

**Teach phenomenology the bomb:  
*Starship Troopers*, the technologized body, and humanitarian warfare**

**Philip Leonard**

**Abstract**

*Paul Verhoeven's SF films are often concerned with how the future body will be reshaped as a technological device. Starship Troopers strangely departs from Verhoeven's own work, other SF film, and current directions in cultural theory by seeing the future body as one that is more organic than mechanical. Drawing upon and challenging ideas developed by Paul Virilio, this essay argues that Starship Troopers' departure from the notion of the 'post-human' mechanized body needs to be understood not as a nostalgic reassertion of detechnologized subjectivity. Rather, Verhoeven's film sees the idea of the pure body as a dangerous anachronism. And, this essay further argues, Starship Troopers suggests that narratives of human salvation – such as those that arose during Nato's interventions in the Balkans – often conceal an appetite for territorial conquest.*

**Keywords**

*technology  
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Paul Verhoeven is a director for whom the human body holds some significance. *Basic Instinct* finds bodies inscrutable at the very moment that the garment gapes (official inspection, during this film's most notorious moment, is turned into spectatorial petrification), while *Showgirls* views the body as a site of performance through which flow various class and social conflicts. If Verhoeven's romance thrillers conjoin sex, sacrifice and death in ambiguous and theatricalized bodies, then his science fiction films render embodiment uncertain by viewing the human body as a form of machine, as an organism that is constantly interfacing with technological devices, or, in extreme cases, itself becoming a technological apparatus. *RoboCop* satirizes the predation of public

services by rapacious multinationals through the lonely figure of Alex Murphy, whose transition from routine officer to cyborg law-enforcer suggests that machinic reconstructions of the body can provoke an awareness of subjectivity and the social that is missing from more organic versions of the human. In *Total Recall*, doubts about the relationship between memory and identity are framed by uncertainties about the limits of the human body: not only do species become hybridized in this film, but corporeality itself is here seen to be impossible without supplementation by artificial skins, by mediating devices, or by a large-scale mechanical reproduction of nature. More recently, *The Hollow Man* turns towards biotechnology in order to track the disappearance of the human body, though just as important in this film is the technology of surveillance that facilitates perception of the invisible while at the same time offering new ways of failing to see.

If *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* and *The Hollow Man* are preoccupied with how technology continually reshapes subjective and social identities, then *Starship Troopers* can only be described as being atypically Verhoeven. Based on Robert Heinlein's 1959 novel of the same name, *Starship Troopers* charts the entry into Federal service by Johnny Rico, a student from Buenos Aires who enlists in the Mobile Infantry to become one of the 'Proud young people in uniform, the bloom of human evolution'.<sup>1</sup> As in Heinlein's text, the Buenos Aires of the film has lost any semblance of cultural specificity, and belongs instead to a global militarized culture which carries out territorial expansion under the guise of space exploration.<sup>2</sup> Exactly how this federalist state has emerged is left unspoken in the film; what is important here is that, in the process of exploring new terrains, the Federation has entered into conflict with the arthropod

inhabitants of another planet, Klendathu. The film's narrative centres on Rico's at first problematic, then exemplary relationship with the military, and along the way it feigns interest in his sexual and romantic maturation.<sup>3</sup> These narrative elements formed the basis for many of the early responses to Verhoeven's film – *Starship Troopers*, these responses tell us, is a film in which Rico intrepidly performs his Federal duty of courageously killing bugs, and helps to save humanity from its perceived threat of extinction; that he does not resolve his relationship with his erstwhile girlfriend, Carmen Ibanez, only signifies the fact that several forms of combat are still in process at the film's close. The comic book gloss, CGI swagger, Ralph Lauren body aesthetic, and death-from-above triumphalism that saturate this film's surfaces serve to reinforce the impression that *Starship Troopers* wholly rejoices in a jejune sensibility.

Finding such an adolescent aesthetic in *Starship Troopers* – reading it as a film that endorses both the brutalizing of alien species and the notion that heroic deeds go hand in hand with sexual conquest – does, of course, considerably reduce the complexity of this film. Such an interpretation would be possible only if the differences between Verhoeven's narrative and Heinlein's text could be elided: according to Barry Keith Grant, Heinlein delivers 'extended passages about the benefits of a social order organized by militaristic principles', and he does so 'without a trace of irony'; Verhoeven, in contrast, 'completely subverts the book's conservative ideology by deconstructing military guts and glory even as it provides it so completely'.<sup>4</sup> By turning Heinlein's Filipino Juan Rico into the quasi-American Johnny Rico,<sup>5</sup> for example, Verhoeven suggests that the disappearance of national borders has taken place alongside the consolidation of North American-European cultural and epidermal purity:

‘Nonconformity, along with racial and ethnic divisions, has been swept away by a hegemonic Anglo-American monoculture’,<sup>6</sup> Andrew O’Hehir observes. Further, Verhoeven’s film also suggests that the perception of Klendathu as a culture entirely organized around the social body is as inappropriate as the belief that the Federation is a collection of citizens who possess corporeal individuality. Indeed, this film persistently, though obliquely, offers an interpretation of human culture that is entirely at odds with the Federation’s interpretation of itself: the bugs of Klendathu and the people of earth appear to share an appetite for colonization, both fight over the same terrain, both fail either to communicate with or understand the motives of the other, both, more importantly, belong to a martial social matrix. This essay is not primarily concerned with examining how Verhoeven challenges discourses of cultural identity and difference by collapsing the human and the alien into each other. Rather, it will argue that the human subject embodies a curious and improbable organicism in Verhoeven’s film. And this essay will show how this detechnologized body both troubles melancholic conceptions of the pre-technologized body and recodes narratives of ‘the human’ that have been central to warfare in the 1990s.

