

The Future We Have Already Made: Fatalism in Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines

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Summary

The following essay is a close reading of the film Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines, the latest installment in the popular Terminator series of films. It shows how the film transforms, in both overt and subtle ways, many of the icons, characters, and narrative devices found in the previous films. Particular attention is given to how this film re-positions us vis-à-vis the future, rethinking our relationship to it and our power to change it. Popular Hollywood action films are often seen with contempt in critical and scholarly circles; implicitly, then, this essay also attempts to show how such films can be addressed with analytical integrity.

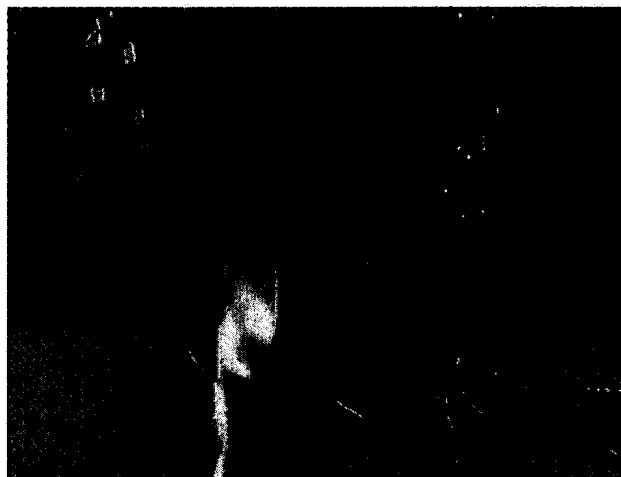
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The first of the Terminator films was released in 1984, nearly twenty years ago, a mid-range budget science fiction film by an unknown director named James Cameron. It was a surprise box-office success, proving to be a major turning point in the film careers of both its director James Cameron and the then world-champion-body-builder-cum-actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who played the title role. Holding its own critically, The Terminator took its place in a wave of gritty, darker science-fiction films of the time, including Ridley Scott's Bladerunner and Alien. It is remembered for its haunting depiction of a relentless killing machine, the “terminator” of the title, sent back in time for the sole purpose of killing Sarah Connor, whose son is to become mankind's only hope for survival in a future where

intelligent machines have taken over the world. A soldier of the human resistance, Reese, is also sent back in time to protect Sarah. Through will and determination, and eventually (of course) their love for each other, they are able to destroy the terminator. The first Terminator film, then, was a cautionary tale about our reliance on machines, but it was also filled with hope and a belief in the indomitability of the human spirit. It's approach to the troublesome conundrums of time-travel was also ambiguously hopeful: on the one hand Reese once tells her that "the future is not set," but the final scene of the film finds her pregnant with Reese's son, who will become John Connor, leader of the human resistance, therefore Reese's leader, who as an adult must send his own young father to the past to conceive him and die. She is pondering this popular science fiction puzzle as she drives down the road to toward the future and the sequel; hope and free will are mixed with a sense of inevitability.

Cameron returned to the franchise 7 years later, with Terminator 2: Judgment Day, and the sentimentality hinted at in the first film came to full fruition. Young John Connor, the love child of Sarah and Reese, has grown up to be quite the wiz-kid, having been trained since his youth to become the leader of a resistance he has no viable reason to believe will ever exist. John goes on believing his mother is completely insane until Schwarzenegger shows up, the twist here being that now he is a nice terminator, having been re-programmed by the future John, and there is another, more powerful terminator who must be reckoned with. Sarah, John, and the now good-guy Schwarzenegger/Terminator team up, with plenty of will and determination, to not only beat the new terminator, but to put a stop to "Judgment Day," the day when the machines will take over and unleash a nuclear war. Despite the strikingly graphic nature of the nuclear holocaust scene (it's realism tempered by the fact that it is presented as a dream), this film presents an even more hopeful vision of the future than the first film. They bring a halt to Judgment Day by destroying the company which is developing the technology for the soon

