Bert Olivier

Time, technology, cinematic art and critique in The Terminator and Terminator II - Judgment Day: a philosophical interpretation

Abstract

This article is an interpretation of James Cameron's films, The Terminator and Terminator II – Judgment Day. As instances of popular art, they are first situated in the context of Habermas's conviction that art has a specific function in the public sphere, viz. to provide an enlightening experience for people who are normally excluded from the specialized discourse of aesthetics and art criticism. The interpretation of the joint film narrative of Terminator I and II is then articulated in two stages. First, the paradoxical time-structure of the film-narrative is explored in terms of Heidegger's analysis of temporality, with its emphasis on the primacy of the future in relation to the past and the present. Secondly, the fact that these films were made possible by a combination of film art and advanced film technology, is thematized along lines suggested by Heidegger's critique of technology. This leads to the insight, finally, that the Terminator films exemplify Heidegger's contention that the threat posed by technology is averted by a liberating force from within itself.

1. Introduction

The Terminator (1984: dir. James Cameron) and *Terminator II – Judgment Day* (1991: dir. James Cameron), also referred to as *Terminator* I and *Terminator II*, are slick, state-of-the art science fiction films. Although they are popular cinematic art-works, they address serious issues concerning the relationship between the history and humanity of mankind and advanced, science-based technology.

In this article I shall attempt to deal with these issues within the framework of Heidegger's metatheory of modernity, which involves the crucial function of science, technology and art (including literature). I also hope to show that the paradoxical structure of time in the *Terminator* movies can be further elucidated in terms of the time-analysis in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where the emphasis on the primacy of the future regarding human existence is particularly useful for the present interpretation. In addition to the application of these interpretive principles borrowed from Heidegger, an attempt will also be made to indicate the relevance of Habermas's contention that art has the capacity to put an integrative and enlightening experience within reach of people (i.e. the public) in general.

What follows, then, is a response to the following question: Beyond their breathtaking

21

special effects, what conception of humanity, its history and its technological creations do these two pop sci-fi movies articulate ?

Moreover, given the thoroughgoing scientific-technological fabric of modern (or, for that matter, postmodern) society, should we not perhaps take note of the serious and far-reaching implications of this fictional projection of our possible future, even if, in the words of one of the films' characters, it is just "one possible future"?

2. Philosophy – mediating between knowledge, morality and aesthetic sensibility

The present essay is an interpretive philosophical, as opposed to semiotic, elaboration on these implications, and is predicated on the belief that these films cannot be written off as mere entertainment. In the first place, like all genuine science fiction, they constitute a critique of technology.[1] Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1870) are paradigmatic early instances of this genre.[2] Secondly, the 20th century has witnessed a number of reasoned affirmations of the ontological, epistemological and moral import of art, architecture and literature, in the face of the Enlightenment's relegation of art to the aesthetic sphere. These affirmations include the work of Heidegger, Adorno, Marcuse, Gadamer, Harries (cf. Olivier, 1987) and more recently that of Habermas – unlikely as it may seem, considering that he has certainly not displayed a predilection for aesthetic issues. Nevertheless, David Ingram (1991) has shown that while Habermas has acknowledged (in accordance with [Kantian] Enlightenment thinking) the legitimacy of a distinct aesthetic sphere, he has also argued that the latter should not be regarded as being exclusively accessible to trained experts. In Habermas's view, the general public should share in aesthetic rationality "in the form of all-encompassing enlightenment" (Ingram, 1991:68) if not esoteric artistic and art-critical refinement. This means that according to Ingram (1991:68)

> art should transcend the realm of subjective expression and illuminate life itself; aesthetic rationality should articulate an *experience* of truth capable of integrating and transforming cognitive significations, normative expectations, and aesthetic sensibilities.

What Ingram alludes to here is parallel to Habermas's contention (1988:312-313) that one of the most important tasks facing philosophy today is to mediate between the three discursive fields of knowledge, morality and aesthetic sensibility. To put it differently, in modern Western culture three distinct spheres of rationality have developed alongside one another since the Enlightenment, namely a scientific-cognitive, a moral-political and an aesthetic-expressive mode of rationality, respectively – each with its own distinctive discursive rules. In the course of increasing specialization, these discourses have grown further away from one another, with devastating consequences for the life-world of human beings, where they (i.e. these three distinguishable modes of rationality) form one integrated whole. Habermas therefore enlists philosophy as a reconstructive discipline to assist in the reintegration of the human life-world, which has been 'colonized', in his view,

---

[1]   The distinguishing trait of 'genuine' science fiction, namely, that it is invariably a critique of technology, was first pointed out to me by James Sey.

