

“I’ll be back”: Linda Hamilton and the return of Sarah Connor in *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019)

1. Thanks / Intro. Assuming no one needs any kind of exposition....
2. Linda Hamilton's appearance in *Terminator: Dark Fate* – 30 years after she last played the role – represents one of Hollywood's most dramatic comebacks. Her entrance on the bridge, a few minutes into the film, resembles one of those moments in sitcom when a star makes a cameo appearance: one feels that there should be a pause for applause. For the fans there is a sense of 'getting the band back together again' – and even for those who have never seen Hamilton's previous films in the franchise, it is clear from the reviews, her iconic performance as Sarah Connor resonates, making her an instantly recognizable and significant figure.
3. At 63, moreover, Hamilton qualifies as a 'Geriatric' star – the term used for the spate of films over the last decade or so featuring aging action leads. The sub-genre has proved something of a boys' club – the last refuge of the old guard, as women increasingly encroach on the male-dominated territory of the action film. Hamilton joins a tiny band of female usurpers within this sub-genre – once again a pioneer, echoing the impact of her previous performance in the role.
4. Sarah Connor as played by Linda Hamilton in *Terminator: Judgement Day* has an iconic status both in Hollywood history, and in feminist film criticism.
5. As the poster girl for Yvonne Tasker's concept of "musculinity," Hamilton's Sarah became a focus of academic debate about the female action lead. For some she was effectively a man in drag – wearing her built body as an armour and adopting masculine traits at expense of maternal ones (Jeffords 1993, 249-50; Cornea 2007, 163); others argued that binary theoretical constructs of gender, risk undermining the transgressive, revolutionary potential of the role (Brown 1996, 52-71; Hills 1999, 38-50).
6. Lisa Purse describes an evolution of the female action lead that is far from consistently progressive. After her brief moment in the cinematic sun during the late 80s and early 90s, she moves into television, where her image and activities are normalized, no longer coded as "inappropriate," then returns to the big screen as an eroticized figure, before settling into what Purse describes as an "accommodating, allegedly 'positive' postfeminism". A similar pattern can be traced in the female leads of the *Terminator* franchise, unfolding through the successive films together with the TV series *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Yet the ghost of Linda Hamilton's Sarah haunts all these texts – either in the imagery or in the narrative – preparing the ground, one might say, for the return of the real Sarah Connor.

Constructing the aging action heroine

7. Just as in *Judgement Day*, Hamilton's Sarah adopted what were considered a masculine physicality and masculine skillset, so, in *Dark Fate* she appropriates a number of the

traits and tropes that have been the stock in trade for male geriatric heroes – albeit in a style all her own.

5 minutes

Josephine Dolan discusses how Hollywood contrives to render its older male stars ‘hard and firm’, and its older female stars ‘hard and smooth’. Sarah is most definitely aligned with the former – the famously muscular arms are on display while her face looks characterful, lived in.... in sharp contrast with the Rev9 (the latest terminator) who is uncannily smooth, both inside and out. Hamilton/Sarah also appropriates the attributes of authority and experience associated with male geriatric stars, which, Lennart Soberon argues make them in many ways the apotheosis of patriarchy. Like her male counterparts she brings to this new text a wealth of what Soberon calls “heroic capital”, highlighted by a crowd-pleasing deployment of intertextual tropes and jokes.

At the same time, there are differences in how the older female star “does” action cinema. Sarah’s aging body, for example, is not offered as a site of vulnerability. Soberon argues that male geriatric stars frequently draw on their age to supply that element of vulnerability and victimization which Susan Jeffords has famously argued is essential to the construction of the action hero. For Sarah, however, this comes from emotional rather than physical trauma: the loss of her son, which is repeatedly referenced, especially in terms of her difficult relationship with Schwarzenegger’s Carl, the Terminator who killed him.

