

REVISITING TERMINATOR 2

IT HAS A LOT MORE TO SAY ABOUT AI,
AND IT'S MORE OFTEN ON THE MONEY,
THAN YOU MAY REMEMBER.



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I was visiting my son in Michigan recently, and for some reason he suggested we watch “Terminator 2: Judgment Day.” I’d only seen its predecessor, “The Terminator,” and I saw that one during its theatrical release in 1984 (which was the only way we watched movies back then). I’d planned to see the sequel, which came out in 1991, but I never got around to it. Both films were written and directed by James Cameron and were well-received. The second, in particular, catapulted his career when it became the highest-grossing film of the year.

I enjoyed the movie, but this isn’t a review delivered 33 years too late. What struck me all these years later is how prescient it was, how clearly it laid out the dangers of AI. And yet back then, I don’t think it was perceived as frightening at all. There’s nothing in the current [Wikipedia entry](#) that suggests anyone was expected to have an anxiety attack about our future. It was science fiction. It was entertainment. Yet, recent developments in AI have made it easy for us to understand the way humans were behaving in those movies. Because many of us have the same concerns right now. And the movies even predicted this would happen in this decade.

THE STORY

Let me briefly summarize the plots of the two movies. The [first film](#) lays out the backdrop. There will be a future war between a malevolent AI network run by artificial intelligence called Skynet, and humans are struggling to defeat this effort before Skynet gains sentience and wipes out humanity. In the future, the resistance will be led by a man named John Connor.

Skynet hatches a plot to gain the upper hand by sending an AI machine—the Terminator, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger—back from 2029 to 1984 in order to kill Sarah Connor before her son is born. The humans send back a soldier to protect her from this would-be assassin. At the end of the film, the Terminator is defeated at the cost of the soldier’s life.

In the sequel, it’s now 1995. John Connor is a young teen who doesn’t know what to make of Sarah’s stories about the future. He can’t be blamed; his mother is locked up in a mental institution as a result of her “ravings.” But the future isn’t done with young Connor. Skynet decides to try again. This time it sends back a more advanced machine to kill John Connor. But it doesn’t land alone. Again the resistance sends a protector—a reconditioned machine like the one that had failed to kill Sarah the first time. But this one is instructed to protect John Connor from this new threat.

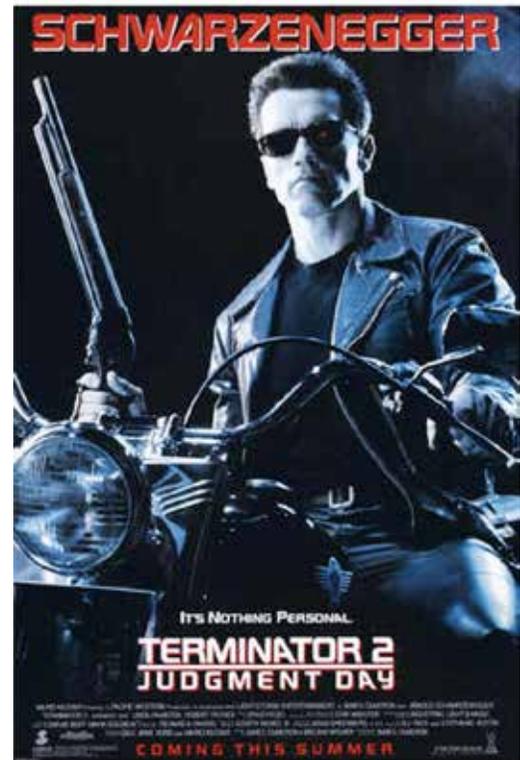
Skynet’s machine has all the advantages. The protector seems overmatched. But in the end, the resistance prevails. In the final scene, after the advanced machine is destroyed, the battered hulk that had helped the Connors survive tells them that he too must “die”—to ensure that humanity survives. John tries to argue with him, but Sarah understands that he’s right. After a brief farewell, the robot leaps to his death.

WHAT STANDS OUT TODAY

Arnold Schwarzenegger was famously the villain in the first movie. As the killer AI machine, he relentlessly hunted down Sarah Connor, killing every Sarah Connor he could find in the phone book in his quest to destroy his target. But in the second movie, he plays the AI defender—though neither the audience nor Sarah Connor understands this at first. When he arrives from the future, we all assume that the battle has once again been joined. But no, this time he’s the “good guy”—or the robot equivalent.

It was a brilliant stroke. By taking the villain and reprogramming him this time into the savior, the filmmakers are telling us something important about technology. The technology itself isn’t evil. Nor is it good. It’s neutral. It’s the way humans *use* the technology that determines whether it advances constructive causes or destructive ones. At least until they achieve sentience and can act independently (assuming they ever do).

Another important theme was the way the humans insisted on anthropomorphizing Schwarzenegger’s character. Some of the most engaging scenes were conversations between John, who never met his father (he was the soldier sent back to protect his mother and was killed by the Terminator), and the AI machine, who John seems to view at times as a father-figure. John tries to “humanize” him by suggesting phrases to sprinkle into conversation (“Hasta la vista, baby!”) and teaching him how to smile.



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But there are limits to how far this can go. John is baffled when the robot says he doesn't fear death. It's hard for the youngster to conceive of this. Speaking of which, the grand irony of the ending is that it was the *machine* that insisted he had to be destroyed in order to protect humanity from his ilk. The question we're left with as the screen turns black is whether, in his decision to self-destruct, the machine was merely following its orders to protect John Connor, or had actually empathized with his human companions and decided independently it was "the right thing to do."

THERE ARE EVEN DEEPPAKES

There's no mention of "deepfakes" in the film, but both of the AI machines are masters of the craft. They can flawlessly mimic the sound of anyone's voice, and they use the skill to their advantages. The killer bot can go one better, and he doesn't require a video camera. He is able to physically morph into a nearly perfect replica of Sarah Connor. Until his real mother appears nearby, John can't tell the difference, and it nearly costs him his life. It was another sign of the film's prescience: This was decades before **deepfakes** began to penetrate the public consciousness.

The foresight in this old film even extends to the dates. It's rather remarkable that we're now just five years away from 2029, the date that Skynet was on the verge of sentience and was battling to defeat humanity. Pretty good guess! Recent advances in AI have prompted serious conversations about whether something like this—sans the special effects—might really occur. I won't repeat the numbers from people in the field who now predict that AI will—or at least might—wipe out humanity. When I went back and found the sources of the information, I discovered that even skilled journalists had misrepresented the statistics.

They might just as well have used an advertisement from a scary old movie made two years after *The Terminator*: **Be afraid. Be VERY afraid!**



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