

Martian Pictures: Analyzing the Cinema of the Red Planet



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AS a life-long Marsophile and having reviewed Robert Crossley's comprehensive *Imagining Mars: A Literary History* and *Visions of Mars: Essays on the Red Planet in Fiction and Science*, edited by Howard V. Hendrix, George Slusser, and Eric S. Rabkin, and having been drawn by this book's clever title, I jumped at the chance to read and review a new text on Martian cinema. However, the experience was not entirely satisfactory.

Martian Pictures is a collection of thirteen essays that are reworked versions of conference papers amalgamated into a single critical text. The chapters are subdivided into three parts: 'Exploring Mars,' 'Invaders from Mars,' and 'Mars and Society.' The main text is preceded by a short essay on the book's origins, a Preface and Introduction; a Martian filmography, an extensive list of references, and an index follow. Thirteen well-chosen black and white stills from film and TV illuminate the text.

Quoting several times from Hendrix et. al., the Introduction imagines Mars as a blank canvas onto which are projected images of human frailty and the precariousness of our planet's biosphere. These projections are shaped by the interaction between film and audience and the need for Hollywood to psyche out the audience in pursuit of success at the box office. If I am reading the authors' intentions accurately, then these points need further discussion and consistent reinforcement in the main text.

The chapters in Part One focus respectively on three major themes: the similarities between Martian and combat films., the role of deviant thinkers in bringing about successful missions, and the depiction of space agencies modeled on NASA. Chapter One is a rapid review of Martian film since WWII emphasizing the evolution of the genre from the Cold War-obsessed 1950's to the early twenty-first century with its extensive Martian exploration and societal fear that science is in danger of running amok. Chapters Two and Three focus on the role of the prevalence of non-conformist

characters that save the day, including those who thumb their noses at NASA, a situation best illustrated by *The Martian* (2015).

Although the topics are important and the theories employed to explore them interesting, the chapters do little to solidify the book's central themes and are not user-friendly. Phrases like “as mentioned above” (32), “as mentioned in Chapter One” (36), or “as mentioned earlier” (42) occur far too frequently, especially when accompanied by lengthy plot summary without many strong transitional sentences between paragraphs. Repetitive plot summary is an issue throughout the book.

The three chapters in Part Two are loosely connected by the theme of Martian invasion. Chapter four considers the Martian as Other. Of note is the discussion of how the perennially hostile Martians of films like *Invaders from Mars* (1986) and *Independence Day* (1996) contrast with Martians as mirror images of ourselves in the 1980 TV adaptation of *The Martian Chronicles* and Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005). Chapter five offers an engaging treatment of serials in general and *Zombies of the Stratosphere* (1952) in particular. I do not know why 1938's *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars* is not included since it would fit here very well. Chapter Six does what the book does best, apply theory—in this case mythic criticism—to Martian texts. The Prometheus myth has played a key role in SF since *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* gave birth to the genre in 1818. The film chosen for discussion is *Prometheus* (2012), which has nothing to do with Mars. The argument is that there are Martian films that also rely on the myth but not as well as *Prometheus* does.

The third section consists of seven chapters, more than half the book's total. Topics include class, gender, climate and comedy, among others. Chapter Seven is an ambitious discussion of feminist utopia/dystopia, especially the stories of Eve and Lilith, and their application to Martian films. The individual film discussions are convincing, as is the chapter's conclusion. The brief chapter on climate (eight) celebrates the few Martian films that are concerned with environmental issues. Think about Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy and you will get a good idea of just how much richer print SF is when it comes to climate.

Total Recall figures in two chapters, one of which is about capitalist exploitation and the other of which focuses on Philip K. Dick's short story “We Can Remember it for You Wholesale” (1966) and the 2012 remake of the 1990 film. The authors see the ending of the 1990 film as a victory over capitalist hegemony, which I think is too simple a reading of this rhetorically complex movie and its final scientifically farcical

or dream-like scene.

The chapter on Mars and religion (ten) is consequential. Much of the discussion concerns Ray Bradbury's classic novel *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and the 1980 mini-series derived from it. The authors recognize the genius of Bradbury's text and never claim that the TV version is its equal. The authors tell us that Bradbury called the 1980 production "boring," a judgement with which it is difficult to quarrel, then write that "for our purposes, the religious themes and messages of the book and series are relatively similar, so perhaps major differences in other respects are not necessarily important" (156). I disagree; the other differences are quite important; however, the discussion of the Father Peregrine episode—a filmic representation of "The Fire Balloons"—and the transformation of a hapless Martian into a suffering Christ is well done. These events are more effectively adapted than are most of the installments in the mini-series.

Although *Martian Pictures* does a good job of cataloging a large number of video productions, some quite obscure, the book has a rhetorical looseness that a unified critical text should not have. In this sense, it has not made the complete transition from a collection of conference papers to finished critical book. There is much to be learned here about the fascinating filmic history of Mars, but the book really should have had one more round of editing for clarity.