

The Provocateur Auteur - Paul Verhoeven and the Reception of Starship Troopers (1997)

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In late November 1997, on a brisk winter day, I found myself at the entrance of West Edmonton Mall, the World's Largest Entertainment and Shopping Centre. Growing up, I had always shunned this regrettably prominent 'landmark' of my hometown, with its daily dolphin shows, massive chain stores, and depressingly conventional architecture. Due to my burgeoning obsession with film, I had to swallow my pride to see the newest film by Paul Verhoeven in the mall's megamovieplex. The film was *Starship Troopers* (1997), based on the controversial 1959 novel by cult sci-fi author Robert A. Heinlein. On the strength of a script by Ed Neumeier (1987's *ROBOCOP*) and special effects by Phil Tippett (whose credits include *Jurassic Park* (1993) and the *Star Wars* movies (1977,1980,1983)), my expectations were understandably high. I watched as a tale set in a distant future unfolded before me, where the world is controlled by a militaristic, totalitarian government in a state of war with giant alien bugs who threaten Earth. The story follows a group of naïve, perfectly molded teenagers as they graduate from high school, turn into soldiers, and promptly die in the most brutal ways imaginable, framed in the structure of a propagandistic film that evokes likenesses to both Leni Riefenstahl and the American *Why We Fight* series.

To my surprise, the young audience started to respond to the film enthusiastically and applaud the soldiers in a way that horrified me. I was seeing rather overt references to *Triumph Of The Will* (1934), but was the audience? By the end, the crowd was cheering at the film's propagandistic call to arms. The credits began to roll, and I slowly filtered out of the theatre, stunned and appalled. As I adjusted to the bright lights outside, my

head was crowded with questions about the audience and the rather twisted agenda of Verhoeven. I looked into the eyes of the moviegoers as we filtered out of the theatre. Do they realize that they are being manipulated at a very basic level to cheer for and identify with a future-fascist society? Do they even care?

I stayed away from the film for a long time, chilled by its harsh and manipulative strategy. However, when revisiting it as I was researching its reception in the popular media, initial reviews reveal an interestingly mixed response. Be they positive or negative, a survey of writing in the popular media regarding *Starship Troopers* eventually unearths certain reoccurring points. Diverse elements of the film under scrutiny in a majority of reviews include: the effectiveness of satire, expectations and/or constraints of genre, violence, and the issue of identification with the characters. The confused and often contradictory nature of the reviews surveyed maps out a complex and enlightening terrain of reception in mainstream journalism.

SATIRE

A recurring topic in reviews of *Starship Troopers* revolves around the question of satire in the film adaptation. The viewpoint that Verhoeven's source material is derived from the work of what some call a "right-wing sabrattler" (Ebert) lends to a certain amount of ambiguity regarding the agenda of the filmmaker ^[1]. A review in the *Globe & Mail*, for example, denies the presence of a satirical angle in the film entirely, instead classifying the film as strictly entertainment:

Here, while he follows the general outlines of Robert A. Heinlein's 1959 novel, he skips over its political implications. Verhoeven's world is both mock-nostalgic (clean-cut boys and cheerleading girls) and futuristically fascist (fetishizing machinery, the military and the suppression of individuality and desire) ^[2].

The writer goes on to call Verhoeven's adaptation "kitsch fun" while stressing that "Heinlein's celebration of military-citizens in *Starship Troopers* was disturbingly sincere" ^[3].

The question of how satire operates (if it operates at all) in *Starship Troopers* is also evidenced by a series of enlightening articles in the *Los Angeles Times* that appeared at around the time of the film's premiere. An initial review of *Starship Troopers* by Los Angeles Times film critic Kenneth Turan on November 7, 1997 describes a "...jaw-dropping experience, so rigorously one-dimensional and free from even the pretense of intelligence it's hard not to be astonished and even mesmerized by what is on screen" ^[4]. Turan's lukewarm review of the "cheerfully lobotomized" film that "offers no shortage of all manner of carnage" prompts a rebuttal a few weeks later in the *Los Angeles Times* by a guest writer named Jon Zelazny in an article entitled "Counterpunch: Amid 'Troopers' Gore, it's Easy to Miss the Message". Zelazny, in a call to recognize an especially audacious form of satire in *Starship Troopers*, argues that "[W]hat Verhoeven has created is nothing less than a total replica of a propaganda film that the futuristic government of earth would itself create, if in fact its goal were to recruit young men and women to swell the ranks of the starship troopers if they were engaged in a distant war" ^[5]. Paramount to Zelazny's argument is the understated nature of the satire in *Starship Troopers*, and he states that "...the oh-so-subtle warning Verhoeven slips us is that people can be swayed by even 'dumb' movies into supporting war and violence" ^[6]. One week later, writer Michael Voss pens a response to Zelazny's piece in the *Los Angeles Times*. The article questions the importance of Zelazny's contention that viewers are taken in completely and do not comprehend satirical elements in the film. To Voss, Verhoeven's entire project fails because the satirical aspect of the film is not clearly delineated for a "mass" audience: "[p]ity the poor, misunderstood filmmaker, who had to actually live under Nazi occupation as a child, yet who somehow fails to clearly present the satiric focus of his movie in a manner that the masses can appreciate and understand" ^[7]. Presenting satire in an ambiguous way becomes problematic for Voss, who