8. Another gendered difference is the way in which the construction of Sarah’s character draws on the cultural trope of the “crone.” A mainstay of folklore that represents the older woman as social outsider, often attributed sinister or supernatural characteristics. Over the past quarter-century, feminists across a range of disciplines have reclaimed this term from its pejorative cultural origins, re-appropriating it to highlight the revolutionary, if often unappreciated potential of the older woman in terms of her prophetic wisdom, her outspoken truth-telling, her freedom and her disregard for social conventions. These qualities bring a degree of fallibility and humour to Sarah’s character in *Dark Fate* but they are also weaponized to reinforce the agency and status of the female geriatric star – and, after all, she needs all the help she can get given the cultural odds stacked against her.
9. Kathleen Woodward argues that ageism is “entrenched in feminism itself” and that post feminism is no better, being overwhelmingly preoccupied with the concerns of young women. At the very least older women are neglected, at the worst they are vilified. Woodward argues that the “youthful structure of the look” dominates western culture - a structure we typically find embedded in mainstream Hollywood output. Its logic, however, is increasingly challenged by both textual representation and critical commentary. Thus, for example, Anne Jersley, writing on older female CEOs in TV dramas, posits their edgy and decidedly post-feminist sensibility of “cool” as a direct

challenge to the youthful structure of the look, with elegant dresses and big statement necklaces representing a refusal to become invisible.

10. No attempt is made to disguise Sarah's age in *Dark Fate*. On the contrary, the fact that she has been chasing Terminators for the past thirty years is a key plot point, and while she looks very good in the role there is no question that she looks her age. Like Jersley's subjects, however, Sarah is hyper-visible and devastatingly cool – albeit replacing their elegant heels and frocks with combat boots and a flak jacket, and their big statement necklaces with big statement firearms. Her positioning alongside the two younger women serves not to diminish her importance but to emphasise the criticality of her role. It is not despite but because of her age that she is essential to this team. Her age is, in effect, her **superpower**.

Besides her combat skills, an impressive arsenal of weaponry and her iconic status as a kick-ass heroine Hamilton's Sarah brings some very particular qualities to her role courtesy of her age: **experience and authority, dedication and staying power and a humanity** explicitly defined by her fallibility and mortality (a particularly pertinent quality in a war against machines). These qualities are underpinned by some of the disruptive and transgressive potential of the post-**menopausal 'crone'** in terms of disobedience, outspokenness, eccentricity and freedom from social convention or control.

11. From her first appearance on the bridge when she moves quickly from one weapon to another, clearly knowing her enemy and exactly how powerful he is, Sarah exudes **experience** and the **authority** that comes from it. Later, when she picks up Grace (Mackenzie Davis), and Dani (Natalia Reyes), as they blunder out of the pharmacy they have just held up to gets meds for the failing Grace, she again assumes control – and somehow hangs on to it even when physically challenged by the revived and decidedly imposing augment. Despite her initial reluctance, Grace is soon persuaded that she needs Sarah's insider knowledge of this world - from her understanding of how the terminator will be able to use mobile phones and police coms to track them, to her well-placed contacts able to supply them with a range of military grade hardware at a moment's notice. Sarah's experience and authority are contrasted with the initial lack of either in the ingénue Dani, who for Sarah represents a version of her younger self.
12. Sarah's **determination & sheer staying power** is evidenced by her 30 years as a hunter of terminators across 50 states – and is in sharp contrast to Grace's turbo-tuned metabolism – which means she can perform at superhuman levels but only for very short periods at a time. It is reminiscent of the dogged endurance of Swarzenegger's character in *Terminator: Genysis*. In that film, the rebooted versions of Sarah and Kyle are sent ahead into the near future to complete a complex game plan devised by Arnie's Terminator – but for technical reasons, he himself has to go the long way round – living through all the years they skip, and preparing the ground for their mission.

In *Dark fate*, it is Sarah who has gone the long way round and Grace who has simply appeared out of nowhere, ready for the final battle. Despite the trauma of John's death Sarah has continued to fight for the survival of humanity, and will continue to protect and mentor Dani after her other protectors are gone. Sarah has come to represent humanity's dogged, almost timeless resistance to the rule of the machines – the structuring logic of the franchise.

