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Fin de Siècle, Fin du Globe: Mars Invaders and the End of Beauty as a Transatlantic Phenomenon

Abstract: *The War of the Worlds* is a famous novel by British writer H.G. Wells. Having been serialised in 1897 in *Pearson's Magazine* in the UK and in *Cosmopolitan* in the USA, it is also an early example of globalisation, as it was read simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, unlike other works of the time (especially American) which conjured up social paradises and utopian worlds on planet Mars, Wells' novel introduced into Western imagery the concretisation of a real threat coming from other worlds and capable of destroying the 'civilisation' that Europe and America had painstakingly built. The narrator, sometimes assuming the traits of the *voyeur*, and at other times those of the *flâneur*, becomes the symbol of a crepuscular phase of Western society that is already on its way towards the condition of a *wasteland*. Thanks to a *deus-ex-machina* device consisting in a new and powerful, albeit elementary, coalition between God and biology, the narrator survives the end of beauty, not only in an aesthetic sense, but also as a cultural heritage that should be preserved. As such, he is one of the most interesting and controversial characters of dystopian fiction; and it is not by chance that the novel has had so many sequels, accompanied by pastiches and adaptations, which have turned it into a real cult work transcending time and space. I intend to focus both on the characteristics of the narrator as a transmedia character and on the American reception of the original novel in the phase of transition from the Gay Nineties to the Progressive Era. This is a little investigated subject if compared, for example, to the countless studies on the collective panic that followed Orson Welles' radio play in 1938.

Keywords: Mars invaders. H.G. Wells. *The War of the Worlds*. Dystopian fiction. End of beauty.

1. *The Beginning of the End*

The War of the Worlds is a famous novel by British writer H.G. Wells.¹ The first edition was published by William Heinemann in London in 1898 and, since *The Invisible Man* had already been serialised in *Pearson's Weekly* before coming out as a volume in 1897, the book cover credited Wells as the "Author of *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*".² Actually, *The War of the Worlds* had been serialised as well: both in *Pearson's Magazine* (in the UK) in 1897 and in *Cosmopolitan* (in the US) in 1897-1898: in fact, "soon after *The War of the Worlds* was serialised, but before the publication as a book, the story was reworked and re-located for publication by two American newspapers".³ This fact is significant because it offers

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¹ See H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, London, William Heinemann, 1898, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36/36-h/36-h.htm> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

² <https://decollected.net/timeline/> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

³ P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 9.

an example of an *ante-litteram* phenomenon of globalisation.⁴ Moreover, it inspired many sequels⁵ and parodies.⁶ The most renowned adaptation is, without doubt, the radio-drama that made a young Orson Welles famous in 1938, triggering a collective panic that is still studied by psychologists and sociologists;⁷ the work also inspired two cinematographic versions,⁸ as well as a plethora of adaptations for television,⁹ comics and graphic novels,¹⁰ music and theatre performances,¹¹ up to video-installations in the new millennium.¹²

Coming back to Wells' original novel, I wish to underline again its almost contemporary publication in England and in the United States. As a matter of fact, among Wells' works, it "was the first to be serialized and published as a book on both sides of the Atlantic".¹³ We must not forget this while we examine two other intriguing characteristics.

2. *A Serious Topic*

In the first place, in the late 1800s and early 1900s Mars had emerged as "a serious topic of contemporary interest on both sides of the Atlantic":¹⁴ thanks to observation

⁴ The novel was serialised in nine instalments, each of them accompanied by black and white illustrations by Warwick Goble, which Wells did not like. See *The Cosmopolitan*, 12 (6), April 1897; 23 (1-6), May-October 1897; 24 (1-2), November-December 1897. The Christmas issue was published with 72 pages in colour.

⁵ There were several unauthorised sequels, starting with *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898) by Garrett P. Serviss, which Robert Crossley describes with these words: "Wells's story of extraterrestrial invasion spawned over the course of the next hundred years a variety of imitations, parodies, and adaptations. But one reply to *The War of the Worlds* deserves particular attention, since it appeared immediately on the heels of the Americanized serial installments of Wells's romance in the United States. No sooner had the last installment of these rewrites of *The War of the Worlds*, complete with the destruction of metropolitan New York and Boston, appeared in the *New York Evening Journal* and the *Boston Post* than a serialized sequel began to run" (R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan U.P., 2011, p. 124). See also the list made by P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 186.

