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The suits of invasion.

Extra-terrestrial warfare and the clothing of the 'body politic' in 20th century space fiction¹



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“Keep your ears open. ‘Have Space Suit – Will Travel,’ that doesn’t say enough. To make money out of that silly clown suit, we got to have oomph. So we add: ‘Bug-Eyed Monsters Exterminated – World Saving a Specialty – Rates on Request.’ Right?”

Ace Quiggle, an oaf.²

I. Suits?

To introduce the topic of suits in a conference that deals with the militarization of space does not seem a logical thing to do. Militarization, of course, can evoke and shape clothes, in which case we would be dealing with armours. Yet, no matter how interesting the topic of armour might be, it is hardly needed when discussing outer space warfare. The fact is that up to now ‘space combat suit’ has never been an issue, since wars in space as simulated and designed by military think tanks have had no use for the individual out there so far. The galaxy is not a place for an in-fight or a close combat. The forces by which one can achieve control of extra-terrestrial space (and thereby also of terrestrial space) do exceed concrete – physical – manpower by far. As a consequence, (and considering the negative results of my own survey), there is no national-founded initiative for the development of galactic armours. This implies that – despite earthbound combat suits tend to become a field of experiment of science fiction-led fashion³ – to date space technology has had no reason to deal with bodies in war.

1 A shortened version of a talk given at the the conference “Embattled heavens. The Militarization of Space in Science, Fiction, and Politics,” Berlin, 10-12 April 2014.

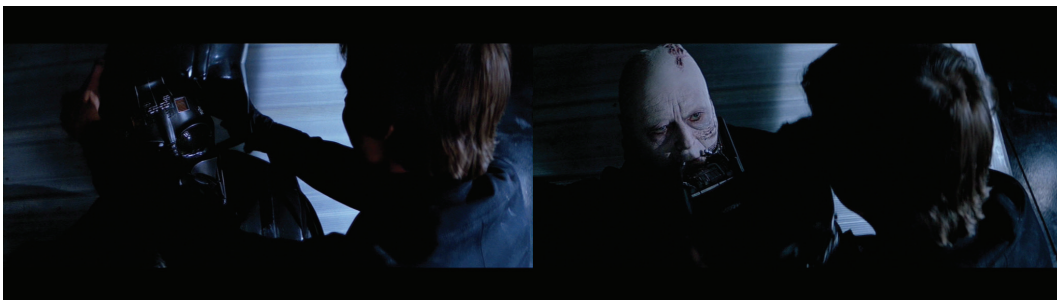
2 Robert A. Heinlein: *Have space suit – will travel*, New York 1958, p. 255.

3 The best and the most recent example so far of that development is the TALOS (Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit), namely a suit designed for the Special Operations Forces of the U.S. Army that copies the style of the “Iron Man”-armour, while actually realizing the technological program of 20th century military SF, also including a powered exoskeleton and situational-awareness displays.

II. Deconstructing Darth Vader: space fiction and space fashion

If that is the case in space technology, there is, however, no doubting the importance of imagining and shaping a new outfit for mankind in galactic fiction, in literature, comics and film. The reason for the existence of most space clothing lies in the fact that space travelling is performed by ‘crews’ who are on ships that are usually owned by ‘Federations’, to which they must show and exhibit the corporate identity. However, the representative function of these suits goes beyond. The easiest way to decipher space clothes, and space uniforms in particular, is by historical association. Space suits can namely work as metaphors that transfer an earthly past into an unearthly future: Fascist fashion has found its prominent manifestation in Hollywood space operas as in “Star Wars,” where the style of armies in grey breeches and jackets is met and overcome by its mere ‘casual,’ or at least pragmatic, version. One can conclude that this may seem a trivial function of the space suit, as clothing stresses the notion of a ‘positive’ and a ‘negative’ approach to enacting galactic power, the division of a liberal and a totalitarian model of soldiering other planets, the downfall of civilized life into dictatorship and the technically underprivileged, but morally and spiritually superior, rebels.

Understanding such principles does not require too much of our intellectual capacity; yet, even “Star Wars“ is far from being that simple, as Niels Werber has shown in his work on the geopolitics of literature.⁴ By implementing a slightly distorted version of Carl Schmitt’s political theology, “Star Wars“ provides a story of how the order of suits was accomplished and it displays the probably most famous redressing of an outer space character, namely Darth Vader. Despite the rather superficial rendering of his type, there is a crucial assertion hidden behind Darth Vader’s mask: to rule a galaxy in the late 20th century requires that the body be reshaped – which calls for an engineering act that is best apt to transform the political idea of the cosmos into human flesh.