[2]   In Verne's novel the critique of technology is articulated in terms of the ambivalence of Nemo's submarine, the Nautilus, which is at one and the same time a machine that puts mankind within reach of as yet unimagined wonders, and also one with immense potential for destruction.

by 'technical imperatives'. This is also what is implied by his insistence, that art (including literature and cinema) has the capacity to make an all-embracing enlightenment available to the public.

Ingram points out (1991:68) that Habermas's thinking has to accommodate two counter-vailing tendencies – the reconciliatory utopianism of romantic idealism as well as "the explosive negativity of modern realism". The former type of aesthetic projects a redemptive vision in which alienating societal contradictions have been overcome, while the latter disrupts or unmasks the apparent but false harmony of contemporary secular society. While the *Terminator* films are not utopian imaginings of an ultimately reconciled society, and although the amount of violence and destruction enacted in their narrative course may be seen as 'explosively realistic' (or even as a confirmation of the *status quo* in a violent social environment), these films contain elements of both redemptive critique and of realism, as I hope to show. The point I wish to make by way of this introductory excursion in terms of Habermas's neo-enlightenment thought, is simply that *Terminator I* and *II* afford us an enlightening experience. In other words, they enable an experience of the usually hidden truth about our technology-saturated world in a manner that highlights the ambivalence of our situation.

3. Paradoxical time-relations in *Terminator I* and *II*

Sometimes paradox is essential to make a point, for example the Socratic *docta ignorantia*, that the only thing we can know with certainty is how ignorant we are – "I know that I don't know" – which Descartes used, ironically, to establish certainty. In so doing he provided the modern version of the Platonic perversion of Socrates's paradigmatic philosophical insight, making the thinking subject the indispensable centre of the characteristically modern quest for knowledge and control of nature. We shall return to the importance of Descartes's epochal thinking at a later stage, but first we must look at the relevance of paradoxes of time in the *Terminator* films, remembering that paradox is a figure instantiated in actions or statements that seem absurd or self-contradictory, but which really embody truth of a certain kind. *The Terminator* and *Terminator II – Judgment Day* depend upon a paradox of time for their very narrative possibility. In both films, a terminator – that is, a sophisticated humanoid killing machine – is sent back through time to the 20th century by "the machines", controlled by the Skynet computer, to terminate or destroy a human being who stands in the way of their complete triumph in the face of remaining human resistance to their rule. In *The Terminator* the machines' target is Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton), mother-to-be of John Connor, leader of the human resistance in 2029 Los Angeles. Their aim: to destroy her before John is even conceived, thus precluding the possibility of his birth and of him becoming a major source of disruption to their bid for total domination in the 21st century. The humans, however, discovering the time-displacement unit, learn about the machines' plan and assign someone to the task of protecting Sarah from the terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger). This means that the human protector also has to traverse time, returning to 1984 from 2029. In the course of performing his duty the protector, Kyle Rees (Michael Biehn), and Sarah Connor become lovers, and it is from their union that John is eventually born.

3.1 The future depending on the past and vice versa

Where is the temporal paradox in the events I have just described, one may ask ? It consists in the fact that, firstly, in *Terminator I* the terminator returns from the post-nuclear holocaust future to a past prior to this fateful day. The latter results from the fact that people relinquish their decision-making capability concerning national defence to a computerized system regarded as being infallible, but which does not fail to trigger the nuclear war in an attempt to achieve supremacy over humans. The terminator's programmed objective is to prevent the birth of the person destined, from a future retrospective, to become a major antagonist and obstacle to technological rule. But, in the second place, the human protector, also ex-future, fathers the very boy whose birth the machines attempt to obviate by intervening in the past. This hypothetical future, being the extension of a past in which the boy has *in fact* already been born, paradoxically becomes the condition of the possibility of the very past which, in turn, makes such a future possible – otherwise the human resistance against the machines in the 2029 conflict could not pose the threat which necessitates the terminator's mission in the first place. Why? Because the future leader of the resistance is fathered by a protector sent back through time by *himself*. This future time (2029) therefore depends upon the past of his (John Connor's) being born, and this past (1984) depends, in turn, upon the future for his being conceived – a temporal relationship of reciprocity or circularity that seems alien to our everyday experience of time as a linear continuum.

3.2 A past presupposed by a future

In *Terminator II – Judgment Day*, the paradoxical temporal configurations are even more complex. Again two emissaries are dispatched from the future on a dual pre-emptive mission. This time two terminators travel through time to the year 1995 from 2029. One (Robert Patrick) has the objective to annihilate John Connor, who is by now a very independently-minded young boy of ten. The other terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a cyborg (cybernetic organism), is programmed to prevent this from happening. (This protector-terminator has the odds against him, as the human protector in *Terminator I* did, too, because the killer machine he has to thwart is an advanced prototype model that can adopt the appearance of any human it has 'sampled' by 'morphing'. Labelled a T-1000, it consists of mimetic alloy or 'liquid metal', and shrugs off the most devastating effects of anything from pistol, machine gun or even shotgun fire. Only two things are lethal to the T-1000: extreme, sustained heat and cold). Again the protector is given his assignment by John Connor himself, reactivating the paradox of rescueing a past that is presupposed by a future which, by securing that past, in turn becomes its necessary antecedent.

