

'The Martian' rewrites 1950s space-race politics

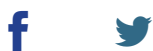


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In **Ridley Scott's "The Martian,"** an astronaut is accidentally left behind on Mars. His struggle to survive while a rescue is planned drives the plot forward, with plenty of tension and action along the way, against a background of lavishly photographed effects and sets. Culturally, this epic movie hits a lot of the same buttons as the original round of golden-age space-race films from the 1950s, but this time the colonialism and paternalism is left behind at liftoff.

The year 1952 was a good one for space. Collier's magazine, an American general-interest publication read by millions, printed several stories that year under a broad theme: "Man Will Conquer Space Soon." The series was a how-to for human space exploration, advocating for an orbiting telescope, a reusable space plane, a permanent space station, and a trip to the moon. This set of stories was created at the suggestion and coordination of ex-Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, who would later design and oversee the Saturn V rocket program that would land Americans on the moon in 1969.

Historians of space science still refer to this step-by-step process that eventually led to the International Space Station as "the von Braun Paradigm." The stories and illustrations in Collier's played no small part in making all of this happen. Von Braun would develop these ideas into a series of popular books over the next few years and, in appearances with Walt himself on the TV show "Disneyland" in 1955, present them as a short film called "Man in Space." Illustrator Chesley Bonestell, who co-created many of the iconically sleek spacecraft for the magazine with von Braun, would also design sets, scenes, and effects for classic films about science, space, hope, exploration, and apocalypse including "Destination Moon," "War of the Worlds," "Conquest of Space," and "When Worlds Collide." The influence of the Collier's "Space" series on popular American culture, and the subsequent golden age in science fiction, is frequently cited by NASA rocket scientists from this generation as having a considerable impact on their later interest in space exploration, and on public support for the space program.

Some 60 years later, the Space Shuttle is now retired, and the American space program is dependent on its old space-race adversary Russia for rides up to the International Space Station, which is scheduled to be abandoned in less than a decade. The von Braun road map has been thrown out, but pop culture is moving forward anyway. Such films as Alfonso Cuarón's "Gravity" in 2013, Christopher Nolan's "Interstellar" in 2014, and "The Martian" are charting new paths to space for new audiences in a new generation, and they're dismantling and critiquing the old paradigms and plans along the way.

When von Braun and his collaborators Walt Disney, Chesley Bonestell, and filmmaker George Pal refer to "Man" in their titles, it's clear that there's something more literal meant by that word than a simple stand-in for humanity at large. In these magazine stories, television shows, books, and films, the folks "conquering" space are all men, and white men, at that. The heroes are no-nonsense, fast-talking engineers, mechanics, and pilots. Space is a new frontier, and we Americans have to claim and take control of this high ground before our enemies do.

"Gravity" makes quick work of dealing with this. It's not a spoiler to point out that within that film's first 10 minutes, most of the American space program, including the Space Shuttle, is destroyed, along with most of the men in the movie. Left without a plan, the film's female protagonist has to make her way back down to

Earth by remaining present and adaptable to constantly changing situations. In "Interstellar," the American space program has to be rebuilt in secret to save Earth, in a scenario not unlike 1951's "When Worlds Collide," produced by George Pal and designed by Chesley Bonestell. The hero in "Interstellar" turns out to be not the absent father astronaut, but the physicist daughter back on Earth, putting the clues together that will allow her and all of humanity to make new worlds.

If we view these three movies as an unintentional trilogy, then it's "The Martian" that goes the furthest toward proposing a new model after von Braun for space exploration, one that's truly human, not just "manned."

That film places a white man, Mark Watney (played by Matt Damon, who also played a marooned astronaut, Dr. Mann, in "Interstellar"), back in the center of the action, but not for the reasons we're used to. This film has echoes of the 1955 George Pal/Chesley Bonestell collaboration, "Conquest of Space," also about a botanist stuck on Mars. Unlike that film, the central position of the white male scientist doesn't exist to foreground the triumph of paternalism and rationalism over new frontiers, but instead to show how science and the exploration of space is enabled by a whole network of diverse non-white, non-male scientists, working together in the background to anticipate and solve problems that the protagonist encounters.

Watney is the hero, but his character as written seems oblivious to all of the help he's constantly getting from women and people of color. His survival is detected by a woman planetary scientist, the effort to bring him home is coordinated by a black administrator along with a black expert in orbital mechanics (Rich Purnell, as played by Donald Glover, called, in traditional NASA fashion, a "steely eyed missile-man" in the script), and his rescue attempt is underwritten by his female mission commander (Melissa Lewis, played by Jessica Chastain) and a team of Chinese rocket scientists.

Through all of this, Watney acts like an endearingly clueless every-bro, a contemporary update of an appropriately manly astronaut from the moon-shot era. He tells his video diary that he intends to "science the shit" out of Mars, he proclaims himself to be a space pirate, and he observes with amazement that he's the first "guy" to do anything or go anywhere while stuck on this alien world. Watney says at one point: "I'm the first person to be alone on an entire planet," but we, the audience, know that this is not true. He has a whole team backing him up. Matt Damon's studied nonchalance in the face of his situation, played against the urgency with which his network of supporting actors is trying to find solutions for him, works better than the posthumous mansplaining in "Gravity," or the overwrought family drama in "Interstellar," to illustrate how a complex enterprise like space exploration actually works in the 21st century: No one is ever alone.

This setup also serves to finish, once and for all, the dismantling of the paternalistic, colonial von Braun

paradigm for the conquest of space. In this new era, we must make sense of space tourism, private enterprise, international cooperation, and the increasingly diverse cast of scientists and engineers that contribute to the project of space exploration.

Movies like this are hinting at the dawn of a new golden age in science-fiction cinema, inspiring audiences that never would have had access to these career paths in the 1950s and '60s. They are also helping to create new paradigms for thinking about the real, ongoing process of learning about the solar system, and coming to terms with the displacement of ourselves from the center of that system. "The Martian" welcomes in those other influences, and illustrates, for a new generation, that men, from Mars or not, need to understand how those influences have enabled their success in space.

"The Martian" is now playing in select theaters.

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