Technofreak. On the Films of James Cameron

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Craft endows a film director with class, obsession with credibility. For nearly 30 years, Canadian James Cameron has told about his feeling for the technical: his love for the fruits of late 20th century technological progress, his fear of the dynamic technologization of life. He has penetrated into the nooks and crannies of a blue planet, escaping into the stars. He has visited space and explored the depths of the ocean, been on the deck of the Titanic and the planet LV-426, colonized by the Earth; he has traveled into the mists of the past and the inscrutable future. The credo of his work could be the words of Stanisław Lem: "Most technologies have their shiny facade, but life gave them a flipside—a dark reality."

In the grim decade of the 1980s, toward the end of the Cold War, there was no shortage of symbols of techno-ter-

ror. Cameron used first the Skynet computer system to awaken fear in audiences (*Terminator*, 1984) followed by the greedy Weyland Yutani corporation (*Aliens*, 1986). When the wind of historical change came, and the United States left their collision course with the Soviet Union, it suddenly turned out that man was in charge of his own fate ("There's no fate but what we make," the hero of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991, declares),able to decide for himself and define his own humanity (*The Abyss*, *Director's Cut*, 1992). Discussing the decline of technophobic tendencies in American society, Cameron asked his favorite questions: how do we define ourselves in the face of civilizational progress? How do we harness its products? And how restrain them from harnessing us?

Identity of the Machine, Identity of the Species
The face of Arnold Schwarzenegger, merged in our mass consciousness with the character of the Terminator, is one example of the conceptual synthesis that only pop culture can permit itself. People may refer to the character as a cyborg, but in fact its conceptual category of the intelligent machine hosts the collective traits of the android, the humanoid robot and the cyborg. The genetic dimension of its existence is still more curious: it is a machine created by another machine– the Skynet supercomputer which in 1997 hit humanity with a nuclear holocaust and declared war on its remnants. The orders of the killer sent into the past are crystal clear: he is to annihilate Sara Connor, mother of the still unborn resistance leader John Connor.

Aesthetically and ideologically, the Terminator T-800 was a symbol of its time. In his studded leather jacket, heavy boots and dark glasses he looks a bit like a converted punk, and a bit like a stereotypical homosexual of the 1980s, missing only a leather cap, thick stubble on his face and a walrus mustache. At the ideological level he is Weapon X, straight from the cheap warehouses of the Soviet Evil Empire. When in March 1983 Ronald Reagan publicly announced the "Star Wars" program or Strategic Defense Initiative, Cameron had just begun making the film. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were dreaming of mobile laser divisions that could take out ballistic missiles before they even left the territory of the USSR while on on screen, Skynet was raging. What Cameron was merely suggesting was later articulated by Jonathan Mostow in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003). Acting in accordance with logic and using its geopolitical knowledge, the computer started a conflict with an attack on Russian targets.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day was released in 1991. The Soviet Union was fading into the past, while the rubble of the Berlin Wall had already been cleaned up. Video technology was at the height of its popularity, while the Interent was still in embryo. Human beings sensed themselves to be a part of the famous metaphor of information overload or informational noise, standing before a row of TV screens absorbing senseless images, from the conflict in the Persian Gulf to advertisements for protein bars. Fatalism gave way to hope, and Skynet became a threat that could be opposed by fortitude and– let us not disregard

this argument – a great deal of firepower. It was all the more compelling in that the Terminator T-1000, sent to wipe out young Connor, was followed by Connor's defender, a dobry cyborg embodied by Schwarzenegger.

The crucial element of antithesis that organizes the film's plot is the relationship between Sara Connor and her son John. The mother is muscular, tough and unemotional. For years she has, for utilitarian reasons, only been involved with men who could teach her how to fight. She subordinated her life to one purpose: stopping the war. John, for his part, lives in freedom, outside the system, as a rebel, a fact underscored by his (overly) expressive affect. He is excitable and scatterbrained, but sincere and human. To viewers' delight, he teaches the cyborg teenage words.