to be self-aware supercomputers. In the final scene the Arnold/Terminator must destroy himself in a vat of molten metal to ensure that the technology housed in his computer brain never falls into the wrong hands. Just as his body is consumed by flame, his hand gives us a thumbs-up to let us know that all is now ok, that his self-sacrifice is for the good of us all. I found myself chuckling at its silliness, and had the film capitalized on its campiness it might have been more entertaining. But this image (pictured below) was, I believe, intended to be quite a tear-jerker, and I am amazed at its unabashed sentimentality. The film ends with the camera speeding along a highway, the metaphor for the uncertainty of the future reprised from the first Terminator film, and Cameron even goes so far as to have a voice-over of Sarah Connor telling us that “the unknown future rolls toward us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope, because if a machine, a terminator, can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too.” So you see not all machines are bad, we just have to teach them how valuable we are, and all it takes to learn that is a couple of days with a sensitive teenager. In the first film the soldier Reese had told Sarah that there was “No fate but what we make,” a line which becomes her motto, and now she has made that new fate a reality, one where the human race does not have to go through such tremendous suffering. This film was to become one of the highest-grossing films ever.



The T-101, enemy in the first film, now protector / father figure of John Connor, tells us not to fret over his self-sacrifice at the end of Terminator 2: Judgment Day

And what has this future brought us? James Cameron can now sell films on his name alone, something few directors can boast, and has graduated from action auteur to “king of the world,” making such gargantuan, sentimental love stories as Titanic. Schwarzenegger, just a few months after the release of Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines, was able to transform his star-power into electoral support, and has recently become the Governor of California after a circus-like recall election. During his campaign, he even used variations of lines from his films, the most popular being those from his the Terminator series. One typical example was a line from Terminator 2: Judgment Day, “Hasta la vista, baby,” which had become a part of the American lexicon, transforming it into “Hasta la vista, Davis [the name of the incumbent Governor].” Schwarzenegger, for one, is filled with hope for the future, particularly his own. And now he has convinced a majority of the populace of the state of California that not only is he capable of saving the free world as a movie character, he is capable in the real and political worlds as well, capable of solving California's pressing economic and social problems. As journalist Bob Hebert put it, “he has played spectacularly strong leaders in one cartoonish movie after another, and as scary as it seems, that is enough reason for many voters in California to hand him the reins of their government.”

I, for one, am not so optimistic about such a prospect, and this is why the most recent installment of the Terminator series, by far the most pessimistic of the three, has proven itself to support the weight of scrutiny far better than the other two films. As if it's full title, Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines, were not enough, from its opening scene this film announces that will take a very different view of our place in history, and the nature of our power to change it, than the previous films. Over a black screen, we hear a voice reprise the line “The future has not been written. There is no future but what we make for ourselves...I wish I could believe that.” Over the last line, we see an aerial shot of a large city, and a missile enters the screen, followed by a nuclear explosion, the future holocaust he wishes he

could unmake. We find out that this is the adult voice of John Connor, who (despite the fact that he and his mother believed they had prevented this holocaust) has disconnected himself from society, avoiding anything that requires him to register his identity with computer systems, in an effort to avoid detection should the machines attempt to assassinate him again. A shot of him sitting on a bridge follows, he drops a bottle into the river below, and as it falls beneath the surface of the water, we find that we are no longer in the present, but have passed into the future he dreads--the river bed is filled with human skulls, and one of the machine's hunter ships passes by, scanning for humans to kill. Like most science fiction films, this film about the future is actually trying to tell us something pressing about our present. Here the visual metaphor is quite obvious, but effective: The death and destruction of the future he dreads is lying unseen just below the surface of the present. This pattern will play itself out visually at other important moments in the film, and it sets up the key difference between this film's vision of the future and its predecessors'. He says "I feel the weight of the future bearing down on me," and indeed in this film the future is an accumulation of the weight of the past. Here the societal problems which allow, or cause, the "rise of the machines" cannot be avoided by changing one key even in our history; our self-destructive tendencies are systemic, and the day of reckoning with those societal problems is inevitable. In the scene shortly after this one, we reprise the "highway of the future" metaphor from the first two films, but this time the highway is twisting and turning, unlike the straight highways we ended the last two films on. John is riding a motorcycle along this highway, and in an effort to avoid a deer standing in the middle of the road, John crashes. The deer had been jack-lighted by the headlight of the speeding motorcycle, not unlike the way we are blinded by the flash of light from the nuclear blast that opens the film. A parallel is being drawn between the helplessness of the deer and that of John in the face of the future that is bearing down on him.

