



THE FILMS OF
**JAMES
CAMERON**
CRITICAL ESSAYS

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“So, what’s your story?": Morphing Myths and Feminizing Archetypes, from *The Terminator* to *Avatar*

Dean Conrad

[Sample Text]

MALE NARRATOR (V.O.)

They made him a machine, trained to deliver humanity from the final cataclysm. They built him a machine, the most awesome ship ever constructed, and with a mind of its own. She was raised by a machine that alone knew the power of love. Together they searched the wilderness of stars for a place where the cycle of creation could begin again. Xenogenesis: Man’s ultimate adventure...¹

Thus begins a film career.

It is never made clear how the woman and the machine are going to re-kindle the human race together, but this is unimportant. As the voice intones its hyperbole and the camera pans and fades through still images reminiscent of *Astounding Science-Fiction* magazine covers of the 1930s, students of science fiction cinema may already discern the style, scope and ambition that would come to typify the work of James Cameron. This is *Xenogenesis*, a 12-minute short, written and directed with Randall Frakes in 1978. It features William Wisher, who would go on to share the writing credits on the first two *Terminator* films (1984, 1991) and Margaret Undiel - in her first and, to date, only screen role.

Xenogenesis has little plot to speak of, the characterizations are minimal and the dialogue is basic. The majority of the effort and budget appear to have been spent on the effects and action shots. Whilst it may be unfair to look for a fully-rounded narrative and characters in what is essentially a calling-card project for the fledgling film-maker, similar searches have regularly been made in reviews of James Cameron’s subsequent feature efforts - a result, according to Laura Miller, of the director’s “...limited powers of dramatic invention”.² This criticism, directed here at *Titanic* (1997), may seem harsh, but it is indicative of a general notion that Cameron’s characters and plots continue to be secondary to his ambition to create what Miller goes on to call little more than “...the most impressive movie money can buy”.³ As early as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* this ambition had been clear to Tony Rayns: “James Cameron’s sense of his own mission seems to be growing as fast as his budgets”.⁴ Wider ambition and mission have ultimately affected Cameron’s female (and male) characters. By his next film, *True Lies* (1994), it is clear to Leslie Felperin Sharman that developing a female lead is not a priority: “Helen’s ineptitude is consistent with the demands of the action genre...”.⁵

It is fair to say that James Cameron has not generally been regarded as Hollywood’s most subtle or skilled writer, a perception that has been sustained by *Avatar* (2009), a film which, according to Andrew Osmond, contains “some ghastly dialogue and info-dumps...”.⁶ Cameron’s skill as a technically-astute director is another matter; his persistence as a writer reflects the needs of a film-maker who will not brook to be compromised in his expanding screen vision. The resultant, largely-undisputed, control that Cameron has had over his films is useful to the commentator, as it affords the luxury of being able safely to pin apparent

preoccupations and priorities to the man himself. The foundations are already apparent in that first screen effort, *Xenogenesis*, which serves a test-bed for a number of techniques and images which will re-emerge in later projects - most notably, the *Terminator* films.

Particularly germane to this essay, however, is Margaret Undiel’s character, Lori. Whilst it is difficult to discern much from her scant dialogue, her fight with an alien robot is more telling. Lori pilots her own spider-legged machine using hand-held, mimic controls, a concept re-used by Cameron for Ripley’s iconic power-loader fight with the alien queen towards the end of *Aliens* (1986).⁷ In *Xenogenesis*, Lori is fighting to save the android, Raj, and whilst she never quite says “Get away from him, you bitch!”, this celebrated *Aliens* sentiment is close to the surface. During the fight, Lori can be seen through the transparent, hemispherical cockpit windshield, as she struggles with the controls. This distinctive image is developed for number of shots of Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and Kimberly Scott, piloting submarines through *The Abyss* (1989).

Such is the pervasiveness of the early Cameron woman that she is still discernable in films written but not directed by him. She is there as Julia Nickson’s jungle fighter Co Bao in *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985); she appears again as Juliette Lewis’ character Faith Justin in the Kathryn Bigelow directed *Strange Days* (1995), a film co-written with Cameron some years after their divorce.⁸

It is not enough, however, merely to say that themes can be seen in the work of James Cameron with respect to his screen women. Critics and reviewers began to note this as soon as sufficient films had passed for a pattern to emerge and reveal what Tony Rayns calls “...Cameron’s gallery of strong and resourcefully maternal women”.⁹ Cameron’s personal investment in his female characters has also tempted critics and reviewers to draw parallels with elements of his own life: his strong, resourceful mother, a penchant for capable, independent women, and four failed marriages - including those to director Kathryn Bigelow, actor Linda Hamilton and producer Gale Anne Hurd.

Less analysis has been directed towards the evolving function of Cameron’s female screen characters as his career has progressed. Closer attention reveals that they are not all hewn from the same stone. Or if they are, subtle, and not so subtle, differences chart ongoing shifts in Cameron’s priorities as a film-maker. Whether changes are the result of personal experiences is, of course, impossible to know for certain. They may betray the maturing mind of the creator; they may reflect shifting cultural and political climates; they may be a symptom of ballooning budgets. Whatever the reasons, a clear development can be seen in James Cameron’s leading ladies - from the female hero, Sarah Connor to the feminine heroine, Neytiri.