⁶ The first one was C.L. GRAVES and E.V. LUCAS, *The War of the Wenuses*, trans. from the Artesian of H.G. POZZUOLI, Bristol, J.W. Arrowsmith; London, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co. Limited, n.d. [1898]; one of the more recent parodies is J. MORROW, "The War of the Worldviews", in ID., *Reality by Other Means: The Best Short Fiction of James Morrow*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan U.P., 2012, pp. 67-78.

⁷ Here is the original version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g> (last accessed on 9 April 2023). The radio-drama inspired many volumes and articles. I would like to draw particular attention to Chapter 12 in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*.

⁸ The two films were respectively directed by B. HASKIN in 1953 (*The War of the Worlds*) and S. SPIELBERG in 2005 (*War of the Worlds*). The latter has also a sequel: *War of the Worlds 2: The Next Wave*, directed by C.T. HOWELL in 2008. See Chapter 14 in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*.

⁹ See the Anglo-French series *War of the Worlds*, set in contemporary France (2019-) and directed by G. COULIER and R. CLARK, and the British BBC mini-series *The War of the Worlds*, directed by C. VIVEIROS (2019).

¹⁰ See P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, pp. 188-90 and https://waroftheworlds.fandom.com/wiki/Graphic_novels (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

¹¹ See Chapter 15 in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 190-91.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

made possible by a new generation of telescopes, and by Italian astronomer Schiaparelli's statements about Martian canals,¹⁵ "through the 1890s there were flurries of excitement about the possibility that the inhabitants of Mars themselves might be attempting to initiate contact with the third planet".¹⁶ Those years also saw the publication of novels, or rather *romances*, which – following the spreading "Marsmania"¹⁷ – were entirely or partially set on the Red Planet: as a matter of fact, Wells' novel was not totally new, original, or unexpected. At least twenty romances were published in the United States between 1880 and 1911, such as *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), *Journey to Mars: The Wonderful World, Its Beauty and Splendor, Its Mighty Races and Kingdoms, Its Final Doom* (by Gustavus W. Pope, 1894), *Daybreak: The Story of an Old World* (by James Cowan, 1896), *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (by Garrett P. Serviss, 1898), and *To Mars with Tesla; or, the Mystery of the Hidden World* (by J. Weldon Cobb, 1901).

What strikes a contemporary scholar is that such novels never obtained as much fame as Wells' did. Could it be argued that their literary quality was poorer? Perhaps so, in some cases, but this – to take one example – certainly does not apply to a novel like *Unveiling a Parallel*, which disappeared completely from the scene only to be eagerly rediscovered in the 1990s by feminist critics. A more serious analysis leads us to read these novels as important cultural products of an era that witnessed the end of the Frontier and felt the need to reformulate the Manifest Destiny project.¹⁸ All of these texts feature good and highly 'civilised' Martians as protagonists: on Mars we find utopian governments, which combine economic and political justice with advanced technology; added to that are gender equality, freedom of expression and religion, and often a vegan or vegetarian diet. The Martians usually warn humans against the drift of capitalism, the dangerous pursuit of profit at any cost, and wars.

¹⁵ It was to the Italian astronomer Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli, 'the Columbus of a new planetary world', that Percival Lowell dedicated his volume *Mars and Its Canals*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1906. Schiaparelli's *The Planet Mars (Il pianeta Marte, 1893)* was so famous at the time that it was included as an Appendix in L. POPE GRATACAP's novel *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars, Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd*, New York, Brentano, 1903. Schiaparelli is credited with the observation of Martian 'canals' (which led to the misunderstanding about the planet's habitability) and the Martian toponymy which is still in use today. He was the author of three books now collected in P. TUCCI et al. (a cura di), *La vita sul pianeta Marte. Tre scritti di Schiaparelli su Marte e i "marziani"*, Milano, Mimesis, 1998, pp. 43-77.

¹⁶ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 111.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. IX.

¹⁸ In 1890 the Bureau of the Census announced that the Frontier was closed, that is, there was no longer any discernible demarcation between 'frontier' and 'settlement'. Three years later, historian Frederick Jackson Turner in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* advanced the thesis that American democracy was rooted precisely in the westward movement of pioneers during the nineteenth century. When the Age of the Frontier ended, it was followed nonetheless by the emerging of new 'frontiers': see, for example, President J.F. Kennedy's "We Choose to Go to the Moon Speech", 1961, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-at-rice-university-on-the-nations-space-effort>, and Robert Zubrin's *The Significance of Martian Frontier*, 1994, <https://space.nss.org/the-significance-of-the-martian-frontier-by-robert-zubrin/> (last accessed on 20 August 2023).

