

WAR OF THE WORLDS

Stuart Clark examines the background to the series

In 1877 Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli made detailed observations of Mars and found what he described as long, straight lines crossing the red Martian deserts. It took American astronomer Percival Lowell and a mis-translated word from Schiaparelli's native Italian to give rise to the popular 'canals' of Mars mythology.

Why the history lesson? Well, to fully understand the importance of HG Well's classic Science Fiction novel, **The War of The Worlds**, one must also have some grasp of the current scientific way of thinking at the time.

Schiaparelli called the features he saw 'canali', which is the Italian word for channels, but when his report was translated it

became 'canals' and so the imaginary Martian civilisation came into being. In the Victorian age canals were considered to be the height of modern technological and engineering skills; Mars had such a vast network of them that the Victorians reasoned the civilisation there had to be much more advanced than Man's.

In a piece of visionary genius HG Well's novel described in vivid detail what happened when the Martians gave up the fight with their world and came to Earth seeking a new home. It was serialised in 1897 and published as a completed novel the following year.

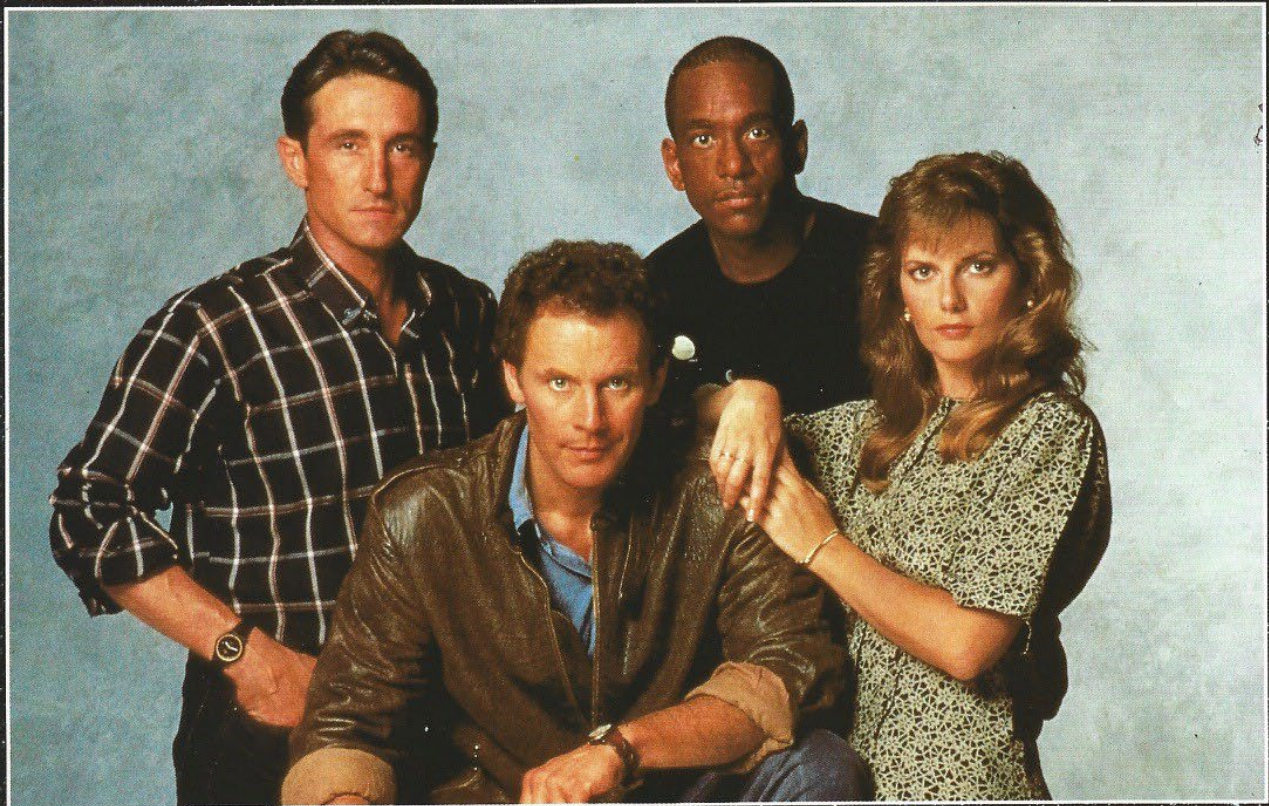
A novel of such quality and, perhaps more importantly, critical acclaim was des-