But this time around there is another twist in the tale. Sarah Connor is incarcerated in Pescadero State Hospital, a maximum security retention facility for the criminally disordered, for what the psychiatric establishment regards as acute schizo-affective paranoia relating to an 'imagined' threat concerning beings from the future. The disorder, so the chief criminal psychologist Dr. Silberman believes, is what prompted her attempt to sabotage a computer factory, convinced as she was that these manufacturing corporations were responsible for developing the technology that would finally precipitate the nuclear

holocaust. From the protector-terminator she learns that the man most directly responsible for developing the micro-processor eventually appropriated for defence purposes by the military, one Miles Dyson, works for Cyberdyne Systems Corporation. After escaping from the carceral institution with the help of her son and his protector, she sets out to eliminate Dyson in a pre-emptive bid to avert the nuclear catastrophe of August 1997.

When finally faced with the task of killing the already wounded man in the presence of his wife and son, she is unable to pull the trigger, perhaps because of the boy's pathetic but moving attempts to shield his father from her gun, or perhaps because of some conflict within herself. After all, can Dyson be held responsible (in the usual sense of the word) for something that has not happened yet – at least not from his temporal point of view? As Sarah crouches over him, bitterly accusing him that it is ".... all your fault!" the frightened man looks up at her distorted face uncomprehendingly, stammering, "What?" And later, after John and the protector have arrived on the scene, and the protector-terminator has convinced Dyson that he/it is really from a terrifying future made possible by – among other things – Dyson's research, the temporal paradox strikes one anew: not only does Dyson prepare the way for that future, but this future is itself implicated in that preparation. How is this possible?

At the boy's (John's) command, the terminator cuts through and removes the organic material (i.e. living tissue and blood) covering the inner metal frame of his arm and hand, revealing a structure identical to the one in the vault at Cyberdyne Systems Corporation – something Dyson has often looked at with awe. The mechanical arm kept in the vault together with a microchip (or CPU-unit) are the remnants of the first terminator sent to destroy Sarah in 1984, but finally crushed by her in a mechanical press. Dyson is one of the few individuals at Cyberdyne who knows about and has access to it. When the protector-cyborg therefore 'bares it all' for Dyson, so to speak, the latter can be persuaded of the shape of the future he is in the process of co-creating because he has seen some of its evidence before. Here lies the hub of the paradox: Dyson is one of the factors in the seemingly inexorable march towards a ruthless future technocracy, but the products of that future (i.e. the remains of the first terminator) function as incentive for his research, thus assisting in giving birth to the very future they represent. What Nietzsche said in aestheticist vein about the world being a work of art that gives birth to itself, (Nietzsche, 1967:§796) is here the case with the future. It is operative in creating itself, despite the fact that it is supposedly the extension of a past where humans voluntarily surrendered their volitional power to machines in the form of computers.

3.3 The openness of the future and the open-endedness of the present

The involvement of finite humans, with all their shortcomings, in this whole past/present/future configuration is poignantly expressed by Dyson when he reproaches his indictors: "You are blaming me for things I haven't even done yet!" And, being human – i.e. limited in and by time and space – it would be impossible for him to foresee the consequences of his work. The relationship between John Connor and his father (the protector in *Terminator 1*) is another case in point. In both films, the protectors are given their assignment by John Connor in the year 2029. In the earlier film, this means that he

chooses his own father, as it were, although it is true that the latter tells Sarah that he volunteered to cross time for her because he loved her from her photograph that John had given him. But, John Connor having already been born in the past, which is therefore a given, makes it inconceivable that the future must be enlisted to guarantee his birth by providing a father, especially because, as Kyle Rees tells Sarah, it is just "one possible future", seen from her perspective. If that were indeed the case, the fact that they eventually succeed in destroying everything that was preparing the way for the Skynet computer-takeover, in this way inaugurating a *different* future, would mean, logically, that Kyle Rees's existence would have been annihilated together with that future. And by cancelling out John's father (Rees), John's own existence would also be nullified.