We also ought not to confuse this kind of utopia with the one associated with the American pastoral, dating back to a later period (the 1950s) and which has been well described by Chris Pak as intercorrelated with the dynamics of colonisation and its extraplanetary variant – that is, Terraforming:

Sf narratives of terraforming, as stories of interplanetary migration, colonisation and adaptation, draw from aspects of the American pastoral. This tradition is rooted in images of America and of new lands depicted in literature, travellers' tales and colonial writing since the age of Discovery [...]. The frequent references to and parallels between the terraforming of alien planets and the colonisation of America point to a cyclical unfolding of a specifically American experience.¹⁹

Pak goes on to illustrate the frequency of “representations of alien planets as wilderness landscapes” in sci-fi novels, which show how “potential transformation of these wildernesses into agricultural land or Edenic gardens directed pastoral longing into the future”.²⁰

Although Washington Irving, in one of his political satires of 1809, had already envisaged an invasion of the Earth by the inhabitants of the Moon, I believe it was Wells' novel that firmly established in the Western imagination the idea of a real threat coming from other worlds and capable of destroying the ‘civilisation’ that Europe and America had painstakingly built up. If it is true that, as early as 1871, George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* had considered the possibility of a German invasion of England, it is also true that, with his novel, Wells went a step further by choosing an invader from outer space. The agenda he proposed to readers/citizens was to prepare for a very strong and ruthless enemy who would sooner or later come and invade us.

Wells' novel testifies the long-feared “end of human hegemony in the universe” and a “global preoccupation with telescopic surveillance”.²¹ Let us turn our attention to the adjective ‘global’, which appears both in the novel (whose *incipit* refers to the Earth as “this globe”) and in later criticism – for example, Peter J. Beck underlines that “although it was not the first fictional work written about Mars, the book has proved instrumental in giving the planet global visibility and a central place in popular culture”.²² The implied idea is twofold: on the one hand, the threat may exceed even that of the Nazis – being on a planetary scale – and, on the other hand, in a prophetic sense, the ‘globe’ must prepare us for a new era of visibility and surveillance.

It follows that, as Robert Crossley writes, in “*The War of the Worlds*, for the first time, the inhabitants of Mars are depicted not as kindlier and nobler versions of ourselves but as monsters of intellect [...]. Mars comes to us in the shape of invasion and imperialist expansion”.²³ *The War of the Worlds* therefore overshadows, amid general indifference, at least ten other romances containing a counter-narration which is

¹⁹ C. PAK, “The American Pastoral and the Conquest of Space”, in ID., *Terraforming: Ecopolitical Transformations and Environmentalism in Science Fiction*, Liverpool, Liverpool U.P., 2016, p. 59.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 59-60.

²¹ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 111.

²² P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 4.

²³ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 112.

radically different from that of invasion. When faced with a crossroads, the history of the West does not seem to look towards utopia and reforms; it does not choose to step back and delegitimise war, violence, colonialism. On the contrary, it chooses war, fear, weapons. We are still paying the consequences of this choice.

In 1897, Wells' novel came to represent precisely that *fin-de-siècle* psychosis concerning a possible total war, a nightmare that would shortly become reality. Preceded by an intense debate about Mars and the Martians, *The War of the Worlds* radically changed utopia into dystopia: "the terror induced by Wells' Martians in 1898 [...] stems from their absolute alienness, their lack of a recognizable psychology, sociology, or politics" and even their "insatiable lust to consume human blood".²⁴

Another concept that was erased, besides utopia, was beauty. This also happened on the opposite side of the Atlantic, where the creed of Aestheticism was not as widespread, but where there was a strong awareness of the magnificence of the natural landscape, both American and cosmic. Edgar Allan Poe had opened the reader's eyes to the beauty of the "cosmical family of Intelligences" with his prose poem *Eureka*,²⁵ and the late nineteenth-century Martian novels mentioned above mostly revolved around depictions of beauty – the beauty of bodies, flowers, gardens, and architecture. For instance, in her *Journeys to the Planet Mars*, Sara Weiss included a dozen plates with drawings of the beautiful Martian flora; and Gustavus W. Pope began the long subtitle of his *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World* with the words, "its beauty and splendor".²⁶ Moreover, the word 'beauty' alone appears fifty times in Pope's novel, not to mention its derivatives or synonyms. To get a taste, let us look at this description of the aurora on Mars:

