

Terminator Genisys and the trajectory of American “independent” filmmaking

David Walsh
8 July 2015

Directed by Alan Taylor; written by Laeta Kalogridis and Patrick Lussier

The fifth in a series of science fiction action films, *Terminator Genisys* centers on the struggle between the human race and an intelligent machine network, Skynet, bent on wiping it out. The action takes place over a number of decades, from the mid-1980s onward.

Recurring characters in the *Terminator* series have included John Connor, the leader of the human resistance to the machine’s genocidal plans, his mother, Sarah Connor, his right-hand man, Kyle Reese, and various “Terminators,” nearly unstoppable cyborg assassins, sent back in time to kill Sarah Connor or her son or otherwise alter the course of history. The original Terminator played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the first film is later reprogrammed to defend Connor and generally oppose Skynet’s plans.

The mildly entertaining elements in the 1984 *Terminator*, made relatively cheaply, included the Austrian-accented Schwarzenegger as the laconic, unsmiling, human-looking machine and Linda Hamilton’s overmatched and unprepared but scrappy Sarah Connor. James Cameron directed in his usual impersonal manner, but there was something slightly pleasing about the mayhem let loose in complacent 1980s’ Los Angeles, amidst its dreadful clubs, clothes and hairdos. If anything seemed “terminal” in that work, it was the social and cultural atmosphere of Reagan’s America.

The second in the series, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), also featuring Schwarzenegger and Hamilton and directed by Cameron, is more or less an extension of the first film. Edward Furlong plays a 10-year-old John Connor, living in Los Angeles in 1995 and the primary target of a new and more advanced, shape-shifting Terminator (Robert Patrick).

In 2003, I noted that *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (directed by Jonathon Mostow) was “a stupid, gloomy film.” John Connor (Nick Stahl in this one), accompanied by his future wife (Claire Danes), is the target “of a machine sent from the future that specializes in assassination.” The only twist this time is that the killer machine in question “is a female, so to speak—an icy blonde super-model terminatrix [Kristanna Loken]—and is more advanced than the Schwarzenegger robot.”

The three lead characters in *Terminator 3* spend much of their time attempting to forestall a nuclear war, or Judgment Day. “In a particularly unpleasant turn of events, they fail, and the film’s final images depict the destruction of major urban centers by a nuclear holocaust. What is one to make of such a cheap and unserious, but misanthropic and morbid conclusion? A *Terminator 4* is foreseen, and there is most likely no way to forestall that future.”

The fourth installment, *Terminator Salvation* (2009, directed by McG), with Christian Bale, Helena Bonham Carter and others, we neither saw nor reviewed.

In the new film, John Connor (Jason Clarke) and his resistance fighters are on the eve of defeating Skynet in 2029, when the network sends a new killer-machine back to 1984 in one more effort to wipe out the

unfortunate, much put upon Sarah Connor (Emilia Clarke). In turn, Connor’s lieutenant, Kyle Reese (Jai Courtney), is dispatched to the earlier time period to protect Sarah. Schwarzenegger turns up again as the now aging T-800 Guardian.

The secret weapon having been relatively easily eliminated, Sarah and Reese, along with the T-800, turn their attention to another problem: at some point in the future, Skynet will become self-aware, take over every computer, cell phone and tablet on earth and prepare to launch nuclear war. (It is never seriously explained why the powerful machine network should have such a dim and lethal view of humanity.) The pair has to travel forward now to 1997, or rather 2017, and prevent all that from happening.

Many explosions, car chases and hand-to-hand combats later, the two humans and one humanoid machine must destroy the mainframe computer at a giant corporation, Cyberdyne. They appear to succeed, but one is led to believe that a sixth *Terminator* will be forthcoming.

This is a bad film, with unconvincing dialogue, muddy and confusing plot twists and tedious action sequences. Viewed in IMAX 3D, it may induce headaches.

Terminator Genisys imagines humanity faced with annihilation and reduces this terrible dilemma to almost unrelieved banality. John Connor in 2029: “I look at each of you and I see the marks of this long and terrible war. If we die tonight, mankind dies with us.” Sarah Connor in 1984: “The timeline John sent you to no longer exists. Everything’s changed ... and we can stop Judgment Day.”

Clarke is perfectly endearing in an insubstantial role, while Courtney is stiff as a board and unappealing. It may be an indication of some of the film’s difficulties that Schwarzenegger offers the most textured (and amusing) performance in *Terminator Genisys*. At least he shows signs of having had some real-life experience.

The new *Terminator* installment is directed by Alan Taylor. This has a certain significance, because Taylor has a history as an aspiring independent filmmaker. In 1995, he made a film entitled *Palookaville*, which I saw at the 1996 San Francisco Film Festival.

I wrote about the film, which was loosely inspired by Italian comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Mario Monicelli’s *Big Deal on Madonna Street*. “*Palookaville* is a rare American film, one which deals with ordinary people in a sympathetic, yet not uncritical, fashion—and with some imagination. Alan Taylor’s film follows the lives of three unemployed men [played by William Forsythe, Vincent Gallo and Adam Trese] in Jersey City who take up crime for a variety of reasons.”

In a conversation in San Francisco in May 1996, Taylor expressed a sympathy for the “underdogs” in society. He said, “Every authority figure in the film is corrupt and untrustworthy. ... This is obviously a film which has a lot of affection and faith in the class of people in which these guys are operating.” He remarked on the characters’ continued and mistaken belief in the American Dream: “That’s all they’re thinking about. It hasn’t gotten to the point where they’re thinking, ‘Well, wait a second,

should we be more critical of the whole idea?" They're not at that stage."