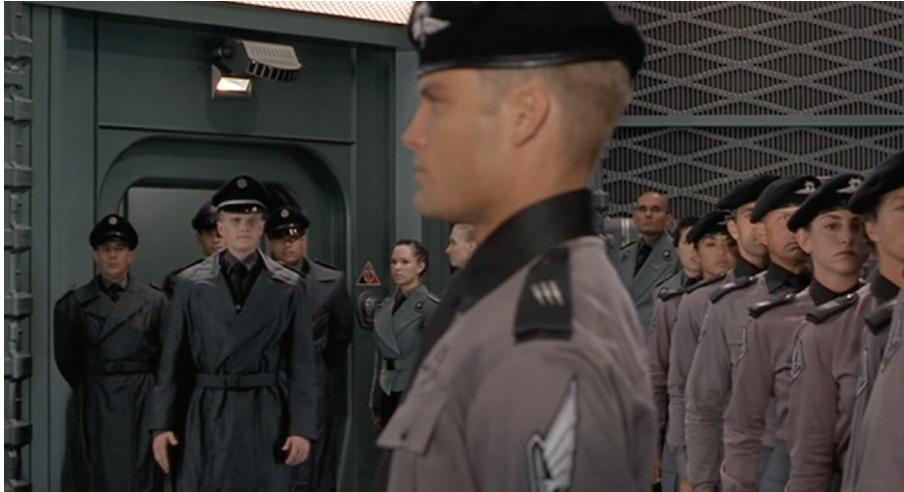
Stills taken from: George Lucas: Return of the Jedi (1983), 20th Century Fox, 1:56:00 and 1:56:13.

4 Niels Werber: Die Geopolitik der Literatur. Eine Vermessung der medialen Weltraumordnung, München 2007, pp. 258-264.

This leads our discussion to the hypothesis I would like to generalize upon, namely that our understanding of the cosmic order has a retroactive effect on the concepts of the body we develop. A cosmic order, which is understood as a spiritual order, produces macranthropic-microcosmic analogies, as stated in Swedenborg's theory of a cosmos that has a human shape where planets work as organs. A cosmos bound to the thought of planetary evolutions logically becomes populated with humanoid species that share our demands and weaknesses and that work as reflections of our cosmic self. Hence, a galaxy that has become a hostile place – where annihilation lures – requires the revision of the politics of the body. It is most of all a question of representation as opposed to survival: whoever wants to enter the galactic battlefield has to become a representative of the martial order as well as its social, technological and ideological structures. In this perspective, 'militarization of space' equates to 'the code of space war inscribed into bodies crossing the galaxy'. The history and mutations of this code defines one aspect (though not the main aspect) of what can be termed the 'conditio extraterrestris' of the modern age. Thus, investigating the clothing of bodies in space fiction leads us towards the unwritten rules of the embattled heavens.

III. Heinlein's "Starship Troopers" (1959)

When I referred to Lord Vader's transformation into a black coughing machine as having had no narrative explanation for a long time, I mildly overlooked the fact that in his case to rebuild the body of a 'star warrior' still takes place within a very simplistic universe that conceals the suggestion that only the dark side of interstellar warfare becomes corrupted and changes in appearance. Actually, Science Fiction steps over this naïve assumption twenty years before Darth Vader enters the scene, when Robert A. Heinlein publishes "Starship Troopers" in 1959. There is no other work of similar importance in the history of SF, since it is a work that evolves exclusively around the politics of body in space combat: the ingenuity of Paul Verhoeven's adaptation can be traced back to him by being aware of that. The literal 'plasticity' of the movie even stresses these aspects of redressing and makes them appear for what they really are: a passing through different martial codes. We can clarify this at best with the following image:



Still taken from: Paul Verhoeven: Starship Troopers (1997), Touchstone Pictures, 1:35:45.

The message shown by this image is clear: there is no clear distinction between an ‘acceptable’ and an ‘inacceptable’ space warrior. It is space war itself that turns a seemingly ungendered and sterile body into the embodiment of fascism. In other words: by the suits these people wear, we learn to tell what fascism actually is and how it is produced by a specific conception of the universe that we imagine. Moreover, as space fiction enables us to unfold fantasies of the human control of space, these fantasies suggest that this control has its price. It will alter us, it will turn us into aliens, true extra-terrestrials, until the forms and surfaces of our bodies will not be that different to those we fight.