Once again, human contingency is highlighted here: finite creatures that we are, our being born is no *a priori* necessity, only a contingent possibility; but this is no reason for despair. On the contrary, it is a reminder that the future is in our hands and that we are not subject to an impersonal and intractable fate. John Connor's father-to-be conveys a message to Sarah from her as yet unborn son, the future resistance leader. "Thank you Sarah for your courage through the dark years", John tells Rees to tell her; "I can't help you with what you must soon face, except to say that the future is not set. You must be stronger than you imagine you can be. You must survive, or I will never exist." In *Terminator II* Sarah is haunted by an image of the devastation caused by an exploding nuclear bomb – a powerful, horrific image of collapsing buildings, flesh being burnt and torn off people until only skeletons remain and flames that look as if they may leap out of the screen at any moment towards the audience, who is equally moved and appalled by the spectacle that horrifies Sarah. Having just come out of a kind of trance in which this catastrophic image held her in thrall, Sarah 'writes' (cuts) the words *No fate* with a knife on a table top just before she sets out to find Dyson. Defying the technocratic future that looms before her, she thus confirms the openness of the future and the open-endedness of the present. What is the significance of this 'openness' of the future and the 'openendedness' of the present? Just like a postmodern novel, which re-enacts the time-honoured science-fiction theme of alternative futures, the present has no definitive conclusion in the form of an inescapable future. The 'now' which, as Augustine noted, *is* no longer the moment it is spoken, is the seed of the future, but the plant that is always already being germinated in the ongoing present acquires its appearance in large measure from the specific character of the future envisaged by us. If that future had a definitive, pre-determined shape similar to the ostensibly ineluctable machine-dominated future hypothesised in *Terminator I* and *II*, we would live, like the blind prophet Tiresias, without hope.[3] Hope survives or is revived only if the future is still undetermined, to some extent dependent upon the present that we inhabit. This present, in turn, is – as the temporal paradoxes of *Terminator I* and *II* demonstrate – dependent to some degree on the specific way that the future manifests itself to us in our present.

3.4 We are future-directed beings

In this sense, then, we are primarily future-directed beings, as Heidegger's analysis of human temporality in *Being and Time* indicates. The future, as our pro-ject, shapes our

---

[3]   Marco Olivier, a fellow science fiction enthusiast, drew my attention to the parallel with the mythical Tiresias.

present even as our present shapes the future in a reciprocal relationship. "Projecting discloses possibilities –" says Heidegger (1978:371), "that is to say, it discloses the sort of thing that makes possible". In other words, in the context of the historical situation of being human, the kind of future we are able to anticipate – given present actualization of past projects – functions as a directional incentive in the present. As long as that future seems fixed, present actions must be predicated on a belief which denies the 'authentic' structure of our own temporality, and which simultaneously leaves no room for any hope. Heidegger articulates the various aspects of human temporality within the framework of the 'primordial' structural dominant of the human condition which he terms 'care'. This simply means that everything humans do, whether it is theoretical or practical, presupposes 'care' – i.e. that we are beings whose Being is unavoidably an issue for themselves. To live 'authentically' in the midst of all the inauthenticity of being among other people and doing as 'they' expect us to do, entails for Heidegger the acceptance of our mortality. This acceptance, described as *anticipatory resoluteness* is said to free us, not only to and for our own Being, but also for that of others and of nature. The temporal structure that belongs to such a 'freed' existence is described by Heidegger (1978:372-373) as a "coming towards" oneself that entails the following:

> This letting-itself-*come-towards*-itself in that distinctive possibility which it puts up with, is the primordial phenomenon of the *future as coming towards*. If either authentic or inauthentic *Being-towards-death* belongs to Dasein's Being [a reference to humans' capacity to accept their mortality; B.O.], then such Being-towards-death is possible only as something *futural* ... By the term 'futural', we do not here have in view a 'now' which has *not yet* become 'actual' and which sometime *will be* for the first time. We have in view the coming ... in which Dasein [Heidegger's distinctive term for human beings; B.O.], in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, comes towards itself. Anticipation makes Dasein *authentically* futural, and in such a way that the anticipation itself is possible only in so far as Dasein, *as being,* is always coming towards itself – that is to say, in so far as it is futural in its Being in general.

3.5 The future: a matrix for historically meaningful actions in the present

The previous passage is important for understanding the paradox of time in *Terminator I* and *II*. What Heidegger says here will no doubt strike readers as paradoxical as well. How does one come "towards" oneself? And in what way is that equivalent to the "future as coming towards" or simply to humans being futural, if that does *not* mean (as Heidegger explicitly points out) that it is a movement towards a predetermined future time which still has to be realized? Firstly, we are futural beings in so far as our activities are comprehensible in terms of their anticipatory-projective status, even if they are rooted in the past (or what Heidegger terms the having-been). Our actions – for example hanging a picture, baking a cake, rowing a boat – are always the actualizations of previous pro-jects, as well as anticipations of, or preparations for something yet to come. Moreover, all of these actions point to the ubiquitous, tacitly underlying motif, namely that in some way or another, they aim at or embody an approximation of every individual's 'true' being. This is clearly reflected in the manner that we customarily explain or justify our own actions and decisions. We 'come towards ourselves' in everything we do, whether that 'self' is 'authentic' in Heidegger's terms (i.e. motivated by a resolute acceptance of individualising death as inescapable) or 'inauthentic' (i.e. motivated by 'the they' or conventional expectations that 'cover up' our mortality). In cases where our actions are fatalistically construed as predetermined anyway, with little or no choice left to us in the process of the

