

The War of the Worlds Book Review Essay

In 1877, during a window of time where the astrological opposition of Earth and Mars allowed for increased visibility¹, the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli attempted to map the Martian surface. The hand-drawn map², created before planetary photography had progressed enough to become the standard of astronomical proof³, displayed strange patterns of intersecting straight lines that he referred to as “canali⁴.” The word’s ambiguous meaning when translated into English, meaning both channel (a naturally formed strait between two landmasses) and canal (a purposely constructed waterway), invited speculation into the possibility of life on Mars⁵.

One such speculator was Percival Lowell, whose book *Mars and its Canals*⁶ (published in 1906, but serving to compile the research he conducted from 1895 onwards⁷) suggests not only the existence of dense seasonal vegetation on the planet⁸, but intelligent Martian beings, who constructed the network of canals for the “husbanding of water”; extracting water from the ice caps during their seasonal melting periods and transporting it across the desiccated surface of the planet⁹.

“The picture created was that of a planet that was older than Earth and that was slowly losing its water because of the weakness of its gravitational field.” wrote Isaac Asimov in his book *Extraterrestrial Civilisations*. “It was a very dramatic picture of an ancient race of beings, perhaps a dying species, who refused to give up and kept their world alive by resolution and hard work¹⁰.”

It was with this cultural understanding of the planet Mars that H.G. Wells wrote his 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds*¹¹, and the novel’s opening helps to situate it within this cultural context of enthusiastic and hopeful scientific speculation. It features a reference to Schiaparelli, which is contained within a description of the planet as aged and water-poor that is consistent with the writings of Lowell (37-39)¹².

¹ Isaac Asimov, *Extraterrestrial Civilisations* (1979; repr., London: Book Club Associates, 1980), 61

² K. Maria D. Lane, “Geographers of Mars,” *Isis* 96, no. 4 (December 2005): 477–506, <https://doi.org/10.1086/498590>. 482

³ K. Maria D. Lane, “Geographers of Mars,” 490

⁴ Asimov, *Extraterrestrial Civilisations*, 62

⁵ Elena Canadelli, “‘SOME CURIOUS DRAWINGS’: MARS through GIOVANNI SCHIAPARELLI’S EYES: BETWEEN SCIENCE and FICTION,” *Nuncius* 24, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 439–64, <https://doi.org/10.1163/221058709x00646>, 440

⁶ Percival Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals* (Massachusetts: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY, 1906).

⁷ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, vii

⁸ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, 127, 348-349

⁹ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, 366

¹⁰ Asimov, *Extraterrestrial Civilisations*, 63

¹¹ H. G. Wells and Andrew Frayn, *The War of the Worlds, the War in the Air: And Particularly How Mr Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2017)

¹² H. G. Wells and Andrew Frayn, *The War of the Worlds, the War in the Air: And Particularly How Mr Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted*, 37-39 (Subsequent page numbers referenced in text)

Though Wells likely believed in the existence of some form of Martian life, having debated on its behalf as a member of the London's Normal School of Science debate society in 1888¹³, his depiction of fictional Martians within *The War of the Worlds* diverges from that of his literary and scientific contemporaries. While Lowell envisions a Mars where living beings had moved past the “boyish and unthinking¹⁴” practice of war, and novels such as Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Robinson Merchant's *Unveiling a Parallel: a Romance*¹⁵ and Henry Olerich's *A Cityless and Countryless World*¹⁶ use the red planet as a canvas on which to project idealistic visions of an egalitarian and familiarly humanoid Martian society in which humanity can be integrated¹⁷, *The War of the Worlds* presents a portrayal of a hostile Mars that violently rejects the anthropocentric notion that alien intelligences could be analogous to, or understood by, human beings. The narrator's remark “At most, terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise.” (37) can be read as a critique of the idea that contact with alien beings could ever be so uncomplicated.

Wells represents the hopeful attitude of his contemporaries within the characters of Ogilvy, Henderson, and Trent; whose attempts at peacefully welcoming the Martians to Earth through the means of a white flag wielding welcome party are quickly rebuffed when they are cut down by the Martian heat ray (51). Their deaths are a tragic way of conveying the clash between the naïve utopian dreams of writers like Lowell and Olerich, and Wells's own more practical perspective on the challenges of interacting with alien life.

