The Perceived Dangers of Technology:
A Movie review of "The Terminator" (1984)

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Abstract

"The Terminator" is a horror/action film based on the dangers of technology. Its thesis was made clearer and more interesting by its sequel, "Terminator 2: Judgement Day," 1991. In this paper I analyze the movie "The Terminator" and use key moments from the sequel to illustrate the tension between the attractions and dangers of technology.

1 Summary

"The Terminator" opens with the ruins of Los Angeles in 2029 after a nuclear holocaust. Ragged humans run like rats through the rubble, fighting an unequal war against giant killing machines. Words appear on the screen:

> The machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind has raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present. Tonight... ("The Terminator," 1984)

The setting changes to 1984 Los Angeles where the protagonist, Sarah Connor, works as a waitress. Two men appear separately, in bursts of lightning. One appears to have superhuman strength, and quickly gets down to business, killing people without emotion. The other appears smaller and weaker, and immediately has to escape the police. Both men arm themselves, and both go looking for Sarah Connor.

When she learns from television news that two other women named Sarah Connor have been killed, the heroine realizes she is in danger. Both men catch up to her in a bar where she is hiding. The weaker human character saves her from the superhuman Schwarzenegger, and they escape together.

Sarah is terrified and unsure if she can trust this stranger who helped her escape. Her captor explains that he is Kyle Reese, sent from the future to save her. Her son, John Connor, who hasn't been born yet, is the leader of a future rebellion against the machines. Her son has sent Kyle back to 1984 because the machines have sent a Terminator to kill her as a way of stopping the rebellion. Kyle explains that the Terminator is a cyborg, a cybernetic organism, part man and part machine, controlled by a "microprocessor"("The Terminator," 1984).

After Kyle rescues Sarah a second time, she finally believes his fantastic story. Sarah and Kyle become lovers and the viewer has a pretty good idea who John Connor's father will be.

The Terminator catches up to them, and nothing can stop him. Kyle sacrifices himself for Sarah, who finally kills the Terminator. In the final scenes of the movie, Sarah is alone and pregnant and preparing to raise her son to be the leader of a future rebellion, the last hope of mankind.

2   Thesis: Uncontrolled Technology

The following quote by Betty Friedan appears under the title "Change and Development" in the book *The Gift of Fire*:

> It is precisely this unique human capacity to transcend the present, to live one's life by purposes stretching into the future — to live not at the mercy of the world, but as a builder and designer of that world — that is the distinction between human and animal behavior or between the human being and the machine. (Baase, 2013, p. 7)

The main thesis of the movie "The Terminator" contradicts this point of view. In the movie, the machines transcend the present by stretching their purposes into the past. The danger of the Terminator is the danger of uncontrolled technology, resulting in artificial intelligence capable of turning against the humans that created it.

The filmmaker shows humans enjoying technology naively, and ignoring its dangers. When Sarah Connors calls for help, her roommate doesn't hear the phone. The roommate wears ear buds constantly, listening to music while she gets ready to go out, while she makes a snack, even when she is in bed with her boyfriend. When she misses Sarah's call for help, her answering machine picks up and says:

> Hi, there. Fooled you. You're talking to a machine. But don't be shy. It's OK. Machines need love, too, so talk to it... ("The Terminator," 1984)

Sarah is meanwhile hiding from the Terminator and from Kyle Reese in a disco bar called "Tech Noir". The bar patrons are drinking and dancing happily and have no idea how "black" the technology is about to get. The roommate still has her ear buds in, and is singing and dancing to the music while the Terminator is killing her boyfriend and coming to kill her.

The authority figures in the movie are unwilling to believe in the existence of the Terminator and are unable to protect Sarah against him. Only Kyle is able to keep her safe, because he understands what the Terminator is capable of. A quote by Neil Postman, again from the book *The Gift of Fire*, describes "technologies themselves as being in control":

> Once a technology is admitted [to our culture], it plays out its hand; it does what it is designed to do. (Baase, 2013, p. 343)

The Terminator has been designed to kill Sarah Connor and won't stop until it achieves its purpose. In the end, Sarah is only able to stop this technology with a combination of human intelligence and technology: she leads the Terminator into a crushing machine, where he is finally terminated.

3   Technology: Good and Bad

I would not recommend "The Terminator" to computer science students because the movie seems so outdated. The view of technology is so flawed that the message about the dangers of technology seems weak. This is shown in how Kyle Reese and the Terminator track down Sarah Connor: they look her up in the phone book. Later in the movie, the Terminator figures out where Sarah has gone by flipping through her address book. The message that technology is dangerous is undermined by the flawed technology in the movie. This problem is just like those mentioned in the book *The Gift of Fire* under the title "The Difficulty of Prediction" (Baase, 2013, p. 345).

This same thesis is more effective in the sequel to The Terminator.

In "Terminator 2", the Schwarzenegger character has been re-programmed to protect John Connor, who is now 10 years old. Sarah Connor watches her child and the Terminator interact, and realizes:

> It would never leave him, and it would never hurt him, never shout at him, or get drunk and hit him, or say it was too busy to spend time with him. It would always be there. And it would die, to protect him. Of all the would-be fathers who came and went over the years, this thing, this machine, was the only one who measured up. ("Terminator 2: Judgement Day," 1991)

In this movie, the attraction and the power of artificial intelligence are clear. How the machines took over and how the nuclear holocaust happened are better explained: the AI, realizing that the humans were going to turn it off, decided humans were the enemy, and so tried to destroy them all. And we meet the person responsible for creating the AI that ended up turning against humans. When he realizes his technology turns into a killer, he says, "How were we supposed to know?" ("Terminator 2: Judgement Day," 1991) In the end, the creator of the AI sacrifices himself to save the world.

"Terminator 2" strengthens the message that technology can bring great benefits, but that it also brings great risks. The second movie does a better job of humanizing the errors, failures, and the difficulty of controlling technology.

References

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