present actualization of future possibilities rooted in past achievements or failures, these actions can only be 'inauthentic' in Heideggerian terms. In *Terminator I* and *II* Sarah's actions are therefore freed from the inauthenticity imposed on them by the fatalism and hopelessness of 'knowing' the future – that on 29 August 1997 Armageddon will occur – by the "future coming towards her" in the form of a protector-terminator that offers an alternative. The protector holds out the possibility of averting that seemingly inescapable future by identifying Miles Dyson as a key figure in its unfolding, which explains the words *No fate* that Sarah carves on the table. The newly open or liberated future is poignantly captured in Sarah's narration accompanying their trip to Cyberdyne Systems under the guidance of Miles Dyson to destroy the fateful microchip and mechanical arm from the first terminator. Her words signify the transition from a paralysing, hopeless fatalism to the kind of (historical) temporality appropriate to being human:

The future, always so clear to me, had become like a black highway at night. ... We were in uncharted territory, making up history as we went along.

This is precisely the point of the paradox of temporal reciprocity in the *Terminator* films: the primacy of the future as a matrix for all historically meaningful actions in the present is such that, without it, one could not even say 'I', nor could one choose or decide anything. If everything were predetermined, we would lose our freedom of choice and hence our hope for a better future. *Terminator's* liberating temporal paradox is an enactment of the reciprocity of past, present and future that Heidegger explores in *Being and Time*. It shows, in the words of Kyle Rees (in *Terminator I*), that a future where technology has become totally hegemonic, is just 'one possible future' among other possibilities.

4. Technology's temptation: the danger and the saving power

If the rediscovery of the primacy of an open future in relation to the present frees Sarah and John from the stifling prospect of a technocratic future (in the most literal sense of a future ruled by machines), how do we deal with the obvious fact that a film with technology as a pervasive theme is *itself* a product of the most advanced film technology ? This draws one's attention to a parodic moment of the films: together they constitute a devastating critique of technology, but they have been made possible by the very technology against whose autonomous functioning they warn us. To put it differently: the state-of-the-art special effects and illusions of the *Terminator* movies bear witness to the use or exploitation of the creative possibilities of a technology in order to articulate a *caveat* regarding the inherent drive towards domination on the part of this technology. In parodic fashion, it presupposes and uses the very thing it criticizes. This tendency on its part to become hegemonic features prominently in Heidegger's critique of technology, articulated mainly in the essay, "The Question Concerning Technology" (Heidegger, 1977b). A brief reconstruction of this assessment of technology's place in the modern world is necessary to understand the connection between the technology that made the *Terminator* films possible and the critical-reflective moment on which their narrative turns.

According to Heidegger, the most pervasively significant structuring force in the modern world is technology. Despite its structural ubiquity, however, and partly because of its familiarity and its apparent innocuousness, it remains virtually anonymous. Furthermore, technology is indissolubly linked to modern science as its foundation which, in turn, has its

metaphysical roots in the epoch-making thought of René Descartes in the 17th century. For Heidegger it was Descartes's metaphysics which transformed humankind into the only real subject – the ontological centre of all relations – in so doing breaking decisively with the lingering theocentric medieval thought-world (Heidegger, 1977a:127-128). Accordingly the world is simultaneously transformed into a totality of calculable objects to which modern scientists apply their calculative procedures. In this way the ground is prepared for technology.

4.1 Technology as a distinctive mode to 'reveal' the world

What is technology? Heidegger believes that it is a grave mistake to understand technology in a merely instrumental sense, as a 'neutral' means to different ends. This would imply that technology is something that we can 'master', too, even as we exercise mastery over the world (natural and social) through technology. Instead he argues that the essence of technology consists in being a distinctive mode of revealing the world, a specific way in which 'truth happens', in contrast to the other ways in which it has happened in earlier epochs, or still happens in other 'places' where truth occurs, like art. In the case of the Greeks, for example, reality was experienced as *physis*, or as a dynamic actualization of potentialities. Modern technology, on the other hand, reveals the world, in Heidegger's terms (1977b:17) as a "standing-reserve". He recognizes it as a kind of "unconcealedness" – his term for truth; from the Greek *aletheia* – characterized by the fact that technology as standing-reserve presents everything as 'ordered', 'stored' or 'set upon' for use, for instance the current of a river which is 'commanded' into supplying hydraulic pressure for conversion into electricity.

