

# The terminator: a musical analysis essay sample

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At the heart of the film industry is a man who has revolutionized movies for generations to come. Since the release of *The Terminator* in 1984, James Cameron has been one of only a handful of writers and directors who is consistently certain to bring profit and success to Hollywood. According to Stephen McVeigh and Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, James Cameron “ shares the rarefied heights of such A-list directors as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, directors who work in similar generic and commercial landscapes of the action-fantasy blockbuster.” Although of a later generation than Spielberg and Lucas, his movies reveal many similar aspects of cinema and he has, in countless ways, taken many of these facets to a new level (McVeigh and Kapell, 2011). James Cameron is undoubtedly a cinematic genius when it comes to writing and directing smash hit movies, but the overall production of those films is part of a much larger picture that Cameron cannot possibly achieve on his own. Amongst the extensive team of specialized professionals is someone who is absolutely crucial to the assembly of a motion picture: the music composer.

Sound and music are key components of cinema that cannot be overlooked in any type of major analysis. When it comes to the dissection of the music score of any one of James Cameron’s films, there is really no better place to start than the production of *The Terminator* in 1984, which was in many ways looked at as the start of his career and his first revolutionary blockbuster. Rebecca Keegan claims that, “ *The Terminator* introduces many of the themes and motifs that would come to define Cameron’s career: a bleak future setting, an exploration of humanity’s relationship to technology, a love story with a potent heroine and a stoic hero, and, oh yes, lots of cool

explosions.” However, The Terminator would be just another overly-ambitious, washed up picture that would have been out of theaters in a few weeks without the music composer (Keegan, 2009). Brad Fiedel’s music provides character analysis, establishes mood, reinforces settings, and generally enhances The Terminator which helped to create one of the most inspirational, smash hit science fiction-fantasy movies of the 20th century.

The Terminator is a dystopian film set in a pre-nuclear war, 1984 Los Angeles. The story traces the path of The Terminator, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is a cybernetic organism, sent back in time to kill a young girl by the name Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton. In the year 2029, the world has turned to ashes due to a nuclear war that was engineered by a defense network computer called Skynet. This artificial intelligence sends the Terminator that targets Sarah Connor for assassination because in the future she will bear a child, named John Connor, who will lead the human resistance against the machines. Additionally, a man named Kyle Reese, played by Michael Biehn, has also been sent back in time to the year 1984 to protect Sarah. In the movie, we learn that it was the future John Connor who sent Reese to protect his mother, and indirectly himself. Reese volunteered because he fell in love with Sarah based on a photograph of her that John had given him. By the end of the film we discover that these events have been set and John’s fate was already created because Reese turns out to be his father.

The setting of the film is urban, industrial, and occasionally desolate and barren. The film begins in a future war zone that sets the mood for a

dystopian scenario. Similar to 'future' scenes found in *The Matrix* (1999), machines are evidently in control and the dark ambiance creates an extremely bleak mood. The sound effects are absolutely crucial in establishing this type of atmosphere. Flying machines whoosh overhead firing laser artillery. The rapid-fire capability of these future weapons create explosion after explosion showing the relentless nature of the machines. Karen Collins describes this beginning scene: "The wind howls and whistles, and there is a hissing of steam and smoke. Bones are crunched, sonically morphed with the metallic clanking of machines."

The sonic motifs present in these scenes also create despair and hopelessness. There are a series of drones at different pitches that "help to create suspense, doom and threat." It comes to no surprise that the scenes set in the 'present' occasionally attempt to mimic these sound effects and sonic motifs. The ending scene in the factory is particularly representative of a future war zone (01: 31: 40). Reese claims that he turns the machines on in the factory for cover so that *The Terminator* cannot track them. This action is clearly in collaboration with Brad Fiedel and the sound designer Gary Rydstrom who most likely wanted metallic sound effects in association with the aesthetics of the soundtrack (Collins, 2004).