Heinlein’s novel harbours precisely this idea, as it lets the enemies from outer space almost disappear behind the process of social re-education among human “citizens”. However, if we take a closer look to the heart of the epic war-scenario, we will encounter an intriguing type of clothing, “the suit”, as they call it:

No need to describe what it looks like, since it has been pictured so often. Suited up, you look like a big steel gorilla, armed with gorilla-sized weapons. [...] But the suits are considerably stronger than a gorilla. If an M.I. in a suit swapped hugs with a gorilla, the gorilla would be dead, crushed; the M.I. and the suit wouldn’t be mused.⁵

But there is more to the suit than just an increase of strength:

The “muscles,” the pseudo-musculature, get all the publicity but it’s the control of all that power which merits it. The real genius in the design is that you don’t have to control the suit; you just wear it, like your clothes, like skin. Any sort of ship you have to learn to pilot; it takes a long time, a new full set of reflexes, a different and artificial way of thinking. [...] But a suit you just wear.⁶

5 Robert A. Heinlein: Starship Troopers, New York 2006, p. 105.

6 Ibid.

While, at first sight, the suit appears to be nothing more than a gadget arisen from space-war imagination, insight in its technological design (as extensively described by the narrator) reveals its structural significance. It is not a gadget, it is not a device that requires certain technical skills. It does have a technological background, indeed, which lies in “negative feedback and amplification”; yet, it is described more or less as a creature, one might even say, as a parasite. Although it pretends to be an improvement that “takes orders directly from your muscles and does for you what your muscles are trying to do,” the suit is actually defined as “[c]ontrolled force ... force controlled without your having to think about it.”⁷ It does not get damaged, but “sick”, and if it is sick it needs its own doctor, “a doctor of science (electromechanical engineering)”.⁸

“Controlled force” – behind that expression there lies a hidden truth, since control woven into that suit works in a twofold manner. It gives the M.I. a surrogate of native control upon supernatural forces – and, at the same time, it forces him or her to be under the control of a civilization that understands outer space as an area that admits no civilians. Therefore, not only does the clothing of those who fight for terrestrial affairs on other planets strengthen their bodily skills and connects them to information channels, but it also ‘rigs their eyes and ears’⁹; it keeps their attention focused on the battlefield and the network they are part of, thereby inscribing laws of sovereignty, equality and efficiency, as well as reprogramming the wearer’s understanding of culture, sex, and morals.

The program that manifests itself in the suit is extensively portrayed in the lessons Johnnie Rico takes at the military academy, which, as might be expected, include the core of Heinlein’s libertarian beliefs. The system one adopts when he or she wears the suit and becomes ‘citizen’ is characterized by a complete wipe-out of characteristics and rules that have been established by what the military historians name “the sovereign franchise”: “place of birth, family of birth, race, sex, property, education, age, religion, et cetera.”¹⁰ All these differences are overcome by a system that differentiates only those who take ‘responsibility’ from those who do not. Again, the central term of this system is ‘force’ that is understood as ‘political authority’. Among all forms of self-government mankind has developed in its history, the ‘force’ of the volunteers proved to be the only one resisting the challenges of the

7 Ibid., p. 107.

8 Ibid., p. 106.

9 Ibid., p. 107.

10 Ibid., p. 192.

space age. Competing with intelligent enemies that keep on colonizing the galaxy planet by planet, that breed in billions and extinguish any other species, space men and women have to get rid of their human deficits in order to close the evolutionary gap – and to survive. Therefore, no second thoughts, no separate private life, no weak spots are allowed in the realm of the ‘world citizen’; and while the suit is the technical improvement for man to be a competitive actor on the galactic battlefield, it also functions as a social filter. This is precisely what I define a ‘suit of invasion’, namely, an armour that empowers humans to invade the galaxy and, yet, at the same time, an armour that invades humans by subjecting them to a program of altered identities.¹¹

IV. Conclusions: The alien and the ‘inner war’ of the space age

Beforehand, I claimed that the concepts of bodies in space are linked to the concept of the cosmos bodies live in, as in Heinlein’s novel that clearly shows how this specific object, the space suit, is necessarily bound to a universe that is perceived as a potential and actual battleground. While the text makes use of the alien enemy with which earth’s inhabitants must compete, and thereby justifies all means of militaristic intervention in global policy, it is remarkable that this type of enemy remains almost invisible throughout the book and makes its appearance quite rarely. The arachnids or ‘bugs’, a species that proves “how efficient a total communism can be when used by a people actually adapted to it by evolution,”¹² serve in this text as a nemesis that threatens mankind purely by natural as well as social superiority.