### **Vitalism and mechanism**

The question of how technology and physical corporeality interact is, obviously, central to many science fiction narratives. For J.P. Telotte, recent science fiction films bear witness to the mounting interest in artificial intelligence and robotics in the last decades of the twentieth century, and in the process reveal ‘a growing awareness of and attention to our own level of artifice, of constructedness, of how we often seem controlled by a

kind of program not so very different from the sort that drives the artificial beings which abound in our films';<sup>7</sup> according to Adam Roberts, 'in most cases technology works in science fiction either directly or obliquely to collapse together the machine and the organic'.<sup>8</sup> Verhoeven's SF films certainly work to endorse such claims as these: they have, with some consistency, sought to displace entrenched constructions of the human by showing how the body is defined in terms of its relationship with machines, and these films speculate on how the body will, in the future, be subjected still further to technological transformations. Although *Starship Troopers* shares with these (and other) films the attempt to unsettle some of the ways in which the subject, the social, and the technological intersect, this film refuses to view the future body as one reshaped as a cybernetic entity. *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* and *The Hollow Man* each see the body as a repository of the machinic; *Starship Troopers* strangely rejects these and other SF narratives by seeing the future body as having a heightened, rather than a diminished, organicism.

In addition to departing from Verhoeven's other SF films, *Starship Troopers*' representation of the body as a fixed, bounded, and organic entity also appears to be at odds with theoretical work which argues that cybernetic technologies offer an opportunity for a reinvention of the human – a reinvention that would allow Enlightenment notions of truth, community, natural law, and human perfectibility to be overturned. For example, the early Deleuze and Guattari claim that 'the real difference is not between the living and the machine, vitalism and mechanism, but between two states of the machine that are two states of living as well. The machine taken in its structural unity, the living taken in its specific and even personal unity, are mass phenomena or

molar aggregates; for this reason each points to the extrinsic existence of the other'.<sup>9</sup> Donna Haraway, in her now notorious manifesto, submits that 'Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves'.<sup>10</sup> More recently, N. Katherine Hayles argues that the human subject has become posthuman, 'a material-information entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction',<sup>11</sup> and for Dani Cavallaro contemporary technosciences reveal 'that the body is the ever-changing product of technologies that are always tied to specific cultural contexts'.<sup>12</sup> What these accounts maintain is that specifically machinic apparatuses are central to the body's cultural location, and that these apparatuses can provoke a departure from entrenched forms of subjectification and subjection.

Much of Verhoeven's SF work could easily be (and, indeed, has been) read as offering filmic instantiations of the claim that technology is a potentially deterritorializing force. 'Films like *Robocop*', for Telotte, demonstrate 'the possibility for a new kind of hybrid life, a ghostly otherness that is part human, part machine, a synthetic life that does not impinge on our own', and these new life forms 'seem almost a fortunate evolution'.<sup>13</sup> 'The threat to the male body in *Total Recall*', according to Linda Mizejewski, 'is the threat of becoming, of process, of the possibility that the body is not separate and stable, but could at any moment turn into or merge with something else'.<sup>14</sup> By not confronting these machinic processes of becoming, *Starship Troopers* appears to diverge from recent directions in the theorization of technology's cultural effects, and it seems also to resist the kinds of readings that have been made of Verhoeven's other material. This departure is made more starkly apparent by the fact that Heinlein's earlier

narrative is entirely preoccupied with the concept of the militarily enhanced human body; since it does not pursue this conceptual pretext, one of the most compelling questions provoked by Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* has to be: how are we to understand this film's reluctance to represent the technologized human?

Answers to this question begin to emerge from the ways in which *Starship Troopers* provides its audience with a visualization of future cultural formations. Or, more precisely, answers to this question emerge from how this film pays specific and sustained attention to the centrality of future *visual* media in the production of knowledge. Extending *Robocop*'s use of news media representations to communicate the sense of a prevailing and thoroughly regulated social order, *Starship Troopers*' narrative is interspersed by a series of interactive Capraesque news reports. Echoing early-nineties claims about the emancipatory qualities of the internet, these news reports prop up notions of agency by suggesting that viewers are cybernauts, navigating their own paths through an unfettered repository of reports on the present. The refrain 'Do you want to know more?' punctuates these reports, and it allows the theatre of war to become a global dramaturgy. But while a sense of interactivity and willed response seems to be enjoyed by the implied viewers of this media, the film quite clearly reveals that more news is only more of the same, narrowly-constructed, news. More than this, the significance of the news broadcasts in *Starship Troopers* extends beyond showing that control of, and disregard for, information saturates the news media of the future. The fact that these screens almost entirely represent the struggle between the global Federation and Klendathu suggests that the scope of visual media is not only blinded by conflict, but that technologies of visualization are also central to the functioning of war.

