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Lies from Outer Space: The Martians' Famous Invasion of New Jersey

Alessandra Calanchi alessandra.calanchi@uniurb.it
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

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ABSTRACT – Over the course of time, people have been told many lies concerning the Red Planet. Maybe the most renowned one dates back to the late 1880s, when, owing to an error in translation, scientists were led to believe in the existence of canals on its surface – *canals* instead of *channels* – which meant that Mars must be inhabited. More recently, in 1976, a lively discussion arose about the "face on Mars", something that was spotted by the Viking 2 spacecraft in the region of Cydonia and was later dismissed as a *mesa* whose unusual shadows had cheated the eye. But the biggest lie of all was told in 1938, when a young actor (Orson Welles) decided to play a Halloween trick with the help of the then-rising medium – the radio. It was not really a *lie* in the strictest sense of the term. It was not a *hoax* or a *fake*, either – it was, in narratological terms, what is commonly called the *suspension of disbelief* pushed to its extreme. In this essay I am going to reconsider this event mainly in the light of two main conditions concerning lying, namely untruthfulness and the intention to deceive. Our specific case is further complicated by a third factor, that is the fact that somebody lies to someone who is believed to be listening in but who is not being addressed. I will also highlight the aftermath of this mass deception which, despite being followed by a number of disclaimers, actually overturned the utopian portrait of Martians, initiating a long literary and filmic theory of alien invasions.

KEYWORDS – Martians; Orson Welles; radio; America; lying.

1. From Utopia to dystopia

(The) [1] *War of the Worlds* is not only a much-discussed case of social panic, but an outstanding example of transmedia storytelling. As the story goes, a harmless drama was perceived by thousands of people as real life, thus becoming an unprecedented case study for psychologists, sociologists, and

[1] The article was originally used by Welles, then it has generally dropped.

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mass-media scholars in the years to come. Still today, after almost a century, this drama poses interesting questions about deception and self-deception, illusion, forgery, fake news, and manipulation.

It all started with the above-mentioned novel by Herbert George Wells, whose instalments were published in England (and simultaneously in the USA) in 1897 in *Pearson's Magazine*. It was published as a volume in 1898. It is considered the first novel which tells of a war between terrestrial beings and alien creatures and, quite predictably, it is imbued with colonialist rhetoric, social Darwinism, and strong religious feelings (Calanchi 2013, 2019). Also, it encouraged imitative works, pastiches, and adaptations, among which Orson Welles's *The War of the Worlds* (the famous radio drama which is the object of this essay) in 1938 (Welles 1938); the film *The War of the Worlds* aka *H. G. Wells's The War of the Worlds*, directed by Byron Haskin in 1953, where "although the Martian base is near Los Angeles, no one seems worried about collateral damage"; and the film *War of the Worlds* directed by Steven Spielberg in 2005, where "invaders aren't necessarily Martians; they may come from further away" (Perkowitz 2007, 96, 25).

It is interesting to point out that in the US of the late19th and early 20th century Mars was considered a sort of utopian place, where people lived in peace and harmony, in a society that did not know gender bias, class inequalities, or racism. Some examples are the following, all of them published between 1891 and 1911: *The Man from Mars* by William Simpson (1891), *Messages from Mars, By the Aid of the Telescope Plant* by Robert D. Braine (1892), *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *A Cityless and Countryless World* by Henry Olerich (1893), *Daybreak: The Story of an Old World* by James Cowan (1896), *Edison's Conquest of Mars* by Garrett P. Serviss (1898), *To Mars With Tesla; or, the Mystery of the Hidden World* by J. Weldon Cobb (1901), *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars. Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd* by Louis Pope Gratacap (1903), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1903), *Lieut. Gullivar Jones: His Vacation* by Edwin Lester Linden Arnold (1905), *Decimon Huydas: A Romance of Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1906), *The Lunarian Professor and His Remarkable Revelations Concerning the Earth, the Moon and Mars* by James B. Alexander (1909), *The Man from Mars, or Service for Service's Sake* by Henry Wallace Dowding (1910), *Through Space to Mars, or The Longer Journey on Record* by Roy Rockwood (1910), *Ralph 124C 41+ A Romance of the Year 2660* by Hugo Gernsback (1911), *To Mars via the Moon: An Astronomical Story* by Mark Wicks (1911).