The horror of Wells's Martians derives from their incomprehensibility, which is amplified by their distinctly inhuman forms that lack the ability to emote in a way that humans can understand (48). Though their possible motivations are explored briefly in the first chapter (38), the book is told entirely from the human side of the conflict through the recollections of the narrator explaining the actions of himself and his brother. The clever omission of the Martian perspective (something Wells does use very briefly in the

¹³ Robert Crossley, “H. G. Wells and the Great Disillusionment,” in *Imagining Mars* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 112

¹⁴ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, 377

¹⁵ Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Robinson Merchant, *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance* (Arena Pub. Co, 1893), <https://archive.org/details/unveilingparalle00twowiala/page/6/mode/2up>.

¹⁶ Henry Olerich, *A Cityless and Countryless World* (Los Angeles: Holstein, 1893).

¹⁷ Katharine Cockin, "Book Review Discussion" LT364-6 Cyborgs, Clones and the Rise of the Robots: Science Fiction (class discussion, University of Essex, Colchester, November 11th, 2022). During the book review discussion, my group discussed the potential of a utopian Mars. Though our discussion mainly focussed on the modern day, it inspired me to do further research, where I discovered the utopian literature about Mars contemporary to *The War of the Worlds*.

end of his short story *The Star*¹⁸.) helps to create a sense of a totally emotionally inaccessible antagonist. A man with a gun possesses a better nature which can be appealed to, and an invading human army can be bargained with, but the violence of an antagonist like the Martians is horrifying because it appears senseless and unreasonable.

Wells attempts to use his hostile Martians to convey an anticolonial theme through a remark his protagonist makes in chapter one (38), comparing the actions of the invading Martians to the displacement and genocide of the indigenous Tasmanians under the British Empire in the early nineteenth century¹⁹. Though the comparison is certainly a salient one, as the world-shaking terror of a technologically advanced coloniser is a feature of both the genocide and Wells's novel, he undermines his own argument by referring to the Tasmanians as “. . . inferior races . . .” (38)

Though this can be interpreted as Wells's attempt to instil a racist ignorance into his protagonist as a character flaw, which could represent his privilege as an affluent London resident, it could also be an unfortunate window into Wells's own mindset. Evidence of Wells holding similar beliefs can be found in his non-fiction vision of the future, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought*, where he speaks of how “. . . those swarms of black, and brown, and dirty-white, and yellow people . . . will have to go.”²⁰ Though Wells condemned his fictional Martians, the fact that he believed that racialised mass-death was an acceptable part of a future society casts a grotesque shadow over the *War of the Worlds*.

The seeds sown by the idea of an alien antagonist whose feelings and motivations are incomprehensible to their helpless human victims can be seen in later examples of science fiction, such as H. P. Lovecraft's 1928 short story “The Call of Cthulhu”²¹. Though the style of Lovecraft's writing is perhaps more twistedly gothic than the scientifically informed Wells, the thematic influence can be seen through “the awful squid head and writhing feelers . . .”²² of the titular alien, and the attempt by the doomed sailor

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, “The Star,” in *Tales of Space and Time* (London: Harper and Wells, 1898), 57, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27365/27365-h/27365-h.htm>.

¹⁹ Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, “The Tasmanians,” in *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 204–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkw38.28>, 217-19

²⁰ H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (London: Chapman, 1902), 317

²¹ H.P Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” in *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P Lovecraft*, ed. Les Edwards (London: Gollancz, 2008), 202–25.

²² Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”, 224

Gustav Johansen to ram the creature with the bow of his ship²³ in much the same way as the HMS Thunder Child attempts to destroy a Martian Tripod (116).