The relationship between the film or TV screen and warfare has always been an intimate one, as Paul Virilio points out in *War and Cinema*. For Virilio,

There is no war... without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception – that is to say, stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system, affecting human reactions and even the perceptual identification and differentiation of objects.<sup>15</sup>

By this, Virilio means that at least since the first World War, with the work of directors like D.W. Griffiths, film has allowed distant battlefields to be surveyed with impunity: by contracting geographical space into a single topos cinema has ‘derealized’ the consequences of war, and by turning combat zones into film sets cinema has made conflict more palatable to its audiences. The larger part of Virilio’s book is given over to documenting the role that film has played in the shaping of consent – such figures as Buñuel, Capra, Huston, Reagan, and Riefhenstahl are among those cited as evidence in this history of the often harmonious relationship between film industries and military institutions. In addition to providing a tool for legitimizing war to audiences at home, cinema has also, Virilio observes, provided the armed forces with ‘sight machines’ for military engagement. Aerial reconnaissance, radar, light intensification devices, spy-satellites, and missiles with optical sensors exemplify the conjunction of perceptual speed and swiftness of action; ‘*what is perceived*’, he argues, ‘*is already lost*’.<sup>16</sup>



At this point, the valencies of Virilio's theory and *Starship Troopers*' thematics are quite clearly evident. Visual technologies certainly saturate the martial order of Rico's culture: cinema, TV and information screens are central to education, military training and interpersonal communication. For example, news reports on the Federal Network make the bombed-out shell of Buenos Aires just as close to the Federation's non-combatant population as skirmishes on outlying planets. These reports spectacularly turn physical space into a uniform digital proximity, and they testify that casualties both at home and abroad are to be attributed only to Klendathan aggression. At the same time as collapsing distance and difference, however, the images provided by news media also cipher and maintain an opposition between human and Klendathan identity: rendering other worlds recognizable, news broadcasts also and contradictorily seek to confirm the alien properties of the bugs.

As much as it appears to endorse Virilio's observations about optical media and the contraction of space, *Starship Troopers* begins to part company with Virilio in its attitude towards the limits of technology and the extent to which the human body can be seen as a synthetic or mediated entity. For Virilio:

Total war takes us from military secrecy (the second-hand, recorded truth of the battlefield) to the overexposure of live broadcast. For with the advent of strategic bombing everything is now brought home to the cities, and it is no longer just the few but a whole mass of spectator-survivors who are the surviving spectators of combat. Nuclear deterrence means that there are no longer strictly 'foreign wars'; as the mayor of Philadelphia put

it twenty years ago, frontiers now pass through the middle of cities. Berlin, Harlem, Belfast, Beirut, Warsaw and Lyon... the streets themselves have now become a permanent film-set for army cameras or the tourist-reporters of global civil war. The West, after adjusting from the political illusions of the theatre-city (Athens, Rome, Venice) to those of the cinema city (Hollywood, Cinecittà, Nuremburg), has now plunged into the transpolitical pan-cinema of the nuclear age, into an entirely cinematic vision of the world. Those American TV channels which broadcast news footage around the clock – without script or comment – have understood this point very well. Because in fact this isn't really news footage any longer, but *the raw material of vision*, the most trustworthy kind possible.<sup>17</sup>

Here, the epochal quality of Virilio's work begins to surface. No longer content to diagnose the overwhelming of the present by the immediate, passages such as these show that, for Virilio, there are disjunctive but definable ages of History: while links between these moments might well persist, an entry into the new reconfigures cultural systems at critical moments in history.

That Virilio appears unwilling to explore the tensions arising from his episodic historiography is only part of the problem with this account of technology's recent incursions into the human. The claim that the human is vanishing into the technological is, as Hugh T. Crawford points out, part of a 'romantic yearning for a fullness of time outside of the very socio-technical assemblages responsible for building time in the first

place’,<sup>18</sup> and his sense of outrage ‘depends on a notion of human nature outside the technologies within which it circulates’.<sup>19</sup> In other words, when Virilio challenges the cultural transformations that stem from the cinematic acceleration of vision – when he mourns, in John Armitage’s words, the ‘almost total collapse of the *distinction between the human body and technology*’<sup>20</sup> – he does so with a melancholic sense of a past in which geographical, subjective, and national differences were not yet subject to the unifying gaze of optical warfare. Certainly, the camera’s mapping of the terrain of conflict has been significant in the twentieth century, but Virilio seems to imply that cinematic surveillance represents an entirely new disciplinary order, one which increasingly threatens the human and which will eventually result in the disappearance of subjectivity as we understand it. Technoscience is here construed according to an old anthropological positivism: a prosthesis that ‘derealizes’ what was once the unproblematic wholeness of man, technology is central to a corrupting modernity that leaves humanity’s original unity in ruins.