questions Zelazny's claim that 99.9% of moviegoers missed the satire in the movie. Voss raises an interesting point in his criticism of the film's satirical elements when he states, "is it no longer the director's task to integrate his audience, to bring meaning to them, rather than the other way around?" ^[8] The ideal for Voss is a film that removes ambiguity in relation to satire, so that a consistent reading of the film is possible. In the above debate, interpretations of *Starship Troopers* by the viewer are crucial, as is the possibility that contradictory readings of the film can coexist. An important question to ask regarding *Starship Troopers* and all of Verhoeven's films is in relation to this acutely divided reception: is it still satire if the audience does not recognize satirical elements inherent in the story?

VIOLENCE

Many observations of *Starship Troopers* concentrate on the elevated levels of violence not normally present in a science fiction film. By most (if not all) accounts presented in this essay, the level of violence and gore is excessive. A writer for *The Deseret News* implies a dubious motive for pushing the boundaries of violence within the genre, suggesting that "in fact, [Verhoeven's] only goal these days seems to be pushing the buttons of the Motion Picture Association of America. If *Starship Troopers* can't get an NC-17 for its over-the-top violence and sickening gore, nothing can" ^[9].

In a similar cautioning tone, a column in *The Washington Post* entitled "The Family Filmgoer" sets out to describe in detail the violent acts in the film for parental consideration. Jane Horowitz writes, "high school kids who like science fiction and war stories will get a jolt out of this long, loud, ultra-gory sci-fi epic, if their stomachs hold up" ^[10]. In describing the "unsettling" heroes in *Starship Troopers* that "... look and act like actors in a Nazi propaganda film" later on in the article, Horowitz remarks: "[s]o, while high-schoolers applaud the action, adults may want to talk about the film's more insidious elements" ^[11]. This rather noteworthy generational consideration mirrors the release of Heinlein's book back in 1959. The book, originally intended for a youthful audience obsessed with science fiction literature at the time, was rejected for publishing in a "juvenile" book series for its unsettling elements and was later released as an "adult" book ^[12].

Roger Ebert's oft-quoted and provocative line in his review that "*Starship Troopers* is the most violent kiddie movie ever made" suggests a level of violence surpassing socially acceptable standards for films aimed

at youths ^[13]. While some note that the violence of *Starship Troopers* is excessive for the genre, Sacramento Bee writer Joe Baltake contends that the violence has a satirical function. He writes, “while other contemporary movies sanctimoniously tell us that violence is a bad thing and then hypocritically wallow in it to prove their point, *Starship Troopers* giddily celebrates its own viciousness” ^[14]. *Film Journal International*, in a decidedly negative review, finds blame and a twisted pleasure in the film’s supposed failure to fit into its genre:

[p]erhaps the sole pleasure moviegoers over the age of 11 will derive from *Starship Troopers* [...] is finding inventive ways to describe it to curious friends and loved ones. But even such attempts as ‘Leni Riefenstahl Meets Melrose Place,’ ‘Ayn Rand’s *Top Gun 2*,’ and ‘Gidget Goes *Gattaca*’ fail to convey the staggering mindlessness of this hugescale exercise in neo-Orwellian kitch ^[15].

An *Empire Online* review of *Starship Troopers* reinforces its violent qualities, remarking that “[t]his is easily the goriest mainstream movie Hollywood has ever made” ^[16]. Elsewhere in the article, writer Ian Nathan notes that, “[o]f course, there are those who will take its square-jawed, bang-bang hooley —blast the bugs, kids! philosophy on face value. But that doesn’t bear thinking about” ^[17]. Here, Nathan acknowledges (and finds problematic) a viewer that takes the violence literally, that is, as entertainment packaged as part of a genre. The above reviews reveal a need (subconscious or conscious) by the writers to place *Starship Troopers* into the science fiction mold (or more pejoratively, the teen melodrama), a process problematized by the excessive violence. Verhoeven’s film, by depicting violence without reproach, goes beyond the limits of genres that usually take it upon themselves to draw up and enforce the boundaries of socially acceptable actions.

CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION

Another point of discussion in writing on *Starship Troopers* is the perceived lack of any character that elicits sympathy in the viewer. Many reviewers display an open resentment for the characters and, by proxy, the actors who play them. For example, the review in the *Globe & Mail* describes the acting in terms of other low-brow forms of entertainment:

[j]ust as you get over the awe-inspiring scenes of kamikaze insects, the movie returns to scenes of the young cast of models/actors who carry their uniforms better than their dialogue. The

B-movie cast of young pretties perform with that dead-behind-the-eyes quality of the Beverly Hills 90210 cast ^[18].

For a reviewer on *Spliced Wire*, a film-oriented website, the “generic” characters are symptomatic of a larger problem in mainstream spectacle films that place special effects ahead of acting talent. “If *Starship Troopers* is a success,” writes the author, “it will be an indication that name stars are not needed to buoy one of these hollow ‘event movies,’ and that may open the floodgates for a tidal wave of starless, plotless effects flicks” ^[19]. An article in *The Chicago Reader* by Jonathan Rosenbaum links the lack of character identification in *Starship Troopers* with self-denial on the part of the viewer: “it seems to me that we’re all too eager to share the movie’s disdain for the target audience [...] just as we’re much too docile about accepting the film’s blood lust as American” ^[20]. The writer elaborates on specific characters in the film by drawing a comparison to one of the most popular science fiction genre films, *Star Wars*:

When Luke Skywalker loses his relatives to alien villains, we’re invited to spend at least a few seconds commiserating with him to validate his desire for payback. But when the parents of Johnny Rico (Casper Van Dien) get nuked—among 12 million other earth dwellers, no less—what we’ve already seen of this pair makes them only slightly less repellant than the bugs who wipe them out, so the tragedy and outrage are simply rhetorical ^[21].

In a *Salon.com* article entitled “Melrose vs. the Monsters,” Scott Rosenberg calls into question the effectiveness of Verhoeven’s delivery of satire. His argument rests on a belief that *Starship Troopers* actively seeks out (yet fails) to elicit viewer sympathy for the characters. Instead, comparisons with other (financially successful) examples of the science fiction genre in the article point to spectacle as a means to an end of commercial gain:

There’s nothing wrong with good satire—but it’s self-defeatingly stupid to inject it into any story that expects us to care what happens to the characters. The creators of successful latter-day space operas, from *Star Wars* to *Independence Day* have always understood this. Nothing in *Starship Troopers* carries the conviction of the Force or even *Independence Day*’s rah-rah for mankind idealism; the movie can’t commit to the militarism it inherited from Heinlein, and it never finds

a different ideal to substitute. Except, maybe, a belief in special effects ^[22].

Writing for *The Flick Philosopher* (an online film journal), Mary Ann Johanson calls for characters that elicit sympathy in the viewer, but later concedes a possible motive behind the construction of “callow, shallow” characters. “That none of the twentysomethings playing these high-schoolers can act is, I am certain, all according to director Verhoeven’s plan” ^[23]. Johanson’s comments suggest that it was the director’s intention to populate his film with unsympathetic characters, an idea that escapes the expectations of many critics. In fact, whereas others find weakness in the two-dimensional characterizations, she sees strength. By using a flat, superficial, yet popular style of performance in his film (thus the comparisons to prime-time melodramas such as *Melrose Place*), Verhoeven draws a link between popular Hollywood dramatic forms (filled with pretty yet vacuous figures) and the fascist ideology of the source novel. As a consequence, the film also runs the risk of alienating or insulting the intelligence of viewers; this is, in effect, the fine line of satire.

CONCLUSION

Since his arrival from Holland, Paul Verhoeven has quickly established a reputation as a provocateur, a maker of ‘difficult’ genre films that contrast sharply to perceived norms. As Rob van Scheers describes it in his book *Paul Verhoeven*:

Mr. Verhoeven is an odd fish, a European intellectual with an untamed appetite for the cinematic equivalent of red meat. The Verhoeven approach: technical finesse, earthly tastes, a lurid imagination, and a zest for putting the ‘big’ back in the ‘big screen’ ^[24].

Verhoeven’s films, while produced within a dominant, hegemonic Hollywood, land in a gray area between ‘dominant’ and ‘subversive:’ his films are surprisingly forceful, yet contradictory. An analysis of the reception of *Starship Troopers* shows how the film opens up seemingly contradictory discourses by virtue of its irrevocably mixed message. In his essay “Heinlein, Verhoeven, and the Problem of the Real: *Starship Troopers*” J.P. Telotte comments on the far-right ideology of Heinlein’s novels:

[m]any of his stories finally seem to be about a kind of cosmic survival of the fittest and the difficulties his young protagonists face in learning

this fundamental truth in life. Their emphasis is frequently on the sort of discipline that would be needed to endure in new and often harsh environments—and by extension, for his juvenile readers to survive in a potentially harsh and constantly challenging future, such as the one facing the United States in the Cold War era. That emphasis has led many to see in all of his work a rather troubling ideology ^[25].

