

“Life On Mars”
by Michael Lennick
(1950 words)

In my dreams, Mars keeps changing; gone are the verdant Barsoomian fields explored by John Carter and Princess Dejah Thoris in Edgar Rice Burroughs’s novels; the arid, canal-laced deserts that witnessed the final exodus of HG Wells’s desperate invaders; the mythical cities and false Ohio farmlands of Ray Bradbury’s *Chronicles*. As of this writing, the ancient Red Planet of our cultural dreams and nightmares has been under nearly fifty years of assault by science, reason, and an escalating armada of robotic emissaries, yet it manages to keep bouncing back more enthralling than ever. As science-fiction author Larry Niven once put it (in an introduction to some tales set within his own constantly changing Martian landscape), “If the space probes keep redesigning our planets, what can we do but write new stories?”

So it was quite surprising to view the 1964 film *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* for the first time in decades and find it scores most highly for its verisimilitude. Given the scarcity of information then available, the filmmakers did a remarkable job of representing some of the conditions on our nearest planetary neighbor, nearly a year before the first close-up views of the real Martian surface were beamed back by the NASA/JPL probe Mariner IV.

Screenwriter Ib Melchoir had already made a career of shifting comfortably between nuts n’ bolts reality-based SF (*Men Into Space*, *The Outer Limits*) and more fanciful monster fests like *Journey to the Seventh Planet* and his directorial debut, *The Angry Red Planet* (another entertaining Martian expedition, this one chock-full of ultra-nasty, astronaut-devouring beasties.) In preparing his heavily illustrated first draft screenplay for *RCOM*, a film he intended to direct, Melchoir was clearly seeking a middle ground; native plant and critter life galore, but this time in support of a lonely astronaut’s internal struggle. Conflicting projects forced Melchoir to drop out of *RCOM*, leading to a very different take on the material once director Byron (*War of the Worlds*) Haskin signed on.

When Melchoir wrote his original screenplay, the canal-strewn visions of nineteenth-century astronomer Percival Lowell were starting to wane, but still had power. (I remember our science teacher advising us that if there weren't any surviving Martians we'd just have to make do with the plant life and lower animal forms he and our textbooks were sure still inhabited the planet.) Lowell's ancient, dying Martian engineers inspired the first rocket pioneers, including Robert Goddard and Wernher von Braun, while giving rise to such early science-fiction literature as HG Wells's cautionary metaphor *The War of the Worlds*. In subsequent novels, television series, and especially movies, the planet took the blame for any number of terrifying attacks on small-town America, from the deeply disturbing visions (at least to this eight-year-old) of William Cameron Menzies's *Invaders from Mars*, all the way to a rather unfortunate 1964 cinematic attempt to kidnap Santa Claus in order to amuse a young, green-hued Pia Zadora. (All right, it was called *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*—though if you had to ask, you probably didn't need to know.)

By 1964 a new reality was starting to emerge. Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke had begun work on *2001: A Space Odyssey*, while the world was caught up in a superpower competition launched by a brash young president to land on the moon by decade's end—a farsighted, 21st-century dream that, at least in the minds of most science-fiction fans, would kick-start our inevitable egress to the planets and beyond. It was against this background that director Haskin and company began scouting Death Valley, California, for Martian locations, one week to the day after President Kennedy's funeral. Borrowing heavily from the designs, nomenclature, and jargon of NASA's upcoming Project Gemini two-man orbital training missions, the filmmakers set out to explore the challenge of surviving in an alien landscape, as realized high in the Death Valley mountaintops that had towered over so many westerns filmed in the valleys below. In an age that saw Daniel Defoe's original survival tale, as well as the accomplishments of the Space Race, played as high camp (*Gilligan's Island*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *It's About Time*), Haskin was setting out to create the adventure for real.

Haskin had directed some of the genre's most memorable epics in the fifties and early sixties (*War of the Worlds*, *Conquest of Space*, and several classic *Outer Limits* episodes including "Architects of Fear," "The Sixth Finger," and Harlan Ellison's "Demon with a Glass Hand"), but his career stretched back to the silent era (during which he worked as a cinematographer for D. W. Griffith) and included several years at Warner Brothers in the thirties and forties as head of visual effects, an arcane field he helped invent. That F/X background served Haskin well on *RCOM*, where he employed the clear skies over Death Valley as a natural blue screen, replacing the dazzling azure dome with a situation-specific variety of red and pastel skies that would look eerily familiar to anyone scanning the alien landscapes beamed back by the Viking landers a dozen years later. Indeed, Haskin's prophetic choice to portray Mars as a dead planet that kept unveiling new surprises continues to resonate, as our increasingly sophisticated robotic explorers transmit their streams of data and wondrous images back home.

