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CAST

Rinko Kikuchi Asuka Moriki

Rila Fukushima Sakakibara

Shun Oguri Ko Honda

Kane Kosugi God Lee

Takayuki Yamada Ichiro Hiruma

Hideaki Itô Shokichi Komachi

Tomohisa Yamashita Jim Muto

Emi Takei Nanao Akita

CREW

Directed by Takashi Miike

Screenplay by Kazuki Nakashima

Based on the manga series by Yû Sasuga and Kenichi Tachibana (as Ken'ichi Tachibana)

Produced by Shigeji Maeda and Misako Saka

Music by Kôji Endô

Cinematography by Hideo Yamamoto

Visual Effects Supervisor Kaori Ohtagaki





LIFE ON MARS? YES, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

By Tom Mes

Takashi Miike's favourite film is Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997). This knowledge will probably change your view of *Terraformars*, so I thought I would get it out of the way first. *Terraformars* is Miike's *Starship Troopers*. By this I mean that it is very much a Miike version of *Starship Troopers*: it is equally spectacular and silly, and populated with characters that will never quite succeed at becoming the heroes that the conventions of the genre (and the expectations of the audience) normally want them to be.

Because *Terraformars* is not simply a variation of *Starship Troopers*. That film presented us with a cast whose impossibly gorgeous physical presence (well, save perhaps for Jake Busey) poked fun (remember those co-ed shower scenes?) at the all-American hero – the kind of square-jawed beefcake cannon fodder that pushed the John Wayne-Clint Eastwood-Sylvester Stallone paradigm into territories that many (i.e. American film critics) still did not recognise as utterly ridiculous.

True, *Terraformars'* ostensible hero, played by Hideaki Itō of *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007) and *Lesson of the Evil* (*Aku no kyōten*, 2012) fame, has precisely the kind of chiselled features that could only be destined for a career in movies and/or modelling. But in presenting us with a ragtag gang of deeply tainted anti-heroes sent on a mission that will allow them to redeem all the wrongs society says they have committed, *Terraformars* owes just as much to Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen* (1967). For younger readers: this is the film that an Italian schlockmeister ripped off in the 1970s with the not coincidentally similar-sounding *Inglorious Bastards* (*Quel maledetto treno blindato*, 1978), which later



– when at least one generation too young to know about Aldrich’s film made up the bulk of the cinema-going audience – became the Tarantino opus of the same, though misspelled, name. In short, *Terraformars*’ main characters are not superheroes, even though the film consciously refers to a long tradition of superhero films and television series.

Transformations

Terraformars is also very much a Japanese version of *Starship Troopers*. This is true for the way it channels characteristically Japanese superhero television shows such as *Ultraman* (1966-67) and the various *Super Sentai* series that would form the basis for the *Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers* (1993-95). In these, transformation forms the central dramatic conceit: the hero is an everyman (or occasionally everywoman) who has the ability, when the need is high and extra-terrestrial invaders plot to conquer our planet by means of rubber-suited stuntmen, to transform into a spandexed giant with superhuman powers.

Takashi Miike has on several occasions investigated how superhero scenarios can form escapist fantasies for the powerless and downtrodden in Japanese society. *Zebraman*, his 2004 homage to the powerful allure of those very same superhero shows, was essentially a mainstream reworking of the director’s 2001 kitchen sink shocker *Visitor Q (Bijitâ Q)* – minus the incest and dismemberment. It investigates the broken-down dynamics of the nuclear family through the figure of a failed suburban husband and father who finds an otaku’s solace in imagining himself the star of his own superhero serial. He realises that his cosplay vigilante antics can be a doorway to discovering the true hero inside himself: a caring, self-sacrificing family man, capable of saving not only his family but all of humanity.

Even Miike’s *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure: Diamond Is Unbreakable, Chapter 1* (2017), his adaptation of the enduringly popular surrealist manga and anime series, played with this trope of everyday people experiencing the greatest trouble when they discover that they have been saddled with powers beyond their own comprehension. Low self-esteem, imprinted on their psyches by relentless bullying and abuse from their peers, renders them thoroughly awkward in controlling what might otherwise be considered a gift from heaven. (In this regard it is rather fitting, if somewhat sad, that *JoJo*’s failure at the domestic box office in spite of the franchise’s wide following means we shouldn’t hold our breath for a Chapter 2.)

Off-World Colonies

Seen in this light, perhaps we could call *Terraformars* “The Severely Limited Morphin’ Advance Guard for Imperialism”. Its dirty heroes are desperate, cornered fugitives who have no realistic choice but to accept the opportunity presented to them: to travel to distant Mars and rid the red planet of a scourge of cockroaches, in a bid to prepare it for colonisation by humankind.