Sunrise on Mars! The glorious orb of day was rising in the east with a splendor unknown in the terrestrial world, and language is wholly inadequate to describe the magnificent scene. [...] How sublime this matchless Empyrean! far transcending the "deeply beautifully blue" that o'erspreads the Mediterranean, the isles of Greece, over the Vale of Cashmere, so oft the theme of the poet and romancer. The Martian skies are infinitely more lovely. Their prevailing hue might be compared to a delicate heliotrope. [...] what a wealth of glory is lavished there!²⁷

Not only nature, but also the bodies of the Martians are aesthetically perfect: one of them is defined as the "model of manly beauty", and about a woman we read that "her beauty is matchless".²⁸ The creatures and landscapes of Mars are so beautiful that they transcend the existing terrestrial categories to the point of rendering them inadequate:

²⁴ R. MARKLEY, *Dying Planet: Mars in Science and the Imagination*, Durham, NC, Duke U.P., 2005, pp. 123-24.

²⁵ See E.A. POE, *Eureka*, New York, George P. Putnam, 1848, <https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/POE/eureka.html> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

²⁶ G.W. POPE, *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World: Its Beauty and Splendor; Its Mighty Races and Kingdoms; Its Final Doom*, New York, G.W. Dillingham, 1894, <https://digitalarchive.tpl.ca/objects/359191> (last accessed on 9 April 2023); S. WEISS, *Journeys to the Planet Mars; or, Our Mission to Ento*, New York, The Bradford Press, 1903, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/61253> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

²⁷ G.W. POPE, *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World: Its Beauty and Splendor; Its Mighty Races and Kingdoms; Its Final Doom*, p. 66.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 68, 163.

It were [*sic*] difficult to describe the beauty of this young Martian Princess by any aesthetic standards with which we Terrestrials are familiar, for the Martian ideal belongs to a superior order and is elevated on a higher plane than ours. And this is all the more apparent from the fact that, our usually accepted standards are more or less fallacious, being founded upon erroneous and often crude conceptions of the Beautiful in Nature and Art. Many so-called aesthetic writers have attempted to formulate and classify what they call their Ideals into standards [...]. To attempt the formulation of rules or models of beauty or grace in human beings is as futile as to lay down standards for horses, cattle, birds, flowers, trees or landscapes.²⁹

Previous representations of Martian beauty are cancelled by the new narratives of Martian invasion. Wells' Martians are ugly, wicked, and unsympathetic assassins. Through his work, Wells stages the end of utopia, and with it the end of beauty.

3. *Relocations*

There is another curious fact about Wells' novel. While other novels remained identical even after 'migrating' to America, *The War of the Worlds* underwent a change of setting in the course of its serialised publication: if the story was originally set in England (Berkshire, Surrey, Middlesex, and London are mentioned), its American counterpart was 'translated' (in its literal sense, i.e. 'transferred') into a new Americanised topography, for the obvious purpose of having a greater impact on readers. The perception of the alien threat had to seem not only plausible, but close at hand:

From the very moment of its first public appearance, *The War of the Worlds* underwent such scenic changes. Before it was published in book form, Wells sold the story in serial installments to *Pearson's Magazine* in England and to *Cosmopolitan* in the United States. When the *New York Journal* and the *Boston Post* requested the right to republish the serial in their newspapers in late 1897 and the first month of 1898, Wells agreed, not knowing that the geographical details would be altered. New Yorkers reading their evening papers learnt about the Martians' sackings 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.³⁰

Geolocation is not a minor fact in *The War of the Worlds*. H.G. Wells was driven by what Beck calls a "strong sense of place" and conducted a punctilious search for "topographic verisimilitude" that nevertheless correlated geography with a kind of "intimacy", a sense of territorial belonging.³¹ Wells was even accused of obsessive fussiness, so much so that one scholar has commented: "Non-British readers (like the present author) are bound to face certain difficulties when trying to follow the early chapters because the text is constantly peppered with local place names and references".³² In this connection,

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³⁰ D.Y. HUGHES, "The War of the Worlds in the Yellow Press", *Journalism Quarterly*, 43, Winter 1966, pp. 639-46, quoted in R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 116.