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It was Wells's book in the UK and Welles's radio drama in the US that totally changed perspectives. Portraying Martians as "the archetype of all remorseless invaders, […] the dark, nightmarish underside of a modernist ideology that places its faith in science, technology, and progress" (Markley 2005, 206) meant that the time for romantic utopia was over, and a new kind of storytelling started to spread. In 1887, Wells's romance came to embody the *fin-de-siècle* psychosis about a feared world war (a nightmare which came true). Preceded as it was "by two decades of intense speculation about Mars and Martians" (*ibid.*, 115), it radically turned utopia into dystopia: "the terror induced by Wells' Martians in 1898 and their offshoots (such as Orson Welles's invaders in 1938) stems from their absolute alienness, their lack of a recognizable psychology, sociology, or politics" and even "insatiable lust to consume human blood" (*ibid.*, 123-24). The alien invaders brought along something which looked and sounded even worse than a war:

> […] the apocalyptic present that it depicts contains an anamorph in the form of the Martians themselves. These aliens – shapeless masses that "heaved and pulsated convulsively" – are the anamorphic stain on Wells' portrait of *fin-de-siècle* England. "Vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous", they are the element of the *unheimlich* excavated in England's so-called home counties. The Martians inspire "disgust and dread" in the protagonist when he sees them creeping from "the Thing" in which they have landed, and in an insane panic he attempts to make an escape – "but I ran slantingly and stumbling", he reports, "for I could not avert my face from these things". That slanting movement, caused by an obscene fascination with the aliens, perfectly describes the anamorphic perspective that this archetypal science fiction instates. (Beaumont 2009, 40)

In 1938, 23-year-old Orson Welles's radio drama took place within the Federal Theatre Project, launched by president Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. It was an adaptation of Wells's novel to be broadcast in the radio series *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* on Halloween night. The fears expressed by British writers some decades before had proved justified – no Martians had actually landed on Earth, but a world war had been fought. Now, in the late 1930s, new fears were approaching, and the risk of a second world war was tangible. Social and cultural life in the United States was getting better after the Great Depression thanks to the New Deal, and yet, the news arriving from Europe was not reassuring – Hitler was invading countries, and Italians were colonizing north Africa.

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At the same time, the radio was becoming the most popular medium for both propaganda and entertainment:

> Albert Einstein, when asked, in 1938, to explain radio, is widely reported to have said: "You see, wire telegraph is a kind of very, very long cat. You pull his tail in New York and his head is meowing in Los Angeles. Do you understand this? And radio operates exactly the same way: you send signals here, they receive them there. The only difference is that there is no cat." (in *A Short History of Radio*, 2003-04)

2. A STUDY IN LYING

While it soon became clear that "radio aesthetics influenced social opinion" (Sheppard 2013), the Halloween trick gave Princeton researchers the opportunity to check their theories. By interviewing several people, they learned that "they had not been listening very closely, but disruptions to the familiarity of the broadcast in the form of news flashes made them so terrified that they forgot what they had heard just a few minutes before" (*ibid.*). As Hadley Cantril later summarized,

> On the evening of October 30, 1938, thousands of Americans became panic-stricken by a broadcast purported to describe an invasion of Martians which threatened our whole civilization. Probably never before have so many people in all walks of life and in all parts of the country become so suddenly and so intensely disturbed as they did on this night.
> Such rare occurrences provide opportunities for the social scientist to study mass behavior. The fact that this panic was created as a result of a radio broadcast is today no mere circumstance. The importance of radio's role in current national and international affairs is too well known to be recounted here. By its very nature radio is the medium *par excellence* for informing all segments of a population of current happenings, for arousing in them a common sense of fear or joy, and for exciting them to similar reactions directed toward a single objective. […] At least six million people heard the broadcast. At least a million of them were frightened or disturbed. For weeks after the broadcast, newspapers carried human-interest stories relating the shock and terror of local citizens. (1954, 411-12)

Beyond the effect of reality inherent in the medium, these comments show an extra authority lent by the Institutions quoted – Princeton University, the Army, and the Government:

