
Study Guide

Terminator Salvation



Feature movies are a medium, an art and a business. Each of these elements plays a role. As a medium, movies represent ideas through the codes and conventions of sound and moving image. As art, they make personal and cultural statements to their audiences. As businesses, they create work for their creators and profits for their investors.

This guide, which extends the ideas presented in the *Terminator Salvation* episode of *Beyond the Screen*, may be used by teachers as they support their students, by parents who want to discuss the movie with their children, or by serious viewers who want to think beyond the screen.

Plot Synopsis: In 2018, John Connor is a minor squad leader in the resistance against Skynet, the machine organization that is systematically hunting and destroying humans. John discovers that his father has been captured and taken to Skynet headquarters at the same time that the resistance leaders have decided to attack and destroy it. He needs to save his father and humanity, but has to trust a machine—something his mother warned him never to do—to get him into Skynet.

A. Plot and Themes

Terminator Salvation's plot and themes derive from the previous *Terminator* movies and television shows. They involve questions of how machines and humans differ and whether humans are plotting their own destruction by building more and more sophisticated machines. They also question the existence and purpose of spirituality as humans become increasingly god-like in their ability to create and destroy life.

How does *Terminator Salvation* advance the plot and theme elements established by its predecessors?

1. Previous terminators, and most of the terminators in *Terminator Salvation*, are machines masquerading as humans. Does that description fit Marcus Wright? Marcus is a cyborg, with a human heart and brain. Does that make him human or a machine?

Do Blair and John Connor think he is human or machine? How can you tell?

What does Marcus think?

The movie shows us repeatedly what scenes look like from the point of view of a terminator (pixilated objects highlighted in red circles and squares with written labels). Do these points of view match the point of view seen by Marcus when he is being interrogated by John? What might that image tell viewers?

2. No one in *Terminator Salvation* speaks of god or prays, but viewers hear the 23rd Psalm* repeatedly.

The first time they hear it is at Marcus' execution. The 23rd Psalm is spoken at many North American executions in hopes of giving the criminal hope for his or her afterlife. What is the theme of the 23rd Psalm?

Why might the 23rd Psalm be heard at other times during the movie, e.g., when Marcus' leg has been damaged by a landmine and he is taken to Connor's hospital?

Might viewers think that someone has saved Marcus from execution and death?

Might they think that he has gone to a 'better place'?

Might they think that the 23rd Psalm is being used ironically, and that the ‘saved’ Marcus Wright has actually gone to hell?

**23rd psalm*

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 He leaded me beside the still waters.
 He restored my soul:
 He leaded me in the paths of righteousness for His name’ sake.
 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: For thou art with me;
 Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
 Thou anointest my head with oil; My cup runneth over.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

3. In previous *Terminator* movies, guardian terminators have sacrificed themselves in order to protect John Connor, which simultaneously protects humanity because John Connor is the key to defeating the machines. These acts seem to signal the fact that the machines recognize that human life is more important than machine existence.

In *Terminator Salvation*, Marcus Wright willingly gives up his heart to John Connor. This is the second time he willingly dies.

Might this be the ‘salvation’ in *Terminator Salvation*?

B. Cinematography

1. The cinematography in *Terminator Salvation* is not just unusual—it is unique. *Terminator Salvation* is set after the massive nuclear explosions that occurred in *The Rise of the Machines*. The director and cinematographer wanted to achieve a look that would reflect the change in sunlight that might occur as a result of the loss of earth’s ozone layer. Without the ozone layer to filter out UV rays, they believed that the quality of the light would shift to a harsher tone. To create that tone, they stressed the film stock with high heat before shooting the movie, then intentionally left the film stock in a processing bath that added extra silver to the negative. The additional silver exaggerates the contrast in the scenes.

Does the look of *Terminator Salvation* feel unique (otherworldly) to you?

Does it feel as though the environment is harsh and hostile?

2. *Terminator Salvation* makes extensive use of hand-held camera movement. Originally used in news and documentary, hand-held cameras move erratically rather than the steady movements of cameras mounted on tripods or dollies.

How do the hand-held camera moves help viewers feel the action and fears of the characters?

3. Camera movement and computer-generated imagery (CGI) are combined frequently in *Terminator Salvation*. In the early scene when John Connor tries to escape from the exploded machine fortress in a helicopter, the camera follows him into the helicopter, then flies out of the helicopter, around the careening helicopter and back in through the main door as the helicopter crashes upside down. It then rotates to upright itself and follows Connor out onto the ground. This scene was a sophisticated combination of live-action and CGI images.

How does the combination of camera movement and CGI in this scene add to the viewers' sense of danger and excitement?

4. Lighting and exposure were used purposefully when Marcus and Clair escape from Connor's headquarters. It is night, and viewers see flashes of light with silhouettes, then long moments of darkness. The cameras are hand-held and moving rapidly with the characters.

How does the combination of hand-held camera, moments of darkness, and flashes of silhouettes help viewers understand the characters' feelings of danger and challenge?

