Abstract for Symbiotic Cinema Conference

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Cinematic vs Televisual Cyborgs in the Terminator franchise

This paper wishes to consider how the TV series Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles (Fox, 2008-2009) builds on and reworks the characteristics of the cyborgs presented in the three Terminator films preceding it, The Terminator (Cameron, 1984), Terminator 2 (Cameron, 1991) and Terminator 3 (Mostow, 2003). How is the spectacle of the cyborg, one of science fiction film’s key special effects, transposed on television? Indeed, if science fiction on a big screen requires the display of special effects, how can they be transposed in the smaller and more intimate realm of television? This paper seeks to compare the mise en scène of the cyborg’s appearances and combat skills in the films and the TV series but also the different narrative arcs governing characters who can be more fully developed within the length of a TV series than within a self-contained film. Indeed, whereas Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles draws from the Terminator films to present its panel of cyborgs, it reprograms the different cyborg characters several times during the narrative, making them the center of the plot’s twists and surprises. The character of Catherine Weaver in Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles, for instance, echoes the Terminator 2 T1000’s metallic fluidity and ability to transform at will, announcing an antagonistic force, yet her final deployment serves to protect Sarah Connor and her son against the enemy, going against the viewers’ expectations set by the films. Finally, it is interesting to note that the TV series changes the gender of many of the franchise’s cyborgs, turning the male protagonist and antagonist of Terminator 2 into females who have to deal with feminine-coded issues like love and motherhood. This raises the question of the difference in targeted audiences between the film franchise and its televisual adaptation. Can the turn to television be seen as a means of attracting the female audience of TV series such as Buffy and Firefly (Fox, 2002-2003, where Summer Glau, who plays the cyborg protagonist in Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles, first appeared), to the male world of the Terminator film franchise?

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