Man & Machine Come Together For a Sci-Fi ‘Upgrade’

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on June 1, 2018 - 10:52am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “We can rebuild him, we have the technology…” Those words from the 1970s series “The Six Million Dollar Man” seems more truth than science fiction these days, as breakthroughs in humans plus robotics get ever closer to rebuilding us. This is all explored in the fun and action-oriented film “Upgrade.”

Written and directed by Leigh Whannell, who usually writes/directs horror for the Blumhouse Productions (“Insidious”), this contains the twist of sci-fi, as a mysterious tech mogul wants to regenerate human tissue through a computer chip insertion. While similar in story elements from 2016’s “Ex Machina,” the themes are different, as the beneficiary of the upgrade is seeking revenge. There is a lot of wit and symbolic wisdom in the story (the “control” of the victim’s limbs are facilitated by an inner voice), and the fight action combines martial artistry with comic surrealism. This is Whannell’s first non-horror film – although there are horror parts to it – and it bodes well for his future as a creative movie maker.

Grey (Logan Marshall-Green) and Cortez (Betty Gabriel) are in the midst of newly wedded bliss in a future world with tech conveniences, one of them being a constant drone supported eye-in-the-sky for law enforcement. When the couple’s self driving car goes off the grid, it ends up in an attack zone, where Cortez is killed and Grey suffers a spinal cord injury that leaves him paralyzed from the neck down.



Grey (Logan Marshall-Green) Gets Rebuilt in ‘Upgrade’
Photo credit: BH Tilt

But they can rebuild him. An eccentric tech mogul, Eron (Harrison Gilbert), has developed a computer chip that when inserted into the spinal cord can bring function to paralyzed limbs. Grey can not only walk again, but has an “internal voice” computer that can give him super powers on command. He decides to use this opportunity to get revenge on his wife’s killers, but the creator of the chip isn’t on board.

Therein lies the sci-fi morality… who is ultimately in control when the control is from the outside? The inner-voice technology of the computer becomes ironic, because like the computer HAL in “2001: A Space Odyssey,” Grey’s inside voice, and the controller of that voice, becomes disappointed by the direction of his pursuit. These layers of consequence is what gives the film its energy, and Whannell’s screenplay and direction performs all the notes of this morality.

Also great is Logan Marshall-Green as Grey. His everyman quality was perfect for the role, as his paralyzed depression morphs into a fiery determination. There is a side story involving his mother, which gives his personality a touch of Oedipal blend. It’s as if the bearded hipster at an artsy neighborhood bar suddenly got woke and did a Jackie Chan on his fellow bar patrons (maybe that’s MY fantasy). Green handles his mild mannered role with truth and justice, which makes the best superheroes.



Reboot: Helping Grey Back on His Feet in ‘Upgrade’
Photo credit: BH Tilt

There were a couple films in the past few years which were similar to “Upgrade,” which might mean it’s now a genre. “The Guest” (2014) had Dan Stevens as a Terminator-style cyber-soldier, and “Ex Machina” (2016) explored the eccentric tech genius desiring to change the world through his science. “Upgrade” blends it all together, and adds the horror elements – bloody violence, humans with guns embedded in their skin and creepy voices – to create a whole new atmosphere, and the creative charge of Leigh Whannell completes the journey.

We’re living in an era where many of the best new director voices in cinema – Trey Shults, Ti West, James Wan and now Leigh Whannell – all have roots in horror. The psychology of scaring people is the root of all inner voices, and moving forward there is plenty of fear to go around.

“Upgrade” opens everywhere on June 1st. Featuring Logan Marshall-Green, Betty Gabriel, Harrison Gilbertson, Benedict Hardie, Melanie Vallejo and Christopher Kirby. Written and directed by Leigh Whannell. Rated “R”

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