They are arthropods who happen to look like a madman’s conception of a giant, intelligent spider, but their organization, psychological and economic, is more like that of ants or termites; they are communal entities, the ultimate dictatorship of the hive.¹³

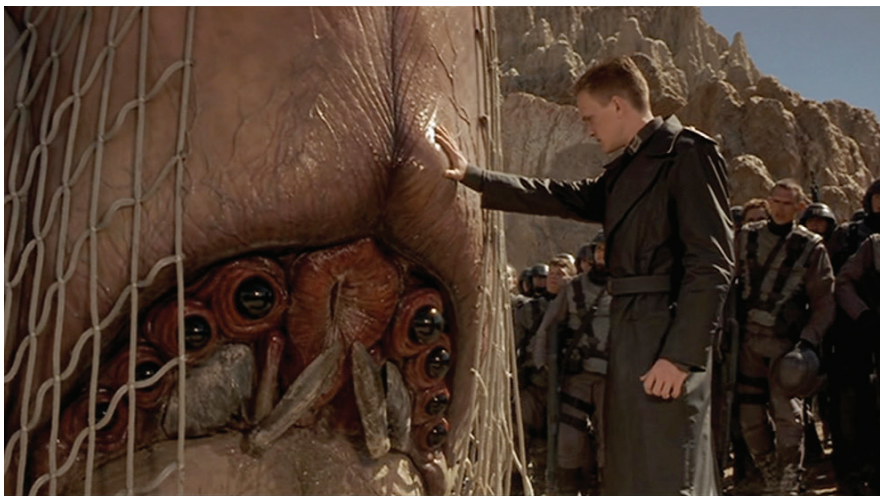
In battle, these creatures might be defeated every so often – still, as a species they will prevail. Thus, actual combat is inefficient and uninteresting. The real war is the ‘inner war’, which is fought in order to overcome the sociobiological deficit of humanity. This ground is where the suit is meant to work.

11 Sergeant Zim reveals as follows: “We supply the violence; other people – ‘older and wiser heads,’ as they say – supply the control. Which is as it should be.” (Ibid., 66.) Thus, wearing the suit means to enter a field of governmental control that cannot be questioned.

12 Ibid., p. 161.

13 Ibid., p. 142.

We may conclude that the previous assumption according to which the suit is the effect of a threat from outside can be reversed: the universe filled with warmongering aliens is the necessary consequence of a re-education program that needs precisely those extra-terrestrial imago to develop. It is not so much the alien body that forces man to adjust; it is rather man's corporal adjustment to extra-terrestrial life that evokes the scheme of the 'bug'. The scheme reveals another agenda. Regardless of existing enemies, to enter the space age is perceived as becoming integral part of a new cosmographical, social, political and technological order. When facing that vast galaxy to which our moral terms are unfamiliar, mankind will have to revise its identity, provided the aim is to join the game (although the other players remain unknown to us).



Still taken from: Paul Verhoeven: *Starship Troopers* (1997), Touchstone Pictures, 1:51:52.

Hence, the political body of the starship trooper reveals itself as the body politic of the galactic sovereign: the ideal body of a ruler that cannot die and whose followers bear an allegorical meaning by characterizing the ideological core of that very reign. In Heinlein's case, this body is constituted by pure physical force, by ultimate connectivity and by the suppression of the sexes. We deal with a collective, or rather a composite, being that transcends the will of the individual. The physical manifestation of that super-individual existence of man in space age is the suit around which this type of universe is built. As long as war remains the decisive paradigm of the space age, its reign will last, no matter whether there are bugs to be found on some planets or not. Verhoeven's adaptation of Heinlein's novel actually pursues this thought, and eventually confronts the order of the suit with what it really fears – namely, the design of the brain of the opposite, the 'brain bug', as a creature made of pure sexuality that has to be captured, tamed and punished by man.