The conflict between mother and son begins at the moment when Sara, haunted by a realistic dream about the apocalypse, carves out on a wooden bench the significant phrase "The future has not been written." After making this revelatory find, John helps us in our interpretative effort and finishes the phrase: "The future has not been written. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves." The heroes have no doubts about their mission: Sara will kill the computer programmer Miles Dyson, who in the future will devise Skynet.

Years of battle have changed Sara into a machine as effective and determined as the Terminator. This human robot falters at a critical moment, however, finding herself unable to shoot Dyson in cold blood. John explains to

her that the only tactic with a chance of working in the struggle against the mechanical menace is saving what machines never had, namely, humanity (at the same time, a crucially relevant fact is that John has mastery over technology, knows how to break into computer systems and how to empty cashpoints or open magnetic doors).

In the end, Dyson perishes, but on his own terms. In a heroic act, he sacrifices his own life to blow up the building in which the remains of the Terminator from the previous film are kept. His death represents a triumph of collective action, which people, unlike machines, are capable of spontaneously undertaking and for which they need no programming. Małgorzata Radkowska, author of the excellent essay "Terminator (Terminatory i ludzie. Opowieść o pędzie i zatrzymaniu)" (Terminator [Terminators and People. A Story of Drive and Suspension[), astutely observes that "Schwarzenegger and the heroes of Dick, Asimov, and Lem, materialize our fear of immanent desire, confinement in a hysterical gesture, fixation."

This Time It's War!
Viewed over a decade after the release of the final episode, the *Aliens* tetralogy proves that the formula of sequels need not always be stamped with the stigma of the derivative, and science fiction is always other genres in disguise. Aware of the value of Ridley Scott's original Alien (1979), Cameron resolved to break with the cinematic model laid down by his predecessor, immersed in the literary tradition of Gothic horror. In *Aliens* (1986), bursting

at the seams with action, Scott's elegant horror metamorphoses into a roller-coaster war film (as eloquently stated by the film's advertising slogan, also the title of this section), and Sigourney Weaver's Ripley character transforms from a fragile woman into a fearless Amazon, while the Aliens themselves (now pluralized, after all, this is war), removed from their archetypal framing, turn out to be nothing more than vicious animals. In a certain sense, Aliens is also the missing link between the two first installments of the *Terminator* series. It shows the gradual transformation of the director's attitude toward a world defined by the development of modern technology.

Awakened from her hibernating sleep, Ripley returns to the planet LV-426, where her nightmrae began. This time she lands there with a platoon of marines at her side, whose goal is the extermination of the hostile species. However, before "victorious anthropomorphism," in Andrzej Kołodyński's words, "manifests itself in the sadistic sense of the destruction of everything non-human," another thread manages to make its presence felt in the film. Besides the hordes of Aliens, the greatest threat to the heroes is the government company Weyland Yutani. The company is powered by the military industrial-technological complex. The company buils powerful atmospheric processors which enable the colonizers of new planets to breathe. The main purpose of the colonization of LV-426 (though this is simultaneously kept secret from the settlers) is to obtain the Alien for the biological warfare division. The bureaucrat Carter Burke who has been sent with the soldiers has

a hidden goal of his own: to smuggle the dangerous species through quarantine. And once again predatory technological expansion ends with an eruption of human wickedness.

The gargantuan Queen of the Swarm lays her nest within the labyrinths of the central processor, resembling an infernal alchemical oven. The first round of the duel between the Queen and Ripley plays out in its biomechanical bowels, billowing with steam. In the literal sense, technology is annexed by biology, while metaphorically it becomes a monster on a leash held by humanity, a match in a child's hands. To maintain balance in the film, there android Bishop appears to help Ripley in accordance with the directives of the program.

By fetishizing the military drill and multiplying scenes of emotional drama from the daily lives of the mercenaries, Cameron paradoxically expresses an antiwar message. wyraża przesłanie antywojenne. He shows in no uncertain terms that a philosophy of the world based on bullet-pounding extensions of manhood loses in a confrontation with pure biology, whose hostility is equal only to its structural perfection, In one of his interviews, the director compared the plot of the film to the trajectory of the Vietnam War: "To me the whole Vietnam experience was almost science fictional, in the sense that it was the first real high tech war that was waged against an extremely low tech enemy—and lost. Which, to me, is a very strange thing. It showed how technology didn't work and there's an aspect of that in the film. It's like, why are we losing?"

