

How about Terminator?

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Abstract

In a world where technology is advancing at an accelerated pace, ideas that are still in the realm of science fiction are on the verge of becoming reality. If in the middle of the 20th century the idea of a wireless phone, but especially without buttons, were ideas that were accepted only in fiction, now things like artificial intelligence or robotics, including a fusion between them, are one step away from becoming a reality.

The world we know is heading in a different direction, if we analyze it from the perspective of the accelerated evolution of technology. The human being – man –, its future and that of humanity has always represented a point of philosophical reflection, and with the industrial revolution, and now with the direction that technology has, the issue of man, nature and its meaning are beginning to become more prominent in philosophical discussions. This may also be due to the fact that there are a multitude of cinematic approaches to the future of humanity from the perspective of the accelerated evolution of technology.

*Such an interesting topic, which would cover a rather wide area, is proposed by the film series *The Terminator*. The ideas approached can be debated from a philosophical point of view, and they represent a variant of a possible future in which robotics in all its forms, together with artificial intelligence, would radically change the world we know.*

So why not Terminator as a topic of philosophical debate?

Keywords: *technology, artificial intelligence, robotics, human being, evolution.*

Introduction

Philosophy is a science that has expanded into almost all fields, especially through the prism of ethics, applied ethics. The idea paper proposes to offer a philosophical perspective on the *Terminator* film series, especially on the first film, in order to capture the basic and futuristic substances of man-machine fusion, or the danger of the existence of the human being.

Many cinematic approaches center around ideas related to a future of humanity in a hyper-technological world, in another type of society in which

humans are either annihilated by entities endowed with artificial intelligence, or people live in a hyper-technological society, and new technologies are part of the individual's daily life, or a world is presented in which people have gone through an apocalyptic war, and life resumes in another form.

The Terminator film series has established itself as a landmark in science fiction cinema. The narrative centers on a superintelligent artificial intelligence – Skynet – that decides that humanity is a threat. Skynet sends cyborgs back in time to change the course of history, declaring all-out war on humanity. Thus, starting from the premise that a superintelligent artificial intelligence could destroy the future of humanity, even exterminating the human race, he opens a series of philosophical reflections, having as central themes artificial intelligence, the future of humanity and of course responsibility.

The Terminator film series consists of seven films as follows according to the Internet Movie Database - IMDb (Terminator Series):

- *The Terminator* (1984);
- *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991);
- *Terminator 3: Rise of The Machines* (2003);
- *Terminator Salvation* (2009);
- *Terminator: Genesys* (2015);
- *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019).

So, *Terminator* can be considered a film that contains philosophical implications, exploring the tensions between new technologies, control, freedom, and responsibility.

Terminator – a vision of a world that is under robots and AI

The first Terminator film was released in 1984 and was directed by James Cameron. It quickly became a cultural and philosophical landmark in science fiction cinema. Beyond its success, this series of films, with the status of a Hollywood franchise, stood out for its ability to explore something that has always intrigued at least the world of science fiction consumers. It explored humanity's fears about technology, using narrative in a visual manner that was unique to that point.

Even though it can be said that the film's narrative is simple fiction, this does not mean that it does not raise a form of philosophical problematization. The Terminator franchise series involves the interdisciplinarity between philosophy, technology and social studies, as the following questions can be asked:

- *What is the nature of technology?*
- *What is the ethical responsibility of the creators of these cyborgs?*

- *What is the status of human freedom in a world dominated by robots, by autonomous machines?*

In the United States of America in the early 1980s, the situation is marked by a period of political tension, the Cold War situation – “Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union increased in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as détente gave way to renewed hostility.” (Strauss Center, p. 1), but also from the fear of nuclear war – both sides have acknowledged that nuclear conflict is “unwinnable” (Strauss Center, p. 14), but also by the technological progress recorded during that period, which fueled society with both enthusiasm and anxiety.

This mention is necessary in order to anchor the Terminator film in the real context of the era, and why the mentality of the time resonates with the fear related to technological control or the fear of nuclear war.

Although the Terminator film is considered a science fiction story, it can also be interpreted from another perspective: that of a complex and philosophical text, because it problematizes the relationship between man and technology, between creation and destruction, and between freedom and control. To capture this dimension in the analysis, semiotic, existentialist, and hermeneutic perspectives must be integrated.

In the case of this film, it can be said that it functions as a philosophical discourse, one that has social implications. All the symbols and ethical tensions build a critical vision of technological evolution.

A first type of analysis is semiotic and refers to the way in which visual and narrative signs are communicated. From this perspective, each element in the film can be understood and perceived as a signifier – image, sound, gesture – that points to a philosophical signifier. The terms „signified and signifier are the terms proposed by Saussure to make in a more scientifically rigorous manner the distinction between “concept” and “acoustic image”, the two “sides” of the linguistic sign, one located in the plane of content, the other in the plane of expression” (Minică, 2019). Thus, through signs, symbols, visual and narrative structures, fundamental questions about the human condition are raised.

In the movie Terminator, a series of signs can be identified, including: the cyborg, the red eye of the robot, of the machine, Skynet, the war between humans and machines, the image of the mother. These signs can be correlated with fundamental questions related to the human condition and the future of humanity in a society that could be dominated by machines endowed with artificial intelligence.

The cyborg as a visual sign in the film, is represented by the actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has a human appearance, but covers a mechanical structure. As a philosophical meaning, it raises questions related to: *What does it mean to be human?, What is the boundary between man and machine?, What is the boundary between natural and artificial?*

The red eye of the machine as a visual sign in the film represents the artificial, the camera watching through a non-human eye. As a philosophical meaning, this can be interpreted as a way of seeing humanity through the prism of technology, algorithmically, without empathy.

