

# The Terminator

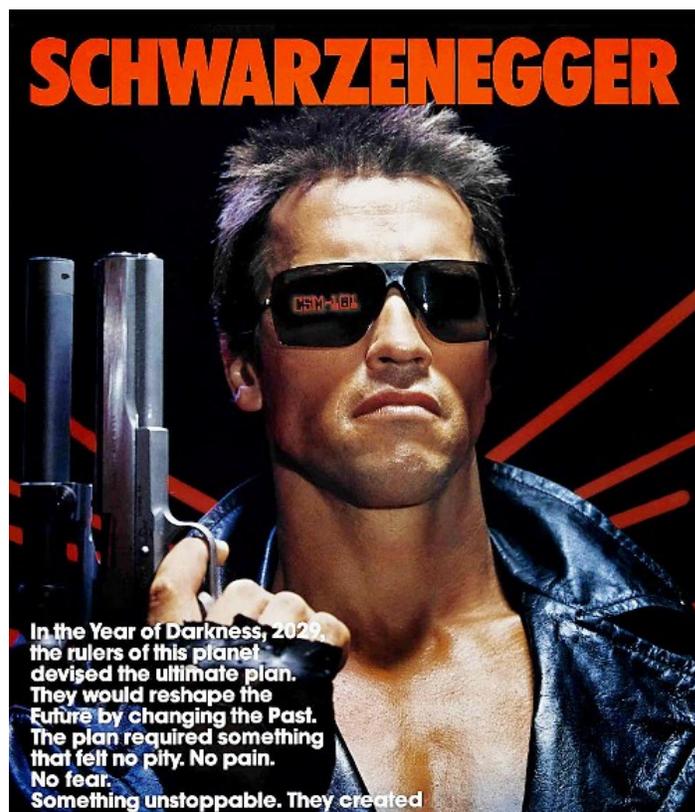
By John Wills

“The Terminator” is a cult time-travel story pitting humans against machines. Authored and directed by James Cameron, the movie features Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton and Michael Biehn in leading roles. It launched Cameron as a major film director, and, along with “Conan the Barbarian” (1982), established Schwarzenegger as a box office star.

James Cameron directed his first movie “Xenogenesis” in 1978. A 12-minute long, \$20,000 picture, “Xenogenesis” depicted a young man and woman trapped in a spaceship dominated by powerful and hostile robots. It introduced what would become enduring Cameron themes: space exploration, machine sentience and epic scale. In the early 1980s, Cameron worked with Roger Corman on a number of film projects, assisting with special effects and the design of sets, before directing “Piranha II” (1981) as his debut feature. Cameron then turned to writing a science fiction movie script based around a cyborg from 2029AD travelling through time to contemporary Los Angeles to kill a waitress whose as yet unborn son is destined to lead a resistance movement against a future cyborg army. With the input of friend Bill Wisher along with producer Gale Anne Hurd (Hurd and Cameron had both worked for Roger Corman), Cameron finished a draft script in May 1982. After some trouble finding industry backers, Orion agreed to distribute the picture with Hemdale Pictures financing it. Linda Hamilton was cast as the feisty waitress Sarah Connor. Cameron approached Michael Biehn to play Kyle Reese, a resistance soldier sent back in time to stop the cyborg from achieving his mission. Having auditioned for the character of Reese, bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger assumed the role of Terminator T-800, but his commitments to filming “Conan the Destroyer” (1984) delayed the project. Stan Winston was appointed for special effects.

Filming commenced in Los Angeles on March 19, 1984, and lasted 10 weeks. With the majority of scenes shot at night, scheduling proved tight, while Hamilton came into the film injured, and Schwarzenegger struggled to pronounce what would become his classic movie line, “I’ll be back”. The low budget of \$6.5 million included custom clothing for the Terminator himself. As Hurd quipped, “You can’t buy off the rack for Arnold.”

Released on October 26, 1984, Orion expected little from the movie, with rumors of it disappearing within



Artwork from the cover of the film’s DVD release by MGM Home Entertainment. The Library of Congress Collection.

weeks. However, critical reception hinted at longer-lasting appeal. “Variety” enthused over the picture: “a blazing, cinematic comic book, full of virtuoso moviemaking, terrific momentum, solid performances and a compelling story.” Janet Maslin for the “New York Times” labeled it a “B-Movie with much flair,” but critiqued the film’s reliance on brutal physicality and relentless action. The role of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the indomitable Terminator proved a popular conversation point. The Austrian-American bodybuilder (who gained US citizenship in 1983) seemed perfectly cast as the cyborg that arrives from the future, appearing in the Griffith Observatory car lot naked like a Grecian Adonis, talks little (only 18 lines in the film), but dominates the screen. As Maslin commented, Schwarzenegger “is about as well suited to movie acting as he would be to ballet, but his presence in “The Terminator” is not a deterrent.” Among cinema audiences, the movie met with an enthusiastic response and charted at number one for two weeks. The “New York Times” called it the “surprise hit of the moment.”

