

\*\* INDICATES HEADER OF EACH ARTICLE

\*\* Starship Troopers

In 1987, a director named Paul Verhoeven made his first American movie, a relatively low-budget sci-fi adventure about a wounded Detroit policeman transformed into a cyborg. Robocop, which marked the screenwriting debut of Ed Neumeier, featured the dark cinematography of Jost Vacano, the swirling, triumphal music of Basil Poledouris, and the robot design of Phil Tippett. Its crossover appeal drew the Starlog set, action fans, and devotees of Verhoeven's Dutch work--and producer Jon Davison had a surprise hit.

Ten years later, the entire team has reunited for Starship Troopers, ostensibly an adaptation of Robert A. Heinlein's first-person novel about a cadet in the war against alien invaders. What they make of it should be no surprise to Robocop fans: Wicked satire gets equal time with stupendous special effects, both on a much bigger scale. Where Robocop skewered television with talking heads and meaningless jiggle sitcoms, Starship Troopers strafes patriotism itself with parodies of World War II propaganda--Nazi and Allied. Where the former had Robocop and ED-209, the latter has a solar system overrun with 10-foot-high arachnids chittering and oozing slime.

But the spirit of subversion is the very same. Starship Troopers manages a magnificent balancing act, satirizing the war movie and the space opera while producing a lean and exciting example of both genres. Its sole failure lies in its manipulative use of human beings as cannon fodder for its gory action and military send-ups. Compared with Robocop, which insists on the cyborg's essential humanity, Troopers seems cold and unfeeling. Compared with Verhoeven's astounding misanthropy in Basic Instinct and Showgirls, however, it's positively cuddly.

The stars are straight out of a teenage soap opera like California Dreams: chiseled, coiffed, and flawless, with simplified emotions to match their lives. Johnny (Casper Van Dien), his girlfriend Carmen (Denise Richards), and psychic geek Carl (Neil Patrick Harris) are graduating from high school in Buenos Aires and preparing to sign up for military service, duly impressed by a one-armed teacher (Michael Ironside). (There's also the small matter of citizenship in the global Federation, conferred only upon veterans.) Love triangles develop quickly as boot camp gets under way: Carmen dumps Johnny for glamorous pilot Zander (Patrick Muldoon), while local jockette Dizzy (Dina Meyer) joins Johnny's Mobile Infantry unit.

Relationship troubles notwithstanding, the first hour of Starship Troopers is as much Army indoctrination film as 90210. Johnny and his fellow soldiers bond into comrades while running obstacle courses, competing for leadership positions, and complaining about the chow. Any lingering homesickness vanishes when Buenos Aires is destroyed by an alien attack, and the recruits ship out to the Klendathu system to exterminate the bugs where they live. The second half of the movie is dominated by human and arachnid body parts splattered all over the screen, as the Terran representatives fight a series of skirmishes and try to figure out what makes the bugs tick.

The bugs are the most outstanding special effect, and they are nothing short of awesome--fully integrated with the human actors in complex shots, and terrifyingly consistent in their movements and attack patterns. Tippett utilized insect-like motion in

his previous designs for Return of the Jedi's walkers and Robocop's ED-209; here computer animation multiplies his imagination into a planetary hive of crawlers, all coming straight at the audience. By contrast, the spaceships and human habitations have a clean Star Trek look that matches the movie's tongue-in-cheek idealism and egalitarianism.

Most reviews have pointed out the prominent influence of a fascist aesthetic in the art design. The Federation Network logo is a Mussolini-styled eagle, and Carl's military-intelligence uniform is a black SS trench coat. But to think that Verhoeven is celebrating might over right is to miss at least half his point. The Fed Net video segments, which echo Robocop's groundbreaking news breaks and serve the same humorous point, feature segments like "Know Your Foe" and "Why We Fight"--direct parodies of American propaganda newsreels during the Good War. Each section of the film has a catchy title, complete with CNN-style graphics. The fight on Planet P, pitting technology and an heroic infantry against hordes of faceless, fanatic enemy troops, recalls nothing so much as the media's spin on the Gulf War. Verhoeven and Neumeier are satirizing all types of propaganda machines, along with the types of stories they produce.

