



THE TERMINATOR AT 35

"I'LL BE BACK" AND THEN SOME...

by Elisa Jordan

Movie culture in the early to mid-1980s was an era dominated by adventurous blockbusters created by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. The space age fairytale of good vs. evil that was *Star Wars*, the thrilling expeditions of fictional archeologist Indiana Jones, the touching story of friendship between a little boy and an alien—they were stories of ordinary people finding themselves in extraordinary circumstances and rising to heroic heights.

As for entertainment in the home, television was giving birth to a second Golden Age by greenlighting such classics as the gritty *Hill Street Blues*, the sexy comedy of *Cheers*, the melodrama of the uber wealthy Carringtons on *Dynasty* and the groundbreaking *Cosby Show*, a sitcom that centered around a successful African American family. MTV actually played videos and was about to emerge as a popular culture juggernaut. The airwaves were filled with the friendly sounds of British synth pop and New Wave.

When *The Terminator* hit theaters in October 1984, few probably expected the low-budget science fiction thriller to make much of an impact. But when the action film opened, it not only climbed at the box office, it launched the careers of actor Arnold Schwarzenegger and director James Cameron, a movie franchise, a television show, comic books, novels and video games. The Library of Congress has even selected the original movie for preservation in the National Film Registry due to its cultural significance.

Although science fiction action flicks are nothing new, *The Terminator* offered a lot that its predecessors or contemporaries lacked or fell short on. The surface of *The Terminator* is the story of a human-looking cyborg assassin sent from the 21st century to eliminate Sarah Connor, whose future son John will lead humans in an apocalyptic nuclear war with machines. It's when the humans are on the brink of victory that Skynet, an artificial intelligence network, sends T-800 "Model 101" (Schwarzenegger) to kill Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in an effort to prevent her son's conception and birth.



>> Arnold Schwarzenegger, Linda Hamilton and James Cameron at *The Terminator* press conference in 1984

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER'S SIGNATURE "I'LL BE BACK." WAS CHOSEN AS #37 ON THE AMERICAN FILM INSTITUTE LIST, AFI'S 100 YEARS-100 MOVIE QUOTES IN 2005.

THE BLEAK PICTURE OF LOS ANGELES AFTER A NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST WITH TANK WHEELS CRUSHING HUMAN SKULLS BENEATH THEM OFFER A DISTINCTLY GRIM PORTRAIT OF A **NOT-SO-DISTANT FUTURE.**

The plot itself is enough to offer an entertaining experience to moviegoers, but *The Terminator's* lasting appeal is likely because the writing explores classic literary tropes, Biblical themes and Greek mythology updated for an era increasingly moving more toward machines. Co-written by James Cameron and Gale Anne Hurd (who also produced), the original inspiration came to Cameron quite literally in the form of a nightmare. In the age of the computer entering the average suburban home and automation, *The Terminator* taps into very real fears—both conscious and unconscious—that as machines rise in prominence, humans become obsolete. Cameron and Hurd, through a war with machines, gives those fears visuals.

“With computers entering the home for the first time in the 1980s, as well as news stories of computerized defense systems, thanks to President Ronald Reagan’s announcement of a ‘*Star Wars*’ style national defense program, *The Terminator* explored society’s fear of an increasingly automated and digital world,” says John Wills, Ph.D., a professor of American cultural and environmental history at the University of Kent. “The movie highlighted how things can go wrong on a fundamental level. Fears of computers taking control linked with dangers of the Cold War, and can be seen in other movies of the time, most notably *WarGames* (1983).”

The bleak picture of Los Angeles after a nuclear holocaust with tank wheels crushing human skulls beneath them offer a distinctly grim portrait of a not-so-distant future.

To save the world from this fate, destiny depends on the birth of Sarah’s son to fulfill his destiny of saving humankind. “The movie might be read as a sci-fi play on the Annunciation in the New Testament, with Karl Reese (Michael Biehn) assuming the role of Archangel Gabriel, there to explain to Sarah Connor, as the Virgin Mary, of the significance of her future son John Connor, the messiah of humanity, and the dangers to him,” Dr. Wills says. “It’s all very apocalyptic in tone.”



