

# F/X Porn

by  
**David Foster Wallace**

What's the difference between a Hollywood special-effects blockbuster like "Terminator 2" and a hard-core porn film? Very little, claims novelist, essayist and footnote fetishist David Foster Wallace.

**1990s moviegoers** who have sat clutching their heads in both awe and disappointment at movies like "Twister" and "Volcano" and "The Lost World" can thank James Cameron's "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" for inaugurating what's become this decade's special new genre of big-budget film: Special Effects Porn. "Porn" because, if you substitute F/X for intercourse, the parallels between the two genres become so obvious they're eerie. Just like hard-core cheapies, movies like "Terminator 2" and "Jurassic Park" aren't really "movies" in the standard sense at all. What they really are is half a dozen or so isolated, spectacular scenes -- scenes comprising maybe twenty or thirty minutes of riveting, sensuous payoff -- strung together via another sixty to ninety minutes of flat, dead, and often hilariously insipid narrative.

"T2," one of the highest-grossing movies in history, opened six years ago. Think of the scenes we all still remember. That incredible chase and explosion in the L.A. sluiceway and then the liquid metal T-1000 Terminator walking out of the explosion's flames and morphing<sup>1</sup> seamlessly into his Martin-Milner-as-Possessed-by-Hannibal-Lecter corporeal form. The T-1000 rising hideously up out of that checkerboard floor, the T-1000 melting headfirst through the windshield of that helicopter, the T-1000 freezing in liquid nitrogen and then collapsing fractally apart. These were truly spectacular images, and they represented exponential advances in digital F/X technology. But there were at most maybe eight of these incredible sequences, and they were the movie's heart and point; the rest of "T2" is empty and derivative, pure mimetic polycelluloid.

It's not that "T2" is totally plotless or embarrassing -- and it does, admittedly, stand head and shoulders above most of the F/X Porn blockbusters that have followed it. It's rather that "T2" as a dramatic narrative is slick and cliché and calculating and in sum an appalling betrayal of 1984's "The Terminator." "T1," which was James Cameron's first feature film and had a modest budget and was one of the two best

U.S. action movies of the entire 1980s<sup>2</sup>, was a dark, breathlessly kinetic, near-brilliant piece of metaphysical Ludditism. Recall that it's A.D. 2027 and that there's been a nuclear holocaust in 1997 and that chip-driven machines now rule, and "Skynet," the archonic *diabolus ex machina*, develops a limited kind of time-travel technology and dispatches the now classically cyborgian A. Schwarzenegger back to 1984's Los Angeles to find and terminate one Sarah Connor, the mother-to-be of the future leader of the human "Resistance," one John Connor<sup>3</sup>; and that apparently the Resistance itself somehow gets one-time-only access to Skynet's time-travel technology and sends back to the same space-time coordinates a Resistance officer, the ever-sweaty but extremely tough and resourceful Kyle Reese, to try desperately to protect Ms. Sarah Connor from the Terminator's prophylactic advances<sup>4</sup>, and so on. It is, yes, true that Cameron's Skynet is basically Kubrick's HAL, and that most of "T1"'s time-travel paradoxes are reworkings of some fairly standard Bradbury-era science fiction themes, but "The Terminator" still has a whole lot to recommend it. There's the inspired casting of the malevolently cyborgian Schwarzenegger as the malevolently cyborgian Terminator, the role that made Ahnode a superstar and for which he was utterly and totally perfect (e.g. even his goofy 16-r.p.m. Austrian accent added a perfect little robofascist tinge to the Terminator's dialogue<sup>5</sup>). There's the first of

---

<sup>2</sup>The 1980s other B.U.S.A.M. was Cameron's second feature, the 1986 "Aliens," also modestly budgeted, also both hair-raising and deeply intelligent.

<sup>3</sup>(Whose initials, for a prophesied saviour of humanity, are not particularly subtle.)

