well and to tell them that there are other ways of doing it, and if this through podcast or if it's through any sort of like media, it's like, "Yeah, let's do it, for sure."

Chris Nichols Thank you. I agree, and I'm really glad we were able to do this with you.

Alberto M Cool.

Chris Nichols So, thank you.

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Alberto M Thank you so much.