

Upgrade ups the ante on low-budget thrills

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «««« out of «««««

Running Time: 95 minutes

It's tough competing with the big studios, who have far more money and production services at their disposal. So, it's great anytime that a small film tires to compete against the majors and comes out on top. Such is the case with *Upgrade*, a small, independent science-fiction/action film full of inventive visual and original ideas that make it just as effective, if not more so, than its expensive big budget counterparts.

Set in a future populated with flying drones and self-driving cars, the story involves Grey Trace (Logan Marshall-Green), a man who prefers to spend his time away from technology and working on antique vehicles.

However, when a tragic robbery results in Grey becoming paraplegic, he accepts an offer from tech industry tycoon Eron (Harrison Gilbertson) to have a piece of artificial intelligence named STEM (Simon Maiden) inserted into his spinal column. Besides allowing him full movement, Trace now has a voice in his head advising him on his actions. He soon heads out on a mission of revenge, hunting down Fisk (Benedict Hardie), a man who also appears to have had technical upgrades and averting the suspicion of police detective Cortez (Betty Gabriel).

The movie shows a novel streak right from the beginning by having the computerized STEM voice read the opening credits aloud, rather than have them listed on the screen. And the film

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benefits from a sympathetic lead character who is forced to deal with horrific circumstances that immediately develop empathy on the part of the viewer. Admittedly, a plot involving the influence of technology on our lives as well as the positive and ultimately negative impact of artificial intelligence isn't unique (we've seen it in films like *Ex Machina*). Yet, while this is more of an action picture than an existentialist drama, it still presents viewers with some fascinating moments.

As the AI begins to influence the lead character, it leads to plenty of dangerous encounters. It's in these sequences that the movie really excels. Trace discovers that he is able to give full control of his body over to STEM, leading him to take on jerky but extremely effective modes of attack and self-defense. These scenes are captured with camera moves that are equally punchy, often moving and twisting along with the actor as he performs various physical feats. The fact that the protagonist is literally watching himself with wonder as he delivers brutal blows is an original and marvelous idea. It provides some incredibly dynamic (if extraordinarily violent) moments.

Sure, while the finale offers a twist it ultimately isn't a mind-blowing reveal. This movie is really about Grey's mission and moving events forward, which it excels at. The fight scenes are striking, but these sequences never repeat themselves so much that it gets tiring. Once the characters and concept are clearly established, the film's pacing is zippy, keeping the fights, investigations and car chases moving at a consistent and rapid rate.

Writer/director Leigh Whannell wrote the *Saw* and *Insidious* movie series and one can see a few nods to the genre during its brief bursts of graphic violence. However, it's quite a different beast, and may even end up having broader appeal. I'm not sure how well

Upgrade

will perform in the middle of the summer movie season against so many Hollywood tent pole releases, but it will eventually find an audience and provide just as much of a blast to those who see it in theaters as its higher budgeted competition.

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