³¹ P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, pp. 160-61.

³² P. KÁROLY, "The Analogical Alien: Constructing and Construing Extraterrestrial Invasion in Wells's *The*

Bernard Bergonzi had suggested that the novel would need a map of West Surrey,³³ and Andy Sawyer even included one in the Appendix of the 2005 Penguin Classics edition.³⁴

The choice of Woking as the starting point of the story stems from the fact that it was the typical late-Victorian location which, in those very years, was taking “national, even global, visibility”.³⁵ As a consequence, the Americans’ choice to change the geographical setting becomes all the more interesting, since “the original locations in London and Surrey have often been discarded in the interests of ensuring local realism and relevance for the intended audience”.³⁶ It was a marketing operation, a ‘customisation’, as we would say today, resulting in an adaptation to the customer, a kind of personalisation on a local key. As Wells himself admitted, “whereas *Cosmopolitan’s* readership was nationwide, American newspapers served a more localized audience”.³⁷

These are the facts. In November 1897 the *New York Journal*, directed by William Randolph Hearst, asked for permission to publish the novel in instalments in the evening edition. Eager as he was to bolster his growing reputation overseas, Wells agreed, also adding an episode³⁸ and making it clear that no changes were to be made without his consent. On 26 December, the *Boston Post* obtained a similar authorisation. However, “neither newspaper sought Wells’s approval for their plans to rework the geographical details to locations more familiar to their respective readerships”.³⁹ It therefore happened that,

[w]hereas New Yorkers read about Martians landing near Irvington-on-the-Hudson [...] and then attacking New York City, Bostonians followed the Martian advance from Concord, Massachusetts, though Lexington and onto Boston. Instead of being set in and around London and Surrey, the action centred on the USA, with every British location being replaced by a suitable American variant.⁴⁰

I am particularly intrigued by the *Boston Post’s* choice of Concord, not only because of its proximity to Boston, but also for the crucial role it played during the War of Independence. The fact that the Martians follow the same route that the British troops took from Concord to Lexington in 1776 must have had a major impact on readers, not only playing on their sense of geographical belonging (the United States *instead* of the United Kingdom), but also appealing to the roots of their national identity (the United States *against* the United Kingdom). The Martians thus turn out, on a subliminal level,

War of the Worlds”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (HJEAS), 18 (1-2), Spring-Fall 2012, p. 136.

³³ See B. BERGONZI, *The Early H.G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Novels*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1961, p. 127.

³⁴ See P. KÁROLY, “The Analogical Alien: Constructing and Construing Extraterrestrial Invasion in Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*”, p. 146, n. 2.

³⁵ P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 165.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 192.

³⁷ H.G. WELLS, *The Future in America: A Search after Realities*, London, George Bell, 1906, pp. 287-88.

³⁸ The episode had been requested by Heinemann in order to increase the number of the volume’s pages: it is the so-called ‘Soldier Episode’, or ‘Artilleryman Episode’. See P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, pp. 198-99.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 199.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

to be the heirs of those same Englishmen who were called ‘tyrants’ and ‘oppressors’ in the Declaration of Independence. Should we suggest that, for Americans, ‘beauty’ is a component of that ‘pursuit of happiness’ foregrounded in the very Declaration quoted above, we could assume that the Martians, at least as ugly and nasty as the British, embody the fear that such a pursuit might fail. But this relocation also gives the reader hope – the hope that, just as the Americans defeated the British in the past, so could they defeat the Martians today or in the future. Similarly, the idea of Martians marching across the Brooklyn Bridge on Christmas Eve (24 December 1897)⁴¹ speaks volumes about the construction of a threat to the values of Christianity on which much of Western society is based, as well as to the collective imagination, according to which Christmas celebrations are one of the typical expressions of the beauty/happiness we have spoken of.