13. The Sarah of *Judgement Day* was likened by some to a Terminator herself due to her driven, uncompromising even dehumanised characterisation. Yet I would suggest her **humanity** is a key element of her superpower in *Dark Fate* - a **humanity** closely associated with her age in the film. In part because her age in itself speaks to her mortality, the ultimate fragility that marks out the humans from the machines. In part because of her own very human journey in the film from grief and despair toward reconciliation and renewed hope. In this respect Sarah is contrasted with Carl who, despite his efforts to blend in and his increasing understanding of the human condition, is most definitely not human himself. As the narrative progresses, Carl and Grace (neither fully human nor native to the current era) are increasingly framed together, while Sarah and Dani (human and contemporaneous) are likewise aligned. Ultimately only Sarah, wise, experienced, reliable and entirely mortal, is fit to mentor the woman who will emerge as humanity's future leader.

Finally, the transgressive qualities of the "crone," as well as misplaced social assumptions about the older woman, become part of Sarah's armory. While the prophetic Sarah Connor of *Judgement Day* was considered dangerously insane and duly incarcerated, the older Sarah of *Dark Fate* is presented as merely eccentric, with her insistence on 'having saved the world' and on keeping her phone in a chip packet. Prophecy and non-conformity are traits traditionally tolerated in older women as harmless, providing a form of camouflage for those who are anything but. Thus, when Sarah is, briefly, captured at the border detention center en route from Mexico to Texas, her age and the social assumptions it brings, are weaponised. The guards mockingly congratulate Sarah on being wanted in fifty states but make the mistake of treating her as something of an oddity rather than a threat. In the only direct reference to her age throughout the film, they joke about taking her to the senior living quarters -- immediately before finding themselves overpowered by their prisoner as she makes her escape.

14. Sarah's fractious relationship with Schwarzenegger's Terminator, whom she insists on referring to as 'it', is characterised by another quality ascribed to the crone: **she tells the truth** however uncomfortable. Thus on learning of his new identity Sarah announces 'I'm never gonna fucking call you Carl!'; she also tells him to his face that once he is no longer needed she is going to kill him. In her new role as Dani's protector and mentor truth-telling is an important quality – she does not sugar the pill, for example, about the nature of the 'killbox' plan she proposes, which uses Dani as bait. And when training Dani on the firing range she tells her to imagine a terminator just killed her whole family

– which anyone else might consider a little undiplomatic Sarah's uncompromising truth-telling and tough love is contrasted with Grace's decision not to alarm Dani by revealing her true destiny until half-way through the film.

15. Perhaps most important of all the Crone is free –and able to make her own choices. Just as Carl, no longer pre-programmed by the machines of a non-existent future, is now free to find his own purpose, so Sarah is no longer beholden to the biological imperative, no longer a mother, or a 'walking womb' in waiting, but free to choose her role as Dani's mentor. Free to embrace the philosophy repeated like a mantra in every iteration of the franchise: 'there is no fate but what we make ourselves.'
16. The final scene of the film sees Dani and Sarah visiting playground where the young Grace is playing – It is an image that recalls the horror of Sarah's dream in Judgment Day, repeated at the start of this film, where an apocalypse turns the children to ash. Yet it is also an image of hope, signalling Sarah's return from exile to the fold of humanity where she has a clear role to fulfil.
17. Catherine Summerhayes argues that Sarah, in the first two films, functions as a guide for us, the audience – representing not only humanity but our connection to the real world. In a franchise about time travel she marches grimly on in real time, with the rest of us mortals. It is the fantastical elements of the franchise that provide escapism and adrenalin – but it is this tie back to a recognisable reality that draws its audience in and helps to explain the resonance of the Terminator myth and the longevity of the franchise (an element critically missing from the popular and critical failure that was the fourth film).

Her presence in Dark Fate, appropriately aged, then, operates on both a textual and an extra-textual level. Here, as in other Geriaction films, the aging star acts as a mark of longevity and thus a kind of brand guarantee, as well as bringing a ready-made back story and associated 'heroic capital'. At the same time there is a particular power in the figure of the woman who went the long way round and who, after nearly 40 years of the Terminator saga, looks old enough to have lived through it, can still handle herself and still has a critical purpose in the world.

18. References

19. References

20. Questions