5. Viewers see cities in long shots, but characters are almost always seen in close up and medium shot. One exception is Marcus, who is seen in long shot twice as he tries to re-join Kyle and Star in San Francisco.

What is the effect of seeing a diminutive Marcus trudging through desert towards machine headquarters?

C. Editing

Editing plays a crucial role in the action and plot of *Terminator Salvation*.

1. Consider the combination of the long shots, close ups and aerial shots in the Harvester's attack on the gas station. How does the editing of these shots tell the audience what is happening to each of the main characters, but also show how the machine is attacking the entire building?
2. When fleeing the moto-terminators, Kyle almost hits a school bus when leaning out of the truck. How do the editing and point of view help the viewers feel the danger in the scene?
3. A *montage* of news reports and videos is used to inform Marcus of his genesis and purpose to the machines. How does this montage deliver information efficiently and effectively?
4. Parallel editing (the intercutting of different plot lines with one another) is used at the end of *Terminator Salvation* to tell several stories: John's penetration of Skynet headquarters, Kyle's rescue and escape, Marcus' rebellion against the machines, and the discovery and destruction of Resistance HQ.

How does parallel editing make these final moments of the battle story more suspenseful?

How do the events' outcomes influence one another?

D. Sound

Sound is used purposefully to help viewers understand and enjoy the action and plot of *Terminator Salvation*.

1. Sub-sonic sounds (sounds below humans' hearing range of 20 hertz) occur when large objects fall to the ground or large explosions occur. How do these sub-sonic sounds enhance the experience of these events for viewers?
2. Voices, gunshots, footfalls and bullet impacts are placed left, center and right, near and far during Marcus' and Blair's escape from Connor's headquarters. How do the placement and volumes of sounds influence the viewers' experience of this event?
3. Viewers clearly hear Marcus' heartbeat during his on-shore encounter with John. ("I need to find who did this to me. You do too.") How does this heartbeat sound connect to the theme in this scene?

4. Viewers hear distorted, muffled sounds at the end of the rescue from the San Francisco machine headquarters. When the sound and image clear, we see John Connor dying in a makeshift military hospital. What meanings might viewers make from the muffled sounds and vague images? Might these be the action as seen from John Connor's point of view?

E. Quotes

Consider the significance of the following quotes to the plot and themes of *Terminator Salvation*. What significant quotes are missing from this list?

- “You tried to kill my mother. You killed my father. You will not kill me.”
 “That is just fate.”
 “What is it that makes us human? It is the strength of the human heart.”
 “We have to try.”
 “The difference between the machines and humans is that we bury our dead.”
 “Stay alive in here and in here.”
 “I’m not a good guy.” “You are. You just don’t know it yet.”
 “If you’re listening to this, you are the resistance.”
 “The devil’s hands have been busy.”
 “I need to find who did this to me. You do too.”
 “Tell them I’ll be back.”
 “No fate but what we make.”
 “Everyone deserves a second chance.”

F. Tributes to past *Terminators*

Terminator Salvation has been made to attract and honour its established fan base of millions of *Terminator* viewers as well as to attract new fans. These are people who bring considerable prior knowledge of previous *Terminator* stories to the screenings. Knowing that these people are in the audience, the director inserted several images and sounds that would allude to previous stories and add to viewers’ enjoyment of *Terminator Salvation*.

Among these tributes and allusions to previous *Terminator* stories are the image of crushing skulls, Guns N Roses’ performance of *You could be mine*, John Connor saying, “I’ll be back,” and the appearance of Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose image was created from computerized records of his previous appearances in previous *Terminator* movies.

What other allusions to previous *Terminator* stories did you notice in *Terminator Salvation*?

How do their inclusions add to the enjoyment of *Terminator Salvation*?

G. Setting up a sequel

This is the fourth *Terminator* movie. McG, the director, is hoping that *Terminator Salvation* might be the first of another trilogy. As such, he has carefully designed the plot of *Terminator Salvation* to allow for two sequels. Can you imagine what those sequels might present to their audiences?

Consider the potential plot events following these end-of- *Terminator Salvation* story elements:

John Connor and Kyle Reese co-exist and know one another.
 The Resistance leadership has been eliminated.

Machine headquarters has been destroyed, but the machines are still active outside North America. John Connor says the battle is won but the war is not over.

We did not see Marcus dead. Did he die when he gave his heart away?

Could the humans replicate the technology and give Marcus a new machine heart?

Could the humans give Marcus a human heart from one of their own dead?

Could Marcus have a virtual life inside a computer?

Sam Worthington, who plays Marcus Wright, stars in James Cameron's *Avatar*. Will the next *Terminator* movie need Marcus Wright, or should a new character be introduced?

Will audiences connect with Marcus again in a sequel after seeing *Avatar*, or will they be distracted by their exposure to Jake Sully, Worthington's *Avatar* character?

For more information on *Terminator Salvation*, visit <http://terminatorsalvation.warnerbros.com/> and www.imdb.com/title/tt0438488

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