Opinion
Culture



Keean Johnson (left) and Rosa Salazar (center) in 'Alita: Battle Angel" (Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox)



by Rose Pacatte

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Science-fiction cyborgs, or "cybernetic organisms" have been around in print and film for a long time. My personal favorite is the Terminator in futuristic filmmaker James Cameron's 1991 film "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

One year earlier saw the first publishing of Japanese author Yukito Kishiro's cyberpunk manga (or Japanese style comic) graphic-novel series, with "Battle Angel Alita" as the heroine cyborg. Cameron is co-producer and co-writer of "Alita: Battle Angel." As beautiful as Cameron's film "Avatar" was, this new film is dark and ugly. "Spy Kids" producer and grindhouse master Robert Rodriguez directs. He manages to appeal to younger viewers while making sure it happens against a trashed, dark dystopian landscape with a lot of violent action.

Dr. Dyson Ido (Christoph Waltz) is a Dr. Frankenstein-like cyberphysician who searches the dump for pieces of biomechatronic parts to join with organic or human remains, to create or give new life to broken cyborgs. It is the year 2563 and a war, "The Fall," has devastated the Earth. Humans and cyborgs live side-by-side in a weird attempt at dingy normalcy. Hunter-Warriors hunt down bad-guy bounty hunters (played by Mahershala Ali and Ed Skrein) who are hunting them. Ido is a secret Hunter-Warrior.

Ido finds a torso and head of a female cyborg with a human brain undamaged in the junkyard. He puts her together and names her Alita (Rosa Salazar), after his little girl who died.

A kind of spaceship city named Zalem hovers over the place where Ido lives and works. It is tethered to the earth but there is no coming and going. Ido, his former wife Chiren (Jennifer Connolly) and their daughter had been expelled from Zalem years before. Chiren is not happy that Ido has named the new cyborg Alita. It brings back memories, and for some reason she longs to return to Zalem.

Alita is very sweet but does not remember who she was or what her talents are. She does not obey Ido's curfew, meets a human boy named Hugo (Keean Johnson) and

falls in love. They compete in Motorball, a roller derby game on steroids. She discovers she is a martial arts master of "Panzer Kunst." Alita is frustrated at Ido's cautious approach of using his skills to fuse organic, biological, mechanical and electronic parts to revive cyborgs, so she registers as a Hunter-Warrior and takes on the bad guys.

My colleague Pauline Sr. Nancy Usselmann and I were invited to an "Alita: Battle Angel" immersion experience for journalists in a scruffy area near downtown Los Angeles before we saw the film. We had no idea what to expect but it was a lot of fun.  Not having read the graphic novels made it all the more intriguing as we waited in the Kansas Bar and spent an hour in a room made up of expertly replicated sets from the film. There, we were part of several teams that competed to win points and receive a special coin to save us from something (we never figured out just what that was!)

We enjoyed the Alita press experience but the 3D film a little less. It is derivative and desperate to entertain. (Our seats shook with the explosions but were a little out of sync; I thought it was so cheesy.) Alita reminded me of other sci-fi films such as "Another Earth" (2011), "Upside Down" (2012) and "Elysium" (2013). These were better told and deeply felt stories with another earth or city attached or connected in some way to a ruined earth, with characters yearning to transcend isolation and desolation to find meaning and connection with others. The original "Blade Runner" (1982) also contributes to the visual ethos of this film. "Alita: Battle Angel" does not come near to delivering a plot and characters that rival these earlier films.

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Science fiction as a genre that maintains its validity when it takes us on a journey that reveals what it means to be authentically human. Sometimes I want to tell filmmakers not to try so hard to create a superficial spectacle, however visually fantastic the CGI and special effects; but instead tell us a story that stays with us beyond the exit door.

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