

Terminator: Dark Fate is the 6th reboot of the science fiction franchise, with Arnold Schwarzenegger reprising his signature role as the increasingly human, time-traveling robot T-800. The aging Arnie, however, does not appear until halfway through the film, playing the comic, if lethal, wingman to the films three kickass action heroines: Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), now a crusading vigilante wanted in 50 states; Grace (Mackenzie Davis), an augmented human bodyguard sent from the future, and Dani (Natalia Reyes), the target of the machines' latest assassination attempt – the woman who embodies the last best hope of humanity'..

In keeping with the pleasures of genre movies, and sequels in particular, this female-dominated line-up offers a blend of novelty and continuity. On the one hand, the threesome represent a break with a very masculine tradition; on the other, the film reboots many of the themes and tropes associated with the heroines of the previous films... and in particular gendered issues of agency and subjectivity – often with decidedly a self-conscious twist.

Female action heroine represents a conflicted and much debated figure in Hollywood cinema and its associated scholarship – not least because of her relationship to notions of agency and subjectivity

Typically a sole action heroine bears the burden of responsibility for all her gender: rendered the exception that proves the rule which rather undermines any revolutionary potential. Frequently she is sexualised to a degree that raises the spectre of Laura Mulvey's post war heroines, trapped in the gilded cage of the male gaze, or given the narrative function of the Proppian 'princess': the priceless treasure to be sought, fought over, protected – or otherwise acted upon. And of course she is frequently positioned as love interest (or sex interest) – whose main function, we might surmise, is to dispel any worrying spectres of homo-eroticism which otherwise might taint a genre which remains something of a bastion of masculinity. Even where the female sidekick appears freed of these burdens, as Marianne Kac has argued, her chief function in many Science Fiction films, seems to be to act as a kind of cinematic cheerleader - a witness for validating the heroism of the male lead and demonstrating the appropriate reaction to the audience. In this capacity the female co-star, notwithstanding her apparently active role and her ownership of the gaze, is rendered effectively passive.

The Terminator franchise, I would suggest, has always offered a rather more complex role for its action-women. Which is not to be said we don't find all the above tropes in evidence, one way or another, across the years The recurring line – spoken in all six movies: “there is no fate but what we make for ourselves’ is a neat way of flagging and excusing multiple timelines and maintaining a sense of jeopardy despite the time travel element. It also puts an emphasis on self-determination – which is interesting in relation to its action heroines characters in particular and the degree of agency they are given. Dark Fate is quite explicit in picking up this baton with regard to its female characters and its (quite self-conscious) treatment of gender politics - like any good sequel, treading a fine line between continuity and change

In contrast to the much maligned all-female Ghost busters which (putting aside the problematic fan responses) did feel distinctly gimmicky – in Dark Fate the female action leads have antecedents - active women (however limited and hedged about with subtly undermining tropes) have always at the centre of the Terminator films (and, of course the TV spinoff) , disrupting macho ideology and the conventional ‘narrative economy’ of the action film. The character of Sarah Connor was a quite deliberately feminist creation on the part of Gale Ann Hurd, Direct James Cameron partner at the time – and has been a critical presence throughout the franchise - even in the two films (3 & 4) where she does not actually appear but haunts the text in the form of references and photographs. In both instances, moreover, her place is taken by other female action characters – including a female terminator in the third film.

The ‘in jokes’ represented by the play of self-conscious intertextuality in Dark Fate also represent a form of continuity. A great many of these centre specifically on gender with the relationship between Linda Hamiltons SC and Arnie’s Terminator resembling nothing so much as a divorced couple’s sparring a Nancy Meyers rom com. [quote on slide’]The wry, dry comedy created at the expense of the Terminators domesticity in his new incarnation as Carl the curtain fitter constitute a self-conscious parody of the gender reversals in Terminator 2 (in which the robot makes a better mother than Sarah) – and I would suggest of the much rehearsed critical commentary on that film. (Sarah remarks quizzically that it is odd ‘Carl’s new partner Alicia hasn’t noticed that he weighs 400lb and never sleeps. He in turn explains that their relationship is platonic, based on his stability to change a baby and qualities as a good listener!)

Although the Dark Fate presents itself plot-wise as a sequel to Terminator 2, effectively ignoring the existences of 3,4 & 5 - it does in fact draw on reference points and themes from across the franchise - particularly in relation to constructions of gender and agency. At the same time it refreshes, challenges and plays on these to introduce a set of 21st heroines – offering a number of creative twists on the well-established themes of the franchise.

One important development is of course the fact that Dark Fate features a team of women – a fact emphasised in the publicity materials - removing the burden of representation such that the three female characters get to embody very different narrative functions and very different constructions of gender, with a twist (albeit muted for a mainstream audience) of intersectionality.

63 year old Linda Hamilton’s impressive comeback as Sarah Connor 30 years after T2 is in an important sense all about continuity – notwithstanding subsequent portrayals, this is, for many, the return of the ‘real’ Sarah Connor – a feminist icon - for audiences and critics alike – who’s significance has been hotly debated by the latter (– to what extent did her physical prowess and ‘musculinity’ in Judgement day work a metaphor for agency? to what extent was she constructed as a man in drag? To what extent was she out performed by Arnie’s T800 both as a protector and as a parent? To what extent did she become practically a terminator herself – somehow less human than the real one?) nevertheless her image has remained a powerful cultural trope effectively outliving the commentary to become simply the poster girl for the female action heroine.