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> "I believed the broadcast as soon as I heard the professor from Princeton and the officials in Washington."
> "I knew it was an awfully dangerous situation when all those military men were there and the Secretary of State spoke." (*ibid.*, 414)

As was later observed,

> Many of the respondents testify both to a faith in authority figures – the "scientists" and "government officials" interviewed early in the broadcast – that overwhelmed any willing suspension of disbelief and to the ability of radio to create a sense of the "reality" of events. […] Another declared, "If so many astronomers saw the explosions [on Mars], they must have been real." (Markley 2005, 205)

It is a fact that "Tuning in late was very decisive in determining whether or not the listener would follow the program as a play or as a news report" (Cantril 1954, 416), for instance the discontinuous level of attention during the program, the fact of knowing the original novel or not, and the habit of following the program or not. Panic was therefore caused by a series of variants, plus pre-existing fears and emotional fragility:

> We have found that many of the persons who did not even try to check the broadcast had pre-existing mental sets that made the stimulus so understandable to them that they immediately accepted it as true. Highly religious people who believed that God willed and controlled the destinies of man were already furnished with a particular standard of judgment that would make an invasion of our planet and a destruction of its members merely an "act of God." This was particularly true if the religious frame of reference was of the eschatological variety providing the individual with definite attitudes or beliefs regarding the end of the world. Other people we found had been so influenced by the recent war scare that they believed an attack by a foreign power was imminent and an invasion – whether it was due to the Japanese, Hitler, or Martians was not unlikely. […] The prolonged economic unrest and the consequent insecurity felt by many of the listeners was another cause for bewilderment. The depression had already lasted nearly ten years. People were still out of work. Why didn't somebody do something about it? Why didn't the experts find a solution? What was the cause of it anyway? Again, what would happen, no one could tell. Again, a mysterious invasion fitted the pattern of the mysterious events of the decade. The lack of a sophisticated, relatively stable economic or political frame of reference created in many persons a psychological disequilibrium which made them seek a standard of judgment for this particular event. (*ibid.*, 419-21)

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Some commentators interpreted panic as the demonstration that the US were not ready for a war – "If Americans had fled like children before a joke, what would happen in the case of a real invasion?" (Higham 1985, 128) – while others pointed out that even a friendly presence such as the radio "was capable of deceiving and deliberately lying" ("era capace di ingannare e deliberatamente di mentire"; Fink 1998, 208). More recently, journalist Annie Jacobsen, in her dossier entitled *Area 51*, wrote: "Just two weeks before, Adolf Hitler's troops had invaded Czechoslovakia, leaving the security of Europe unclear […] Death rays and Martians may have been pure science fiction in 1938 but the concepts played on people's fears of invasion and annihilation" (2011, 21). It is worthwhile to remember that only ten days later (November 9-10, 1938) the *Kristallnacht* or the Night of Broken Glass would occur, the terrifying *pogrom* against Jews carried out by paramilitary forces and civilians throughout the whole of Nazi Germany.

Other radio dramas preceded *War of the Worlds* in The Mercury Theatre on the Air series. Each of them lasted 60 minutes and they were interrupted from time to time by commercials. The scripts included *Treasure Island*, *Dracula*, and *The Invisible Man*, yet no pirates, vampires, or bodiless entities caused any panic or hallucinatory reaction in the audience. Why, then, did so many people believe what they heard – that is, that Martians were invading New Jersey? Who was responsible for this? Who was to blame? Maybe Orson Welles, later called "The Man from Mars" (Callow 2006) and "the man who caused the Mars panic" (Naremore 1978, 20)? As a matter of fact, he was not alone – he had worked together with Howard Koch. They had the idea of structuring the first part of the drama as a fake news program, gradually leading the audience to believe that what they were listening to was really happening outside.

Nonetheless, the listeners were informed as many as four times that what they were hearing was pure fantasy, and at the end of the program Welles himself reassured them that no invasion was really taking place. Besides, the name of the radio station (Intercontinental Radio) was absolutely imaginary. In spite of all this, the *illusion* of reality won over common sense, and the idea that Martians were marching on Manhattan was not perceived as a *lie*. It must be added that the names of scientists and academicians sounded real because they were very similar to real and renowned names, and that at the very last moment "The cries of the advancing Martians, '*Ulla, Ulla, Ulla*', were […] deleted because CBS thought they sounded too terrifying" (Brady 1989, 167).

