

Starship Troopers

Michael Lennick (1998) 2830 words

"All is well. Watch the days go by. All is well. 23rd century dies."
– Slightly altered David Bowie lyric - irony fully intact - as utilized
in the "last night of their lives" high school dance sequence in
Starship Troopers.

From the tone of the reviews upon its initial release (and apathetic public response), it would seem that neither the conventional media nor filmgoers quite got the hang of Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers*. Reviewers reviled its apparent jingoism, *Premiere* suggested that its too-good-looking young cast "seem to have collagen in their teeth," and *Entertainment Weekly*, in their video review column, gave the film their first "no rating" review – not zero stars, just no stars. They weren't sure whether it was the worst big-budget science-fiction film they'd ever screened, or one of the cleverest and most subversive. Good for them. Let me take this opportunity to try to clear up the mystery.

When Robert Heinlein published *Starship Troopers* back in 1959, few fans seemed to know quite what to make of the novel, either. Easily his most controversial storyline, *Starship Troopers* has been enjoyed, reviled and debated over for decades. "Boys' own adventure" storytelling aside, it seemed far too adult, too blood n' guts, to fit easily among his more clearly youth-oriented novels like "Rocketship Galileo" (on which George Pal's 1950 *Destination Moon* would be based). Controversy aside, *Starship Troopers* won the 1960 Hugo award (science-fiction fandom's highest honor) for best novel, as would his radically different (yet oddly similar) *Stranger In A Strange Land* the following year.

Starship Troopers, the film, evolved out of screenwriter Ed Neumeier (*Robocop*) wanting to tell an old-fashioned war story in which a liberal '90s audience need have neither guilt nor sympathy for the enemy. Bugs seemed a great solution, and *Robocop* director Paul Verhoeven was quickly on board. It was *Robocop* producer Jon Davison who suggested a search to see if the rights to Heinlein's novel were available. They were, and the project evolved to attempt a screen adaptation of a classic. (Although not for the first time, depending on your outlook. *Starship Troopers* is also notorious for having inspired not only subsequent great novels like Joe Haldeman's *Forever War* – which benefited from Heinlein's automated fighting suits, an element eliminated from the film – but also some equally terrific films like James Cameron's *Aliens*, with its Colonial Marines, drop ships, and Hudson inquiring, "Is this gonna be a straight-up fight, or another bug hunt?" Personally, I've generally enjoyed all those references/homages over the years – it always does my heart good when science-fiction screenwriters choose to let us know they've actually read the stuff.)

In classic three-act structure, *Starship Troopers* tells the kind of old-fashioned war story that could have been filmed by Sam Fuller – green kids learn to work and fight together, growing both closer and more cynical as their numbers

dwindle. But stylistic contrasts begin to emerge early in the storytelling. The first is probably the conflict between the dark underpinnings of this society (a true science-fiction “what kind of society would result if...”) and the apparent vapidness of the lead characters. A narrative linking device (a series of newsreel-like internet “Federal Network Reports” - similar to *Robocop's* "Newsbreaks") both inform us as to simultaneous events across the story's huge canvas and, stylistically, put us in the mind of Frank Capra's World War II *Why We Fight* propaganda films. These segues are absolutely appropriate mood-setters for both this story and the society it exists within, but probably also one of the main elements that turned off audience members, unsure of exactly what emotional reaction would be appropriate in response to all this input. The story is at once simple and deeply layered, gentle and incredibly brutal. Are we as in favor of this strictly disciplined and very warlike society as the film seems to be? No easy answers here – rather odd for a 120 million dollar movie that needed to sell a lot of popcorn – and didn't.

But this is not at all hard to fathom, once you understand that Verhoeven was a three year old when the Nazis marched through the streets of his native Amsterdam. War, and the brutality that comes with it, is, in Verhoeven's worldview, neither good nor bad, just inevitable – a natural and regular state of affairs. In this both he and Heinlein are exactly in sync. (The same ambivalence permeates Verhoeven's take on “law and order” in *Robocop*, and his view of the wars between the sexes in other films such as *Basic Instinct*, for that matter.)

Of course, no Earthly army even had an enemy like these guys. Verhoeven's other motivation in taking on *Starship Troopers* was a chance to work again with visual effects guru Phil Tippett. Though still a relatively young man, Tippett can rightly be considered one of the old guard, having largely resurrected classic stop-motion animation and evolved it into the computer age in films like *Star Wars* and its two sequels, *Dragonlayer*, and Verhoeven's own *Robocop* (as well as the liveliest moments of *Robocop II*). In 1993 he developed a “digital input device” that allowed stop-motion animators to get their hands onto and manipulate a computer-linked armature, thus allowing them to hand-animate the digital raptors of *Jurassic Park* – creating a new level of reality both for stop-motion and computer-generated critters. And it was this technology that was updated and utilized for the incredible army of bugs in *Starship Troopers*.

Would you like to know more?