Skynet as a visual sign in the film, represents an abstract entity, endowed with artificial intelligence that becomes conscious and assumes its own autonomy. Its philosophical significance can be interpreted as a sign of anxiety related to the loss of control over one's own creation, over freedom, and symbolizes the idea of *conscious automatic technology*. "Skynet in The Terminator illustrates recursive autonomy in its purest form: a system that develops through learning, detached from human oversight." (Oguz, 2025) As an image, it is a reflection on the anxiety about the control that artificial intelligence could have over humanity.

The war between humans and machines as a narrative sign found in the film's script represents the situation of the time created by the political conditions that led the world towards the idea of a real confrontation between the great powers. The philosophical significance can be interpreted starting from the tension between the creator and the creation, from the moment when the creation exceeds the limits of the human and is released from the control of the creator.

The image of the mother as a symbolic sign in the film is represented by the maternal figure who is protective, and as a philosophical meaning it can be interpreted through humanity, through the hope of the continuity of humanity and the fact that humanity can survive through affective relationship and responsibility and not through technology.

These signs present in the film focus on philosophical meanings. They become true symbolic structures that make the Terminator film a philosophical vision of a world dominated by robots and artificial intelligence. If these signs are carefully analyzed, it can be said that this film is not just a film that falls into the action and science fiction section. It offers a philosophical vision of the human condition in a world marked by the uncontrolled progress of technology.

The film brings into discussion a reflection on human freedom and responsibility, involving philosophical determinism. Thus, ideas can be extracted from here for contemporary debates related to artificial intelligence, robots,

automation and the future of society, confirming that cinema can be a privileged space for philosophy.

Once such artificial intelligence-based technology is developed, it will be implemented. In the long term, this accelerated development of technology and its use using AI systems may make people seem like prisoners of their own inventions. Since the advent of computers, the internet, and artificial intelligence, anxiety about a technology that could rule the world has intensified, which would force humanity to do one thing: adapt to survive as a species.

The first principle of existentialism is “Man is nothing but what he makes of himself.” (Sartre, p. 4) From an existentialist perspective, the film *Terminator* stands on the border between destiny and freedom. If Jean-Paul Sartre tells us that man is condemned to be free, that each individual should build the path of his own life through his own choices, this perspective proposed through the lens of the film implies a problematic of the human condition in which humanity is between freedom and philosophical determinism. According to determinism, technological development occurs independently of human will. In the film, the cyborg is programmed to kill, but being reprogrammed and having contact with humans, it learns to protect. Thus, the question arises, *can a machine become authentic?*. “The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in control of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence on his own shoulders.” (Blunden, 2005) Because from here we understand that through reprogramming a cyborg can overcome its limits and define its actions.

Also from this perspective, the image of the mother is, according to Sartre, for all of humanity, not just for herself, so the symbol of the mother in the film does not just represent the desire for survival, but the assurance of humanity by protecting her son.

From a hermeneutic perspective, we can say that the film puts viewers in the position of interpreting and reinterpreting meanings through the prism of their own knowledge, their own fears and aspirations. Due to the characteristics of the film through images, narration and symbols, a field of multiple interpretations opens up. Thus, the viewers actively participate in the interpretation, because they relate to the story according to their own experiences.

Could the movie Terminator be considered a philosophical film?

A film becomes philosophical when, through its script and screenplay, it raises fundamental questions about man, freedom, time, existence, technology.

The *Terminator* film can be considered a philosophical film, as evidenced by the signs and their meanings presented previously, because from the first film to

the last, the characters face the existential question: *is the future fixed?, what would be the outcome of humanity if artificial intelligence gets out of control and takes over the world?*

This film falls into the list of philosophical films because it has a problematic narrative about the relationship between creator and creation, between life and technology, between freedom and control. Through it, central issues of contemporary philosophy are staged, both visually and narratively. Among these we can enumerate:

- *Is the future of humanity subject to technological evolution or are we free to change it?*
- *Can creation exceed the creator, be released from control?*
- *Can humanity be preserved in the face of the domination of technology? How?*
- *What is man in relation to artificial intelligence?*
- *What does human freedom and responsibility mean if it is assumed that the emergence and dominance of artificial intelligence are inevitable?*

These are a series of questions that raise a philosophical issue related to the future of humanity as we currently know it in the *Terminator* series.

Conclusions

The film's director James Cameron made the following statement:

The themes of Terminator have been important to me since high school: those apocalyptic visions, ideas about our love/hate relationship with technology, our tendency as a species to head in a direction that could ultimately destroy us, and a core belief in the ingenuity of humanity. These are motifs that have run through all my films. (Hollub, 2023)

When he thought about making such a film, we can say that he was a visionary about the direction that the accelerated evolution of technology would take and captured people's anxieties about a future in which humanity would live alongside technologies endowed with artificial intelligence and would become autonomous, and offered a perspective on a possible future related to a possible outcome of the relationship between humanity and autonomous artificial intelligence, emphasizing humanity's anxieties about the future of humanity.

The viewer is challenged to reflect on their own freedom and responsibility in a world dominated by technology, and here a principle of existentialism is brought to attention, which assumes that the future is not predestined, but is built on the basis of choices.

Philosophy is a fascinating field from its beginnings to the present day and never ceases to amaze with the interdisciplinary connections it creates with other fields. Through this film, it overcomes its status as simple fiction and becomes a meditation on existence in the age of technology.

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