Herein lies Starship Troopers' great flaw. Since the story and characters are meant to recall and parody movies that glorify combat and ignore its complications, there's little true human interest. Verhoeven's method in movies such as Basic Instinct and Showgirls has been to conceal from his actors that their performances are in the service of an ironic goal. In Troopers the actors emote with great sincerity; for the most part, they're not in on the joke. At least they're not being cynically exploited, as they were in Showgirls. But the fact that the soap-opera shenanigans and die-with-your-boots-on speeches wind up as humor undercuts the simpler pleasures of adventure and emotion found in pure space opera--as in, say, Star Wars.

If all Starship Troopers had left were its scary giant bugs, it would be a mere technical curiosity. Thanks to Verhoeven and Neumeier, however, it succeeds beyond all expectations as a send-up of weapons-worship. Just in time too. We may have thought that revisionist Vietnam movies had killed off that super-patriotic innocence, but flag-waving has been back in style at least since "Nuke the Ayatollah" bumper stickers. After all, the U.S. government refused to rule out the use of tactical nuclear weapons during the grotesque mismatch against Iraq. Verhoeven, who directed a sensitive portrayal of the Dutch resistance during World War II (Soldier of Orange), knows that because unthinking devotion to the state never goes out of style, neither will his sly criticism.

--Jim Ridley, The Nashville Scene

#### \*\* Politics of Starship Troopers

In his commentary on the DVD edition of the film, director Paul Verhoeven states unambiguously that the movie's message is "War makes fascists of us all", and that he sees the movie as a satire of American militarism. On the same commentary, screenwriter Ed Neumeier (who had previously worked with Verhoeven on RoboCop) broadly concurs, although he sees the satire as applying to the whole of human history, rather than solely to the U.S.

Since the filmmakers did not make these statements at the time of the film's release, viewers have interpreted it variously: as a satire, as a celebration of fascism, or as a simple tongue-in-cheek action film.

### Satire on militarism

The film depicts a future state that is extremely militaristic and uncompromisingly warlike in its attitude toward a race of arachnids that inhabits a distant planetary system. The military training is cruel: officers purposely wound recruits, and flogging is a mode of punishment, which (however) is mitigated by the fact that existing technology can heal such wounds immediately. The movie highlights this further by using weaponry (and tactics) that, considering it is the 23rd century, can only be seen as totally inadequate — the assault rifles of the Mobile Infantry force them into man-to-man fights with the bugs, the latter using their animalistic weapons like tooth and claw, as well as simple head-en-masse infantry charges, which are reminiscent of World War I, stressing the point. Combined arms tactics seem to be a lost art. And, as both forces are slaughtered in high numbers, they are being photographed by embedded television crews for the benefit of viewers at home. Also, as Verhoeven mentions in the DVD commentary, the humans are the aggressors and the bugs the victims: when the bugs bomb Buenos Aires, they are not attacking the human race but reacting to human colonists encroaching on bug planets.

The 'infotainment' nature of the film narrative as a recruitment advert, can be interpreted as a commentary on the propagandistic nature of contemporary media, and its role often as a willing accomplice to militarism. The symbols of the Federation and some of the clothing styles are greatly modeled on the Nazis' clothing styles (e.g., windbreaker, suits, cap, the military intelligence officer's uniforms bear a striking similarity to SS uniforms). Verhoeven's use of fascist emblems to imply criticism of the Federation may be related to his background.[citation needed] He and some of his crew come from the Netherlands, which endured occupation in World War II. Verhoeven himself witnessed dead bodies of fellow countrymen killed by bombs, as his home was close to the German rocket base and was frequently bombed by Allied air forces, hence the pervasive feel of moral equivalence between a victim and a culprit in not only this, but all of his movies.

--Online review. Author uncited

### \*\* Starship Troopers: Special Edition

Starship Troopers may well be one of the most misunderstood films of the last decade. Directed by that great satirist Paul Verhoeven, who's so unafraid that he made the glorious Showgirls with a straight face (OK, that's probably the most misunderstood movie of the previous decade), many critics and viewers derided the picture as a big, brain-dead spectacle inhabited by monotone pretty people. Worse, some thought it an endorsement of fascist thought. And in their own wrong way, these critics were, right, as the colorful, plastic-looking, cartoonish Starship Troopers is filled with vapid beauties and is a successful vision of sexy fascism (put Doogie Howser in an SS-style outfit and suddenly he's a good-looking fellow). But that's entirely the point. As Verhoeven muses on this Special Edition disc (which replaces the previous DVD release), he may have done too good a job with the satire. Starship Troopers is so seamless and so unflinching in its vision of teeny-bopper totalitarianism that it's understandable why those going to a