Who, then, is responsible for preserving this beauty, which is also a piece of happiness? Certainly not the narrator, whose fundamental role is neither resistance nor resilience but, simply, the telling of a story. Just as with Scheherazade, the Melvillian Ishmael, or John Watson, the narrator can do nothing but narrate. And in this case, he is telling the story of what he perceives to be the irreversible decline of beauty. Sometimes assuming the characteristics of a *voyeur*, sometimes those of a *flâneur*, he becomes the symbol of a twilight phase of Western society that is already heading for a wasteland status. Jonathan Jones, a critic for *The Guardian*, used this very term in his 2011 article to describe the devastated London of Wells’ novel – “eerie wasteland”.⁴² And it will only be thanks to the *deus ex machina* of a new and powerful, albeit elemental, coalition between God and Science that the narrator – and, with him, humankind – will be able to survive the end of beauty. This concept of beauty is to be interpreted not only in an aesthetic key, but as a cultural heritage to be preserved.

4. *Just Invaders*

In the same period that we are examining (between the ‘Gay Nineties’ and the ‘Progressive Era’), the adventures of Sherlock Holmes also migrated to the United States, but the setting remained the one chosen by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; on the contrary, Wells’ Martians land in America instead of Europe. And – this being no small detail – not only are they scary, but they are ugly and make ugly noises, too. In 1938, Orson Welles even had to cut the Martians’ noises because they were too frightening for radio audiences. In the original, the Martians simply say “Ulla! Ulla!”, but, when pronouncing this in English, something very similar to ‘ALALÀ’ comes out, which in 1938 would certainly not remind listeners of the ancient Greek war cry,⁴³ also used by Italian poets Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D’Annunzio, but of the far more sinister motto of the Fascists.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

⁴² Quoted *ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴³ See <http://www.alpinimilanocentro.it/bollettini/pagine1518/1917-08-09/alala.htm> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

Oscar Wilde used to say that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, and Gustav Klimt wrote something similar: “Those who can see beautiful things have beauty within themselves”.⁴⁴ What about *hearing* beauty or ugliness? These maxims, both of which belong to the period under consideration, can serve as a guide to understanding the end of beauty to which I have alluded. We see / hear beauty as long as we have it inside us, but we stop seeing / hearing it when we lack it. In other words, in order to understand utopias and follow the guidelines of a more just society, we ought to *believe* in beauty – the beauty of an ideal, of the state, of the planet; conversely, if we have emptiness within us, if we have introjected evil, we will lose our capability to recognise the real beauty. And it is here, in this *fin de siècle* / *fin du globe* full of anxieties, in this “dying world”,⁴⁵ that the Martians arrive as perfect invaders capable of annihilating our species: ugly, deformed, evil, bestial, impossible to look at (and to listen to). As much as the Martians of utopian novels were “comforting”, Wells’ ones are “malevolent”.⁴⁶ Darko Suvin has suggested that Wells paved the way for modern science fiction by offering a model of the ugly, evil alien,⁴⁷ and that he even gave a “Goebbelsian” representation of otherness.⁴⁸

The so-called ‘Gay Nineties’ are a complex period (the phrase was coined only later, in the 1920s, and is now obsolete after being associated with the last decade of the twentieth century, when ‘gay’ took on a new meaning).⁴⁹ They owe their name to the expression used by artist Richard V. Culter, an advertising illustrator for the most popular magazines of the time, including *Cosmopolitan* itself, to refer to a series of his drawings for *Life*. But the ‘gaiety’ is only superficial, for part of those years was marked, in the US, by economic crises, the Panic of 1893, a long depression and periods of severe drought especially in the Plains areas and the West. In contrast, the Progressive Era (1896-1916), which partly coincides with the aforementioned Gay Nineties, can be described as a period of activism and political reforms including civil service regulations, food safety laws, and greater political rights for women and workers; in addition, 15 million immigrants entered the United States. It is also remembered as a period of peace, prosperity, and progress.⁵⁰

What do the Martians have to do with all this? How do these potential space invaders fit into the socio-political framework of turn-of-the-century America? Why were (and still are) readers attracted by the tales of invasion and interplanetary conflicts (*The War of the Worlds* has never been out of print since its publication in 1898)⁵¹ rather than urged by the wise suggestions American astronomer Percival Lowell gave

⁴⁴ Exhibition: *Klimt. L'uomo, l'artista, il suo mondo*, 12 April -24 July 2022, Galleria d'Arte Moderna Ricci Oddi, Piacenza.

⁴⁵ M. NORDAU, *Degeneration*, London, William Heinemann, 1895, p. 6.

⁴⁶ R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 141.