<sup>4</sup>The fact that what Skynet is attempting is in effect a retroactive abortion, together with the fact that "terminate a pregnancy" is a pretty well-known euphemism, led the female I first saw the movie with in 1984 to claim, over coffee and pie afterwards, that "The Terminator" was actually one long pro-choice allegory, which I said I thought was not w/o merit but maybe a bit too simplistic to do the movie real justice, which led to kind of an unpleasant row.

<sup>5</sup>Consider, for example, the now famous "I'll be back" line took on a level of ominous historical resonance when uttered by an unstoppable killing machine with a \_German\_ accent. This was chilling and brilliant commercial postmodernism at its best; but it is also what made "Terminator 2"'s in-joke of having Ahnode repeat the line in a good-guy context is so disappointing.

---

<sup>1</sup>(Actually defined in the film as "mimetic polyalloy," whatever that's supposed to mean.)

Cameron's two great action heroines<sup>6</sup> in Sarah Connor, as whom the limpid-eyed and lethal-lipped Linda Hamilton also turns in the only great performance of her career. There is the dense, greasy, marvelously machinelike look of "The Terminator"'s mechanized F/X<sup>7</sup>; there are the noirish lighting and Dexedrine pace that compensate ingeniously for the low budget and manage to establish a mood that is both exhilarating and claustrophobic<sup>8</sup>. Plus "T1"'s story had at its center a marvelous "Appointment-in-Samarra"-like irony of fate: we discover in the course of the film that Kyle Reese is actually John Connor's father,<sup>9</sup> and thus that if Skynet hadn't built its nebulous time machine and sent back the Terminator, Reese wouldn't have been back here in '84, either, to impregnate Sarah C. This also entails that meanwhile, up in A.D. 2027, John Connor has had to send the man he knows is his father on a mission that J.C. knows will result in both that man's death and his (i.e. J.C.'s) own birth. The whole ironic mess is simultaneously Freudian and Testamental and is just extraordinarily cool for a low-budget action movie.

Its big-budget sequel adds only one ironic paradox to "The Terminator"'s mix: in "T2," we learn that the "radically advanced chip"<sup>10</sup> on which Skynet's CPU is (will be) based actually came (comes) from the denuded and hydraulically pressed skull of "T1"'s defunct Terminator...meaning that Skynet's attempts to alter the flow of history bring about not only John Connor's birth but Skynet's own, as well. All

---

<sup>6</sup>It is a complete mystery why feminist film scholars haven't paid more attention to Cameron and his early collaborator Gale Ann Hurd. "The Terminator" and "Aliens" were both violent action films with tough, competent female protagonists (incredibly rare) whose toughness and competence in no way diminish their "femininity" (even more rare, unheard of), a femininity that is rooted (along with both films' thematics) in notions of maternity rather than just sexuality. For example, compare Cameron's Ellen Ripley with the panty-and-tank-top Ripley of Scott's "Alien." In fact it was flat-out criminal that Sigourney Weaver didn't win the '86 Oscar for her lead in Cameron's "Aliens." Marlee Matlin indeed. No male lead in the history of U.S. action films even approaches Weaver's second Ripley for emotional depth and sheer balls -- she makes Stallone, Willis, et. al. look muddled and ill.

<sup>7</sup>(There is a ponderous, marvelous built-looking quality (complete with ferrous clanks and/or pneumatic hisses) that -- oddly enough -- at roughly the same time also distinguishes the special effects of Gilliam's "Brazil" and Paul Verhoeven's "Robocop." This was not cool only because the effects were themselves cool, but also because here were three talented young tech-minded directors who rejected the airy, hygienic look of Spielberg's and Lucas's F/X. The grimy density and preponderance of metal in Cameron's effects suggested that he was looking all the way back to Méliès and Lang for visual inspiration.)

<sup>8</sup>(Cameron would raise the use of light and pace to near-perfection in "Aliens," where just six alien-suited stuntmen and ingenious quick-cut editing resulted in some of the most terrifying Teeming Rapacious Horde scenes of all time. (By the way, sorry to be going on and on about "Aliens" and "The Terminator." It's just that they're great, great, commercial cinema, and nobody talks about them enough, and they're a big reason why "T2" was such a tragic and insidious development not only for 90s films but for James Cameron, whose first two films had genius in them.))