By placing the organic body at the centre of its narrative, *Starship Troopers* appears to confirm Virilio’s suggestion that a return to technology’s prehistory is possible as well as desirable. In terms of the genealogy of *Starship Troopers*, Verhoeven’s refusal to imagine the body’s machinic dimensions also reveals a disinclination to incorporate some of the most visible and distinctive elements of Heinlein’s earlier text. Central to Heinlein’s version is the way in which troopers are deployed; these soldiers are dropped into battle from orbit in independent capsules, and during combat are protected by powered armour which enhances their mobility and gives them a greater capacity for carrying a range of weapons. ‘Powered armor’, Rico tells us,

is one-half the reason why we call ourselves ‘mobile infantry’ instead of just ‘infantry’. (The other half are the spaceships that drop us and the capsules we drop in.) Our suits give us better eyes, better ears, stronger backs (to carry heavier weapons and more ammo), better legs, more intelligence (‘intelligence’ in the military meaning; a man in a suit can be just as stupid as anybody else – only he had better not be), more firepower, greater endurance, less vulnerability.<sup>21</sup>

Readings of and responses to Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* have often centred on this image of powered armour – adaptations of this text have usually found the augmented infantryman to be central to the kinds of future conflict imagined by Heinlein.<sup>22</sup> What is immediately evident about the transition of *Starship Troopers* from Heinlein’s novel to Verhoeven’s film is that the film speculates on the transformation of daily life by future technologies, and this film itself relies upon advanced imaging techniques. At the same time, and in an apparently contradictory move, however, Verhoeven’s film refuses to represent a human subject transformed by machinic processes.<sup>23</sup> While the troopers of Verhoeven’s film certainly carry armour and weapons in order to engage the enemy more effectively, they visibly lack the bodily augmentation that both protect and transform Heinlein’s troopers. Indeed, the tools of combat used by Verhoeven’s soldiers are much closer to those of armed forces of the 1990s than they are to those of the infantryman represented in Heinlein’s text.<sup>24</sup>

Verhoeven's decision not to adopt Heinlein's concept of the trooper supplemented by an armoured skin is often seen as the outcome of aesthetic or budgetary limitations; for example, the film's producer Jon Davison states that 'Heinlein's Drop Capsules were jettisoned mostly for financial reasons';<sup>25</sup> Verhoeven's own explanation of the retro-future depicted in his film is that 'in sci-fi films illogicality comes with the genre'.<sup>26</sup> However, conspicuously finding the source for the disembodiment of the body *within* the organic body, Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* also offers a challenge to commentators, such as Virilio, who are troubled by a disappearance of the human into the technological. Abandoning Heinlein's notion of powered armour, as well as his own earlier images of cybernetic transformations, Verhoeven suggests that the fragmentation that accompanies globalization will demand a corresponding revivification of the self-identical citizen. But rather than constituting a pure emergence, the rebirth of this citizen is seen to be a bloody and violent one, since in combat the trooper is, without epidermal supplementation, left inadequately equipped and precariously exposed: the demechanized body here becomes one celebrated by a culture that places the brutalizing of both its contestant and its inhabitants at its centre. Rather than supporting Virilio's claim that prosthesis augurs degeneration, *Starship Troopers* challenges anthropocentric anti-technologism by showing that the process of becoming corporeally human specifically does not liberate the human. Rather, the reinvention of the self-identical subject, Verhoeven's film suggests, serves only the interests of a particular cultural order.

**‘A generation commanded by fate to defend humankind’**

If the reinvention of the self-identical – organic – subject serves only the interests of a particular cultural order, then in *Starship Troopers* this order is one built around attempts aggressively to extend national and cultural boundaries. Against the backdrop of a Cold War waged by anonymous armies and fought in hidden battles, Heinlein’s vision is of a future global subject who is plainly modeled as an idealized post-Second-World War North American citizen, and whose body is enhanced by devices that reflect military research of the fifties. Heinlein, in other words, responds to the dramatically alienating effects of the Cold War by suggesting that this war, and the scientific advances it engenders, provide the resources for recentring the North American subject. Framed and insulated by both defensive and offensive apparatuses that spectacularly augment the individuated human body, Heinlein sees his troopers to be fixed by their second skins, rather than compromised by technological supplementation in the way that Virilio’s work suggests.

Belonging to the decade which has the emergence of the post-Cold War era as one of its defining features, Verhoeven’s film perceives conflict in different terms. Released in 1997, *Starship Troopers* appeared midway between Nato’s 1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and its 1999 intervention in the dispute between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. What is so striking about both conflicts is that they expose the new role adopted by Nato following the dismantling of its former adversary in 1991. In contrast with the Gulf War, during which the US led a coalition of almost thirty nations to enforce a UN Security Council resolution on Iraq’s annexing of Kuwait, the Balkan conflicts saw Nato pursuing what it see as a humanitarian agenda. During the 1990s, then, the direction of

global conflict shifted away from a UN-orientated restitution of state sovereignty towards Nato's pursuance of a universalist, or at least non-nation-state identified, compassion – a compassion captured in Tony Blair's statement, made during Nato's bombing of Serbia, that 'It's right for the international community to use military force to prevent genocide and protect human rights, even if it entails a violation of national sovereignty'.<sup>27</sup> (While Nato – as well as the UN – experienced a diminished role in the Iraq war of 2003, this narrative of humanitarian intervention was nonetheless instrumental to British and US military action).

