

An Official 'Bad-Bug-Movie' Review
ENT 812, Insects in the Cinema
Michigan State University

Starship Troopers
Reviewed by Bernice Demarco



Background:

Starship Troopers was produced in 1997 by Jon Davison, directed by Paul Verhoeven and starred Casper Van Dien as Johnny Rico. The cast included a number of other main characters including Dina Meyer as Dizzy Flores, Denise Richards as Lt. Carmen Ibanez, Patrick Muldoon as Zander Barcalow, Neil Patrick Harris as Carl Jenkins and Jake Busey as Ace Levy. Other important characters were the biology teacher played by Rue McClanahan, Sergeant Zim, played by Clancy Brown and Jean Rasczak, played by Michael Ironside. The story is loosely based on a book of the same name written by Robert A. Heinlein in 1959. Edward Neumeier wrote the screenplay. The major impact of the movie was its commentary on Fascism. It was nominated for Best Visual effects at the Oscars and won The Saturn award for best costume and Best Special Effects by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror (information from IMDb.com).

Yahoo reported the following events happening in 1997:

1. O. J. Simpson was found liable in a civil suit (Feb. 5).
2. Heaven's Gate cult members committed mass suicide in California (March 27).
3. Timothy J. McVeigh was sentenced to death for Oklahoma City bombing (Aug. 14).
4. Ellen DeGeneres outed herself and became the first gay woman to have her own sitcom.
5. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone was published in the U.K. It came to the U.S. in 1998 as Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.
6. Deaths: John Denver, Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, James Stewart, Jacques Cousteau, and Gianni Versace.
7. Tiger Woods became the youngest golfer to win the Masters Tournament
8. In London, scientists reported their DNA analysis findings from a Neanderthal skeleton, which supported the out of Africa theory of human evolution placing an "African Eve" at 100,000 to 200,000 years ago.
9. Titanic (the highest-grossing movie ever as of 2005) opened in U.S. theaters.
10. Men in Black was 2nd in popularity to Titanic in 1997.

After looking at the above events, which are interesting, but don't really relate to the movie, I went back and searched the web for events relating to women in 1997 at historyorb.com and found the following interesting items. On Jan 15th, the Space Shuttle Atlantis docked with Mir Space Station. The crew included Marsha Sue Ivins, a NASA flight engineer and the only woman in the crew. A later flight that year had 2 women on

board. On Feb 22nd, Annika Sorenstam won the LPGA Cup Hawaiian Ladies Open. This was the first of four tournaments she would win that year. She went on to play against the men in the PGA in 2003. On March 4th, the Brazil Senate allowed women to wear slacks in the senate chambers for the first time. This astonished me that any country could be so controlling of women in the late 20th century. Susie Maroney, 22, of Australia, was the first to swim from Cuba to Florida on May 12th. This was a great woman's first! Disappointingly, there were 3 mentions of women winning pageants, including Miss America. Hopefully, this will be a trend that dies off in the future, as women are respected more for their minds than their bodies (well, maybe not!)

The Story:

Starship Troopers gets its title from the premise that the soldiers fighting in the "Bug War" must travel in starships to face their enemy. The story is presented much like a war commercial from the 1940's, complete with messages to convince the listener that the policy of the government is the only option in their current circumstances. The movie is filmed in the studio in Los Angeles, uses Kaiser Permanente Hospital in LA, the Convention Center in downtown LA, areas of the Badlands in Wyoming, the desert in Utah, and film footage from LA fires (from comments by director Paul Verhoeven and screenwriter Edward Neumeier). The hospital was chosen because of its modern façade. One wonders how much was paid to use that space? The movie is told from a narrator's point of view, while he tries to convince the viewer of the benefits of joining the military; primarily to become a citizen after time served.

The main character is Johnny Rico, a young rich kid who decides to ignore his parents wishes and join the military with his friends. The other friends who join with him are his girlfriend, Carmen Ibanez, best friend Neil Patrick Harris and want-to-be girlfriend, Dizzy Flores. Other important characters are Ace (a friend Johnny meets after signing up), Zander (who competes for Carmen's affections), and his commanding officer, Lieutenant Ratzcak. The story follows a parallel progression and flips between scenes happening simultaneously. The most critical scenes don't actually involve the insects, but follow the main character and his development as a soldier. His opinions about military service change with his experiences as a soldier. He progresses from a naïve high school student who quotes his teacher's statements without really understanding them to becoming a firm believer in the military and its goals, and a leader of new soldiers in the bug war. His final line in the movie in which he says "Come on guys; you wanna live forever" is a copy of a quote at the beginning of the book from an unknown platoon sergeant in 1918 who says "Come on you apes! You wanta live forever." He tries to emulate Lt. Ratzcak, and copies him almost exactly in the end.