In discussion of the sound effects and other aspects of the soundscape, it is necessary to point to other works of Brad Fiedel. The best association with *The Terminator* in terms of underlying sonic conventions is Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1989) starring Jaime Lee Curtis as police officer Megan Turner. In both films, most of the time there is very subtle music, which is in a bleak

and ominous tone. This gives the feeling that something can always go wrong and that there is always the possibility that a crime will take place or that the Terminator will show up. Once again, the use of drones to create suspense, anxiety, and anticipation is particularly significant. Another important component of the soundscape that Brad Fiedel focuses on is the exaggeration of certain sounds to enhance emotion. For example, in *Blue Steel* when Megan Turner is on the scene of a crime, especially during the convenience store robbery, she is tense and has her gun at the ready. Every sound that she makes is exaggerated.

Her breathing is particularly loud and on a steady beat with the music. In the beginning training scene there are intervals of deep beats that create a suspenseful mood; however, this can also be looked at as a subtle pulse-like rhythm. The exaggeration of sound to relay emotions from the characters on the audience is also done in *The Terminator*. For example, when Sarah hides out in the dance club *Technoir* the sound effects and music are crucial to the emotional components of the scene. Once the Terminator spots her and Reese saves her, the music changes (00: 35: 03). As the Terminator begins to fire his Uzi at civilians, accelerated pulse music begins. Similar to Megan Turner in *Blue Steel*, there is also an exaggeration of Sarah's breathing as the Terminator approaches her with the Uzi. This is on beat with the pulse music and is present under the drone of anticipation as the gun is pointed at her. Furthermore, this pulse may be mistaken for being the Terminators, as he is closely associated with a steady heartbeat rhythm; however, this pulse becomes accelerated and is therefore much more associated with Sarah's pulse. The Terminator is stable and relentless and his pulse has no reason to

speed up. The exaggeration of breathing is also present shortly after the chase scene when Reese talks to Sarah in the parking garage (00: 46: 25).

Here, the breathing of both of the actors is enhanced and felt by the audience. The viewers feel the sheer adrenaline of Reese and Sarah as they hide from the police, but even more so, they feel the shock of Sarah as she hears about the depressing future and the genuine earnestness of Reese as he explains the unfortunate circumstances. Even as Reese loads his shotgun, the focus is on every slight sound that is made and every indication of emotion, which all spirals toward generalized fear and anxiety. These sound effects help to enhance the emotions of the scenes, but only with the assistance of theme music is the mood really felt. Each character in the film is associated with a different theme music that can be used to further analyze their nature and personality. To start with the simplest character and character theme there is Ginger, Sarah's roommate. Ginger is a typical 1980's teenager with bouncy hair, a knack for dancing around the house, and an affinity for 80's music. Ginger is associated with 80's music and an interesting aspect of her theme music is that it is what actually leads to her demise.

A suspension of disbelief is necessary when realizing that the sounds of a walkman clearly cannot entirely cover up the sounds of the fight going on between the boyfriend and the Terminator; however, nonetheless, had Ginger not been listening to music, as she usually is, she would have been able to survive, get away, and possibly warn Sarah before the Terminator gets to Technoir. The scene with Ginger and the Terminator is particularly

interesting in that there is an alternation between viewpoints as Ginger makes the sandwich in the kitchen and the boyfriend fights with Terminator (00: 30: 52). There is absolutely no music playing when the camera is focused on the fight and when the shot goes back to Ginger in the kitchen, the 80's music is fully blasting. This is to further enhance the fact that Ginger clearly has no clue what is going on and is about to walk into an ambush. Throughout the film there is a certain sonic motif that is repeated in times of exigency and future war. I refer to this as “ urgent future war” music and it is essentially the theme of Kyle Reese. This music features a fast pace ostinato that is associated with chasing and running, and is also only played when Reese is present. It is first played when Reese begins to run from the police and is played throughout the film in times of urgency (00: 07: 27).

For example, it is played during most of the chase scene between Reese and Sarah and the Terminator after they leave Technoir (00: 37: 02). This theme, or modifications of it, is also played when Reese has the ‘ flash-forwards’ to the war times (00: 17: 45). This deep, hurried, repetitive, and anticipatory rhythm is associated with chase scenes and war, thus it make sense to be associated with Kyle Reese. Reese grew up in times of war and all he really knows is fighting, staying alive, and hiding from machines. This music and its associations are symbolic of Reese and his aggressive, yet heroic nature. The Terminator is undoubtedly the character that is most closely associated with a theme music, which is really, simply a theme rhythm.