It is this troubling ideology that I encountered on that cold winter day in 1997. However, I felt its lasting effects most profoundly in the film’s reception in that crowded theatre, cementing the thought in my mind that, for better or for worse, *Starship Troopers* is truly a film made for the people. As his films reach a mainstream audience, they reveal similar contradictions in the society that receives them. *Starship Troopers* is undoubtedly a film made for younger viewers with plenty of disposable income, but just as writers are unsure of how to place *Starship Troopers*, *Starship Troopers* is unsure how to place the viewer. A seemingly totalitarian film made by someone who lived under an oppressive Nazi occupation as a child, *Starship Troopers* leaves it unclear whether viewers will appreciate the bleak satire or “eat this gooey sci-fi thriller up with a spoon” ^[26].

Raising the issue of ‘communication to the masses’ is vital to Verhoeven’s work here; the message to the viewers is therefore deliberately compromised. For Verhoeven, this holds true especially for Hollywood summer blockbusters, films expressly made for wide audiences and which can easily be shaped into shameless propaganda. Thus, the discussion around the filmic text, the controversy, becomes as important as the film itself. Eliciting a varied response may support an audacious project that links the Hollywood product (of which *Starship Troopers* is a part) with blatant propaganda, Nazi and otherwise. I think that the reason for making a film in the vein of *Starship Troopers* may well be a wish to produce an opening to expose this problematic, to drive an alien probe straight into the forehead of the mainstream.

1 In the reviews surveyed in this essay for Verhoeven’s film, Heinlein and his work is described as Fascist (Lacey, Rosenberg), totalitarian (Rosenbaum, Ebert) and very right-wing (McCarthy).

2 Lacey, Liam. “Review of *Starship Troopers*.” *Globe & Mail*. 17 November 2003.

- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Turan, Kenneth. "Stop Buggin' Me!; Based on the Heinlein Novel, 'Starship Troopers' is Directed by Paul Verhoeven With Lots of Attention to Mayhem, Gore, and Goo." *Los Angeles Times*. 1 Nov. 1997: F1
- 5 Zelazny, Jon. "Counterouch: Amid 'Troopers' Gore, its Easy to Miss the Message." *Los Angeles Times*. 1 Dec. 1997: F3
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Voss, Michael. "Exploring Hidden 'Satire' of 'Starship Troopers.'" *Los Angeles Times*. 8 Dec. 1997: F3
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Vice, Jeff. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Deseret News*. 17 November 2003.
<http://deseretnews.com/movies/view>
- 10 Horowitz, Jane. "The Family Filmgoer." *The Washington Post*. 7 Nov. 1997: N49
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Telotte, J.P. "Heinlein, Verhoeven, and the Problem of the Real: STARSHIP TROOPERS". *Literature/Film Quarterly* #3 (2001) Pg. 197,198.
- 13 Ebert, Roger. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Chicago Sun Times Online*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert.reviews/1997>.
- 14 Baltake, Joe. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Sacramento Bee*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.sacramentobee.com>
- 15 Satuloff, Bob. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Film Journal International*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.filmjournal.com/Article.cfm/PageID/64298266>
- 16 Nathan, Ian. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Empire Online*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.empireonline.co.uk/reviews>
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Lacey, Liam. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Globe & Mail*. 17 November 2003.
- 19 Blackwelder, Rob. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Spliced Wire*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.splicedwire.com/97reviews/starship.html>
- 20 Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Multinational Pest Control: *Starship Troopers*." *The Chicago Reader*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.chireader.com/movies/archives>.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 Rosenberg, Scott. "Melrose vs. the Monsters." *Salon.com*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/1997/11/07starship.html>
- 23 Johanson, Mary Ann. "Character Assassination: *Starship Troopers*." *The Flick Philosopher*. 17 November 2003.
<http://www.flickphilosopher.com/flickfilos/archive/97/starshiptroopers.html>
- 24 Van Scheers, Rob. *Paul Verhoeven*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1997. Pg xi.
- 25 Telotte, J.P. "Heinlein, Verhoeven, and the Problem of the Real: *Starship Troopers*". *Literature/Film Quarterly* #3 (2001) Pg. 198.
- 26 Vice, Jeff. "Review of *Starship Troopers*." *Deseret News*. 17 November 2003.
<http://deseretnews.com/movies/view>

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