The over-riding message of this film may be much darker and more

pessimistic than that of the previous films, but in many other ways the film is far more humorous, from scene to scene taking itself much less seriously. At one point, for example, just hours before the probable end of human society as they know it, the terminator hears the two main characters joking with each other and comments “Your levity is good...It relieves tension, and the fear of death” a strange balance of humor and morbidity. One might even say that while the film takes its relation to our real world more seriously, it is more self-aware of its own fictional conventions, those of the popular science fiction genre as a whole, and the Terminator series in particular, and is more willing to play with the audiences expectations. The new director, Johnathan Mostow, whose credits include Breakdown and U-571, and the new writers John Brancato and Michael Ferris (noteworthy here is the absence of Cameron from story development), were able to play with these conventions in a way that Cameron never did. On the first DVD edition of the film, there is even a scene (which did not make it into the theatrical cut of the film) involving a mock-advertising video for the “autonomous weaponry” which will become Skynet and the terminator technology. In this scene, there is an image of the American flag blowing in the wind, superimposed over an image of an Terminator101, with the voice-over “In this day and age, leaders are not born, they are made.” This is followed by a scene with Schwarzenegger, dubbed into an American Southern accent, playing Sgt. Candy, who has been selected to be the model for the terminator series “I don't know about the accent,” says one client, to which one of the video presenters replies “it can be fixed,” in Schwarzenegger's accent. While this over-the-top playfulness may not have been permissible in the final version of the film, it certainly points to a willingness on the part of the directors and writers, and significantly on the part of Schwarzenegger.

In all three of the Terminator films, the terminators must travel through time naked, so there is always a scene in which the terminator searches for clothes, allowing an opportunity for Schwarzenegger to show off his physique, and an

opportunity to show the strength of the terminator as he confronts some minor character who does not want to part with his clothes. This type of scene quickly became a staple of the Terminator franchise and its knock-offs (i.e. the Jean-Claude Van Dam vehicle Cyborg). In The Terminator, he shoves his bare hand into his victim's chest cavity, removing a still beating heart. In T-2, in the now famous "bar scene," he marches into a country-western saloon and announces to a biker "Give me your clothes, your boots, and your motorcycle," his deadpan order giving rise to a brawl the audience had been waiting for.

In Mostow's version of the same scene, he chooses to play with what the audience expects from him and transform the Schwarzenegger/Terminator image in the process. There are initial parallels to set-up the comparison. First we see him shot from behind, naked, as he walks up to a country-western bar, just as he did in T-2. When he is greeted by a burly man at the door, however, there is no look of surprise on the doorman's face. The doorman tells him, "You're supposed to go around back," a message which the terminator ignores. He marches into the bar, and is greeted not by fright or gasps of surprise, but only by looks of desire and excitement from a room full of women. What has happened to the intimidating power of the terminator? The terminator looks down, and the camera pans over to a sign which reads "Ladies Night," and so we are clued in he has been mistaken for a male-stripper. Then there are "terminator point-of-view shots," the computer graphics and red color scheme identical to what we have seen in the previous films, telling us that this is indeed a robot's point-of-view. As he prowls the bar in search of clothes, the familiar "terminator vision" outlines the clothes of whoever he is looking at and produces the graphic text "MISMATCH" for differences in size. At one point he finds a match in size, an overweight woman wearing a halter-top, and this yields the message "INAPPROPRIATE," giving us a chuckle as we try to imagine the Arnie in such an outfit. Finally he confronts the stripper on stage, the only match in the room, who tells him to wait his turn (to strip), and when the Schwarzenegger/

Terminator is insistent, to “talk to the hand.” This “inappropriate” colloquialism, or at least (in many fans' eyes) out-of-character line, will be appropriated by our newer, more alternate-life-style conscious, terminator later in the film. We next see him stepping out of the back door, wearing the stripper's outfit, and he stands and stares at the camera. It should be noted, though, that in this shot and throughout the scene, he has largely been shot from eye level or slightly above eye-level, whereas in the equivalent scene in Terminator 2 he was shot from lower angles; the effect of the lower angles was to emphasize his power and strength, and here the higher angles tend to undercut that feeling. This last shot, where he addresses the camera directly, is again a mirror of the end of the scene in T-2. In that film, he caps off his new outfit with a pair of ray-ban sunglasses. Here, however, he pulls a pair of star-shaped, 70s style sunglasses from the stripper's jacket pocket, and puts them on. He must realize they are inappropriate, because he takes them off and steps on them, but the damage to his image has already been done--he has already been transformed into a stripper.

