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Terminator Salvation

Abstract

This is a review of *Terminator Salvation* (2009).

Filled with countless action-packed sequences, entertaining digital sci-fi effects, and subtle references to its predecessor films, over five years after the third *Terminator* film installment, *Rise of the Machines*, was released *Terminator Salvation (T4)*, is a wonderful addition to the franchise.

Departing from the earlier films which focused deterring *Judgement Day*, *T4*'s plotline takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where the Resistance, humanity's avant-garde, retaliates against robot tyranny. Viewers are introduced to Marcus Wright (Sam Worthington), a convicted murder, who prior to his execution permits his body to be donated to science in exchange for a kiss from cancer-stricken Dr. Serena Kogen (Helena Bonham Carter). Fifteen years later, Wright wakes up, in cyborg-form, during an assault against a Skynet VLA outpost. Escaping death, Wright wanders through the desert to Los Angeles, where he meets young Kyle Reese (Anton Yelchin) and his silent companion, Star; both of whom are later captured by Skynet. Wright befriends a Resistance fighter, who takes him to meet Resistance leader John Connor (Christian Bale) who, initially, doubts Wright's loyalty to humankind. Wright and Connor eventually join forces and endeavour to destroy the San Francisco Skynet surveillance base and rescue Reese. After being impaled through his heart during combat with an eerie Arnold Schwarzenegger-like T-800, Connor detonates the city via remote and falls unconscious. Wright subsequently resolves to donate his heart to Connor and dies

an honourable death. The film ends with a clichéd epilogue where viewers learn that other Skynet bases exist and although this battle has been won, subsequent ones will follow, leaving the door wide opened for another sequel.

Terminator Salvation has an abundance of overt and implicit religious symbolism and metaphor. Explicitly, there is the blatant messianic-theme of the film. Protagonist John Connor (whose initials peculiarly correspond to those of Jesus Christ) bears unique talents pertaining to espionage, weaponry, and computer-technology. And upon gaining realization that he has the potential to help correct the plight of the Earth, Connor secures himself a small, albeit devoted band of followers to support his cause. Connor himself has had to go through much adversity both mentally and physically as he not only lost his mother but also had to deal with various assassination attempts. Nevertheless, his perseverance to defeat Skynet only intensifies, as do his feelings for his pregnant wife, Kate, and for his soldiers. Suffering a fatal wound, Connor is ready to nobly lay down his life for his cause but resurrects anew after receiving Wright's donated heart. Connor, the saviour-figure of humankind, survives and resumes his fight for human liberation. His repeated exhibition of the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude help paint Connor as a steadfast and trust-worthy liberator, one who appeals to audiences not only for his "all-American" appearance but also for his

humanity – surely a valued trait in a post-apocalyptic world where emotionless robots rule.

There is also a ubiquitous narrative of sacrifice and redemption in *T4*. Marcus Wright, for example, is seen being executed via lethal injection, payment for his crimes, at the beginning of the film. However, fifteen years later, he awakens and comes to believe that he is not worthy of being given a second chance at life. When Connor faces imminent demise, Wright redeems his name through his own sacrificial death to save his friend's life. Coupled with the narrative of sacrifice and redemption is that of hope and salvation. Compared to previous installations of the series where hope remained that the apocalypse could be avoided, the arrival of Judgment Day, the day the machines attack their makers, destroys any optimism audiences may have had for a peaceful future. However, the continued survival of John Connor, in many ways, fosters a new profound sense of assurance that things will be all right after all. Connor's unborn child thus becomes not only a symbol of hope but also serves to represent purity, new-life, and innocence in a post-apocalyptic world.

Basic issues of good versus evil can also be found in *Terminator Salvation*. While many films portray evil as an inherent trait exhibited by merciless, corrupt humans, *T4*'s villains are artificially-intelligent robots with hell-blazing red eyes lacking emotions, moral agency, and capacity to imagine. Humans, in general, are

portrayed as kind-hearted and responsible in their attempts to destroy the robots and protect the remainder of humanity. Even young Jadagrace Berry, who plays a traumatized child survivor of the apocalypse, seems cute and blameless when she hands Connor the detonator for the bombs which subsequently destroys Skynet.

In demarcating such a stark contrast between good and evil, where the latter seem completely removed from humanity, the film almost prevents any potential compassion towards the robots. However, like the Chinese yin yang, where good and evil are rooted-together and opposing yet connected, *T4* is multifaceted in its portrayal of these dualities. The seemingly innocent reputation of humans is slightly tainted by the presence of some individuals who remain selfish and violent in their motives, such as those who terrorized and attacked Wright and his companions. Even Connor and his Resistance are shown torturing Wright before they come to believe his innocence, thus making audiences question human moral steadfastness. Additionally, Wright dies as a self-sacrificing robot which causes viewers to feel compassion for him, in comparison to the “other” robots who wish to obliterate humankind completely. As was the case in previous *Terminator* films, not all robots are evil and not all humans remain fully virtuous.

Director McG and composer Danny Elfman compliment each other’s talents well in *Terminator Salvation*, as the film’s entertaining factor clearly compensates for what some may consider a lack of plot depth especially compared

to *T1* and *T2*. Replete with religious symbolism and action scenes, the film appeals to an array of audiences. Redeeming itself after the disappointment that was *Rise of the Machines*, this film proves that the *Terminator* franchise clearly still has life left within it but has a far way to go before it truly attains salvation.