Heidegger calls this process of storing up natural forces for use *monstrous*, because it reduces nature and even people into 'resources' for use, concomitantly obliterating their Being along the way. In other words, in this technological-scientific era we experience things as something to be mastered, ordered and 'developed' to an optimal degree. This way of experiencing the world is made possible by the essence of technology, termed *enframing* by Heidegger. As William Lovitt reminds us in a note to his translation of Heidegger's text (1977b:19,n.17), it would be a mistake to think of this simply as a 'framework', in the sense of the context within which we unavoidably experience the world in the present era. To be sure, it is that, too. But above all it is a process, hence the *en-* of *enframing*. This process is so encompassing that it has become the condition for the possibility of experiencing anything today, so much so that nothing can escape its pervasiveness. "... perhaps even God is thought of as 'standing-reserve'" remarks Norman Melchert (1991:576), "a kind of public utility that can be used to gain the satisfaction of one's desires; one often gets this impression from the television evangelists ...." And indeed, technology is every bit as ubiquitous as Heidegger claims. Not only do we find a 'technology of religion', so to speak, but a technology of sport, of psychological health, of sexuality, of learning, of teaching, and so on.

The fact that technology and its inseparable companion, science, are so omnipresent, easily leads to the belief that there are no other legitimate ways to approach reality. According to Heidegger (1977b:28), this impression constitutes the 'extreme danger', because it obscures our being by covering up the fact that other, equally valid ways of revealing reality are

possible. Two such alternative modes of *unconcealment* are thinking and art (or poetry). While *enframing* is the 'danger', thinking and art are linked to the 'saving power' which grows, ironically, in the enframing itself, to the degree that humans pay heed to the revealing power of technology's essence (Heidegger, 1977b:28-33). This is the case because as alternative modes of unconcealment, art and thinking recall the Being of things out of oblivion, supplementing the limited and limiting understanding of things that science and technology provide. Whereas they (science and technology) maintain themselves in a calculating and mastering of things, thinking, art and literature, by letting things appear as they are, free them from the imperialism of enframing. Thinking, art and literature let things (nature, human beings) be. As such, they are concerned with truth (Heidegger, 1977b:34-35; 1977c:49). Habermas, it will be remembered, is in agreement with Heidegger on this insight into the integrative truth-function of art and literature.

4.2 Heidegger's critique of technology applied to *Terminator I* and *II*

It should not be difficult to assess the relevance of Heidegger's critique of technology for *Terminator I* and *II*. In *Terminator I* Kyle Rees sketches in broad outline the scenario of events that culminate in internecine global nuclear conflict. He tells Sarah about the impending nuclear war, and that it "was" started by "the machines ... defence network computers ... new, powerful, hooked into everything ... trusted to run it all ... They say it got smart ... a new order of intelligence. Then it saw all people as a threat, not just the ones on the other side. It decided our fate in a microsecond ... extermination!" In *Terminator II* a desperate Sarah interrogates the protector-cyborg on the precise stages of the technological development that finally leads to global conflagration. As indicated earlier, he informs her that he has "detailed files" and that Miles Dyson is the man most directly responsible for constructing the computer referred to as Skynet, because he develops a revolutionary new microprocessor (with the help of the CPU-unit from the first terminator in the vault at Cyberdyne Systems). But the most significant information the cyborg gives her – in the context of Heidegger's assessment of the place of technology in the modern world – emerges from the conversation where he tells her that:

"... Cyberdyne will become the largest supplier of military computer systems. All stealth bombers are upgraded with Cyberdyne computers, becoming fully unmanned. Afterwards, they fly with a perfect operational record. The Skynet funding bill is passed. The System goes online on August 4th, 1997. Human decisions are removed from strategic defence. Skynet begins to learn at a geometric rate. It becomes self-aware at 2.14 a.m. Eastern time, August 29th. In the panic they try to pull the plug." "Skynet fights back", Sarah interjects. "Yes", replies the cyborg. "It launches its missiles against the targets in Russia .... because Skynet knows that the Russian counter-attack will eliminate its enemies over here."

4.2.1 "Human decisions are removed"

The most important words in the previous paragraph are: "Human decisions are removed ..." In graphic fictional form, it marks the symbolic surrender of humankind's humanity to the mastering capability of technology, its subjection to the standing-reserve of information systems which manifests the mode of ontic revealing that is proper to the enframing. Compare this event in the film narrative to Heidegger's remark (1977b:32), that "... Enframing ... threatens to sweep man away into ordering as the supposed single way of