Moreover, Taylor expressed an antagonistic attitude toward Hollywood, and especially its tendency to divert attention from social problems with violence and bombast: "A lot of the Hollywood movies we see are responses to desperation and fear, economic uncertainty and political uncertainty. Most of them confront that fear by going: Pow! Pow! Pow! It's a very reassuring thing for an audience to feel that they can get control back that easily."

If Taylor, two decades later, is now contributing to Hollywood's "Pow! Pow! Pow!," it is less a personal failing than a reflection of profound socio-cultural problems, including the lack of serious political and historical perspective on the part of a generation of so-called independent directors and writers.

No doubt, Taylor made an effort. He directed episodes of several television series that were viewed, rightly or wrongly, as more substantial than most (*Traders*, *Oz*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*, *The West Wing*, *The Sopranos*, etc.). *The Emperor's New Clothes* (2001), about Napoleon in exile, was charming but slight. His *Kill the Poor* (2003), about life in New York City in the 1980s, showed a social conscience. After that, there is mostly television work in Taylor's résumé, including six episodes of *Game of Thrones*, and then suddenly, *Thor: The Dark World*, in 2013. And now this ...

Around the same time as *Palookaville*, we interviewed Steven Soderbergh in Toronto, for his film *Schizopolis* (1996), who said he was happily located under Hollywood's radar and planned to stay there. This was only a few short years before he became Julia Roberts' "favorite director" for a time and prepared himself to shoot *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Ocean's Twelve* (2004) and *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007).

Again, in neither case is it appropriate to make cheap jokes at the expense of the filmmaker involved. The problem is more serious than that.

The needs and aims of the handful of conglomerates that dominate the entertainment industry are enforced with iron rigor. Independent thought, creativity, spontaneity, criticism and outright opposition do not fit into the plans of the giant corporations. They are both hostile to those qualities or sentiments and uncomprehending of them. Whatever does not lead to *immediate* box office success is deeply suspect. As far as their executives are concerned, the studios should turn out a few large-scale, technologically advanced films a year that offend no one and say nothing, the equivalent of exhilarating amusement park rides.

And the economics of this situation tends to herd a certain category of artists in the direction of the blockbusters. Like Taylor and Soderbergh, they often have vaguely oppositional or "left" views, but nothing that would stand in the way of making wise and seemingly inescapable career choices. Largely cut off and insulated from broad layers of the population, from its hardships and seething anger, the filmmakers' lack of definite social and historical views renders them vulnerable to the siren song of these vast and lucrative productions.

No doubt such a scale of operations seems a challenge for a filmmaker, and no doubt as well each director tells him or herself that he or she will contribute something personal and artistic and perhaps even socially critical to the action or superhero genre. But it never happens, or the touches are so slight that the overwhelming noise and commotion far outweigh them.

In any case, the movement of global independent filmmakers into the "blockbuster" vortex is widespread and deserves taking note of.

Here are a few other examples:

Paralleling Taylor somewhat, although their early work was never as interesting, are the Russo brothers, Anthony and Joe. Their *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002), about a working class neighborhood in Cleveland, bore certain superficial similarities to *Palookaville*. Joe Russo commented at the time: "These characters are underdogs, the lovable losers. I think everybody, to some degree, thinks of themselves as an underdog." And

his brother added, "Especially in Cleveland, in a neighborhood like Collinwood that has had a lot of bad breaks over the last few decades."

By 2014, the Russo brothers (who in 2002 were looking in cinema history "for models that were straightforward, more honest, more open, more simple") had graduated to directing *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. They are scheduled to direct several more superhero films over the next few years, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Avengers: Infinity War Part I* and *Avengers: Infinity War Part II*.

British actor-director Kenneth Branagh, best known for his series of films intended to bring Shakespeare to a wider audience (*Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Hamlet*, *Love's Labour Lost* and *As You Like It*), directed *Thor* in 2011.

British-born Christopher Nolan, whose low-budget *Following* made the independent film festival rounds in 1998, including San Francisco, has made a far bigger name for himself by directing several of the insufferably self-serious, murky Batman installments: *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

John Singleton, African American director of *Boyz n the hood* (1991), about life in South Central Los Angeles, was recruited to direct the second installment of *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003).

New Zealand-born Lee Tamahori, director of *Once Were Warriors*, focused on an urban Maori family, voted the best New Zealand film of all time in 2014, went on to direct *Die Another Day* (2002), the twentieth of the James Bond fantasies.

Marc Forster, the German-Swiss director of the much acclaimed *Monster's Ball* (2001), again a small-budget film, with Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton, and *The Kite Runner* (2007), about life in Afghanistan, likewise turned to directing one of the Bond films, *Quantum of Solace*, in 2008.

Director of the (undeservedly) award-winning *American Beauty* (1999), the UK's Sam Mendes, presided over the most recent Bond film, *Skyfall* (2012), as well as the next in the series about the British secret agent, *Spectre*, which opens in November.

Patty Jenkins, whose *Monster* (2003), recounting the life of serial killer Aileen Wuornos (Charlize Theron), received a great deal of acclaim for its supposedly hard-hitting and painful realism, is slated to direct *Wonder Woman*, to be released in 2017.

And so forth ...



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