Although a concern for human rights and international law have been offered as the motivation for Nato's Balkan wars, some commentators maintain that this narrative conceals less avowable reasons for the US-led interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. For Slavoj Zizek, these wars are the consequence of the West's earlier interference in Eastern European countries: when the West intervenes in Eastern Europe conflicts, he insists, 'it is *not* fighting its enemy, one of the last points of resistance against the liberal democratic New World Order; it is, rather, fighting its own creature, a monster that grew as the result of the compromises and inconsistencies of the Western politics itself'.<sup>28</sup> Tariq Ali argues that the Balkan conflicts need to be seen as evidence for Nato's recently acquired appetite for expansion in eastern Europe, since these wars have provided 'Natopolitan' countries with an opportunity to prevent Russia from re-establishing itself in eastern Europe: while Russia is still frail, the West believes that 'a network of bases and fortified positions must be constructed to contain Russia in future'.<sup>29</sup> And David Chandler is just one commentator who points out that Nato's role in Kosovo not only contravenes international law (since it was conducted without UN authorization), but also promotes

the sovereignty of only those nations that belong to Nato; 'It is, in other words', Chandler argues, 'not sovereignty itself but sovereign equality... which is being targeted by the new interventionists'.<sup>30</sup>

If *Starship Troopers* at all engages with its location between two wars that have been decisive in the rebranding of Nato and in the reshaping of global conflict, it does so by suggesting that wars conducted in the name of humanity and human salvation invoke universalist discourses in order to mask a drive for territorial conquest and global dominance. This film on the one hand suggests that Federation violence arises in response to the catastrophic threat that humankind is experiencing: during a crucial moment in the narrative, Carl (Rico's geek-wunderkind friend) declares that 'We're in this for the species, boys and girls. It's simple numbers, they have more, and everyday I have to make decisions that send hundreds of people like you to their deaths';<sup>31</sup> such an apocalyptic sentiment is reinforced extradiegetically by movie taglines which proclaim that 'In the distant future, the biggest threat to our survival will not be man at all', and 'Mankind just became an endangered species'.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, and working against the grain of the film's main action, certain moments in *Starship Troopers* begin to problematize the notion that human military force is triggered by unprovoked acts of foreign aggression. The topography of battle, for example, begs questions about the logic of struggle that is promoted by the media and military at home: when the Federation clashes with the Klendathans it is on arid landscapes – these terrains seem to be almost inhospitable to humans, but provide the bugs with a habitable territory. Viewers might, as a consequence, reasonably assume that the military is engaged in a war that is being conducted for reasons other than the



salvation of the species. Similarly, the spur for a new Federation campaign, and the turning point in Rico's career as a Mobile Infantryman, comes when a colossal asteroid obliterates his home town of Buenos Aires: the media and military perceive this catastrophe as the result of a projectile launched by the bugs, but nowhere in the film is this interpretation substantiated. And when the sole act of inter-species communication in *Starship Troopers* does occur all we learn is that this creature is not the inexorable aggressor the Federation perceives it to be, but is, instead, simply afraid. The inconsistencies and ambivalences that these moments introduce into *Starship Troopers'* surface narrative are perhaps most dramatically articulated in one of the film's set pieces, the rousing call to arms made by the leader of the Federation forces, Sky Marshall Dienes: 'We are a generation commanded by fate to defend humankind! We must meet the threat with our valor, our blood, with our lives, to insure that human civilization, not insect, dominates this galaxy now and always'.<sup>33</sup> Moments like these imply to the audience of *Starship Troopers* that human culture has not been forced into conflict because of the threats presented by a colonizing alien species, but that humanity itself is the assailant, seeking conquest but unable or unwilling to recognize its own bellicosity.

### **The bomb's eye view**

Virilio's *War and Cinema* and his recent work on the Balkan conflicts add a level of complexity to this reading of *Starship Troopers'* coding of 'humanitarian' expansionism during the 1990s. Concurring with commentators like Ali, Žižek, and Chandler, Virilio argues that Nato's Balkan campaigns have been carried out in order to shore up US and European investments in a global – or what he calls a 'globalitarian'<sup>34</sup> – order. And, for

Virilio too, Nato's interventions in the 1990s have been propped up by claims that the concepts of humanity and human rights have been central to the West's violation of other countries' national sovereignty. Virilio's insight, though, lies in his claim that this globalitarian 'philanthropy' has been facilitated not only by new media and digital technologies that are now an everyday part of domestic and corporate life. Rather, it is military and clandestine technologies – it is weapons and surveillance technologies, as well as military research in cybernetics – that (alarming for him) usher a contemporary world that is both post-human and post-national. 'Scorning "nature" in the name of "computer reason"', he states, '*fin de siècle* America... is transplanting its *systemic rationality* into programmed automata, into "smart" missiles, as though the world were a toy or a war game'.<sup>35</sup> Earlier, in *War and Cinema*, Virilio prophesies that this systemic rationality will become ever more central to future conflict:

the deterrence strategy geared to nuclear weapons will give way to one based upon ubiquitous orbital vision of enemy territory. Rather like in a Western gun-duel, where firepower equilibrium is less important than reflex response, eyeshot will then finally get the better of gunshot. It will be an optical, or electro-optical, confrontation; its likely slogan, 'winning is keeping the enemy in sight'.<sup>36</sup>

The narrowing of physical space that Virilio diagnoses throughout his work is, then, enabled by visual technologies that both corrupt human consciousness and enable the rampant 'globalitarianism' of the late twentieth- and early twenty first-centuries. Cinema

not only provides the military with sight machines that derealize perception. These weapons have also, in recent years, played a decisive role in contracting both geographical distance and cultural difference.