revealing, and so thrusts man into the danger of the surrender of his free essence ...". The tendency on the part of people to valorize (especially computer) technology to the point where all shortcomings and mistakes are blamed on 'human error', is symptomatic of the willingness, dramatically highlighted in the *Terminator* films, to relinquish humanly essential decision-making to what is widely regarded as the paradigm of approaching reality, namely technology. As director James Cameron's films suggest, such a surrender of our ability to choose would amount to a 'termination' of our being. It will be remembered that the only hope, according to Heidegger (1977b:32), consists in the possibility "... that we, for our part, begin to pay heed to the coming to presence of technology ... [which] ... harbors in itself what we least suspect, the possible arising of the saving power". This "saving power", it will also be recalled, amounts to the insight into the enframing or essence of technology as being but one mode of unconcealment of Being among others, notably thinking and art. *Terminator I* and *II* are instances of film art that reflect precisely this insight through their combination of film technology and film art. Technology becomes self-reflective, as it were, in these films by placing itself in the service of truth, i.e. of the unconcealment of its essence – both via its (technology's) thematization in the film narrative (Wittgenstein's *saying*) as well as by virtue of the demonstration of its dazzling capacity to 'open up a world' (Wittgenstein's *showing*). Nor should this surprise us. Heidegger reminds us that the Greek word *techné* originally referred to art, and therefore belonged together with *poiésis* as the poetic moment shared by the fine arts and poetry (Heidegger, 1977b:34). This initially close relationship between these root words should therefore serve as a constant reminder of what technology and art have in common – a commonality celebrated in *Terminator I* and *II*. They truly witness to the growth of the 'saving power' within the 'extreme danger'.

4.2.2 Hope for the retaining of the humanity of mankind

Perhaps the most exemplary aspect of *Terminator II*, as far as the convergence of art and technology is concerned, pertains to the fact that the protector-cyborg learns from John to respect human life, despite the fact that it goes against the grain of its own specific form of programmed technological mastery, which consists in killing or terminating people. He tells John that he has been designed to learn from people at a rate proportional to the amount of contact he makes with them. And indeed – not only does he refrain from killing people from the time that John instructs him not to, but eventually sacrifices himself in a strikingly 'tragic', but more than that, *humane*, Christ-like gesture, literally (in terms of the narrative) so that John and Sarah may live. Symbolically, the protector-terminator's 'death' also implies the survival of the whole of mankind, and more importantly, new hope for retaining its humanity.

This sacrificial act on the part of the cyborg is a stroke of genius in the narrative. Basically it is a machine, albeit an intelligent one. Through contact with John and Sarah it increasingly behaves in an anthropomorphic fashion, – to such a degree that ultimately it shows itself capable of an act most unlike the functioning of a machine: self-sacrifice for the sake of human survival. Art and the essence of technology converge here, in the sense that what Heidegger perceives as the distinctive revealing power of both come together in the 'user-friendly' protector-cyborg. On the one hand it is a machine, on the other, it disrupts our perception of itself as a machine by performing an act of self-sacrifice worthy

31

of a human tragic hero, because it implicates a whole set of values concerning the essence and dignity of human life. After all, its own destruction does not only make the physical survival of humanity possible, but holds out the possibility that such physical survival will be meaningful, i.e. that mankind's essential humanity will not be permanently obscured by technology. In short, the protector-cyborg *reveals* (to use Heideggerian terminology) the 'truth' about technology's essence as an ordering and mastery of reality, as well as representing the truth that is characteristic of art, namely to open up a world for us by defamiliarising the familiar (in this case its own technological character). In this way, it epitomizes Heidegger's remark, that the saving power grows where the danger is.

5. In conclusion

The fact that this essay adopts (as emphasized earlier) a philosophical rather than a semiotic approach to the *Terminator* films – in other words, that it focuses on ideas rather than images – should not be construed as detracting from the importance of their audiovisual semiotic dimension. After all, they are cinematic works that function or are constituted primarily in terms of sight and sound. To analyze the structural-iconographic dynamics of signification in these films would entail a separate, albeit related study, hence a brief reference to the important semiological aspect of their status as *spectacle* must suffice. While it is certainly true, as Polan (1986) has demonstrated, that spectacle plays a crucial role in cinema generally, a strong case can be put forward that it is particularly important in science-fiction cinema, where the thematics of an imaginative (and imagistic) extension of science and technology has to rely crucially on the impact of images for the effect and credibility of its persuasive illusions. For example, the breathtaking sequences, in *Terminator II*, where the audience witnesses the T-1000 'morphing' or changing from one form into another, consist of a succession of images that merge into one another in such a way that their very sequentiality vividly demonstrates the awesome, lethal capabilities of the machine – sometimes via the incongruity between the form it adopts (e.g. that of a woman) and the relentless, unswerving pursuit of its goal, viz. to destroy John Connor. In the scenes where we see transitions from its policeman- (Robert Patrick-) mode to the shiny, 'liquid-metal' figure-mode, the spectacle is particularly pertinent to the theme of a dehumanizing technology. The scene-sequence where the T-1000 crashes through the glass panel on the motorcycle at the Cyberdyne Corporation building, becoming briefly airborne before attaching itself to the helicopter by means of arms-become-hooks, and breaks the helicopter cockpit-shell before 'flowing' onto the seat next to the dumbstruck pilot, who promptly jumps out of the helicopter at the terminator's command, is a case in point. Here the visual images of intelligent humanoid machine (T-1000), riding machine (motorcycle), flying machine (helicopter) and intelligent but vulnerable human being, comprise a spectacular spatio-temporal configuration constitutive of the (power-) relationships at stake in the film. The mixture of awe, horror and incomprehension on the pilot's face is matched by the viewer response to the startling camera image of the killer android.[4]