All right, just in case there remains any confusion about my feelings towards this astonishing film, here's a short and probably incomplete list of the remaining things I found to be just incredibly cool about *Starship Troopers*:

1. The wonderful use of the David Bowie / Brian Eno song (“But I Have Not Been To Oxfordtown”), as modified (with permission - so why isn't it on the soundtrack) and performed by the film composer's daughter, Zoe Poledouris, in

the “last night of their lives” high school dance, just before everyone we've met goes off to take their Oath of Service. "All is well...."

2. Every single moment that either Michael Ironside or Clancy Brown are on screen. (Not to overlook scary old Jake (Gary's kid) Busey's good guy Ace Levy, who manages to creep you out about as much as anything else this guy has ever played. *Contact* comes to mind.)

3. That terrific little prop Career Sergeant Zim offers Johnnie Rico to bite down on just before his flogging ("It helps. I KNOW.") That bitty carpet-wound-with-colored-string chatcka looks like it's been doing this job for one helluva long time, and is typical of the wonderful art direction on this show. One glance at it and you instantly know what far too many troopers have found out - and what Johnnie Rico's about to learn.

4. The transition from Johnnie Rico's 17th century naval punishment (flogging) to the shot of his former high school sweetheart Carmen Ibanez sipping coffee on the bridge of the *Rodger Young*. It's a critical turning point in our story – the bugs are about to attack Earth for the first time – and yet the moment seems to be entirely about the relationship between Rico and Carmen. He had, of course, joined the service largely because of her – which instantly got him laid, we might note (“My father's not home tonight”), and now, in the wake of her entirely predictable “dear Johnnie” letter, he’s lost all motivation to stay. I love the layers within this sequence – the contrast between his grunt's life and the status and comfort Carmen enjoys (she's clearly found her place in the universe), and even the obnoxious and somewhat clumsy come-ons from Carmen's training officer Zander – Johnnie's old rival. The punchline of the sequence ultimately provides Rico with a new motivation to stay with the Mobile Infantry as it veers our storyline from uneasy peace to outright war – and suddenly the problems of these three fairly-unworldly characters don't amount to even Bogie's classic “hill of beans.” (These scenes are also tempered upon second viewing by our awareness of the truly horrible fate some of these young people have in store for them.) And finally, there's the breathtaking nature of this sequence itself – from the pull-down to find first the enormous corvette transport *Rodger Young*, and then the move into the bridge to find Carmen – finally to the near-miss of the bug meteorite on its way to Buenos Aries. As delightful a glory/beauty/excitement of spaceflight sequence as ever committed to neg. (It's also, by the way, the last sequence shot and completed by Richard Edlund's late company Boss Films. They went out on a good one – the one that won't go on their reel.)

5. The frequently overlooked work of Visual Concept Entertainment – Peter Kuran's seventeen-year-old F/X shop that often gets called in to bat clean-up on big-budget features, long after the money starts to run thin. Phil Tippett, Sony Imageworks, ILM and BOSS Films may have gotten the biggest sequences (and most of the bucks), but it's Pete's team at VCE that sold the final illusions behind (no pun intended) Raszak's missing arm, the surgical tank in which Rico's leg is

repaired, various transport and weapon systems, and a bunch of other stuff. Pete started out as an animator on the original *Star Wars* – doing lightsabers, mainly – and has since contributed flawless work to practically every science-fiction and fantasy film you've ever seen, including the *Star Wars* sequels, the *Star Trek* series, fun stuff like *Dragonslayer* and *Buckaroo Banzai*, as well as Verhoeven's own *Robocop*. In his spare time Pete scrounges in government vaults for forgotten old Lookout Mountain negative, which he restores and builds into documentaries like *Beyond Trinity* and *The Atomic Filmmakers*. As a partner in a relatively small visual effects company myself, I have endless regard for the sub-critical outfits like Pete's, Van Ling's Banned-From-The-Ranch and the handful of others who keep this business flowing and growing on budgets both huge and non-existent. Watch for their credits. They're out there.

6. The fact that both the book and the movie afford additional pleasures for those with a neurotic passion for looking things up. Carmen's huge troop-carrying spacecraft, the *Rodger Young*, for example, takes its name from an incredibly corny / patriotic song written in 1944 about a very real army infantryman who died in the South Pacific during World War II. That little background detail is also missing from the novel, although Heinlein was clearly influenced by the song – and the whole mood of service and sacrifice underlying the lyric. ("Rodger Young! Rodger Young! Fought and died for the men he marched among...") Fifty years later, it's probably worth pointing out that the song's composer, Frank (*Guys and Dolls*, *Hans Christian Andersen*) Loesser knew nothing about the real Rodger Young when he was commissioned to "write something patriotic" back in 1944. He searched lists of infantrymen killed in the South Pacific until he found a name that scanned well. The guy could have bought it in a whorehouse on Guam for all Frank knew.