>> Arnold Schwarzenegger—
Cyborg Assassin in *The Terminator*



>> *Terminator: Dark Fate* starring: Natalia Reyes, Mackenzie Davis and Linda Hamilton

YOU'LL BE BACK... *TERMINATOR: DARK FATE*

After departing from the series following *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, James Cameron has returned as a writer and producer for the latest installation, *Terminator: Dark Fate*. (The film is directed by Tim Miller.) He's kept quiet about much of the project, but Cameron's been forthcoming about the fact that the new film will pick up where *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* left off and ignore the other sequels. Linda Hamilton returns as Sarah Connor and Edward Furlong, who played adolescent John Connor in T:2 also reprises his role. What is less known is the role that Arnold Schwarzenegger plays in the film, other than he is referred to as "Carl."

One of the few things that's been noted about the upcoming movie is a direct reference back to a climactic fight scene in T:2 between T-800 (Schwarzenegger) and T-1000 (Robert Patrick). During that sequence, T-800's left arm is crushed in the giant gears of a machine. After the fight, that arm wasn't destroyed. While considered an error by some fans of the franchise, it's believed that oversight is corrected in *Terminator: Dark Fate*.

One thing is certain: anticipation for *Terminator: Dark Fate* is high, as evidenced by the successful panel with cast members at this year's Comic Con in San Diego. - E.J.

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Destiny is also a significant theme in Greek mythology, and Cameron has been open about how the classics inspired him. Though they may try to alter their respective fates, Greek myths portray characters in futile struggles to change their own destiny. The more they struggle, the more futile and hopeless their fight becomes. The story of Oedipus serves as a perfect example. The undercurrent, and perhaps a positive takeaway, is that those in authority simply cannot change the world to suit their whims or desires. In the case of *The Terminator*, that relates back to Skynet trying to alter that fate of human survivors of an apocalyptic holocaust rallying to retake their position over machinery.

The staying power of *The Terminator* is not just reliance on past myths to help flesh out its major themes, but also its ability to predict future fears has no doubt kept the franchise relevant as it continues. Debates about nuclear weapons, job losses to automation, air quality due to emissions, violence and urban decay continue to be concerns.

As a movie, the National Film Registry gets it right: *The Terminator* has not only made a significant cultural impact, it has influenced the success of its own sequels and dozens of movies that have followed.

"The movie works on a number of levels," Wills says. "One of director James Cameron's earliest films, it captures Los Angeles as a dark and degrading space, intruded on by a machine with ultimate power. There's a palpable sense of danger and threat posed by Schwarzenegger's T-800. While critiqued at the time, the movie's physicality and bombast placed it amidst of a wave of impressive 1980s sci-fi/action films, an obvious example being John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981), and the impressive action scenes of T1 and its successor *T2: Judgment Day* (1991) clearly influenced the 21st century superhero movie genre. *The Terminator* also offers some lovely dark humor and parody."

What started as a nightmare and then a low-budget movie has transitioned into a watershed series that weaves profound theories into popular action films. It's a touchstone by which other movies are compared and continues to resonate on a very human level.

Elisa Jordan is a freelance writer in Los Angeles who frequently writes about cultural history, architecture and pets. She saw Terminator 2: Judgment Day before going back to see the original Terminator.



>> Linda Hamilton and Michael Biehn

WHAT STARTED AS A NIGHTMARE AND THEN A LOW-BUDGET MOVIE HAS TRANSITIONED INTO A WATERSHED SERIES THAT WEAVES PROFOUND THEORIES INTO POPULAR ACTION FILMS. IT'S A TOUCHSTONE BY WHICH OTHER MOVIES ARE COMPARED AND CONTINUES TO RESONATE ON A VERY HUMAN LEVEL.

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