SARAH CONNOR

Come on. Do I look like the mother of the future?¹⁰

Cameron was 23 years old in 1977, the year that George Lucas’ film *Star Wars* kick-started a science fiction revolution whose (special) effects are still being felt. The phenomenal, popular success of *Star Wars* brought the genre’s commercial potential to the attention of the Hollywood studios, and resulted in a profusion of hopeful investors - such as the group of dentists who funded *Xenogenesis* - as well as ambitious young film-makers, like Cameron, attempting to surf the new genre wave.¹¹

Xenogenesis never matured into a feature project, but it did prove useful in securing Cameron’s first professional feature work, on Roger Corman’s *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980). This invaluable practical film-making experience, coupled with what he had learned on *Xenogenesis*, would form the backbone of Cameron’s own first feature project. However, for a plot, he would lean heavily on lessons learned from *Star Wars*.

Lucas himself had turned to the work of Joseph Campbell, the American writer and academic who explores the traditions and conventions of storytelling in his seminal text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell references psychologist Gustav Jung’s work on archetypes in his examination of the development of hero myths down the centuries and across cultures. The result is the identification of a unifying archetype: the universal Hero’s Journey: the narrative path followed by heroes from Theseus, in his adventures with the Cretan minotaur, to Prince Siddhārtha Gautama on his quest to become the Buddha. It is part of the monomyth that lends familiarity to the character of Luke Skywalker.¹²

Cameron would have been familiar with the basic tenets of this journey through the plot of his own favorite film, *The Wizard of Oz*.¹³ It is one of the movies cited by Christopher Vogler, along with *Star Wars*, as a classic example of Campbell’s work, as reflected in Hollywood. Vogler’s 1992 study, *The Writer’s Journey*, is now required reading for would-be screenwriters, but back in the 1980s, Cameron wanted to be different. As he says himself in Rebecca Keegan’s celebration of his life and work, *The Futurist*, “In writing I like to be fresh, and at the time of *Terminator*, that kind of female character hadn’t really been done”.¹⁴ “Fresh” may not be the best description for a plot structure that can be traced back thousands of years; however, Cameron’s claim for his female lead does carry weight. Vogler’s study of Campbell’s plot structure contains a preface-note that triggers some insight into Sarah Connor’s central contribution to a development in the representation of women in film:

The Hero’s Journey is sometimes critiqued as a masculine theory, cooked up by men to enforce their dominance, and with little relevance to the unique and quite different journey of womanhood.¹⁵

Rather than offering a traditional woman’s journey, akin to that of Princess Leia in *Star Wars* or Ann Darrow in *King Kong* (1933), Cameron takes his lead from Dorothy’s trip to Oz. Ripley had emerged from *Alien* (1979) as the lone survivor and heroine of Ridley Scott’s ensemble piece; In *The Terminator*, Cameron takes this a step further, by presenting Connor as the survivor and hero of *her own journey* through an action picture. This action is central to Cameron’s re-shaping of Campbell’s hero myth, as he reflects the masculine through his female lead’s perspective.

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1. *Xenogenesis* (1978) opening dialogue [00:01:07]. This short film is not commercially available; however, it is readily accessible on the internet, including at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8O1XFmM8wc (19th November, 2010)
2. Laura Miller, review of *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron. *Sight & Sound* 8, no. 2 (1998): 52.
3. Miller, 52.
4. Tony Rayns, review of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, directed by James Cameron. *Sight & Sound*, 5, no. 9 (1991): 51.
5. Leslie Felperin Sharman, review of *True Lies*, directed by James Cameron. *Sight & Sound*, 4, no. 9 (1994): 50.
6. Andrew Osmond, review of *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron. *Sight & Sound* 20, no. 3 (2010): 49.
7. Similar, bi-ped machines appear in *Avatar*, notably for Sully’s climactic battle with Colonel Quaritch.
8. Although distributors now make much of Cameron’s involvement with *Piranha II: The Spawning* (1981), very little of this is actually his work. The Greek production company merely needed an expendable American name to secure funding; it seems that the Canadian Cameron was close enough. The majority of footage, including topless women lounging on expensive yachts, is the work of director/producer Ovidio G. Assonitis.

For further details, see: Rebecca Keegan, *The Futurist: The Life and Films of James Cameron* (New York: Crown, 2009), 28-35.

9. Rayns, 51.

10. *The Terminator* (1984), special edition DVD [01:04:45].

11. For more on the genesis of *Xenogenesis*, see: Keegan, 14/5.

12. For a deeper discussion of Lucas’ use of hero myths, see: John Shelton Lawrence, “Joseph Campbell, George Lucas, and the Monomyth,” in *Finding the Force of the Star Wars Franchise: Fans, Merchandise and Critics*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kappell and John Shelton Lawrence (New York, Peter Lang, 2006), 21-34. For *Star Wars*, Lucas also borrows liberally from Akira Kurosawa’s *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). For more on this, see: Dean Conrad, *Star Wars: The Genesis of a Legend* (London: Valis, 1996), 20-24.

13. (“because it’s perfect,’ Cameron explains, tellingly”), Keegan, 218.

14. James Cameron quoted verbatim in Keegan, 44.

15. Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Pan/Macmillan, 1999), xviii.

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