<sup>9</sup>(So actually I guess it would be more like "Luke Skywalker's Appointment in Samarra" -- nobody said this was Art-Cinema or anything.)

<sup>10</sup>(Viz. a "neutral net processor" based on an "uncooled superconductor," which I grieve to report is a conceit ripped off from Douglas Trumbull's 1983 "Brainstorm.")

"T2"'s other important ironies and paradoxes, however, are unfortunately unintentional and generic and kind of sad.

Note, for example, the fact that "Terminator 2: Judgment Day," a movie about the disastrous consequences of humans relying too heavily on computer technology, was itself unprecedentedly computer-dependent. George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic, subcontracted by Cameron to do "T2"'s special effects, had to quadruple the size of its computer graphics department for the T-1000 sequences, sequences which also required digital-imaging specialists from around the world, thirty-six state-of-the-art Silicon Graphics computers, and terabytes of specially invented software programs for seamless morphing, realistic motion, digital "body socks," background-plate compatibility, congruence of lighting and grain, etc. And there is no question that all the lab work paid off: in 1991, "Terminator 2"'s special effects were the most spectacular and real-looking anybody had ever seen. They were also the most expensive.

"T2" is thus also the first and best instance of a paradoxical law that appears to hold true for the entire F/X Porn genre. It is called the Inverse Cost and Quality Law, and it states very simply that the larger a movie's budget is, the shittier that movie is going to be. The case of "T2" shows that much of the ICQL's force derives from simple financial logic. A film that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to make is going to get financial backing if and only if its investors can be maximally -- *maximally* -- sure that at the very least they will get their hundreds of millions of dollars back<sup>11</sup> -- i.e. a megabudget movie must not fail (and "failure" here means anything less than a runaway box-office hit) and must thus adhere to certain reliable formulae that have been shown by precedent to maximally ensure a runaway hit. One of the most reliable of these formulae involves casting a superstar who is "bankable" (i.e. whose recent track record of films shows a high ROI). The studio backing for "T2"'s wildly sophisticated and digital F/X therefore depends on Mr. Arnold Schwarzenegger agreeing to reprise his Terminator role. Now the ironies start to stack, though, because it turns out that Schwarzenegger -- or perhaps more accurately "Schwarzenegger, Inc.," or "Ahnodyne" -- has decided that playing any more malevolent cyborgs would compromise the Leading Man image his elite and bankable record of ROI entails. He will do the film only if "T2"'s script is somehow engineered to make the Terminator the Good Guy. Not only is this vain and stupid and shockingly ungrateful,<sup>12</sup> it is also common popular knowledge, duly reported in both the trade

---

<sup>11</sup>The industry term for getting your money back plus that little bit of extra that makes investing in a movie a decent investment is ROI, which is short for Return on Investment.

<sup>12</sup>Because Schwarzenegger -- compared to whom Chuck Norris is Olivier -- is not an actor or even a performer. He is a body, a form -- the closest thing to an actual machine in the history of the S.A.G. Ahnode's elite bankable status in 1991 was due entirely to the fact that James Cameron had had the genius to understand Schwarzenegger's essential bionism and to cast him in "T1."

and the popular entertainment media before "T2" even goes into production. There's consequently a weird postmodern tension to the way we watch the film; we're aware of what the bankable star's demands were, and we're also aware of how much the movie cost and how important bankable stars are to a big-budget movie; and so one of the few things that keeps us on the edge of our seats during the movie is our suspense about whether James Cameron can possibly weave a plausible, non-cheesy narrative that meets Schwarzenegger's career needs without betraying "T1"'s precedent.