Since it shows how the camera lens legitimates conflict by collapsing physical space into digital immediacy – since it reveals to viewers a global order reduced to cultural homogeneity – *Starship Troopers* seems to be very much a film of the 1990s, and it seems to echo Virilio's sense of a global chronopolitical shift. At the same time, however, this film is strangely reluctant to consider the systemic rationality that troubles Virilio. Echoing Virilio, John Broughton observes that one of the most recognizable features of 1990s conflicts is 'the bomb's eye view' – a view which attempts to 'install the medical mythology of "surgical strikes", in order to create the public impression of a hygienic war'.<sup>37</sup> This bomb has an eye which allows it to sight its target, a sentience which allows the landscape of its incursions to be mapped and interpreted, and a telescoping which (supposedly) testifies to its precision. Bizarrely turning away from the weapons technologies that define warfare in the 1990s, Verhoeven's film refuses to consider the military advantages of these optical weapons in future conflicts. Indeed, as one reviewer of the film points out,

The picture seems to depict a future in which weapons technology has not kept pace with other scientific advances. Our heroes can fly to distant ends of the galaxy, but when it comes to fighting the bugs, the soldiers are left with conventional air strikes, tactical nukes and puny machine guns. What

about chemical weapons – you know, Raid, Black Flag? What about flypaper?<sup>38</sup>

More to the point, given this film's interest in the specifics of 1990s conflicts, what about sight machines and weapons of perception? The defeats suffered by the Federation occur not because it fails to engage in biowarfare, but because it consistently fails to see what the Klendathian armies are capable of, and because it steadfastly refuses to deploy the technologies that define late twentieth-century warfare – technologies that would permit military action while at the same time allowing the Federation to avoid endangering its soldiers and citizens. As much as *Starship Troopers* turns away from seeing the soldier of the future as a post-human machine, this film is also backwards in coming forwards about sight machines yet to come: just as the mobile infantry are stripped of the powered armour they possess in Heinlein's text, so *Starship Troopers* suggests that the increasingly human qualities of late twentieth-century weapons will play no part in the wars of the future.

Despite the differences between both versions of *Starship Troopers*, possible reasons for the film's ambivalence about technoscience and optical warfare are intimated in Heinlein's text. For example, in Heinlein's narrative a drill instructor tells a group of new recruits at boot camp:

There can be circumstances when it's just as foolish to hit an enemy city with an H-bomb as it would be to spank a baby with an ax. War is not violence and killing, pure and simple; war is *controlled* violence, for a

purpose. The purpose of war is to support your government's decisions by force. The purpose is never to kill an enemy just to be killing him... but to make him do what you want him to do. Not killing but controlled and purposeful violence.<sup>39</sup>

Later in the text, Rico echoes this same sentiment:

There are a dozen different ways of delivering destruction in impersonal wholesale, via ships and missiles of one sort or another, catastrophes so widespread, so unselective, that the war is over because that nation or planet has ceased to exist. What we do is entirely different. We make war as personal as a punch in the nose. We can be selective, applying precisely the required amount of pressure at the specified point at a designated time – we've never been told to go down and kill all left-handed redheads in a particular area, but if they tell us to, we can. We will.<sup>40</sup>

As this essay has already argued, Verhoeven's film is based upon a different premise to Heinlein's earlier version: where Heinlein represents a number of species struggling for supremacy, Verhoeven shows a human culture that is not just at war, but is, according to its own unsustainable logic, fighting for its very survival. This threat of extinction at no point underwrites military activity in Heinlein's text: here, military force constitutes an act of will, rather than a defence of the species, and ground troops clearly act to expose this intention. In Verhoeven's film, however, the supposed risk of extermination should

make the impersonality of optical warfare an imperative. The world of *Starship Troopers* – both Federation culture and the space it seeks to conquer – is one grown small by technologies of representation, but at the same time this culture’s military prefers the immediacy of proximate combat to what should, presumably, be the preferred option of remote and automated strikes. Speed of spectatorial vision is here conspicuously not matched by speed of military aggression. This culture has chosen to discard the weapons that could ensure its survival, and this abandonment suggests that managing the human subject is just as central to conflict as controlling the alien: by placing its armed forces in the midst of the battlefield, and by turning the battlefield into a TV spectacle, this culture, Verhoeven suggests, is built on the perception of dominance, and exercises its will to dominate through the bodies of its inhabitants. As well as disguising its colonial appetites as a critical humanitarianism, the Federation culture of Verhoeven’s film therefore celebrates the individuated body by willingly placing its citizens on the frontline of wars fought over distant territories.