The movie's climax occurs when Neil Patrick Harris helps Johnny (telepathically) to find the brain bug, and rescue Carmen. Zander dies in the process, but the brain bug is Harris's ultimate goal. The movie ends with more propaganda inviting the viewer to believe that more war, and therefore another movie, will be forthcoming. The theme in the movie is that the best and most effective society is one where everyone is treated

equally and all are there to serve the common good. This is clearly a satire written to comment on war in our society, and how humans don't seem to learn from past mistakes. We continue to force our way into other societies and their lives. This applies to both the American and Third Reich actions during World War II, as well as Vietnam. The implication is that we will never learn, and will continue to use force to try to solve problems. These types of propaganda were used very effectively in World War II to encourage support for our troops on the radio and with publicly posted posters and banners. Also, every World War II movie ended with a patriotic speech, and this movie followed that pattern.

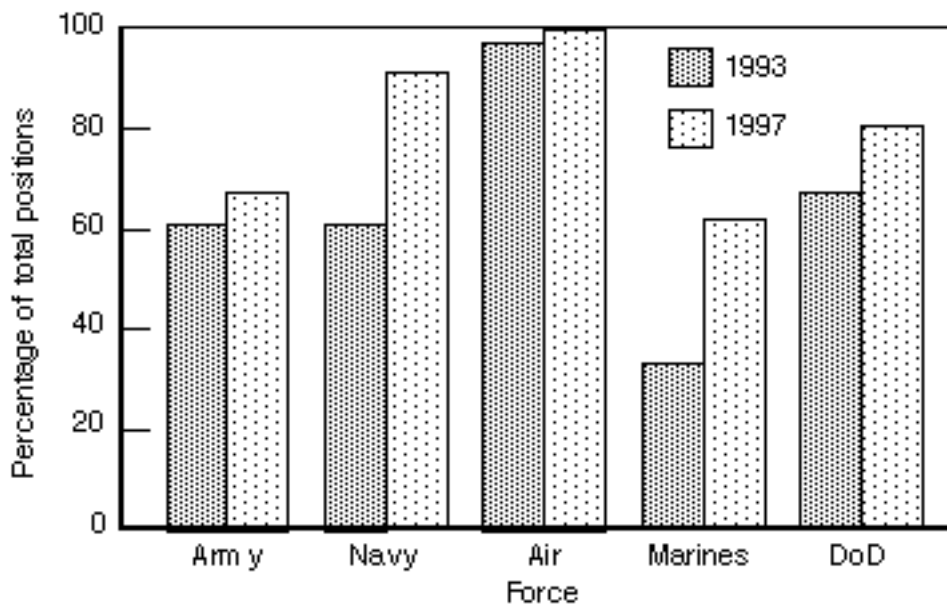
Physical Aspects of Starship Troopers:

The physical aspects of the film are very important to the story line. Clothing is used to show equality, respect for elders, and make reference to World War II. Dark colors, such as Neil's long coat, represent power and evil. There are lots of shots using models of the starships to convey how large they are. According to Director Paul Verhoeven, layers of film were combined to enhance the visual effects of fire when the ships collided. In the scene where Johnny jumps on top of the "tanker bug", cuts between real and digital images enhanced the sense of him being thrown around by the giant bug. Sound greatly contributed to the action with explosions and music. One great use of music was the playing of the song "Dixie" in the scene where Lt. Rasczak hosted a party after his troops won a particularly difficult battle. There were multiple races dancing together to this song, showing how well all races got along under the militaristic government. The film locations were also important in depicting a desolate place where one could imagine giant bugs growing and forming communities. The special effects were good, but not quite at the level of Star Wars or Total Recall (which Paul Verhoeven also directed).

Cultural Aspects of Starships Troopers:

Starship Troopers was produced in 1997. In addition to the events mentioned above, one important change occurring was the role of women in the military. An article in the Army Times from July 29, 1996 stated that some women do possess the physical attributes suitable to become combat soldiers.

The figure below (from a Rand Research Brief) shows that, between 1993 and 1997, positions opened for women in every service. However, the figure also shows that opportunity varies by service. The Air Force has the highest percentage of billets available to women at 99.7. Although the changes reflect a relatively small increase in the percentage of assignments open to women (97 percent were already open when the changes went into effect), they were important because they permitted women to fly combat aircraft, a coveted and career-enhancing assignment.



from: 1997, *New*

Opportunities for Women: Effects on Readiness, Cohesion, and Morale, by Margaret C. Harrell and Laura L. Miller (Rand Research Brief) (DoD = Department of Defense)

In *Starship Troopers*, women participated in many aspects of life including playing in high school football, serving as pilots and foot soldiers in the military, and were even shown to be better at decision making than men in certain areas. Carmen demonstrated better piloting techniques than Zander, and Dizzy used her skills as a quarterback to help in aiming grenades at the enemy. Again, the movie focuses on its goal of showing that all people are equal, and serve a valuable place in society. Even soldiers who have been wounded are useful in society as teachers or recruiters for new soldiers. Another director's comment was that those who were wounded represented adults, knowledge and experience, while the young were inexperienced, and had much to learn about the world. There was a similar symbol in the book. When a fellow soldier died, the survivors would wear a skull and crossbones earring to remember the loss, and show their experience with war and death. Also, anyone could serve as a military worker in whatever capacity best suited him or her. Even Neil's telepathic skills proved to be useful in locating and stopping the bugs.