Cameron does not succeed, at least not in avoiding heavy cheese. Recall the premise he settles on for "T2": that Skynet once again uses its (apparently not all that limited) time-travel device, this time to send a far more advanced liquid metal T-1000 Terminator back to 1990s L.A., this time to kill the ten-year-old John Connor (played by the extremely annoying Edward Furlong<sup>13</sup>, whose voice keeps cracking pubescently and who's just clearly older than ten), and that the intrepid human Resistance has somehow captured, subdued, and "reprogrammed" an old Schwarzenegger-model Terminator -- resetting its CPU's switch from TERMINATE to PROTECT, apparently<sup>14</sup> -- and then has somehow once again gotten one-time access to Skynet's time-travel technology<sup>15</sup> and sent the Schwarzenegger Terminator back to protect young J.C. from the T-1000's infanticidal advances.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>It augurs ill for both Furlong and Cameron that within minutes of John Connor's introduction in the film we're rooting vigorously for him to be Terminated.

<sup>14</sup>A complex and interesting scene where John and Sarah actually open up the Terminator's head and remove Ahnode's CPU and do some further reprogramming -- a scene where we learn a lot more about neural net processors and Terminative anatomy, and where Sarah is strung out and has kind of an understandable anti-Terminator prejudice and wants to smash the CPU while she can, and where John asserts his nascent command presence and basically orders her not to -- was cut from the movie's final version. Cameron's professed rational for cutting the scene was that the middle of the movie "dragged" and that the scene was too complex: "I could account for the Terminator's behavior changes much more simply." I submit that the Cameron of "T1" and "Aliens" wouldn't have talked this way. But another big-budget formula for ensuring ROI is that things must be made as simple for the audiences as possible; plot and character implausibilities are to be handled through distraction rather than resolved through explanation.

<sup>15</sup>(Around which the security must be shockingly lax.)

<sup>16</sup>That's the movie's main plot, but let's observe here that one of "T2"'s subplots actually echoes Cameron's Schwarzenegger dilemma and creates a kind of weird meta-cinematic irony. Whereas "T1" had argued for a certain kind of metaphysical passivity (i.e., fate is unavoidable, and Skynet's attempts to alter history serve only bring it about.) "Terminator 2"'s metaphysics are more active. In "T2," the Connors take a page from Skynet's book and try to head off the foreordained nuclear holocaust, first by trying to kill Skynet's inventor and then by destroying Cyberdyne's labs and the 1st Terminator's CPU (though why John Connor spends half the movie carrying the deadly CPU chip around in his pocket instead of just throwing it under the first available steamroller remains unclear and irksome). The point here is that the protagonists' attempts to revise the "script" of history in "T2" parallel the director's having to muck around with "T2"'s own script in order for Schwarzenegger to be in the movie. Multivalent ironies like this -- which require that film audiences know all kinds of behind-the-scenes stuff from watching Entertainment Tonight and reading Premiere magazine -- are not commercial postmodernism at it's finest.