### **Ambivalences**

If Virilio’s humanist response to technology ends up as a nostalgic and apocalyptic one (in which technology is seen not only as aiding the erosion of humanity’s erstwhile character, but also as a force which will, in the future, eventually overcome the human), then *Starship Troopers* exposes the phenomenological contradiction that props up such a condemnation. For Virilio, technologies of warfare are now woven so completely into the fabric of human identity that they have come to reconstitute the ways in which subjectivity is experienced. But Virilio also suggests that we should recall an age when

the bomb existed, though without threatening humanity in the way that today's weapons do. Charting the derealization of vision, Virilio implies that perception and deception were once distinct; charting the dehumanization of war, Virilio suggests that war was once fully human. *Starship Troopers* seems, in striking contrast, to suggest that the notion of an unsullied primordality is a threatening fantasy: this film sees the detechnologized and corporeally self-identical subject as an artifice, one which easily accommodates militarized – North American-European – notions of citizenship. In this respect, *Starship Troopers* departs from the injunction of John Carpenter's *Dark Star*, to 'teach the bomb phenomenology'; Verhoeven's film instead points to the need to develop more a rigorous understanding of the relationship between war, technology, and the human. *Starship Troopers* suggests, in other words, that we should teach phenomenology the bomb, that recent theories of technology and identity – such as Virilio's – need to offer less melancholic conclusions about the sanctity of the human body.

*Starship Troopers* is also concerned with how new cultural contestants will emerge when North American and Western European hegemony becomes globally entrenched and systemic. Old frontiers may well disappear with the West's efforts to seize a worldwide imperium, and this film reflects upon one version of uniformity that could arise from the overruling of the nation-state by global governance. But *Starship Troopers*, perhaps most significantly, shows how notions of the global and the human can co-operate to reaffirm established and exceptionalist cultural distinctions: in *Starship Troopers*, just as the martial citizen is displaced onto a nostalgic anthropocentrism, so Western antagonism is reinvented as humanitarian obligation. Just as organizations like Nato have turned to notions of protective benevolence in order to narrate their drive for

expansion, so Verhoeven's film images a Federal organization in which notions of human salvation act as an alibi for the colonization of new spaces. In a domain of competing representations, Nato's declared motives find themselves audaciously ciphered in Verhoeven's vision of a culture which has to reinvent its interplanetary struggles as a defense of the species, rather than view these struggles as disputes over territorial sovereignty. *Starship Troopers'* ambivalence is at least double, then: representing the future human as one whose time has passed and showing a global specular order that dare not look at itself, this film exposes a late-twentieth conflictual economy that situates difference both within and beyond the scope of comprehension. In doing this, *Starship Troopers* draws attention to global processes that need to be challenged not for developing out of the wrong name of humanity, but for continuing invest in questionable concepts of the human.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ed Neumeier, *Starship Troopers*, [http://www.movie-page.com/scripts/starship\\_troopers.txt](http://www.movie-page.com/scripts/starship_troopers.txt), accessed 23 July 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The sense of Buenos Aires as a city stripped of cultural specificity is reinforced by one of *Starship Troopers'* 'goofs': 'Errors in geography: Several hills appear outside of Johnny Rico's house in Buenos Aires. In real life, Buenos Aires does not have any elevations in sight from any part of the city'. See 'Goofs for Starship Troopers', <http://imdb.com/Towards?0120201>, accessed 23 July 2004. Verhoeven's portrayal of the Buenos Aires of the future as both the locus of globalizing hegemony and the source for critical citationality seems to echo the work of Celeste Olalquiaga, which, according to Edward Soja, argues that in Latin America 'the most exciting cultural proposals of the moment can be found. Leaving behind postindustrial melancholia and identity nostalgia, and to the side market globalization of ethnicity, the humorous overturning of mass media images, like the artistic exposure of scientific disciplines... works exclusively within the ironic realm to proclaim it a flexible language that may be bent, twisted, and turned to satisfy far more needs than the ones that produced those icons in the first place'. Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas M. Disch finds the reluctance in Heinlein's text to confront questions of sex and sexuality to be 'embarrassing': 'Leaving politics aside and turning to that great gushing source of our richest embarrassments, sex, I find *Starship Troopers* to be... a veritable treasury of unconscious revelations. The hero is a homosexual of a very identifiable breed. By his own self-caressing descriptions one recognizes the swaggering leather boy in his most flamboyant form'. Thomas M. Disch, 'The Embarrassments of Science Fiction', in Peter Nichols (ed.), *Science Fiction at Large*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1976, p. 154.