This premise contains many an allusion to chapters in our Earthbound history: the expulsion of the unwanted to Australia as an effort to expand the British Empire; the exile of the samurai clans loyal to the Shogun into the snowy wastes of Hokkaido; the Pilgrim Fathers’ journey into the unknown wilds of what would become North America. Each of these would form the vanguard to a wider, more concerted and above all more brutal effort to conquer savage lands for the greater glory of an imperialist power.



In this sense too, *Terraformars* is very Japanese: it evokes Japan's imperialist past, the reverse scorched-earth approach to building an empire in East and Southeast Asia that was to culminate in the subterfuge of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" – an empire by any other name, sold to the masses as the liberation of Japan's Asian "brothers" from European colonial powers, but in practice the replacement of one brutal foreign oppressor by another.

A Good Old-Fashioned Future

The presence of Japan's imperialist past in *Terraformars* is tied rather astutely to a totalitarian future that is only a slight exaggeration of the ideas and acknowledged goals of the country's current administration. Much of what Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and the hawkish wing of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party envision for Japan finds its inspiration in an imperialist past they see as the halcyon days, when Japan was a global superpower that went toe-to-toe with Western military might and, for a while at least, beat them at their own game.

If now you are thinking I am reading too much into all of this, please do remember that Takashi Miike is no stranger to dystopian science fiction. *Zeburaman 2: Attack on Zebra City* (*Zeburâman: Zebura Shiti no gyakushû*, 2010) presents the first film's protagonist with a new challenge to his full-fledged hero status by catapulting him into a capitalist-totalitarian future, in which an almighty despot sends government-sanctioned death squads into the streets, while his daughter keeps the masses distracted as a Lady Gaga-esque pop star.

Even the director's earliest attempt at helming sci-fi, 1998's teen-idol vehicle *Andromedia*, features a whiz kid villain (played by ace cinematographer Christopher Doyle in shorts and Chuck Taylors) who in retrospect comes off rather uncannily like a proto-Zuckerberg: all too eager to abandon ethics and scruples simply because he's rich and powerful enough to get away with it.

And then there is *Dead or Alive: Final* (2002), set in the 24th-century city state of Yokohama but filmed in (and as) present-day Hong Kong, complete with predominantly Cantonese dialogue. Here too, a sovereign tyrant ruthlessly dictates his laws against heterosexual intercourse and procreation to a generally apathetic populace that is all too thankful not to be living in the poisonous wastelands suggested to exist beyond the city's borders. With its run-down Hong Kong setting, its pan-Asian melting-pot society, its dragon-shaped dirigibles blasting out garish advertisements and public service announcements, and the appearance of a "replicant" hero (played by Sho Aikawa, who would become Zeburaman two years later), *Dead or Alive: Final* definitely prefigures the future-world of *Terraformars'* scenes set on Earth – both being heavily inspired by another science fiction classic, Ridley Scott's monumental *Blade Runner* (1982).

Aside from its much-debated techno-orientalist cityscape, a major factor in what makes *Blade Runner* so memorable is the fact that at street level, below the gleam of all those towering neon-clad monoliths, it presents us with a vision of the near future as a grimy, messy affair. This is emphasized even more in Denis Villeneuve's sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), a film that reflects our current awareness of impending ecological disaster, but it also forms the hook upon which Takashi Miike can hang his own future scenarios. Miike after all is an artist of the imperfect; of the dropouts and outcasts; of lives led on margins and in gutters, and of the seamy side of city life. To him, a messy future is just another expression of human failure. No wonder *Terraformars* is literally infested with cockroaches.



This of course brings us neatly (or messily) back to *Starship Troopers* and the idea of future war as an endless extermination campaign against infestation, with the enemy depicted as giant irrepressible insects. Not unlike Verhoeven's film and the Robert Heinlein novel of the same name on which it is based, the manga and anime of *Terraformars* have been accused of xenophobic undercurrents. Yū Sasuga and Michio Fukuda's original comic book has been denounced for its depiction of the hulking, muscular humanoid cockroaches as rather too overtly informed by stereotypical imagery of black men.¹ While I cannot comment on the contents of the manga, Miike's film adaptation contains no allusions of this kind. I would argue instead that it paints the insectoid "enemy" as rather more symbolic of a proud yet oppressed people, dehumanised in the eyes of a coloniser eager to pave its expansion over any vestiges of an older culture.

It certainly wouldn't be the first time a film turns the ideological subtext of the source material on its head. In fact, this is what makes *Terraformars* the direct kin of *Starship Troopers*. Verhoeven cleverly employed Nazi-esque imagery and propaganda film conventions to make his point - too cleverly for some, many US film critics among them, who took the intertextuality at face value and reproached the Dutch director for displaying fascist tendencies. (For an actual face-value approach to Heinleinian militarism, one would rather need to turn to James Cameron's *Aliens* [1986].)