Cameron's premise is financially canny and artistically dismal: it permits "Terminator 2"'s narrative to clank along on the rails of all manner of mass-market formulae. There is, for example, no quicker or easier ingress to the audience's heart than to present an innocent child in danger, and of course protecting an innocent child from danger is heroism at its most generic. Cameron's premise also permits the emotional center of "T2" to consist of the child and the Terminator or "bonding," which in turn allows for all manner of familiar and reliable devices. Thus it is that "T2" offers us cliché explorations of stuff like the conflicts between Emotion and Logic (territory already mined to exhaustion by "Star Trek") and between Human and Machine (turf that's been worked in everything from "Lost in Space" to "Blade Runner" to "Robocop"), as well as exploiting the good old Alien-or-Robot-Learns-About-Human-Customs-and-Psychology-From-Sarcastic-and/or-Precocious-but-Basically-Goodhearted-Human-with-Whom-It-Bonds formula (q.q.v. here "My Favorite Martian" and "E.T." and "Starman" and "The Brother From Another Planet" and "Harry and the Hendersons" and "Alf" and ad almost infinitum). Thus it is that the 85% of "T2" that is not mind-blowing digital F/X sequences subjects us to dialogue like: "Vhy do you cry?" and "Cool! My own Terminator!" and "Can you not be such a dork all the time?" and "This is intense!" and "Haven't you learned that you can't just go around killing people?" and "It's OK, Mom, he's here to help" and "I know now vhy you cry, but it's somesing I can never do"; plus to that hideous ending where Schwarzenegger gives John a cyborgian hug and then voluntarily immerses himself in molten steel to protect humanity from his neural net CPU, raising that Fonzieque thumb as he sinks below the surface<sup>17</sup>, and the two Connor hug and grieve, and then poor old Linda Hamilton -- whose role in "T2" requires her not only to look like she's been doing nothing but Nautilus for the last several years but also to keep snarling and baring her teeth and saying stuff like "Don't fuck with me!" and "Men like you know nothing about really creating something!" and acting half-crazed with paramilitary stress, stretching Hamilton way beyond her thespian capacities and resulting in what seems more than anything like a parody of Faye Dunaway in "Mommy Dearest" -- has to give us that goeey "I face the future with hope, because if a Terminator can learn the value of human life, maybe we can, too" voiceover at the very end.

The point is that head-clutchingly insipid stuff like this puts an ever heavier burden of importance on "T2"'s digital effects, which now must be stunning enough to distract us from the formulaic void at the story's center, which in turn means that even more money and directional attention must be lavished on the film's F/X. This sort of cycle is sympto-

---

<sup>17</sup>(His hair doesn't quite catch on fire in the molten steel, though, which provokes intriguing speculation on what it's supposed to be made of.)

matic of the insidious three-part loop that characterizes Special Effects Porn --

ONE: Astounding digital dinosaur / tornado / volcano / Terminator effects that consume almost all the director's creative attention and require massive financial commitment on the part of the studio;

TWO: A consequent need for guaranteed megabuck ROI, which entails the formulaic elements and easy sentiment that will assure mass appeal (plus will translate easily into other languages and cultures, for those important foreign sales...);

THREE: A director -- often one who's shown great talent in earlier, less expensive films -- who is now so consumed with realizing his spectacular digital vision, and so dependent on the studio's money to bring the F/X off, that he has neither the leverage nor the energy to fight for more interesting or original plots / themes / characters.

-- and thus yields the two most important corollary formulations of the Inverse Cost and Quality Law:

(ICQL(a)) The more lavish and spectacular a movie's special effects, the shittier that movie is going to be in all non-F/X respects. For obvious supporting examples of ICQL (a), see lines 1-2 of this article and/or also "Jurassic Park," "Independent Day," "Forrest Gump," etc.

(ICQL (b)) There is no quicker or more efficient way to kill what is interesting and original about an interesting, original young director than to give that director a huge budget and lavish F/X resources. The number of supporting examples of ICQL (b) is sobering. Have a look, e.g., at the difference between Rodriguez's "El Mariachi" and his "From Dusk to Dawn," between DeBont's "Speed" and "Twister," between Gilliam's "Brazil" and "Twelve Monkeys," between Bigelow's "Near Dark" and "Strange Days." Or chart Cameron's industry rise and artistic decline from "T1" and "Aliens" through "T2" and "The Abyss" to -- dear Lord -- "True Lies." U.S. entertainment media report that Cameron's new "Titanic," currently in American release, is (once again) the most expensive and technically ambitious film of all time. Doubtless, Britons have been pricing trenchcoats and lubricants in anticipation of its arrival in the UK.

---

The author of the novel "Infinite Jest," David Foster Wallace has been called by The Guardian's James Wood "a superb comedian of culture." His new book, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," is a collection of sharp, playful and humorous essays that touch on everything from David Lynch to the equivocal relationship between novelists and television. Full of astonishing verbal dexterity, impish wit and off-the-wall analysis, the is fresh, funny and hugely entertaining.

"A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" is published in paperback by Abacus on 5 February at £6.99