If Mostow uses the “Ladies Night” scene at the bar to undermine the image of the Schwarzenegger/Terminator, then we could even say that the entire film has the feeling of a “Ladies Night,” a film full of strong women characters. First of all, the bad terminator in this film is one whose main form is female. She is the top of the line terminator, a T-X (yet another X to add to recent films of the X-generation X-Files, X-Men, XXX)--stronger, faster and smarter, able to produce weapons from the future, and partly made of “liquid metal” (like her counterpart from Terminator 2), which allows her to assume to shape of anyone she comes into contact with. “I am an obsolete model,” the Schwarzenegger/Terminator tells us, and certainly the gap in terms of strength between the two adversaries is far more definitive than in the first two films. In the first two Terminators, there was always a feeling that the bad guys were stronger, but only by a hair. In this film, there is a sense of hopelessness from the start: Bullets barely make her bat an eye, rocket launchers don't even take

her down for a five-count. Certainly this is nothing new in terms of the logic of Hollywood sequels, but it also adds to the feeling of hopelessness; even the best efforts of our heroes are only postponing the inevitable. The T-X is also equipped with the ability to control other machines, which she does not only with efficacy but apparent relish. In one scene she uses a number of rescue and police vehicles to chase the fleeing John Connor--the machines of the institutions meant to protect us have turned into a menace. In another scene toward the end of the film, the T-X and the Schwarzenegger/Terminator have their obligatory one-on-one fight scene (this time in a men's lavatory) and she wins by, among other things, dragging him through a row of urinals. She then proceeds to reprogram the Schwarzenegger/Terminator, a process involving a rather phallic protrusion lengthening from the end of her finger, which she then inserts into his neck. Ladies Night, indeed.

She is meant to represent the negative side of the feminine, and Mostow makes sure that we are aware of this in the way he introduces the character. When the Arnold arrives from the future, he does so in the middle of the desert, complete with snake and burning bush. Note the biblical references here, which (sort of) play themselves out later in the film, and which are connected to the theme of prophecy/free-will. The T-X, however, arrives in Beverly Hills (Mostow's take on the nature of evil, perhaps?), in the middle of a display window stage full of mannequins she resembles. The mannequins' faces even melt, echoing the qualities of her liquid metal body. Her first encounter is with a middle-aged woman in a new Lexus. The woman is concerned at this sight of a nude woman on the streets of Hollywood and asks if she is all right. The next shot shows an interesting composition, with the T-X's hair blocking her breasts, and the rear-view mirror blocking the camera's view of her vagina. Of course this is a clever PG-13-rating-inspired shot, but it also serves to equate the two women, the younger one deciding to procure the identity of the older. The T-X says only, "I like your car," a line which we will come to understand is a euphemism for her next action, which will be to kill the listener and take the

thing she likes from him or her. Both she and the Schwarzenegger/Terminator are tied to icons of sexual politics, the female model and the stripper. She is able to use this power quite effectively, we will find out, during another scene when she is pulled over by a police officer. She notices a large billboard for Victoria's Secret, which has written on it "What is sexy?" next to the answer to the question--an image of a large-breasted woman in a brassiere. She immediately changes her own breast size to match that of the billboard; she has quickly learned the power of knowing the answer to "What is sexy?" When the police officer approaches, she says only "I like your gun," and smiles. Mostow very cleverly presents two these elements--the advertisements and mannequins--questioning our ideas about representation and sexuality, and the "I like..." line, where desire immediately leads to violence—and allows the viewer to try to make sense of the connection between them.



The model/T-X makes her appearance on Hollywood Blvd.

Following the "I like your gun" line is a cut to another gun, this time the laser gun used for reading bar codes in a store, and to the introduction of the other important female character in the film, Katherine Brewster. She is obviously frustrated with the malfunctioning gun, and her first line in the film is "I can't get this thing to work...I hate machines," clueing us in to the role she will play in this film. Like the T-X, she will prove to be far more strong-willed than her male counterpart,

John Connor. When they first meet, it is at the Veterinarian's office where she works. She has come on a late-night call to help a client with her cat Hercules, the cat's name another tongue-in-cheek allusion to the Arnold Schwarzenegger's past (one of his early film roles was as Hercules in New York). He had broken in earlier in the night to steal pain-killers for his leg, which he hurt during the crash depicted at the opening of the film. When she is about to call the police, he tries to stop her by threatening her with a gun. She very easily over-powers him and takes his gun (which turns out to be a paint gun), then shoves him into one of the dog cages. Here and at many other points in the film, like the T-X compared to the Schwarzenegger/Terminator, she turns out to be faster, stronger, and more intelligent than John.