At the conclusion of the novel, the Martian invasion ends abruptly when the Martians fall victim to “. . . the putrefactive and disease bacteria which their systems were unprepared . . . ”(164). Discussion group criticism focussed in on a perceived narratively unsatisfying nature to the ending, with humanity not having a hand in the Martian defeat²⁴. However, the ending is in keeping with the book’s wider themes. *The War of the Worlds* is not a story of triumph. Though Mars bears the name of the Roman god of war²⁵, this is not war as man knows it²⁶. The fact that the Martians are only marginally affected by the most technologically advanced products of the human world, such as the HMS Thunder Child (118-119), but can be obliterated by a simple fact of nature displays the unwavering strength of the evolutionary process.

The ending is also effective in the way that it challenges the hierarchical misconception of evolutionary theory, where evolution is perceived as an inevitable march of progress, and living beings are ‘more evolved’ or ‘less evolved’ than one another²⁷. Though the Martians in all of their power may perceive humanity as “. . . lowly as the monkeys and lemurs are to us [humanity].” (38), their end at the hands of “. . . the humblest things that God, in all his wisdom, has put upon this earth.” (164) casts humans and Martians as ultimately alike in their vulnerability at the mercy of their environment. This ending conveys the nuances contained within Charles Darwin’s phrase “. . . survival of the fittest . . . ”²⁸, where the fittest is not automatically the most violent, but the one most adapted to the challenges of their environment in the “. . . incessant struggle for existence . . . ” (37) that is life.

²³ H.P Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu,” in *Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P Lovecraft*, ed. Les Edwards (London: Gollancz, 2008), 224

²⁴ Katharine Cockin, "Book Review Discussion" LT364-6 Cyborgs, Clones and the Rise of the Robots: Science Fiction (class discussion, University of Essex, Colchester, November 11th, 2022). The ending was a point of discussion during class. Though some of the group did not enjoy the ending because of the lack of a human participation in the Martian defeat, I defended it on the grounds that a successful human resistance by force would go against the book’s themes.

²⁵ Marcia Dunn, “Named for Roman God of War, Mars Isn’t Very Kind to Visitors,” *phys.org*, November 23, 2018, <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-roman-god-war-mars-isnt.html>.

²⁶ Katharine Cockin, "Book Review Discussion" LT364-6 Cyborgs, Clones and the Rise of the Robots: Science Fiction (class discussion, University of Essex, Colchester, November 11th, 2022). We discussed the mythological significance of the name of Mars in class, and forged connections between the imagery of the Martians sheltering in their pit on Horsell Common, and a mythological gladiatorial arena. We decided that the unfair advantage of the heat ray subverted the expectations of a gladiatorial arena as a place of honourable combat, symbolising the idea that war with Martians is not war as men understand it.

²⁷ Berkley University of California and UC Museum of Palaeontology, “Misconceptions about Evolution - Understanding Evolution,” Misconceptions about evolution, September 19, 2021, <https://evolution.berkeley.edu/teach-evolution/misconceptions-about-evolution/#a3>.

²⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868; repr., New York: Appleton, 1900), 65, <https://archive.org/details/variationofanim02darw>.

Experiments conducted in 1903 by J.E. Evans and E.W. Maunder suggested that the Martian canals of Schiaparelli and Lowell were likely to be optical illusions²⁹, and the eventual 1975 landing of the Viking 1 rover confirmed this fact through its images of an utterly barren Martian landscape³⁰. Though the turn of the century scientific speculation inspired influential works of science fiction like *The War of the Worlds*, it was all ultimately confined to the realm of literature and the imagination. To perhaps the relief of humanity, there are no Martian canals, no advancing Tripods, and definitely no little green gondoliers.

Despite the fact that the culture of astronomical speculation that inspired it has long since given way to a more subdued understanding of the red planet, H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* remains a powerful presence in modern culture, with iconic adaptations such as the 1938 radio drama by Orson Welles³¹ and Steven Spielberg's 2005 film adaptation³² continuously refreshing its relevancy long after its utopian contemporaries have faded into relative obscurity.

²⁹ J. E. Evans and E. W. Maunder, "Experiments as to the Actuality of the 'Canals' Observed on Mars," *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 63, no. 8 (June 12, 1903): 488–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mnras/63.8.488>.