tinued to be given the Hollywood treatment sooner or later and so it was that in 1925 Paramount Pictures film director Cecil B De Mille purchased the film rights to the story. Despite passing through the hands of some of the most legendary names in film history, De Mille, Sergei Eisenstein, Ivor Montagu, Jesse Lasky, even Alfred Hitchcock, it proved to be unfilmable. Despite these repeated efforts to film the story another chapter in its history came to pass before it finally lit up the silver screen in 1953.

Aural Invasion

On October 30th that year a 'news bulletin' revealed that strange explosions of

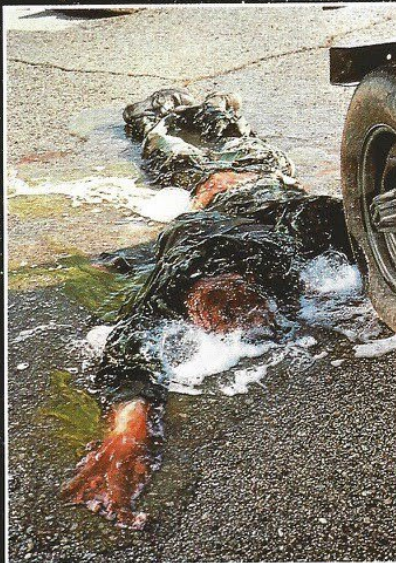
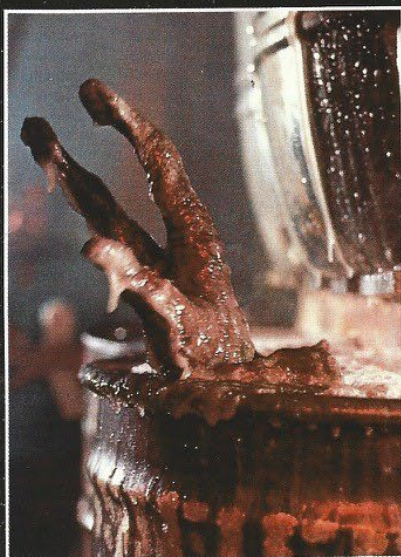




Lt Col Ironhorse, Dr Blackwood, Norton Drake, Dr McCullough

green gas had been observed on Mars and then reported that a large meteor had fallen on Grover's Mill in New Jersey. In this way the invasion of Earth by the Martians unfolded in real time on the airwaves and in so doing disturbed, to the point of panic and hysteria, over one million American citizens. The relocating and updating of the scenario was necessary for the style of the presentation but meant that the only things which remained intact from the novel were the original idea and the Martian war machines; no longer were we in Victorian England but modern day America. Actor Orson Welles and writer Howard Koch served up this piece of radio history.

The alien menace returns



Being controlled by aliens can seriously affect your health!

Pal's Invasion

Presenting film audiences with a contemporary version of the story was George Pal's biggest blunder. At the turn of the century intelligent Martians were thought highly probable but by the fifties, based on more accurate observation, scientists had disproved the Martian civilisation. In effect, by his modernisation, Pal had knocked the floor out from under the feet of his movie.

The style and character of Wells' novel was utterly destroyed as audiences were presented with US Army marines who clenched their teeth and failed to destroy

the floating war machines. The 'sledgehammer' approach of Pal's film shrinks beside the power and emotion with which Wells' fills his pages.

Musical Invasion

1978 saw a new adaptation of **The War Of The Worlds**, this time in the form of an excellently crafted double album composed by Jeff Wayne. The story line follows the novel much more closely and brings the story to life very effectively. It is still easily available in shops, the compact disc version being very fine indeed, and an item any lover of music and Science Fiction should get hold of. What it represents is the finest adaptation of Wells' novel to date.