The Katherine character takes the place of Sarah Connor, John's mother, who we come to learn has died of leukemia somewhere in between the two films. It seems this is what happens when Hollywood is not able to sign a deal with the actress who plays a character. Her posthumous presence, however, gives rise to one of the film's most morbid scenes. The Schwarzenegger/Terminator, John and Katherine have successfully fled from the T-X, and have arrived at a cemetery. The terminator leads them into the mausoleum, where he shows them what is apparently the final resting place of Sarah Connor. The epitaph reads "No Fate But What We Make." John and Katherine stand with solemn looks on their faces until the terminator punches through the wall of the tomb and pulls the casket out onto the floor. John, assuming his mother's rotting corpse is inside the casket, protests, but the terminator opens the casket to reveal that it is in fact filled with weapons--rocket-launchers, machine guns, grenades, rifles, etc. The phrase "No fate but what we make" has now taken on several possible meanings, and the ambiguity is both complex and disturbing. We can take the terminator's punching of the wall to be a symbolic smashing of the message written on it, supporting John's questioning of his mother's wisdom at the beginning of the film. We can also read the line in conjunction with where it is written, implying that it is our fate, as human beings, to

die, and that this is the only fate we are in the process of making. As the terminator points out later in the film “humans inevitably die.” The final reading that we could give is that our fate, the one we have made ourselves, is not only death, but death by the weapons of our own construction, the weapons that the terminator unearths from her coffin. Even when we expect to find her body (whose ashes were scattered, we are told), we end up finding only a stack of weapons, as if her body has been replaced by them. When the police arrive on the scene and the terminator and John must escape, the only option is for John to hide inside his mother's casket and be carried out on the terminator's shoulders--he has been transformed into a corpse, and at the same into a weapon, and has finally found himself trapped inside of the future which his mother thought they had changed but he has discovered is inevitable.



The terminator carries the weight of the future leader John Connor on his shoulders

So where is this mixture of humor and morbidity going? We find out during the climactic scene, when the terminator, John and Katherine rush try to stop Skynet from being put in charge of America's military systems. Katherine's father is General Brewster, in charge of the development of Skynet. When they arrive, however, they find that it is too late, and so now they must find the “system core” and destroy Skynet before it can launch its nuclear attack on the human population.

This phrase “system core” sounds very plausible, just what the main character in a science fiction film might say. And in fact John says “We've got to find the system core” or something of the kind at least four times in the last ten minutes of the film. General Brewster sends them off to Crystal Peak, which John assumes will be the “system core,” the keystone that will prevent the machines from taking over. General Brewster tells his daughter, though, that he has opened Pandora's box, and if John had known his mythology a bit better perhaps he would have been more skeptical of his chances. The “system core” turns out to be the McGuffin of the film, and we come to find out that “by the time it was self aware, Skynet had spread into personal computers everywhere workplaces, dorm rooms it was software, in cyberspace. There was no system core, it could not be shut down.” The problems of our society, those that will lead to our destruction, are systemic, not endemic--even the phrase “system core” becomes an ironic linguistic joke here, since it implies endemic thinking about the problems they are facing. The systems we have put in motion, and the problems present in those systems, are not going to be solved by a single heroic act. While the film may only hint at the nature of the problems our society faces--materialism and greed, our over-reliance on machines, perhaps?--it is very clear about the fact that these problems are not easily solved.

And Mostow is very clear about the only option available to our main characters, and perhaps by extension to our society: technological regression. Crystal Peak turns out to be a fallout shelter made during the Cold War era, deep within a mountain side--the under-the-surface motif playing itself out again. It is filled with computers and machines over fifty years old. As Skynet launches its nuclear attack, the call for help comes on a short-wave radio. In the fight to save the human race, the systems of defense and communication of our era are rendered useless, to be replaced by much simpler technologies. At one point earlier in this essay I mentioned that there are a number of biblical metaphors. Mostow transforms John and Katherine into a kind of Adam and Eve, though here it is difficult to

imagine them in anything like a paradise. The film ends with images of the missiles falling on American landscapes, and perhaps the lack of a happy ending allows us take this film as a cautionary tale. We should make ourselves more aware of the future we are making, the future which lies beneath the surface of our present, because there will be no chance to correct it at the last minute.