The evil-smartphone movie Jexi doesn’t understand why people like technology

The new evil-smartphone comedy *Jexi* is a desperate mockup of recognizable human behavior, but one key element rings truer than most Hollywood productions: characters are constantly looking at their phones. It’s not just aspiring journalist Phil (Adam Devine), the film’s awkwardly isolated, phone-obsessed hero. *Jexi* briefly pathologizes Phil’s particular fixation through a couple of flashback scenes where, as a child, he’s repeatedly handed a phone to stave off boredom or strife.

But it quickly broadens to show nearly every background extra in the movie’s San Francisco setting with their heads tilted down toward their smartphone screens. When Phil literally bumps into local bike-shop owner Cate (Alexandra Shipp) because he’s staring at his phone, the fact that she’s wholly uninterested in a glowing screen, and has seeming no social media presence, is the movie’s idea of a major personality trait. The ubiquity of devices is supposed to be at least a little bit satirical, but most of the time, it registers as realistic.

[embedded content]

The rest of *Jexi* is less realistic. Categorizing it as science fiction would be an act of generosity to its screenplay, which is an object lesson in the distinction between world-building and just making up random stuff. The movie is basically Spike Jonze’s movie *Her*, about a sapient AI companion and the man who falls in love with her, retooled as a comedy of mild life lessons. When Phil’s beloved phone breaks, he seeks a new one with a fervor that a phone-store employee (Wanda Sykes) likens

to addiction, though she notes at least “a crackhead gets his steps in” and socializes with other crackheads. Phil, on the other hand, is eager to return to his routine of ordering food delivery and watching Netflix from his couch. But the new phone’s glitchy, suspiciously emotional operating system / voice assistant, Jexi (voiced by Rose Byrne), quickly announces that it has other ideas.

That concept sounds more like a years-too-late comedy sketch than a feature film, and that’s how it plays, complete with rapid escalation. Jexi starts sassing Phil about 30 seconds into their relationship, and soon she’s criticizing his eating choices, loudly offering him a change-up in his pornography routine, and goading him into clumsy interactions with Cate. Phil makes a cursory attempt to replace his haywire AI, but for reasons that are hand-waved away by blaming “the cloud,” Jexi follows him to another new phone, and he’s forced to accept her into his life. She’s hard to resist, because while she favors a bluntly profane coaching style, she isn’t entirely wrong in her diagnoses of Phil’s various social ills.

Photo: David Moir / Lionsgate

Jexi is in the unenviable position of being a movie that criticizes technology, which the internet at large often receives with hostility, even when the criticism is this light and benign. Writer-directors Jon Lucas and Scott Moore are basically advocating for more human interaction, and lightly satirizing our collective dependence on technology by imagining a situation where phones are as needy and grasping about their owners as vice versa. A little of this is clever; it’s fun to hear Byrne affecting a Siri-like stiffness to talk trash about other technology. (She has no kind words for Siri, Alexa, or anyone else on the voice-assistant beat.) But much of the movie’s humor amounts to making a robotic voice swear, just as the Lucas/Moore series of *Bad Moms* films rely on the

spectacle of mothers saying “vagina” and euphemisms for “vagina.”

Just as they do in *Bad Moms*, Lucas and Moore derive a lot of their *Jexi* ideas from real life, which they filter through some kind of screenwriting life-lessons program. Through this process, genuinely relatable moments become vaguely phony, the kind of yuks that are invisibly and unconvincingly hashtagged “#relatable.” They gags are exactly the kind of empty observations that the movie tries to criticize when Cate confesses to a past life of Instagrammed vacuousness.

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It would be easier to buy *Jexi*’s more intentional absurdities if its reality wasn’t so elastic, stretching to accommodate poorly staged large-scale slapstick. (Lucas and Moore rarely go for a clean single-shot execution of a gag when they can stretch it out with pointless extra cuts.) Even the movie’s quietest moments, like when Phil actually gets an actual shot at taking Cate out to dinner, are dotted with canned studio-comedy exchanges; there are lots of “Really?” / “No.” non-jokes and pointless, underlining asides like Phil saying something blundering, then adding, “Why did I say that?”

The Phil / Cate relationship requires a fair amount of buy-in up front, not least because Devine is nearly a decade older than Shipp, though the movie seems to be pretending otherwise. So it’s especially bizarre when the movie contrives an arbitrary conflict and an equally arbitrary resolution. The good news is that with all of the wan, watered-down rom-com material between Phil and Cate, *Jexi* only has a short section where Byrne’s operating system turns to ladies-be-crazy jealousy. Though there are some cheap crazy-ex-girlfriend riffs, Jexi’s vengeance more often feels like rage against her potential obsolescence, and the movie is relatively magnanimous about her transgressions. Maybe we are just a few

OS updates away from a phone that truly misses us when we turn it off or leave it at home.

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That idea goes underdeveloped in *Jexi*, as does any inkling that Phil might be a genuine introvert who doesn't necessarily need to be nudged into making friends with his coworkers at a BuzzFeed-like publisher. (They work on viral lists, while Phil yearns to move into the serious-journalism vertical.) Granted, Devine is such a demonstrative, outsized performer that even when he's trying to play relatively subdued here, he still doesn't especially read as introverted.

But the movie still shows disappointingly little interest in how he might use technology to forge different kinds of interactions and friendships, as real people do. Instead, social media is just a crutch that people like Phil use to pretend they're happy and surrounded by friends. That isn't an unfair or unlikely view of the world, but it's a simplified one that ignores more significant issues, like virtual harassment and online vitriol. The smartphone epidemic is certainly fair game for satire, but while *Jexi* pokes fun at Phil, it ultimately isn't satirizing anything in particular, because Phil not much of anything in particular. He's a blur of a character, by turns lecherous, sensitive, funny (or "funny"), impulsive, or terrified. Even at her least dimensional and most outlandish, Jexi has a personality. In the end, the movie doesn't seem to understand how badly Phil needs an operating system of his own.

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