Review: 'The Machine' conjures a stylish sense of wonder, danger

A resourcefully stylish indie sci-fi entry from Britain, "The Machine" drapes sleek visuals over an artificial intelligence tale set in a top-secret British government facility where robots are being developed to fight a cold war with China.

Empathic computer genius Vincent (Toby Stephens) has more on his mind, however, than creating a weapon-strength, self-aware being for his military boss (Denis Lawson). Vincent imagines a revolutionary future in which the brain-damaged (be they wounded soldiers or his medically afflicted daughter) are given their humanity again.

That makes Vincent's breakthrough — the Machine (Caity Lotz), an aerodynamic hot bod of a robot who can flip, fight and care deeply — into a moral battleground of sorts. With her slick-backed hair, Lotz is a cyberblond right out of Hitchcock's dystopian fantasies.

Writer-director Caradog W. James is so enamored by the coolly designed future aesthetics of movies like "A Clockwork Orange" and "Blade Runner" that his metaphoric dark-and-darker lighting can get the best of him. (Being able to see an actor's face has been known to be effective.) But even with a cut-and-dried approach to characterization and the issue of man-made consciousness, "The Machine" percolates with an elegantly palpable sense of wonder and danger.