



Effigy

Terminator Salvation leaves proud series in ashes

TERMINATOR SALVATION: Directed by McG. Written by John Brancato and Michael Ferris. Cinematography, Shane Hurlbut. Music, Danny Elfman. Starring Christian Bale, Sam Worthington, Anton Yelchin and Moon Youngblood. Warner Bros., 2009. PG-13. 115 minutes. 🍌

During the *Seinfeld* era, insomniacs took refuge in *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, a comedy series in which the world's worst movies were replayed with running commentary. Films such as *Hobgoblins* and *The Brain that Wouldn't Die* were screened to a considerable density of wisecracks, a formula I found so addictive that to this day, I'll sit through a B-movie provided I'm allowed to make comments. Such urges find little sympathy in theaters, where decorum is more or less the norm, putting myself and others in an awkward position during the screening of *Terminator Salvation*. *Terminator Salvation* is at once a B-movie and an embarrassment to B-movies, which at least have a proud tradition of making do with less. (*Salvation's* budget was \$200 million.) It is a film so poorly conceived in every way that it unintentionally spoofs itself, self-parodying with exchanges like this one, early on in the film: "It's not what you said it would be!" No? "It's worse!" Oh. Quite.

Terminator Salvation is the fourth installment in the *Terminator* franchise, a saga which chronicles the rise of Skynet, a self-aware computer program, and the freedom fighters who assemble post-apocalypse to resist it. Skynet's army consists of Terminator machines, flesh-covered cyborg assassins; the resistance is led by John Connor, son of Sarah Connor, the hero of the first two installments. In the first film, Skynet sends a Terminator (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) back in time to kill Sarah, thus preventing John's birth. Failing to do that, Skynet tries to kill a teenage John in *Terminator 2*. Foiled again, Skynet alters course in *Terminator 3*, attempting to kill John's future lieutenants. Even if you've managed to avoid these films, your cultural gatekeepers have not: *Terminator* was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation, and *T2* is the rare sequel that exceeds the original,

winning four Academy Awards. If *T3* deflated the series, trying for sexy with a female Terminatrix, at least it limped us toward Judgment Day, the nuclear attack which provides the basis for *Terminator Salvation*.

Terminator Salvation dispenses with time travel, taking place in 2018 — a future in which no one utters a believable line of dialogue. I can't recall a film so universally appalling. There's a suddenness to every decision, and a resultant meanness of spirit, that seems to equate humans with cyborgs. Bleakness pervades everything, suggesting a view of human nature that is chaotic, heartless, depraved, confusing, self-righteous and jumpy. There's not a single character at all convincing in *Terminator Salvation* — even the Terminators, which have donned head scarves, look like refugees from *Pirates of the Caribbean* — largely because character, along with logic and intelligence, is wholly dispensed with. There isn't room here to discuss its limitless failings in music, set design, casting or screenplay, but it wouldn't be fair to ignore the "direction" provided by McG. There will be books written about this film someday, about the laboratory-grade narcissism of McG, who is more interested in how people die than what makes them want to live. No wonder Christian Bale went berserk on set: He's a conspirator in one of the most expensive jokes ever played on film audiences. You could call the film a catastrophe, but that implies there's something worth saving in *Salvation*.

Beyond the irony of the title, then, what can we say of it? The *Terminator* franchise, weakened after *T3*, is artistically on life support. *Terminator Salvation* is *The Phantom Menace* of a once-great series, the *Ishtar* of our generation. I would rather be lost at sea than experience this film again. At least at sea I would be safely distanced from a world in which McG is directing movies. His film is so profoundly disconnected to both art and entertainment that our ancestors will need a new genre to describe it. Unintentionally comic science fiction? In the meantime, just avoid it. **EW**

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