---

[4]　"In a similar vein", an anonymous, perceptive commentator has remarked, "I, for example, found a scene (In *Terminator II*) located under a broken truck which the Terminator tries to repair, particularly moving and explicit. (Here John Connor explains the cause of tears to the Terminator who, ignorant of human emotions, is able only to reduce tears to being responses to pain. Pain of course, has different resonances, as the verbal and non-verbal reactions of the child indicate). In a single frame, the camera captures feeling, thinking human being (child), 'thinking' machine (Terminator) and 'unthinking' inanimate machine (truck), in juxtaposition. All are powerful referents in the visual articulation of the theme of the films and the argument contained

In this way, the *Terminator* movies show that advanced film technology[5] may be harnessed by popular film art to open the eyes of those who are committed to the dream of a computer technology-controlled world. They demonstrate that we should not mistake a simulated reality – however 'perfect' the simulation – for human reality, even when we learn from it. The T-1000 terminator simulates everyone (and even some things) that it has 'sampled' so perfectly that it is impossible to tell the difference. In this way it epitomizes, in its turn, the seductiveness of sophisticated technology, as well as its 'danger': it simulates Sarah at one point in an attempt to lure John closer for the kill. Usually (although not with Sarah) it terminates a human subject it has sampled with the intention of simulating it. Baudrillard would point out that in a wider context, this is the case with the technologically sophisticated media today, too: they terminate human reality even as they simulate it (Baudrillard, 1983). Despite Baudrillard's apparent pessimism *Terminator I* and *II* give me hope, because, as film art combined with film technology, they attest to the integrative function that Habermas attributes to art and literature, while simultaneously relativizing the totalizing claims of technology as *enframing* by providing a powerful reminder that there are other possibilities of Being. In short, as film art, *Terminator I* and *II* have affirmative qualities which contribute to the recuperation of the idea of being human in a world choking on technology. It is therefore fitting to end this article with Sarah's concluding statement in *Terminator II – Judgment Day*:

> The unknown future rolls towards us. I face it for the first time with a sense of hope, because if a machine – a terminator – can learn the value of human life, maybe we can too.

6. Bibliography

Baudrillard, J. 1983. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities ... or the End of the Social, and Other Essays*. Tr. Foss, P., Patton, P. and Johnston, J. New York : Semiotext(e), Inc.

Corliss, R. 1992. They Put the ILM in Film. *TIME* magazine: 70-71, April 13.

Heidegger, M. 1977a. The Age of the World Picture. In: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Tr. W. Lovitt. New York : Harper Torchbooks. pp. 115-154.

Heidegger, M. 1977b. The Question Concerning Technology. In: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Tr. W. Lovitt. New York : Harper Torchbooks. pp. 3-35.

Heidegger, M. 1977c. The Turning. In: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Tr. W. Lovitt. New York : Harper Torchbooks. pp. 36-49.

Heidegger, M. 1978. *Being and Time*. Tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford : Basil Blackwell.

Habermas, J. 1988. Philosophy as Stand-in and Interpreter. In: Baynes, K., Bohmann, J., & McCarthy, T. (eds.), *After Philosophy – End or Transformation?* Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press. pp 296-315.

Ingram, D. 1991. Habermas on Aesthetics and Rationality: Completing the Project of Enlightenment. *New German Critique*, (53):67-103.

Melchert, N. 1991. *The Great Conversation*. London : Mayfield Publishing Company.

Nietzsche, F. 1967. *The Will to Power*. Tr. W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale. New York : Random House.

Olivier, G. (Bert) 1987. Art and Transformation. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 6(1):16-23.

Polan, D.B. 1986. "Above All Else to Make You See": Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle. In: Arac, J. (ed.) *Postmodernism and Politics*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press. pp. 55-69.

---

in the paper." I found this comment very helpful.

[5]   For an informative report on the specific advanced film technology that was instrumental with regard to the special effects that won Industrial Light and Magic the academy award in the category Best Visual Effects for 1991 (for *Terminator II – Judgment Day*), cf. Corliss, 1992.

SF Film bibliography

Cameron, J. 1984. *The Terminator.* Orion Films.
Cameron, J. 1991. *Terminator II – Judgment Day.* Columbia Tristar.

University of Port Elizabeth