What Next?

With Mars beckoning Mankind in much the same way as the Moon did in the sixties, the time for a remake of this classic story was surely upon us. The television arm of Paramount Picture's certainly thought so, however, those of us who hunger for a fully-fledged Victorian piece with tripods and faithful reproduction of the novel must still kindle our dreams for the future as this is not it. What we have to contend with, instead, is a twenty-four episode long series which takes place in the present day and serves as a 35 year later sequel to George Pal's 1953 feature film version of the story.

The TV series

Combating the weekly invasion is a principle cast of four people. Leading the team



The original alien fighting team from Pal's film

is a brilliant astrophysicist who goes by the name of Harrison Blackwood. He is an eccentric non-conformist that seems to like standing on his head which, he claims, restores the isostatic equilibrium of his internal organs! The actor behind the portrayal is Jared Martin, who *Starburst* readers may remember as Varian in the US TV series **Fantastic Journey**.

Martin took time and trouble whilst constructing the character of Harrison Blackwood as he points out, "I took a little bit of Carl Sagan and I also used Greg Strangis (executive producer and creator of the series) quite a bit, because he wrote and designed the character. Then I took the parts of myself which have always been curious and inquiring and systematic, and I wedded these things to the part of me that is a leading man."

He has certainly prepared well for the rôle by reading *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* and the works of Carl Sagan and Lucretius. His own natural interest in science helped to pique his curiosity about astrophysics and extra-terrestrial life.

"My great hope for this series is that people are going to learn things from it," Martin says.

His leading lady is played by Lynda Mason Green, a Canadian actress who portrays Dr Suzanne McCullough. The character is a prominent microbiologist and single mother who finds that in the midst of her personal evolution with her eleven year old daughter she is offered the chance of a life time.

"What an extraordinary opportunity," Green says of the situation her character faces, "to be able to theorise and hypothesise about the possible structure of an alien species and how it works. For Suzanne, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that she just can't resist."

Unable to pass the task by McCullough must draw on her serious nature and use her scientific curiosity to rise to the challenge.

Green is no stranger to Science Fiction as she admits to being a fan of the genre and particularly fond of the works of Isaac

Asimov and Arthur C Clarke.

Norton Drake is the group's Jamaican computer expert and is brought to life by actor Philip Akin. The character is confined to a high-tech, voice controlled wheelchair which goes by the name of 'Gertrude'.

Preparation for the rôle was very important to Akin and when the time for costumes to be decided upon arrived he discovered that his new-found knowledge of handicapped people could be used to good advantage.

"The wardrobe department had given me a really nice pair of loafers to wear. But if you think about it, you really can't put on a pair of loafers if you are handicapped because you can't move your heel the right way to get into them. I suggested shoes with velcro straps. They make more sense."

The final member of the team of leading characters is Richard Chaves who has been cast in the rôle of Lt Col. Paul Ironhorse, a

Cherokee Indian and graduate of West Point whose extensive knowledge of weaponry and military tactics makes him a valuable addition to the team.

Chaves, whose mother is part Cherokee, says about his part, "Playing this character I have the opportunity to portray an American Indian in a very respected high-ranking position with the military. I'm very excited about that, that as an Indian I can project such a positive image for our community."

Chaves seemed a natural choice for the part having portrayed a number of military rôles over the course of his acting career. A career which was preceded by a three year tour of duty in the military during which time he spent eleven and a half months in Vietnam, stationed at Freedom Hill with the 196th Infantry Brigade.

Also someone to look out for is Ann Robinson who co-starred in the original movie as Sylvia Von Buren. She will reprise her rôle in several episodes as the regular cast go to her for historical information and advice about the first invasion.

The Production Team

Co-ordinating the weekly invasion is a talented crew of behind the scenes personnel. Greg Strangis serves as one of the executive producers to the series but is also creator of the show and wrote the pilot episode. Having been working in television since 1969 Strangis formed a successful company, 'Ten-Four Productions', with his father Sam Strangis in 1979. Just prior to his commitment on **War Of The Worlds**, Strangis served as a creative consultant on **Star Trek: The Next Generation**.