mindless bug-killing movie were confused when they had to check their heads afterwards: "Are we supposed to like these people?" But for anyone with an eye for parody, it still is baffling as to how they couldn't get the film's slick, WWII-inspired recruitment ads ("Join Now!") in which laughing soldiers hand bullets out to children, or little kids enthusiastically smash bugs while an approving mother looks on, as just one part of the film's clever caricature. "The only good bug is a dead bug," a crusty man barks with emblematic anger. Now really, in the hyper-PC times of 1997, do you think a film truly would offer this sentiment as an incitement for viewers to embrace genocide? In this DVD's entertaining and informative documentary "Death from Above," some people did see Verhoeven as endorsing fascism, leaving the liberal Dutchman continually in defense of his film, particularly in Europe (you'd think they'd get it), where an article criticized *Starship Troopers* as part of Hollywood's fascist fetishism in film. What may be more perplexing are those critics who understood the film and yet still didn't understand, like Roger Ebert. His intelligent but finally confused review complained that the film wasn't like a certain famous space epic: "Unlike the *Star Wars* movies, which embraced a joyous vision and great comic invention, *Starship Troopers* doesn't resonate. It's one-dimensional ... where's the warmth of human nature? The spark of genius or rebellion? If *Star Wars* is humanist, *Starship Troopers* is totalitarian." That's a criticism? That this movie isn't like *Star Wars*? And yet both pictures used scenes from Leni Riefenstahl's beautiful, terrifying Nazi-propaganda art-film *Triumph of the Will* for inspiration. We see it in *Star Wars*' final award ceremony scene, and — as confessed in the *Starship Troopers* documentary — in the picture's propaganda. Verhoeven even shows clips from *Triumph* to illustrate how, like Riefenstahl, he chose the most beautiful people to punctuate the film's pretty jingoism.

...but to the movie. Based on the novel *Starship Troopers* by Robert A. Heinlein, the technically advanced future Earth is governed by a militarist federation where news is presented in newsreel-style computer announcements, informing people of even the most horrific and gory events. Interspersed throughout the movie, these patriotic pieces serve as the film's wry reminder that we are indeed watching a sardonic satire. Currently the perfect world presented is threatened by a race of super-bugs, huge insects that are blasting asteroids from their planet, attempting to extinguish all of humanity. There is a need for men, and this is a cause worth fighting for, pushing a group of high school friends into service. Squared-jawed Johnny Ricco (Casper Van Dien) signs up, mainly because his girlfriend Carmen (Denise Richards) does, but they're soon separated when she — the smart one — becomes a pilot. In the meantime, Johnny is part of infantry, along with the girl who's in love with him, the butch Diz (Dina Meyer), while his rival, Zander (Patrick Muldoon) is also a pilot, sitting close to Carmen. The other friend, Carl (Neil Patrick Harris — need we remind you this is Doogie Howser?), is ultra-smart, assigned to Military Intelligence. There's a teen love story in this, and poor Johnny gets the shaft from Carmen, causing him to nearly ditch the effort until he finds his parents dead, killed by an asteroid wielded by evil bugs. Now super-bitter and super-psyched, Johnny goes all-out Rambo, and the film takes us to the simultaneously horrifying and hilarious bug planet where impressive insects are wreaking repulsive carnage on soldiers whose bodies are mangled to death, their limbs littering the terrain (with some heads clearly sucked in by these voracious creatures). The razor legs, crabby bodies, and ability to jump, bite, and cut are just some of the creatures' horrifying and nearly unstoppable assets, along with gooey discharge we get to watch spray in the soldier's faces as they blast them. These battles are wonderfully staged, cartoonish but truly gory, and yes, fun. But let us not forget that *Starship Troopers* is saying something, commenting on the lure of fascism, the gung-ho ridiculousness of so many stupid action

films and the plastic world of perfection. Many critics don't want to live in a world where women have smiles as gorgeously huge (and creepy) as Denise Richards', and yet part of them probably do, making *Starship Troopers* all the more cunning.

--Kim Morgan