Twilight of the Conquerors

The Abyss opens with a scene of an atomic submarine, the USS Montana, malfunctioning after a collision with an unidentified object. The government sends a mobile drilling platform to the rescue. The American army, in charge of the mission, sends a group of commandos on board, whose task is to safeguard the Montana's atomic charges. While on board they discover that a peacefully inclined race of aliens took part in the accident. The soldiers' commanding officer, Lieutenant Coffey, paying no heed to the crew's protests, resolves to open up "World War III in a can" (as a character refers to the Montana) and detonate one of the charges. Against Coffey stand a couple in the process of getting divorced, Virgil and Lindsay Brigman.

In the studio (producers') version, The Abyss is an adventure tale about a conflict between American pacifists and a die-hard imperialist. In the director's cut (called *Głębia* [The Deep] in Polish, disregarding the existing 1977 thriller of that name by Peter Yates), longer by 28 minutes and 36 scenes, and given a wide theatrical release in 1992, Cameron allows his ambition free rein, as signalled by the opening scene bearing its rusty epigraph from Nietzsche about th abyss looking into those who look long into it. He changes the ending and adds a whole series of scenes that place the story of Virgil, Lindsay and Coffey in a political context. The action takes place not long before the end of the Cold War, but the director's cut (or special edition) was edited after the conclusion of that conflict.

Coffey and the Brigmans metaphorically represent a divided society and a twofold response to the United States as the parental stock of weapons technology. At the same time, Cameron does not take the side of the superefficient conquerors, as Maria Oleksiewicz refers to the space marines in *Aliens*, and he undermines faith in the sense of destruction as a universal means for protecting our interests. The technology of evil used by Coffey is oposed to the technology of good, by means of which Virgil keeps the bomb from exploding. The thesis formulated here is shocking in its naïveté, but sounds sincere: it is we who control technology, not it that controls us. Morality is a value that will not be quashed even by the might of the atom. Bud and Lindsay fall in love once again, as Cameron shows that pacifism does not rule out conservative values (though we might note in passing that this has an odd ring coming from someone who's been married five times). The conservative model of the fundamental social cell is a weapon in the fight against the common enemy – this time neither the Soviets nor an alien race but an internal enemy as defined in the constitution. Though the film's action takes place underwater, the critique of imperialism resonates more clearly than ever before: the heroes say that Coffey has had the ground swept away from under his feet because he has been cut off from his chain of command. He has become like a puppet without its puppeteer. An analogous plot situation occurred in *Aliens*, when after the first confrontation with the monsters, command over the decimated marine forces was seized by Corporal Hicks, the highest-ranking of those remaining. In that film, how-

ever, the festival of destruction occasioned high praise. Is it an accident that both Coffey and Hicks are played by the same American actor, Michael Biehn?

The *Avatar* Project

When, at the 1998 Oscar ceremony, James Cameron paraphrased the words of his protagonist and cried out that he was the "king of the world," many saw this to herald a second period of youthful promise for the director. When the new millennium came, however, the Canadian fell out of touch with the times, venturing into the realm of pompous epic. He went underwater, both literally and figuratively. He summoned the spirits of sailors from the wreck of the Bismarck, catalogued the residents of the darkest recesses, visited the remains of the Titanic. For his first feature in twelve years, he returned to the genre that had assured his status as a Hollywood craftsman with the Midas touch before his Oscar win with *Titanic*. *Avatar* is a film made entirely using three-dimensional animation and, at the same time, a testing ground for many new technologies. As usual, the self-confident director talks of a coming revolution. He knows how to run an advertising campaign: since he won 11 Oscars for a tearjerker that he feels no particular attachment to now, how could he treat this, his magnum opus, with indifference?

Translated by Timothy Williams