Much of the appeal of “The Terminator” resided in Cameron’s vision of a world unknowingly on the precipice of destruction, an everyday realm of bikers, diners and drive-ins that mysteriously connected with a cyborg war and a human resistance movement.

As an action movie, "The Terminator" impressed by its fast pacing and spectacular set pieces, including a dramatic attack on a police station and an epic finale in an automated factory. The synthesizer-based soundtrack by Brad Fiedel complemented the techno-industrial mood of the piece; Fiedel later described his signature tune as "a mechanical man and his heartbeat." Moments of dark humor perforated the violence set across a noir-ish metropolis.

Missing from myriad action films of the 1980s, Cameron injected into "The Terminator" a sense of gravitas and mission. While time travel had been done before (Cameron's script itself resembled two "Outer Limits" episodes by Harlan Ellison, who successfully sued Orion for copyright infringement), "The Terminator" granted quasi-religious meaning to the proceedings. On a basic level, the science fiction tale resembled the Annunciation story of the New Testament; with Reese charged as Archangel Gabriel to warn Sarah Connor (diner waitress/Virgin Mary) of threats to her son John Connor, the messiah figure destined to lead humanity to salvation. The apocalyptic ending (cleverly positioned at the movie's opening, underpinning the time-travel credentials) thus had Biblical connotations. Cameron captured a sense of formidable challenge ahead, of a decadent world not ready for a war against machines, or (in its dirty, polluted Los Angelesan form) worth saving. Compared to the 2029 AD technological-machine world glimpsed at the movie's outset, the woefully fragile and un-advanced humans clearly faced an uphill struggle. Schwarzenegger's Terminator underlined the scale of the threat: despite losing an eye and an arm, he "keeps on marching."

Sarah Connor's immense fear of the T-800 meanwhile reflected broader anxieties over the impact of technological development on 1980s American society. Could empowering machines ultimately disempower humans, and the slaves become the masters? Could machines keep the nation safe? Cameron's Skynet, the US military defense system that becomes self-aware and starts a war against humans, shared much in common with the US military's WOPR supercomputer in "Wargames" (1983) that asks a young boy 'do you want to play a game' but with real-world nuclear consequences. Both films raised the specter of artificial intelligence run amok. While imagining World War III as a machine-human conflict, Cameron's movie also tapped classic Cold

War themes of fearing the 'outsider,' the infiltrator, and the Red in the Bed. Schwarzenegger's apparent foreignness strengthened this 'other' imagery.

Schwarzenegger's T-800 also raised existential questions over what it meant to be human and male in late twentieth-century technological society (ideas also explored in "Terminator 2: Judgment Day"). While the "Six Million Dollar Man" (1973-78) and "Robocop" (1987) toyed with the idea of biomechanics repairing and enhancing stereotypically male attributes such as strength, the T-800 in Cameron's movie represented a totally machined and futuristic man. Schwarzenegger's cyborg exuded physicality, assertiveness and the triumph of rational thought, but programming excluded emotion, empathy and morality. The brutal and efficient Terminator thus challenged contemporary trends toward a more feminized, emotional and reflective masculinity.

"The Terminator" proved a breakthrough movie for Cameron, who went on to direct "Aliens" (1986), "Titanic" (1997), Hollywood's first \$200 million picture and winner of 11 Oscars, and "Avatar" (2009). For Schwarzenegger, a range of action leads followed in "Commando" (1985), "Predator" (1987) and "The Running Man" (1987), before comedic turns in "Twins" (1988) and "Junior" (1994). The film inspired a hugely successful franchise that included comic books, videogames, novels and the television series "The Sarah Connor Chronicles" (2008-9). Cameron wrote and directed the much-acclaimed "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991) that ingeniously mirrored the first movie, with Schwarzenegger reprising his role but as a savior figure. The T-800 character serviced Schwarzenegger's rise in politics, contributing to his mass appeal as well as his reputation for steely strength, earning him the nickname of "the Governor" as Governor of California (2003-2011). After a significant gap away from the screen, Schwarzenegger reprised his role as a T-800 in the fifth Terminator movie, "Terminator Genisys" (2015).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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