The Terminator's leitmotif is essentially a drum pattern ostinato that is meant to mimic a heartbeat. Brad Fiedel clearly wanted to create a more life-

like, organic association with the Terminator and accomplished that through this steady pulse that is usually present whenever the Terminator is on screen. Karen Collins comments on this theme: “ It is a powerful sound, militaristic in its percussiveness. Its propulsive repeating ostinato creates an unstoppable, inexorable feeling: it is unrelenting and merciless.” Reese further supports this in the film by telling Sarah, “ It can’t be reasoned with, it can’t be bargained with. It doesn’t feel pity or remorse or fear and it absolutely will not stop. Ever. Until you are dead” (Collins, 2004).

Sarah Connor is very loosely associated with a particular theme. She does not have a designated theme and as the protagonist, this is quite surprising. On the other hand, Sarah is closely associated with the piano. The first time we see her there is a jolly piano melody as she rides her moped to work (00: 11: 32). Similarly, the love scene with her and Reese features a softer version of The Terminator movie theme on piano. This contrasts with the Terminator’s heartbeat theme. Sarah is a human and an organic being, thus associated with a pure and natural sound, whereas the Terminator is a synthetic robot that is associated with an artificial leitmotif. According to Collins, “ The breakdown of the sonic barriers between organic and mechanic is perhaps an important way to subliminally drive home the movie’s theme of the loss of humanity at the hands of the machines.” It is no surprise that the climax of the movie in the factory has a more acoustic, orchestral sound. This is symbolic of the fact that the Terminator is degrading down to a robot without his organic components and shows that the humans are in fact winning the battle. Sarah Connor also has another theme associated with her that is further explained below.



The main theme of the film is played only four times during the movie and each time is significant. The opening title sequence is classic of many movies in that it encompasses the bigger picture of music in the film. A film's theme music is associated with the name of the film and thus it makes sense to be playing when the title is introduced. If the film does not have a definite theme then the opening credits usually attempts to give a preview of the music score in some way. The other times that the theme music is played are during the love scene between Sarah and Reese (01: 21: 40), when The Terminator is killed (01: 39: 40), and at the end of the movie when Sarah drives off into the desert, which leads into the end credits (01: 42: 28). These scenes are representative of Sarah accepting the apparent circumstances and taking on her role in the " new" future. Thus, The Terminator movie theme is essentially Sarah Connor's theme. Aside from being the protagonist in both films, The Terminator and Terminator 2: Judgment Day, Sarah is associated with the main symbolism and motifs of the series that there is " No fate but what you make" and that the future is not set.

This becomes clearer in Judgment Day when Sarah's role as a future war radical is more evident. In the second movie, Sarah sets out to change the future and stop the nuclear war from occurring by destroying Cyberdyne Systems, which is responsible for creating the artificial intelligence Skynet. Brad Fiedel created this theme and only played it in critical parts of the films that represented the message that the future is not set and can be changed: the conception of John Connor, the death of the Terminator, and Sarah taking on her new role. This is essentially Sarah's message and what she fights for, thus making it her theme. Karen Collins states that, " The Terminator films

represent landmarks in cinematic collaboration between sound effects and music.” The industrial setting, the wide array of character themes, and the effects of music on mood and emotion in the film enhance the viewers experience to unprecedented levels. An interesting aspect that Collins touches on is the subliminal nature of the music in films and in particular, the effect this has on the audience of The Terminator.

“ And while the references may not be consciously recognized as such by the viewer, the subliminal quality of the Hellish atmosphere constructed by Cameron, Fiedel and the sound designers undoubtedly leaves an impression.” She further suggests that the increasing popularity of these films is associated with an increasing identification with “ this Hell-on-earth, the loss of individual power and control, and anxiety about the future in the West” (Collins, 2004). It is inspirational writers such as James Cameron that create amazing, awe inspiring stories but it is great composers such as Brad Fiedel that facilitate in giving those stories the roller coaster ride of emotion and suspense that all audiences love. Without music the audience would not have the feelings of anticipation and the reflection of emotion. When the relaxed Megan Turner is stopping at a convenience store and suddenly turns to a state of nerve-wracking panic, the audience wants to feel how she feels. When the anxiety struck Sarah Connor is sitting in the dance club with no idea what is about to happen the audience feels how she feels. Brad Fiedel’s music is what makes that possible.