Many authors described "the panic rush for shelter, the heart attacks, the suicide attempts, the miscarriages" (Taylor 1986, 39), or the people "speeding

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along highways to try to distance themselves from the Martian menace" (Berg 2003, 407). The *New York Times* received 875 telephone calls and commented on the first page "RADIO LISTENERS IN PANIC, TAKING WAR DRAMA AS FACT", while the *New York Daily News* wrote in block letters: "FAKE RADIO 'WAR' STIRS TERROR THROUGH U.S." (Brady 1989, 173).

It is undeniable that Welles could rely on a "fascinating, hypnotic voice" (Salotti 1978, 12), but "in adapting the book for a radio play, Welles made an important change: under his direction the play was written and performed so it would sound like a news broadcast about an invasion from Mars, a technique that, presumably, was intended to heighten the dramatic effect" (Sanes, n.d.). At the same time, "he and Koch […] were trying not only to grip the listener but to joke about the power of radio itself" (Naremore 1978, 25). The fact that the audience believed what they heard but did not see made them "responsible for what they thought they saw" (Conrad 2003, 112) with the complicity of the wireless medium. Many years later Marshall McLuhan would define the radio as a "tribal drum", saying that "it attuned and synchronised the central nervous systems of the people who listened, creating a state of trance" (in Conrad 2003, 111). As a consequence, "the battery of special effects […]: hissings and hummings from the spaceship, the clanking of extra-terrestrial metal, the coughing of pilots flying through suffocating smoke, and the thud of bodies hitting the floor" (*ibid.*, 118) were all self-evident lies, but they were not perceived as such.

3. Lie after lie

The program opens with the speaker announcing that CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) is going to present *War of the Worlds*, inspired by the novel by H. G. Wells. Soon after that, Welles delivers a speech as if talking from the future: "We know now that in the early years of the twentieth century this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal than his own" (Welles 1990, 20). Now the story can start: "In the thirty-ninth year of the twentieth century […] near the end of October […]" (*ibid.*, 22) [2].

[2] See also https://www.wellesnet.com/the-war-of-the-worlds-radio-script/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzC3Fg_rRJM.

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The metafictional aspect of the *lie* is present from the very beginning. Welles is not talking about the novel, nor about Mars or the aliens, but about his own audience: "thirty-two million people were listening in on radios" (*ibid.*). It is an interesting variant of the "once upon a time" incipit of fairy tales, with a major difference: the listeners are the protagonists of the story, they are *inside* the story, they *are* the story. Or rather – this is the case for the listeners who have already tuned in, since the listeners who will turn the radio on later may be incapable of distinguishing between reality and fiction, truth and lie.

Another trap is set by the musical score and by the weather report, which have the double aim of relaxing and distracting the audience while preparing them for the (fake) breaking news that follows (Menduni 2018). Then we have Welles again, this time embodying a professor Pierson at Princeton University, who denies any possibility of life on the Red Planet and adds that nothing unusual is visible on its surface. Thanks to his role, he is perceived as an authority (as is the case with the State Secretary later on). The second person who is interviewed is a farmer, and he is considered reliable because he is an ear-witness: "Then you saw something?" "Not first off. I heard something […] a hissing sound. Like this ssssss… kinda like a fourt' of July rocket" (Welles 1990, 48). Obviously, there are no professors nor farmers, only actors, but the lie must go on – and so it does.