⁴⁷ See D. SUVIN, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, New Haven, CT, Yale U.P., 1979.

⁴⁸ See D. SUVIN, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, Kent, OH, Kent State U.P., 1988, p. 78.

⁴⁹ See <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/progressive-era-to-new-era-1900-1929/> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ See R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, p. 13.

them in his three books devoted to Mars?⁵² The vision of ugly and wicked Martians must necessarily be a motivation for the success of the work. The end of beauty, or rather the confinement of beauty to the Earth (or, better still, to the West, and in the form of ruins), suggests that monsters and deformities may exist beyond the borders and beyond the Frontier. The cylindrical object from Space is called ‘The Thing’ when it is not yet known whether *it* is or contains living matter, and only later is it discovered that “the cylinder was artificial”.⁵³ When the object opens, observers expect to see a human form emerge – “possibly something a little unlike us terrestrial men, but in all essentials a man” – but what actually emerges is “something resembling a little grey snake” armed with “tentacles”.⁵⁴ The reaction of the onlookers is mixed with “horror” and “terror”, two words that alternate throughout the chapter. The alien’s body consists of a large head in which the eyes, mouth, and a single ear are distributed in a less-than-anthropomorphic manner; the skin is dark and oily, the limbs are replaced by tentacles, and the entire organism is shaken by constant quivers:

A big greyish rounded bulk, the size, perhaps, of a bear, was rising slowly and painfully out of the cylinder. As it bulged up and caught the light, it glistened like wet leather.

Two large dark-coloured eyes were regarding me steadfastly. The mass that framed them, the head of the thing, was rounded, and had, one might say, a face. There was a mouth under the eyes, the lipless brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva. The whole creature heaved and pulsated convulsively. A lank tentacular appendage gripped the edge of the cylinder, another swayed in the air. Those who have never seen a living Martian can scarcely imagine the strange horror of its appearance. The peculiar V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of brow ridges, the absence of a chin beneath the wedgelike lower lip, the incessant quivering of this mouth, the Gorgon groups of tentacles, the tumultuous breathing of the lungs in a strange atmosphere, the evident heaviness and painfulness of movement due to the greater gravitational energy of the earth – above all, the extraordinary intensity of the immense eyes – were at once vital, intense, inhuman, crippled and monstrous. There was something fungoid in the oily brown skin, something in the clumsy deliberation of the tedious movements unspeakably nasty. Even at this first encounter, this first glimpse, I was overcome with disgust and dread.⁵⁵

The Martians are repeatedly described as “ugly brutes” or “the most unearthly creatures it is possible to conceive”, and it is made clear that they do not wear clothes.⁵⁶ Interestingly, they are one with the cylinders that contain them – “their cyborg bodies

⁵² See P. LOWELL, *Mars*, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895; *Mars and Its Canals*, New York, Macmillan, 1906; and *Mars as the Abode of Life*, New York, Macmillan, 1908. According to the sources consulted here, Wells did not know Lowell when he wrote his novel, although reading *Mars* might have influenced him in the process (see S.J. DICK, *The Biological Universe: The Twentieth-Century Extraterrestrial Life Debate and the Limits of Science*, Cambridge, CUP, 1996). It is true that Wells, in his article “The Things That Live on Mars” (*Cosmopolitan*, March 1908), refers to Lowell as a ‘friend’, but, according to Robert Crossley, if there was friendship it must have been recent, since Lowell is not mentioned at all in *The War of the Worlds* (see R. CROSSLEY, *Imagining Mars: A Literary History*, pp. 322, 115). In any case, the fact that Wells does not picture Martians “as human look-alikes” rather suggests that “Darwin, not Lowell, is the key intellectual influence on Wells’s Martians” (*ibidem*, p. 113).

⁵³ H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, e-artnow, 2015, p. 5, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11. This is the description of the first apparition, the first time a cylinder opens (Chapter 4).