³⁰ NASA, "Viking 1 Lander Mission Page," [nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov](https://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/imgcat/html/mission_page/MR_Viking_1_Lander_page1.html), July 15, 2015, https://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/imgcat/html/mission_page/MR_Viking_1_Lander_page1.html.

³¹ Orson Welles and John Houseman, "The Mercury Theatre on the Air: The War of the Worlds" (CBS Radio Network, October 30, 1938).

³² *War of the Worlds*, dir. Steven Spielberg, feat. Tom Cruise, Dakota Fanning (Paramount, 2005).

Appendix 1 - The War Of The Worlds Book Review Essay Plan

Growing Scientific Interest In Mars, and Erroneous Belief In Martian Life: Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli attempted to map the surface of Mars in 1877, noticing what appeared to be channels on its surface. When his work was translated into English, the Italian word “canali” was mistranslated as canal instead of channel, erroneously suggesting purpose-built structures made by intelligent life³³.

This inspired the research of American astronomer Percival Lowell, who wrote the book *Mars and its Canals*³⁴ (Published 1906, but consisting of research conducted from 1895 onwards³⁵). He wrote that Mars possessed plants, speculating that dark spots on the planet were locations of dense seasonal vegetation³⁶ (reminiscent of the red creeper that Wells wrote about in *The War of the Worlds*), and intelligent life forms who built the canals for “the husbanding of water”; transferring it from the polar ice caps during their semi-annual melting and across the otherwise dry surface of the planet³⁷.

Wells represents the scientific interest towards Mars through the characters of Ogilvy, Henderson, and Trent, and uses the characters to demonstrate what would happen if a man like Percival Lowell met Martians. Though they try to attempt first contact with the Martians through the means of a white flag, their group is killed instantly by the Martian heat ray, symbolic of the clash between the hopeful optimism of scientific speculation, and the unforgiving hardness of the Darwinian principle of “survival of the fittest.”

The Martians As A Precursor To Cosmic Horror: Cosmic Horror as a science fiction subgenre relies on the idea of fear for things beyond the human sphere of comprehension and influence. Though later and more genre-defining works such as H. P Lovecraft’s *The Call of Cthulhu*³⁸ take a more gothic and perhaps twistedly spiritual angle, Wells’s Martians are more grounded in the real, the scientifically plausible (or at least, what was considered scientifically plausible for the era), and the decidedly atheistic. Their horror comes from the fact that they are obviously very intelligent, yet totally beyond reason, empathy, or understanding. This ties into the horror that comes from the breaking of the Christian worldview that the universe was built for humanity, and the revelation of an ambivalent cosmos; something represented by the character of the Curate and his mental breakdown.

The Strengths And Weaknesses Of The Abrupt Ending: At the end of the novel, the Martian invasion ends when the Martians die of diseases they were not prepared for. Though it may seem narratively abrupt, and perhaps a little unsatisfying to the reader, the ending is in keeping with the book’s themes. *The War of The Worlds* is not a book about triumph and victory; it is a book about the “. . . incessant struggle for existence³⁹ . . .” that is life. If humanity had managed to repel the Martians, or the Martians totally destroyed the humans, it would have defeated the point that they are both largely powerless to the force of the environment at large. It is also indicative of the idea that “survival of the fittest” does not automatically mean survival of the largest and most violent; the Martians are destroyed by small and hidden microbes much the same way the narrator and the surviving humans had to make themselves small and hidden to survive.

³³ Elena Canadelli, “‘SOME CURIOUS DRAWINGS’. MARS through GIOVANNI SCHIAPARELLI’S EYES: BETWEEN SCIENCE and FICTION,” *Nuncius* 24, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 439–64, <https://doi.org/10.1163/221058709x00646>.

³⁴ Percival Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals* (Massachusetts: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY, 1906).

³⁵ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, vii

³⁶ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, 127, 348-349

³⁷ Lowell, *Mars and Its Canals*, 366

³⁸ H. P Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Tales* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

³⁹ H G Wells and Andrew Frayn, *The War of the Worlds, the War in the Air : And Particularly How Mr Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2017). 37

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