Here she usurps the accustomed position of her male co-star in the text. Her centrality to Dark Fate is announced both by her positioning in the film poster and by her appropriating in her first scene of Arnie's hyper-real foot fall, sunglasses and most famous line: "I'll be back".

Hamilton brings to Dark Fate all the heroic capital earned in her previous films, but at the same time reinvents herself as an unapologetic vigilante hero. Her age makes her a rare female example of a 'Geriatric' star – alongside, Arnie, of course. He has already explicitly introduced the theme of old age in T5 in which he firmly tells a young Kyle that –he is 'old not obsolete'. For SC her age is effectively her superpower – it is the qualities associated with her longevity - experience , authority and sheer persistence - that make her the perfect future mentor for the new messiah.

And in stark contrast with the previous films, this role is presented as her choice. Just as the machine, "Carl" finds himself no longer programmed, free to find his own purpose in life, so Sarah is no longer a mother, no longer driven by a biological imperative but very much in charge of her own destiny

Agency is likewise critical to the character of **Grace (Mackenzie Davies)** – an augmented human sent back in time to protect Dani from the latest Terminator. She owes something in this respect to the aberrant T4 – also features enhanced human. The difference is that the cyborg played by Sam Worthington doesn't know he is one and doesn't know he has been programmed to destroy John Connor – making him the perfect infiltrator. Grace, by contrast is 100% aware and in control. Choosing to sacrifice herself and over and over again to protect her charge and finally insisting that the humans rip out her artificial heart to use it to destroy the terminator.

This, her final moment in the film, speaks to a new development within the franchise in the form of an underlying homoeroticism both in terms of imagery and narrative. For the androgynous Grace effectively takes the place of Kyle – John Connor's lieutenant sent back in both 1 and 3 to impregnate Sarah. In both cases he is in love with her or at least with her image and myth which survive her into the future. In Dark Fate we learn that Grace was saved by the 'commander' as a child, and has been devoted to her ever since. The self-sacrifice, and in particular the sacrifice of her heart speak to this as well as supporting a distinctly queer charge that characterises their relationship.

Dani (Natalia Reyes) herself seems to be modelled very much on the original Sarah Connor – a normal working class girl, going about her business (although already showing signs of her future leadership role as she is very much head of the household, managing her brother and father at home and challenging the factory owner when her brother seems set to lose his job to a robot – a nice set-up for the age of the machines). She is out of her depth once the terminator arrives and initially very much the princess/victim figure to be protected by her two companions – however she is a quick learner and as she comes to better understand

what is going on so she comes to assert her agency – echoing the relationship between knowledge and agency played out by the original Sarah Connor. Thus Dani takes charge of the border crossing, for example, and makes strategic decisions such as the ‘kill box’ plan. Just as Sarah developed into the protector her child would need over the course of terminator 1, finally killing the Terminator after Kyles death, so Dani becomes a future leader before our very eyes.

This brings us to what is arguably the most radical change to the franchise: the new identity of the future messiah and saviour of mankind – no longer the suggestively initialled John Connor but Dani herself. A woman –changes the ur-myth entirely, removing at a stroke the central idea of motherhood (actual or future) as the (acceptable) driving force behind the action heroine. The Madonna theme is surprisingly persistent through the franchise: SC in T1 must be protected because of her future son, not herself and in Terminator 2 is explicitly fuelled by a maternal drive to protect her son at any cost. The theme is continued as a leit motif in T3, where the young John Connor and his wife to be are told (before they are actually in a relationship) that their children will be important. Even in T4, where there is no direct significance to the plot we are explicitly told that JCs wife is pregnant. T5 addresses the issue with a touch of parody: a savvy, souped-up Sarah Connor has been raised by Arnie’s Terminator as a kick-ass action heroine – but she is still, in effect, a walking womb and on the appearance of Kyle in their timeline, Arnie makes it clear they are required to ‘mate’, while simultaneously channelling a scary protective dad in relation to the hapless Kyle.

Dark Fate’s departure from this Madonna myth then, is significant, and serves to redefine its young heroine, however inexperienced, as an agentic human subject rather than a biological vehicle. The shift is given particular emphasis in the text by the withholding of Dani’s true identity – we are encouraged, both by our own generically schooled expectations and by Sarah’ explicit assumptions to think that Dani is another Sarah – the mother to be of a future, male messiah, until a denouement that surprised Dani as much as it does Sarah.

Dark Fate did not do well at box office – but in many ways that may say more about the failure of previous attempts to revive the franchise than the film itself. It met with mixed reviews – as might be expected given some of the liberties it takes with gender politics. I predict it will prove to be a film with a long tail. As a sequel it feels grounded in the original notwithstanding its departures – a case of evolution more than revolution, and not too heavy handed. It exploits the qualities of the franchise, including its self-mocking humour, rather than turning it on its head – draws on the revolutionary potential that was already there - and perhaps that is its achievement as a mainstream quasi-feminist text for the 21st C.