Views

Comment

Seeing red

We have projected our hopes and fears onto Mars through the ages. Even today, the Red Planet still spells adventure, says **Stuart Clark**

THERE is something about Mars that captivates us. Throughout history, different cultures and individuals have looked at the blood-red beacon in the night sky and filled it with whatever their imaginations associated with the unknown. Across time, Mars has been the celestial embodiment of warrior gods, an astrological talisman of spiritual influence, a venue for utopia and the wellspring of horrors beyond belief. Even today, our relationship with the Red Planet continues to evolve.

Of the five planets that are visible to the naked eye, Mars is easily the most dramatic, and its observable behaviours have informed our cultural interpretations of it. Yet from the flighty apparition of Mercury in the twilight to the extraordinary beauty of Venus in the gathering evening, the unflinching progress of Jupiter and the laboured march of yellowed Saturn, Mars has stiff competition. Still, it stands out for two reasons.

The first is its baleful red colour. The second is that it is the only planet that appears to wax and wane significantly in brightness. Sometimes it is an unmistakeable beacon, strangely daunting and burning brightly. At other times, it is so faint that it fades to the point of obscurity against the stars.

Perhaps it is these comings and goings that have piqued our curiosity through the ages, inviting us to speculate. In his book *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, published in 1960, noted psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote: "The starry vault of heaven is in truth the open book of cosmic projection." He believed that when we look at celestial objects, we can't help but project our innate hopes and fears onto them.

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Indeed, Mars has proven itself to be the perfect venue for such projection, as the vast library of stories set on the Red Planet can attest. Yet these works aren't wholly flights of fancy. The imaginations of writers like H. G. Wells, Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke were fed by the leading scientific investigations of their age.

The late-19th century was a particularly fertile time for interest in Mars. Telescopes were just starting to resolve the planet's surface features, but, due to a strange quirk of human cognition, our brains joined these half-glimpsed landmarks into straight lines. This led to the idea that Mars was a dying planet, with its supposed inhabitants digging canals in a desperate attempt to irrigate the deserts.

So widespread was the belief in Martian life that, in 1891, when Anne Goguet established a prize of 100,000 francs in the name of her son, Pierre Guzman, to be awarded to the first person to communicate with extraterrestrials, Martians were excluded from consideration on the grounds that talking to them would be too easy. Despite the canals being thoroughly debunked in the early decades of the 20th century, they continued to be a motif in fiction until the second half of the century.

These days, we continue to shroud the planet in our hopes and fears. For evidence, look no further than the discussions around Elon Musk's aim to colonise Mars. And, while a view of the planet is lost to so many of us because we live in light-polluted areas, our mental image of Mars is perhaps more vivid than at any other time in history. Thanks to space exploration and the internet, many of us can be on Mars at the click of a mouse.

But why has Mars endured above all other planets in the public consciousness? I believe it is because the more we discover about it, the better it becomes. It is a world composed of larger-than-life versions of Earth's most exciting landscapes. Mars has taller volcanoes, deeper canyons, colder deserts and larger dust storms. Everything about it spells adventure – and that is irresistible to us. ▮

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