Japan was once Asia's only indigenous colonial power and the lure of a nostalgic fantasy of empire continues to resonate strongly among large swathes of the country's elite. Its fears over China's increasing might and North Korea's ballistic caprices, as well as the simmering resentments that continue to plague relations with South Korea, feed such sentiments and create a volatile concoction when mixed with frustrations over lost military and economic dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. In such a hothouse political climate, making a movie about

¹ - Kenny Ukpona, [Article] in *The Kenpire*. (Web. 17 Mar, 2015).

the Japanese colonising the solar system with home-grown technology and bio-weaponry, Miike forgoes Verhoeven's use of belligerent grandeur and instead opts for a parodic approach, contrasting the bloated blockbuster-ism desired by the film's producers with the ineptitude of flawed characters and the Japanese tradition of rubber-suited special-effects TV shows. Instead of exaggerating fascist tendencies as Verhoeven did, Miike deflates them. We may never know if androids dream of electric sheep, but it is patently obvious that only frustrated little men dream of war and empire.

Tom Mes is the author of Agitator: The Cinema of Takashi Miike and Re-Agitator: A Decade of Writing on Takashi Miike. For Arrow he wrote the books Unchained Melody: The Films of Meiko Kaji, about the 1970s exploitation movie siren, and Father, Son, Sword: The Lone Wolf and Cub Saga, on the perennially popular samurai movie series. He teaches Japanese film and popular culture at Leiden University in the Netherlands.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Terraformars is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 5.1 audio.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**

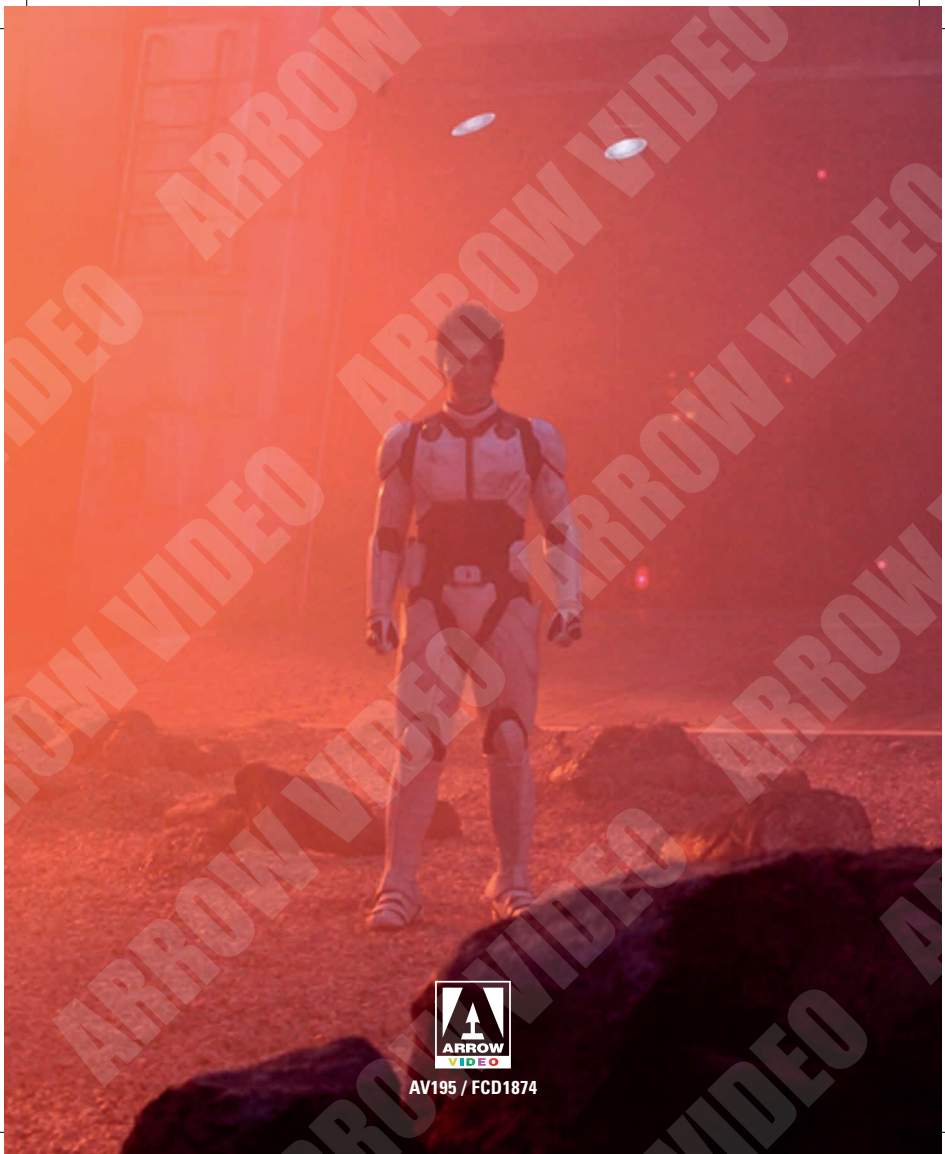
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Tom Mes, Yuki Oguriyama, Haruko Watanabe



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