Entomological Aspects of the Film:

The use of insects was not crucial to the story. There could have been any sort of enemy, but using insects allowed the screenwriter to rely on the social behavior of insects to imply that a "brain bug" was controlling all the other bugs in the storyline. That is where any similarity to real insects ends. The bugs in the opening scene, attacking the humans are referred to as arachnids, which (of course) are spiders. They look more like praying mantids, and bear no resemblance to any other bugs in the film. The second bug we encounter resembles some sort of plant-sucking insect, but we don't really know their function, since the high school students are dissecting them. Other bugs in the film include the "hoppers" or flying bugs, the "blast-fire" bugs that target the starships, the "bombardier-beetle bug" that Johnny fights and the "brain bug" who sucks out human brains to acquire knowledge about our species. The "brain bug" looks like a giant caterpillar and is carried around by "carrier

bugs”, as it has apparently lost the ability to walk. The bombardier-beetle bug resembles our Tenebrionidae (darkling beetles). They have the ability to spray a noxious chemical for defense, but only about .5 meters in distance, and certainly not into space! It would be really interesting to see an evolutionary tree where all these different bugs are somehow related and working together. Most of these bugs have the wrong number of legs, and many abilities that our insects do not possess. They are attacking the humans justifiably though, because humans moved into their territory, and the bugs responded by fighting back to protect their home.

Conclusions:

I was initially disappointed with this movie after reading the book by Robert Heinlein. The book focused much more on Johnny and how he transitioned from a student into a soldier. There were some items I looked forward to seeing in the movie, such as the “power suits” and the officer training section, both of which were not in the movie at all. The movie took a male character named Dizzy who died early in the book, and turned him into a female who was a major part of the story in the movie. In spite of that, the whole concept of “brainwashing of the community” with the military commercials was fascinating. I also enjoyed it much more after listening to the director’s comments. There were lots of hidden messages that I missed the first time through, while I was concentrating on the bugs.

One of the interesting comments by the director was that everyone who previewed the film hated the character Carmen played by Denise Richards. This was a stark contrast to how people felt about Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in the movie Alien. Ripley was well respected as a strong female character. The director and writer of Starship Troopers were shocked that audiences felt so negatively about Carmen. They concluded that the American audience was applying a “double standard” to Carmen and were not ready for a strong career-oriented woman. I disagree with their conclusion and point to the huge success of the Alien Quadrilogy and how the American public had already embraced women in a strong, career-oriented role. I believe that there was a fatal character development when Carmen’s character flirted with Zander rather than spurning his initial advances as Johnny spurned Dizzy when she began flirting with him in high school. If Carmen had remained true to Johnny, I believe she would have been generally better liked. Also, if she had made her decision to become a career officer on her own, without Zander’s influence, her decision would have been more respected.

I loved the storyline, the use of color, the uniforms and the dialogue to communicate the concept of “equality of the masses”. One of the messages they were trying to convey in the film was to intimate that Fascism is part of biology. The director and screenwriter commented on how they feel that humans need an enemy to define who they are and that perhaps this is ingrained in human biology. However, they were ironically concerned about the “bug-stomping” scene. It seems that killing bugs on screen could be viewed as inappropriate, but killing off 90 % of the cast was all right. I believe the final message to viewers was that by destroying our own habitat, some insect (perhaps an invasive species) could revolt against us. I only wish they could have made the movie closer to the original

story written by Robert A. Heinlein. This was my favorite movie of the course, and I am happy I chose it to present to the class.

Citations:

Yahoo Current Events for 1997.

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20060904134306AAPAyVS>

Historical events for year 1997: <http://www.historyorb.com/events/date/1997/>:

Marsha Sue Ivins:<http://www.astronautix.com/astros/ivins.htm>

GI Jane on IMDb: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119173/>

Starship Troopers on IMDb: www.imdb.com/title/tt0120201/

New Opportunities for Women: Effects on Readiness, Cohesion, and Morale.
http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB7515/index1.html

Additional information from listening to the Director's and Screenwriter's comments on the Starship Troopers CD.