7. The often-overlooked post-production work of editor Mark Goldblatt and his team. The film's many battle and training scenes each possess their own unique visceral impact, and yet the warp-speed action can be followed and understood without effort – rare for this type of film and a showpiece for all concerned. Editorially, though, my favorite sequence is probably the incredibly slow reveal – it takes about twenty shots – before we discover that the moon is actually surrounded – girdled – by an artificial ring of docks, weapons and other technology. It's this ring that Carmen flies the shuttle through and slips the *Rodger Young* away from, but you don't get a real sense of its scale until the final moments of the ship's departure, some four and a half minutes into the scene. Subtle stuff for a space sequence. (And while we're at it, let's add that loopy grin on Carmen's face when she's flying pretty much anything - huge troop transports or zippy little shuttles – through just about anything, including, at one point, the side of a mountain. This woman is utterly fearless and truly lives to fly. It's a genuine thrill to watch the beaming face of this rarest of all humans – one both lucky enough to have found her true place in the cosmos, and self-aware enough to realize it while it's happening.)

8. Them bugs. ALL THEM BUGS. Swarming the fort on Planet P, dancing in the machine gun fire on Klendathu, igniting their flame-throwers with that little “bzzitt” spark over their nosies, or pointing their tushies in the air and emitting that gorgeous and deadly “bug plasma” that can eat through an orbiting troop carrier. There are bugs right here on Earth who can do stuff that's almost as impressive (the Bombardier Beetle comes to mind – it manufactures two benign chemicals that become incredibly caustic when it combines them in an abdominal firing chamber prior to shooting the mixture at an enemy. It can fire this flame warfare in a rapid-pulse fashion over several feet.) The behavior of the bug warriors is probably the most blatant (and most successful) departure from the details of Heinlein's novel. In the book, the bugs were much more anthropomorphic – evolved into sentience, they wore uniforms, carried weapons and other technology, and fought, basically, like a very ugly human army. Not here. The origins of this project (see above) and the involvement of Phil Tippett meant these guys would be BUGS – nasty, single-minded, swarming, utterly relentless bugs – whose technology would have evolved quite naturally from the already existent capabilities we've all seen in nature right here at home. The results, visually, are stunning – some of the most astonishingly natural yet utterly alien imagery we've ever seen on film. Incredible flying/swarming shots – particularly in the fort ambush on Planet P, or the fact that the Brain Bug, when we finally meet him/her, looks like a big Gilliam-esque butt mit spider eyes. And let's not forget those adorable little stink beetles that the Brain Bug rides around on.

What is ultimately the most impressive thing about this film is that the sly underpinnings of Heinlein's 1959 novel have remained such an integral part of the story – either in dialogue or production design. Heinlein's best work was always a very pure form of science fiction – in the sense of setting out to answer a “what if” speculation. In the case of *Starship Troopers*, the speculation was along the lines of what kind of world would evolve had the generation that won World War II not ended the military draft in the early 1970s – years after the novel came out – but carried it to its logical conclusion: military service was not only compulsory, but a mandatory requirement in order to earn the right to vote. Heinlein was, I think, much more interested in this idea than his wrap-around story about the morass created when we accidentally get into The Bug Wars (we really were colonizing their territory. That's much clearer in the novel). Heinlein regularly stopped the action and spent entire chapters speculating on the type of society that would emerge after a few generations of “only the military can vote.” The results look, in many ways, rather a lot like contemporary Singapore: Strict discipline, even for infants; respect and rights earned, not granted, through service and judgment. These were some of the most interesting and thoroughly-developed elements of the novel, and many of them have been retained in the film – and given as dialogue to Michael Ironside's Lieutenant Raszak. It's through this retention of the story's most subtle underpinnings that *Starship Troopers* differs radically from the director's previous science-fiction outing, *Total Recall* – a film that never lived up to the crafty premise of its source material, Philip K. Dick's

story “We Can Remember It For You Wholesale,” though probably for different reasons. Certainly the top-heavy influence of Ahn-old's casting would inevitably have tossed some of the nicest stuff out. In Cronenberg's version – and yes, in the mid-80's it was going to be a David Cronenberg film – the central character eventually played by Schwarzenegger was to be portrayed by Richard Dreyfuss. It's still a guilty pleasure for me, but *Total Recall* remains a movie in which I'm never sure if *all* the filmmakers were fully clued in on the joke – that this whole adventure is actually the fever-dream of a scientific and cultural illiterate. *Starship Troopers* casts the director into a brand-new league of science-fiction interpreters, undoubtedly because Verhoeven's Dutch World War II childhood makes him the perfect fellow to pick up on the speculation of Heinlein's novel. And when Neil Patrick (“Doogie Houser”) Harris makes his heroic third-act entrance in the slicker of a German SS Kommandant, I laughed out loud (and all by myself) in the theater. The central gag of *this* novel Verhoeven clearly gets.

Would you like to know more?

-30-

Michael Lennick is an award-winning author and filmmaker (“2001 & Beyond”, “Rocket Science”) who has also served time as a visual-effects supervisor (“Videodrome”, “War of the Worlds”, “Dick”). The warm feelings he expresses herein for Verhoeven’s “Starship Troopers” reflect his losing struggle to curb a lifelong obsession with giant bug movies, and should probably not be encouraged.