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 12, 77, 80.

are hidden by the machines that encase them”⁵⁷ – and their physical monstrosity is of a piece with the war machines: indeed, the tripods with which they set out to conquer the planet are called “monstrous machines”.⁵⁸ Here Wells voices an elaborate critique of the relationship between body and technology. It is true, as Christopher Keep writes, that “Martians’ mechanical prostheses have rendered their bodies obsolete”,⁵⁹ but it is also true that these bodies – almost absent with respect to the size of their heads and tentacles – do not respond to any aesthetic category, do not even have anything that evokes a kind of ethereal, slender, spiritual beauty, but rather confirm a total alienation from the beautiful and the sublime. Both of them – bodies and machines – are capable of evoking disgust and revulsion: but while the former reflect the fear of wilderness (they are brutes, naked and dark-skinned), the latter betray the anxiety arising from an excess of technological progress that seems to anticipate Ray Bradbury’s “mechanical wilderness”.⁶⁰

In a society in which beauty is gradually disappearing, then, the ‘ugly’ presents itself to Western racist ideology both in the form of nature – a nature that is rebellious and deviant, *unearthly*, but still nature – and as artifice: nature and culture are both compromised in this novel, which raises a cry of alarm against Aestheticism on the one hand, and against the emerging mass culture on the other. It is not by chance that, following the sensation caused by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, the Mercury Theatre on Air found a sponsor in the Campbell Soup Company and changed its name to the Campbell Playhouse (December 1938 - March 1940).⁶¹ Of course, we now know about ‘convergence culture’⁶² and so we know that it was precisely convergence culture that made it possible for a British novel of the late 1890s to *collide* with American radio in the late 1930s, and for fictional Martian metal cylinders to remind real listeners and consumers of the most famous soup can in the Western world.⁶³

The War of the Worlds became one of the first mass products in the world of culture, and perhaps, at least in part, precisely because of its (possibly unintentional) unmasking of ‘beauty’. Wells tells us of the end of beauty by suggesting that we should expect a season of war (World War I would break out seventeen years later). At the same time, he leaves us with a bitter taste in our mouths, because the only way out in the story is through bacteria. This is an ambiguous solution because he positions them on the borderline between metaphysics and science; but still they solve the problem, so much so that the Martian invasion will be downgraded to “more purgative apocalypse than catastrophe”.⁶⁴ After all, I think the most interesting and least investigated line

⁵⁷ S.J. JAMES, “Witnessing the End of the World: H.G. Wells’ Educational Apocalypses”, *Literature and Theology*, 6 (4), December 2012, p. 466.

⁵⁸ H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, e-artnow, 2015, p. 28, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁹ C. KEEP, “H.G. Wells and the End of the Body”, *Victorian Review*, 23 (2), Winter 1997, p. 237.

⁶⁰ R. BRADBURY, “The Million Year Picnic”, in ID., *The Martian Chronicles*, New York, Harper Collins, (1951) 2014, p. 177, <https://d-pdf.com/book/3981/read> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

⁶¹ See <https://orsonwelles.indiana.edu/collections/show/3> (last accessed on 9 April 2023).

⁶² See H. JENKINS, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York U.P., 2006.

⁶³ The company was founded in 1869 – twenty years before Wells’ novel was published. With Welles’ radio-drama the circle was closed.

⁶⁴ H. JENKINS, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 465.

in the entire novel is a question one character asks the narrator: “What are these Martians?”, with the answer sounding even more significant: “What are we?” It is, in fact, a different question that projects the former one onto an existential level.⁶⁵

In conclusion, Wells’ novel is fully situated in its time, whether we refer to England or the United States, but it is with regard to the latter that it creates a discontinuity, since it does not fit into the utopian genre but overturns its assumptions. Certainly, Wells is concerned about the end of civilisation and society, a concern he had well highlighted in *The Time Machine*, where it becomes clear that progress may lead to “degeneration” and “extinction”.⁶⁶ On the other hand, by drawing more on the genre of “war-scare literature”⁶⁷ than the scientific-romance field, he offers us a new enemy from outer space on a silver platter, an enemy that will inaugurate a seemingly inexhaustible strand on the level of the imagination, and that will plunge the West into a logic of permanent conflict on the level of reality.

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⁶⁵ H.G. WELLS, *The War of the Worlds*, e-artnow, 2015, p. 42, Kindle Edition.

⁶⁶ From Wells’ letter to the director of *The British Weekly*, 26 June 1939, quoted in P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 37.

⁶⁷ “Wells’s story possessed a strong contemporary resonance at a time of growing tensions between the USA and Spain over Cuba” (P.J. BECK, *The War of the Worlds. From H.G. Wells to Orson Welles, Jeff Wayne, Steven Spielberg & Beyond*, p. 206).

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