- <sup>4</sup> Barry Keith Grant, “‘Serious Elaboration’: Reason and the Visible in the Science-Fiction Film”, in Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, London: Verso, 1999, p. 27.
- <sup>5</sup> The question of Rico’s ‘racial’ identity has troubled a number of commentators on Heinlein’s text. Edward James remarks that he can find no evidence to support Samuel R. Delany’s claim that Rico is black. See Edward James, ‘Yellow, black, metal and tentacled: the race question in American science fiction’, in Philip John Davies (ed.), *Science Fiction, Social Conflict and War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 27. According to Adam Roberts, ‘the protagonist of *Starship Troopers* is black, although little is made of this feature in the book. Altering the racial identity of the hero in Verhoeven’s 1997 film of the book went some way towards producing a more straightforwardly fascist text’. Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 119. Christopher Weuve convincingly points out that ‘The lead character is Filipino’ because ‘Rico says quite specifically at the end of the next-to-last chapter that Tagalog is his native tongue’. Christopher Weuve, ‘Thoughts on *Starship Troopers*’, <http://www.kentaurus.com/troopers.htm>, accessed 23 July 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Andrew O’Hehir, ‘Starship Troopers’, in *Sight and Sound* 8:1, 1998, p. 54.
- <sup>7</sup> J.P. Telotte, *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995, p. 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 147.
- <sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane), London: Athlone 1984, pp. 285-86.
- <sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991, p. 181.
- <sup>11</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson*, London: Athlone, 2000, p. 78.
- <sup>13</sup> Telotte, *Replications*, p. 20.
- <sup>14</sup> Linda Mizejewski, ‘Action Bodies in Futurist Spaces: Bodybuilder Stardom as Special Effect’, in Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone II* pp. 158-59.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (trans. Patrick Camiller), London: Verso, 1989, p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Virilio, *War and Cinema*, p. 4.
- <sup>17</sup> Virilio, *War and Cinema*, p. 66.
- <sup>18</sup> Hugh T. Crawford, ‘Conducting Technologies: Virilio’s and Latour’s Philosophies of the Present State’, in *Angelaki* 4:2, 1999, p. 172.
- <sup>19</sup> Crawford, ‘Conducting Technologies’, p. 174.
- <sup>20</sup> John Armitage, ‘Beyond Postmodernism? Paul Virilio’s Hypermodern Theory’, [http://cttheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=133](http://cttheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=133), accessed 23 July 2004.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, London: Four Square, 1961 [1959], p. 86.
- <sup>22</sup> Illustrations and concept drawings for various reworkings of *Starship Troopers* highlight this centrality of powered armour. Paul M. Sammon’s *The Making of Starship Troopers* reproduces some of the concepts that were considered for Verhoeven’s film. See Paul M. Sammon, *The Making of Starship Troopers*, London: Little, Brown & Co., pp. 20; 30-5. Jonathan Clements’s article on precursors to Verhoeven’s film includes images from Tetsuro Amino’s 1988 six-part anime version of *Starship Troopers*. See Jonathan Clements, ‘Above and Beyond Hollywood’, in *Manga Mania* 44, pp. 20-3. And the cover art for different editions of *Starship Troopers* has promoted various interpretations of powered armour. See ‘Heinlein Book Bin: Starship Troopers’, <http://www.wegrokit.com/st.htm>, accessed 23 July 2004.
- <sup>23</sup> Indeed, the film even excludes Neumeier’s limited inclusion of both drop capsules and powered armour in the final version of the screenplay. Scene 73 of Neumeier’s script, for example, states: ‘Ext Live fire combat range – day – the recruits arm their Marauder power suits. Zim and Bronski wear Command model suit with rank designations. Johnny checks weapons, scans the electronics on each squad member’s power suit. Zim: “With the Marauder’s visual capabilities, all you have to do is look at something to hit it”’. Neumeier, *Starship Troopers*.

- <sup>24</sup> For example, Neumeier says of the standard issue rifle depicted in *Starship Troopers* that ‘The Morita’s overall “look” was based on something real: initially it was patterned after a Pancor Jackhammer. That’s a genuine, futuristic-looking shotgun’. Cited in Sammon, *The Making of Starship Troopers*, p. 73.
- <sup>25</sup> Sammon, *The Making of Starship Troopers*, p. 30.
- <sup>26</sup> Rob Van Scheer, *Paul Verhoeven* (trans. Aletta Stevens), London: Faber & Faber, 1997, p. xv.
- <sup>27</sup> Daniele Archibugi, ‘Cosmopolitical Democracy’, in *New Left Review* 4, 2000, p. 147.
- <sup>28</sup> Slavoj Zizek, ‘Against the Double Blackmail’, in *New Left Review* 234, 1999, pp. 79-80.
- <sup>29</sup> Tariq Ali, ‘Springtime for NATO’, in *New Left Review* 234, 1999, p. 66.
- <sup>30</sup> David Chandler, “‘International Justice’”, in *New Left Review* 6, 2000, p. 55.
- <sup>31</sup> Neumeier, *Starship Troopers*.
- <sup>32</sup> ‘Taglines for Starship Troopers’, <http://us.imdb.com/Taglines?0120201>, accessed 23 July 2004.
- <sup>33</sup> Neumeier, *Starship Troopers*.
- <sup>34</sup> Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception* (trans. Chris Turner), London: Verso, 2000, p. 37.
- <sup>35</sup> Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*, p. 11.
- <sup>36</sup> Virilio, *War and Cinema*, p. 2.
- <sup>37</sup> John Broughton, ‘The Bomb’s Eye View: Smart Weapons and Military T.V.’, in Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons & Michael Menser (eds), *Technoscience and Cyberculture*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 141.
- <sup>38</sup> Mick LaSalle, ‘Raid!!! Starship Troopers will leave viewers bug-eyed – and reaching for a huge fly swatter’, *San Francisco Chronicle* 7/11/1997, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1997/11/07/DD21012.DTL>, accessed 23 July 2004.
- <sup>39</sup> Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, p. 56.
- <sup>40</sup> Heinlein, *Starship Troopers*, p. 87.

**Philip Leonard is a Lecturer in English at Nottingham Trent University, UK.**