The first portrait we have of an extra-terrestrial invader – "The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent. The mouth is V-shaped with saliva dripping from its rimless lips that seem to quiver and pulsate" – is soon followed by the awareness that "those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invading army from the planet Mars" (*ibid.*, 58, 80). From now on the drama becomes a commentary whose rhythm betrays mounting excitement:

> Communication lines are down from Pennsylvania to the Atlantic Ocean. Railroad tracks are torn and service from New York to Philadelphia discontinued except routing some of the trains through Allentown and Phoenixville. […] By morning the fugitives will have swelled Philadelphia, Camden and Trenton, it is estimated, to twice their normal population. […] We take you now to Washington for a special broadcast on the National Emergency […] (*ibid.*, 82-84)

The values of the nations are evoked (*unity*, *supremacy*) while people die "like rats" or "like flies" (*ibid.*, 110-12). The fictionality of the play is stated again – "You are listening to a CBS presentation of Orson Welles and the

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Mercury Theatre on the Air […] The performance will continue after a brief intermission […]" (*ibid.*, 112-14) but is shortly forgotten as soon as *fake* news arrives from *real* places – Langham Field, Virginia; Basking Ridge, New Jersey; Morristown; Watchung Mountains; Middlesex; Plainfield; Winston Field, Long Island; Bayonne; Newark; New York City. Professor Pierson then makes a sad monologue:

> As I set down these notes on paper, I'm obsessed by the thought that I may be the last living man on earth. […] All that happened before the arrival of these monstrous creatures in the world now seems part of another life… a life that has no continuity with the present, furtive existence of the lonely derelict who pencils these words on the back of some astronomical notes bearing the signature of Richard Pierson. (*ibid.*, 114-16)

He does not appear to be holding a microphone, but a pencil. It is the premise of what we might call Welles's *poetics of the fragment*, a journey that will start with his first movie, *Citizen Kane*, completely built on a single name, "Rosebud", and end with his last one, *F for Fake*, whose title recalls a single letter of the alphabet (Calanchi 2019). While Pierson's *signature* is his only heritage, it will be thanks only to this scrap of paper that he is able to re-establish contact with his listeners. In other words, it is only by turning them into readers again that he can make the story (and history) proceed: "In writing down my daily life I tell myself I shall preserve human history between the dark covers of this little book that was meant to record the movements of the stars" (Welles 1990, 116-18).

After a while, Pierson meets another survivor who tries to convince him to live underground and form a new race of superior men: "You and me and a few more of us we'd own the world" (*ibid.*, 140). But he is not interested in such a crazy proposal – which is, by the way, dangerously similar to the Nazi project. Here the *lie* regarding Martians reveals its hidden *truth*, which Welles does not explicitly formulate but leaves on the ground in the form of an implicit question: *who is the real enemy of humankind*? The following scene, with aliens defeated by bacteria, has the quality of an epiphany: "there, before my eyes, stark and silent, lay the Martians, with the hungry birds pecking and tearing brown shreds of flesh from their dead bodies" (*ibid.*, 146). Martians have ceased to be predators and have become victims in turn, now looking almost human. As Perkowitz writes, "In all versions of *The War of the Worlds*, the Martians go down because they're susceptible to earthly bacteria, which implies anatomical similarities between the two species" (2007, 45).

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The drama ends with a reverie: professor Pierson, sitting in his study at Princeton, looks out of the window and recalls the "remote dream" of Martian invasion (Welles 1990, 148). This is the last lie we meet, which is particularly intriguing since we do not know whom he is speaking to – himself? The audience? The future generations (inside and outside the story)? In any case, we know he is not a university professor but an actor. The story is then concluded by some music followed by Welles's voice recalling the listeners that it was just a joke:

> This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen, out of character to assure you that the "War of the Worlds" has no further significance than as the holiday offering it was intended to be… […] and remember, please, for the next day or so, the terrible lesson you learned tonight.
> That grinning, glowing, globular invader of your living-room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and nobody's there, that was no Martian…
> It's Halloween! (MUSIC). (*ibid.*, 150-52)

It is interesting to observe that the joke/lie is now called a "holiday offering" [3] and a "lesson". Through this early example of *edutainment*, Welles is therefore asking his audience to remember that news arrives "across an immense ethereal gulf" (*ibid.*, 20) which is not Outer Space, but the wireless. Welles' (unwilling?) teaching method is definitely inductive and experiential. This is also an evidence of the didactic potential of theatre, and of the radio as educational tool.

