Starship Troopers: A Patriotic Pastiche

As *Starship Troopers* celebrates its 25th Anniversary, more critical attention has been placed upon it. Upon its release in 1997, it was not received well and faced a lot of criticism, with the general consensus being that it was a fun movie with wooden acting and too much gore. However, over the past few years, a cult audience has found a new appreciation for it. Calum Marsh, writing for *Atlantic*, regarded it as, "satire, a ruthlessly funny and keenly self-aware sendup of right-wing militarism," A thought which continues to grow amongst fans of the film. But how far is this true? Is *Starship troopers* a pastiche of right-wing militarism or is it just another patriotic colonial quest?

Starship Troopers is set in the distant future, where humans have begun to colonize planets beyond our solar system. After landing on a planet which is home to an insect-like alien species, a war breaks out between the two. The insects use defensive tactics in order to protect their world whilst the humans perceive this as aggressive and so escalate the conflict. The story follows Johnny Rico, a high school graduate, who joins the Mobile Infantry unit, and we follow his journey and rise to leadership.

Originally, the book *Starship Troopers* was published in 1959 and written by Robert A. Heinlein, which was notoriously militaristic, but this is merely a framework for the story. David Wroth, in an article for *the New Yorker,* "With the possible exception of Mary Harron's "American Psycho," it's hard to think of a film adaptation that's more invested in refuting and satirizing its source." This is the basis of which Paul Verhoeven - director - and Edward Neumeier - screenwriter - went into the creation of not only *Starship Troopers* but other satirical classics such as *Robocop* (1987). Using archetypes borrowed from teen soap operas coupled with the militarism turned fascism of the source material shows the cracks in the patriotic attitude of the US Military.

The fascist imagery is not lost on many viewers. Most notably, the flag is very similar to that of the national emblem of Nazi Germany, which leads viewers to question whether

it was the same. Not to mention, Carl Jenkins - played by Neil Patrick Harris - is dressed in a costume, which is very similar to a Nazi officer uniform, in several scenes. However, the characters seem almost oblivious to this, as Verhoeven described in an interview with the Guardian in 2018, *Starship Troopers* is "a movie about fascists who aren't aware of their fascism." This is the essential theme which takes the film from criticism of the Third Reich to a satire of modern militarism in the US and how it has become integrated into that society. During the 1990s, there were many aspects of US society flourished, some of which were fascist in nature. For example, George Bush's capital punishment rates whilst he was governor of Texas. On average, a prisoner on death row was executed every nine days, this accumulated to 154 deaths. This can be reflected in the film during the punishment scene, in which Rico is whipped as he allowed a trainee to die during training. Whilst, it's not so extreme as to kill him, it still shows the extremity of punishment which is normalised in their function as a military organisation. This shows the authoritarian regime under which he lives, where there are no democratic processes or liberalism, if you make a mistake you are punished and your perspective does not matter.

The character's attitude to war and to the insect-like aliens they are fighting against also displays the deeper criticism of modern-day US militarism. Throughout the film, many of the soldiers - and even some officers - refer to the insects as lesser than. They also take great pride in killing them. There are two moments that demonstrate this perfectly. Firstly, when the Mobile Infantry is first deployed, they are ecstatic to be fighting the arachnids. As they all leave their drop ships, they are doing the modern-day equivalent of a war cry with triumphant music playing over the top. This is then contrasted with the slaughter of thousands of soldiers - who were not entirely aware of what they were walking into. This heavily relates to the US military propaganda, in which many young people are often shown that a career in the military is a way forward and emphasis a lot

on the glory of it when in reality they might not know fully what they are signing up for. Whilst a career in the army, navy or air force is not itself bad, many grow up thinking of the army as heroes, who are pure good when the lines are more blurred than that. This isn't exclusive to the US, 70 countries worldwide have their own version of armed forces day. The US in particular gives many incentives to join the army, for example, they uploaded a video to their YouTube channel titled "finding family and opportunity in the army." Not only this, they receive full health, dental, and vision coverage as well as life insurance, and a 401k. In a country which does not offer these freely, this is a huge incentive for someone to join the army. *Starship Troopers* takes it up a notch, by joining the army you can become a "citizen" which means you can give certain privileges. One of the soldiers claims that she needs to be a citizen in order to go into politics, and another wants the federation to pay for his education. Another needs to serve in order to help obtain a license to have children. The satirical edge of the film points out how the incentives the federation offers negate any drawbacks of joining the mobile infantry. You could die but hey, they'll put you through Harvard. This line of thought could easily be translated into real life, you may die, but at least you'll have the 401K.

Starship Troopers over time have gradually come to show the issues and problems with US militarism. Upon its release, there was still a lot of respect for the US army, and this would only escalate with the War on Terror, under Bush. However, like in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, there are large groups of people who condemn the War on Terror and US actions in such conflicts. This newer audience has grown a new appreciation for films such as *Starship Troopers* which aim to point out the flaws in the militaristic ideology. The audience of *Starship Troopers* in 1997 thought they were getting a new franchise like Star Wars, and they did but as Verhoeven put it, "Here are your heroes and your heroines, but by the way – they're fascists."

Sources:

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