

Meditative ‘Transcendence’ Also Artificially Intelligent

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The Internet is for real in “Transcendence”, a B-movie with grade-A production quality, loaded with terabyte-size open-ended questions, so long as one can accept it lastly with a scientific mindset. It is a film that perceives technology to be more expansive than a box of wires and computer chips, and actualizes the expanse of the internet as limitless to the realm of spiritual. Like the notion of titling a wide-released movie “Heaven Is for Real”, the experience of “Transcendence” depends on believing in the possibility of the film’s philosophies, and through a mostly meditative state about what an internet connection can really achieve. Its hyper reality is to be accepted, do-or-discard. For some, it will play off as glossy Ed Wood, but for those who choose to roll with its prophesying, “Transcendence” will challenge and intrigue by raising questions beyond the usual blockbuster scope.

Before taking on a hyper reality, “Transcendence” begins as a contemporary take on our relationship with technology. Dr. Will Caster (Johnny Depp) is a genius scientist who, along with his wife Evelyn (Rebecca Hall) dreams of restoring the world with the assistance of evolving technology. In his provocative way, he dreams of creating a new god (“Isn’t that what we’ve always done?” he asks at a conference). Soon into the film he is shot with a poisoned bullet by an anti-tech terrorist group named RIFT (which stands for Revolutionary Independence from Technology, as led by Bree, played by Kate Mara), which weakens his body and gives him about a month to live. With the help of fellow scientist Max Waters (Paul Bettany), he and Evelyn download Dr. Caster into a computer, where his consciousness is uploaded entirely into a hard drive in something called “transcendence”. When Mara and her thugs race over to destroy this computer human, Evelyn uploads him to the internet, and the game completely changes.

From this point on, “Transcendence” fully kicks off into its B-movie mode, beginning with a wishful, but stupidly huge, two-year-long plot crater that may fully implode the film for viewers who approach stories with logic in firsthand. Nonetheless, the story within “Transcendence” then turns its focus to ruminating on the limitless expanse of the internet age, as Dr. Caster takes his new god-like potential as a supercomputer to biblical lengths. RIFT then teams up with the FBI (led by Cillian Murphy’s Agent Buchanan) and Dr. Caster’s scientist colleague Joseph (Morgan Freeman), and attempt to symbolically unplug the computer man before his internet control affects the entire world.

Presented as an image on various screens for 3/4ths of the film, Depp upgrades the famous sci-fi character of the supercomputer to having a vivid personality. His dialogue reasonably coming in flat like a computer’s intonation, he articulates a vivid sense of consciousness within technology. The film’s most significant performance, however, belongs to Hall, a woman who creates a monster out of love’s desperation, and for the most part pledges to that bond even when things are going haywire (even though the the script’s imposed naivete on her character made me laugh out loud at least once).



Johnny Depp, Rebecca Hall, and Paul Bettany in 'Transcendence'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

As “Transcendence” challenges audiences with jarring non-science, its storytelling becomes a similarly irregular experience. Reasonable preconceptions about characters, concerning their purpose for the story, are countered. For example, while Mara makes a case for a strict antagonist against Depp’s heroic dreams, the film’s debate becomes bigger than choosing one side or the other. Even then, by the time it reaches a strikingly heavy climax, where the film finally provides a burst of action, “Transcendence” is bigger than the designation of a villain at all. This all makes the film a surprising ride, in the face of its polarizing notions.

One of the script’s plainer flaws is its bloated list of characters, which seem to better service the idea of utilizing familiar faces, than actually drawing rich characters. The same intrigue that makes for the bizarre relationship 2.0 between Hall & Depp isn’t shared in particular with characters played by Freeman, Murphy, who are complicit in over-expanding what could have been a more intimate story albeit with huge theories.

For whatever immediate logic may casually glossed over by the movie, “Transcendence” creates a vivid progressive vision of its own hyper-reality, utilizing certain sci-fi elements with tact. Their inclusion may be comical at first (you’ll chortle too when a certain character opens his mouth), but these strange visual elements do settle into the experience, matched with the endless hallways shown as symbolism more than concrete feats of architecture and manpower. First-time director Wally Pfister and debut scribe Jack Paglen have a reasonable control over the genre tropes they throw into the big picture, (which are too surprising to spoil), providing them only as supporting details, and not the main idea.

“Transcendence” strikes deepest when it explores the good ol’ paradox of our primitive organic existence, the allegorical evolution of technology within the film asking “Under the Skin”-size questions about what shall always separate humans from sentients. Though backed up with the image of gibberish formulas, slapped on the screen like similar images of tangled wires leading to nowhere, consciousness is one of its most intriguing discussion topics (can self-awareness be downloaded?), along with the science of human emotion, which computer-Depp reasons is simply “biochemistry”. A moment in which Bettany’s character reasons that human emotion is illogical particularly stuck with me. These questions are heaped, of course, on top of the movie’s head-scratching about the plausibility of this film’s technology, if super intelligence is indeed as mighty as the film dreams it to be.



Morgan Freeman, Cillian Murphy, and Hall in ‘Transcendence’
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Though not shown until the end credits, “Transcendence” does want to note throughout its story that it was overseen and supported by juggernaut Christopher Nolan, who is indeed one of the film’s executive producers. Pfister, Nolan’s right-hand cinematographer from “Memento” through “The Dark Knight Rises”, provides nudges to this with the usage of many actors (Freeman, Hall, Murphy, Josh Stewart, Lukas Haas) from previous Nolan projects. Nonetheless those anticipating a movie charged like a Nolan movie will be underwhelmed. Aside from expressive wide angle shots, Pfister steps away from the mythic visual authorship he assembled as a cinematographer (though he does keep an allegiance here to the dimensions of film stock). That being said, “Transcendence” doesn’t necessitate an IMAX experience, unless one can locate a theater actually presenting it on film.

Though made with the blessing of Nolan and his acting collaborators, “Transcendence” raises skepticism, like that tumultuous third act of “The Dark Knight Rises”, about the ultimate cerebral intentions behind the usage of specific creative stretches. Its script tells a story of a “new type of thinking,” but feels safer with standards, while eschewing the tight storytelling that universally leaves more of an impact (RE: Nolan’s “Inception”). Despite its creation by intelligent beings, the film’s own self-awareness to its flawed choices remains disturbingly questionable.

“Transcendence” opens everywhere on April 18th. Featuring Johnny Depp, Rebecca Hall, Paul Bettany, Morgan Freeman, Kate Mara, Cillian Murphy, Clifton Collins Jr., and Lukas Haas. Screenplay by Jack Paglen. Directed by Wally Pfister. Rated “PG-13”



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