Three years later, with his first movie (*Citizen Kane*, 1941), he will deal again and more radically with the influence of information in mass society, exposing its manipulatory power and social tyranny. Here, on the contrary, the media can lie, as we have seen, but can also reveal the truth – that is, the horror of an oncoming world war. A later version of the story (*The War of the Worlds*, 1953) shows that the real enemies are not "the invading Martians themselves, who are glimpsed only briefly and appear as relatively frail creatures" but "malevolent power seekers. Their film presentation as 'Martians' – at a time when 'alien' Chinese and North Koreans were battling Americans in the skies over Korea and even more frighteningly faceless technicians on both sides of the Iron Curtain were assumed to be preparing nuclear Doomsday

[3] Quite interestingly, the word "offering" also means "theatrical presentation" in American English.

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Machines for Armageddon – is simply a question of cosmetics" (Tomkins 1978, 23-24).

The "cosmetics" also includes an "orgy of technicolored destruction" (Gifford 1971, 81), the cherry that tops "the most resounding attack from space in all science fiction", also called "atomic-age Martian holocaust" (Strick 1976, 10-12). Again, the double quality of the story (lie/truth) is marked by another change of place: we are not in New Jersey but in California, corresponding to changed geopolitics. If England was *the* superpower at the end of the 19th century, and Wells had chosen London as the final target of Martian destruction because it was the "capital city of the most powerful country on the planet, headquarters of an empire" (Crossley 2011, 118), in the 1930s the core of progress and modernity is undoubtedly Manhattan, with its skyscrapers projected towards the future like rockets:

> Orson Welles sought American equivalents to that sense of journalistic immediacy with dispatches from Princeton University, reports of black smoke pouring through Times Square, and the view of a gigantic Martian machine in Central Park. (Hollings 2008, 115)

In reality, as Crossley reminds us, the person who had the idea of moving the action to America was not Pal, nor Welles. The novel was first published in instalments in *Pearson's Magazine* in Great Britain and in the *Cosmopolitan* in the United States. When the *New York Journal* and the *Boston Post* asked for the rights to republish it between the end of 1897 and the beginning of 1898, Wells accepted, but he was not informed that the geography would be altered:

> New Yorkers reading their evening papers learned about the Martians' sacking of such landmarks as the Brooklyn Bridge, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Columbia University Library, and Grant's Tomb. In Boston, readers could track the invasion from Concord to Lexington to Waltham before the Martians headed for Boston Harbor and the industrial center of the city. (Crossley 2011, 116)

In the 1950s, the post-Pearl Harbor and post-Hiroshima years, California comes to represent, in turn, the focal point of a system that has been attacked and symbolically becomes the best target for Martian invasions:

> Initially mistaken for fireballs or meteors, their spaceships choose neither to land on earth nor to crash into it. Instead they slam down upon the rural terrain, quickly transforming the California countryside into an arid wasteland that even

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> the animals are soon fleeing. […] The Martians continue to widen their area of devastation, as if trying to transform the whole of Earth into a vast desert. […] the atomic strike against the Martians looks remarkably like an AEC test being carried out in the Nevada desert. (Hollings 2008, 100)

This is a post-atomic version of the *wasteland*, but also of the *wilderness*:

> Home to the crashed saucer and beloved of the Martian invader, the desert continues to exert its powerful hold over the popular imagination, becoming a favored location in which to meet representatives from other worlds […] Encounters with beings from other worlds tend to isolate the individuals involved, stranding them in a cultural desert […] The Martian invaders in *The War of the Worlds* love the dry wilderness so much that they bring it with them, as if attempting to re-create conditions on their home planet wherever they go. […] "out there" is rapidly becoming "out here." (*ibid.*, 103-06)

Alien invasions ensued and multiplied during the cold war and beyond, preparing the path for *our* invasion of Mars. The current projects of terraforming, the rovers sent onto the Red Planet, and the various investments in space economy are a sort of legitimate defense against all those invasions we only feared, but which have put down roots in the human imagination. Ironically, the finale of the drama depicts terrestrial bacteria winning over the Martians, whereas in real life bacteria have turned against humans.

Ultimately, if Welles did tell us a lie, it was that humans must fear Martians – the truth being that humans must fear themselves. But that this *lie* helped to construct and reinforce the project of space colonization, is an inescapable truth.

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