Production values notwithstanding, what makes *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* hold up when most SF films of its day don't is the central compelling story, already 250 years old when Melchoir began his adaptation. Once the basic problems of survival and shelter had been solved, Daniel Defoe's classic eighteenth-century tale revealed itself to be about isolation and loneliness, and it's in those quiet moments that *RCOM* truly comes alive. Adam West's typically muggy acting in the film's opening scenes is far surpassed by his truly creepy and surreal materialization before our hallucinating hero late in the movie, while Victor Lundin provides a lovely, nuanced take on Defoe's Friday, now reconceived as an escaped intergalactic mining slave. But it's actor Paul Mantee as Commander Kit Draper who does most of the heavy lifting. Mantee (who bears a striking resemblance to Mercury astronaut Alan Shepard, America's first man in space) is on record as believing the film's challenges sometimes overwhelmed him at this early stage of his career, but he managed to strike a deft balance between the lightness and humor of his relationships—human, alien, and simian—in the first and third acts of the film, and his steely will to survive even the intractable sentence of solitary confinement the middle act imposes. Mantee has spoken at length of how tough these scenes were on him – endless days spent trying to convey the Draper's incremental triumphs and tragedies without anyone else on

set to play off of, a unique acting challenge made only slightly easier by his growing friendship with the animal actor hired to play his sole pre-Friday companion. (I recall wondering at the time why Mona the Woolly Monkey was credited only as “The Woolly Monkey”, but Mantee has cleared up the mystery. Turns out Mona was actually played by a talented young newcomer named Barney. I’d always felt sorry for the poor little critter, struggling with that incredibly uncomfortable-looking spacesuit and helmet, although Mantee has revealed Barney’s far nastier wardrobe accessory – the fur-covered diaper he was strapped into every morning to enable him to more accurately portray the winsome Mona. Clearly no method thespian he.)

Robinson Crusoe on Mars carries a heavy burden of contradictions and debatable ideas, apparent even to us impressionable kids way back when. One could discern a fairly strong religious subtext running throughout the film – and indeed, both disaster and a near-rhythmic series of salvations—heat, shelter, breathable air, food, and companionship—seem to pop into Draper’s life at just the right moments. Still, the real *deus ex machina* constantly felt in this movie is the thoughtfulness of the director, screenwriters, designers et al. Despite some notorious poster art, Draper is no ray gun-toting space adventurer (though he does pull out a nasty-looking revolver on a couple of occasions. Why were so many early movie astronauts packing heat?) In fact Draper’s tools and technology are some of the most impressive elements in the film, despite the occasional cognitive dissonance (e.g. such futuristic yet still somehow retro NASA technology as the Mars Gravity Probe orbital vehicle’s ultra-realistic functions being driven by a mechanical computer that looks more like one of Vannevar Bush’s late-1920s Differential Analyzers.) More impressive is the remarkably prescient portable VTR and camera combo that plays such a crucial role in the film, looking very much like the black and white Porta-Pack units Sony would unleash on the aching backs of news cameramen and fledgling filmmakers (myself included) in the late sixties.

Even the film’s most questionable choices came about through serious reflection—though by the third act, compelling moments are sitting cheek by jowl with misfires. The alien miners (certainly one of the sillier aspects of the movie—and I’m not just referring

to Friday's faux-Egyptian sandals and hairdo) are introduced via Draper's clandestine Porta-Pack videotaping of the mining operation— all deeply spooky, until we get way too long a look at one of the alien slavers, decked out in a leftover *Destination Moon* spacesuit. (Even at that, darkening the faceplates might have prevented us from seeing the clearly non-emotive extras within.) Probably the film's biggest controversy—and ultimately one of its most intriguing visual elements—came in the form of the alien's ray-blasting mining vessels. The decision to step-print the ships' motion (eliminating every other frame to double the crafts' apparent speed) created an eccentric, jerky movement which was meant to correspond to UFO reports of that era, but really just looked weird, freakish—and yet oddly memorable. A larger problem lay in the design of the alien craft. Haskin is on record as resisting Paramount's request that he cast at least one well-known actor in the film—and yet he seems to have instructed veteran designer Al Nozaki to create near-duplicates of the Martian war machines he'd built for Haskin's *War of the Worlds*. Humans are pattern-recognizing creatures, and I recall this from childhood as one of those major “willing suspension” disconnects, for it was assumed the filmmakers had taken the cheap route and just repainted one of the beautiful copper miniatures from the earlier film. I'm not sure if it's heartening or even more discouraging to learn that was not the case, that in fact three brand new miniatures, based largely on the earlier design, were created for *RCOM*. Thinking back, the irony of former Martian invaders violently invading Mars was somewhat thin compensation for my fellow SF geeks as we emerged from that particular matinee.

And yet for all its flaws, *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* remains exciting, moving and relevant—particularly now, as we begin to make concrete plans to send humans to Mars within the next few decades. The red planet of our cultural dreams may have constricted somewhat under the recent deluge of photographic and robotically gathered evidence, but such tantalizing new realities make us more enthusiastic than ever to explore first-hand those windswept dunes, rock-strewn plains and burgeoning river valleys under rich, salmon-hued skies. In the end perhaps all is indeed prophesy; as both Ray Bradbury and Carl Sagan suggested in their very different musings, ultimately, the Martians will be us.

Writer/director Michael Lennick's Discovery Channel series Rocket Science explores the real history of humanity's first steps into space—though he's very fond of most of the fictional versions too. In a much earlier life he served as a visual effects supervisor on the Paramount TV series War of the Worlds, and feels that Mars keeps attacking him.