The other executive producer, Sam Strangis, also has a link with **Star Trek**, but with the original series. As vice-president in charge of production for Paramount

Early progress for the team



Television he oversaw such series as **Star Trek** and **Mission Impossible**.

Another ex-**Next Generation** staffer fills the rôle of Creative Consultant. Herbert Wright brings his skill to the project and will serve as a writer and producer for the series.

The Toronto-based producer of the series is twenty year veteran Jonathan Hackett. He is responsible for the physical production of the series in Toronto, where it is filmed. Executive Script Consultant for the show is Tom Lazarus, whose job is to write original material for the series as well as supervise the utilisation of freelance writing talent.

The series also boasts some exceptional

special effects work by Bill Sturgeon, Greg Jein and Bernie Laramie. Sturgeon's body of work includes the make-up effects on **An American Werewolf In London** and he is in charge of the alien effects on the new show; including the gruesome melting scenes when the aliens die. Jein has built the alien spacecraft and serves as the series model-maker whilst Laramie is the special effects co-ordinator and worked on ABC's **Max Headroom**.

Money, talent and enthusiasm have all come together in this television programme and it is already a hit in the United States. Even before it had been seen in the United Kingdom comparisons with **V** were already being made but it should not be dismissed

out of turn, or without a viewing - it has too much money and talent behind it for that.

The series is being distributed in this country on video cassette by CIC Video in much the same way as **Star Trek: The Next Generation**. Also like **The Next Generation** the series has been sold directly to over 190 US Television stations, representing 98% of the country.

The feature-length pilot episode, *The Resurrection* will be followed by the twenty two hour long episodes which, based on current information, will be cut together and packaged two to a video tape. The tapes will then be released for the rental market on the basis of one every two months.

David Mitchell reports on the impact of the series

The most notable difference between the film and the series is that the aliens have the ability to take over human bodies, and this of course is the main gimmick of the show. This is certainly not a new idea - for instance both **The Invaders** and **V** used this concept, and one can never get away from the feeling that it is just an easy way on skimping on convincing alien costumes. This may have been true in the past, but **War Of The Worlds** is not afraid to show a tentacle or two and in fact does so within the first five minutes of the premiere episode. The aliens, almost identical to the single martian briefly glimpsed in the film, scuttle around the place quite menacingly. True to type, you only ever see a shadow, a three fingered claw or an eye, just enough to keep you guessing. The aliens are soon back and inhabiting the bodies of some unsuspecting terrorists, plotting the total domination of the world.

In the light of current scientific knowledge could any television show, set in the modern day, take itself seriously if it still persisted in talking about invaders from Mars? The explanation we are presented with is that Mars was only a staging post for the aliens on their way to Earth from outside the solar system.

The invasion in George Pal's film was but a scouting party. Their job was to secure the Earth for themselves and then prepare it for the rest of their alien civilisation who were following behind them in a giant fleet of space craft. In the intervening years the space ships have neared Earth and are now only several years away from arriving. Despite a conscious effort to keep the show in line with current scientific theories one or two old clichés have, unfortunately, been used on the show. In fact, the corner stone of the resurrection stands solely on the premise that an accidental blast of radiation revives the corpses! This kind of 1950's plot device is rather off-putting to say the least but perseverance with the show should pay dividends as the kind of war the aliens will be waging opens the scripts to moral, social and even ecological grounds.

For instance, in order to undermine the Earth so that it cannot stand up to the



main invasion fleet the aliens will resort to all kinds of guerrilla warfare tactics which could be as straight forward as sabotage or more subtle, though none-the-less deadly ways such as upsetting the ecological balance of the planet. For instance they could increase the concentration of sulphur in our atmosphere which in turn would lead to a build up of acid rain. It is by accentuating modern day problems that the writers can cause us to think about the course Mankind is plotting for itself and hopefully serve to remind us of how fragile the natural balance, that we seem to pay so little attention to, is at times.

Of course what everybody wants to see are the war machines. Unfortunately these are rather dangerous things to have around when you are making a series. It was well established in the film that not even an atomic blast could destroy an alien vessel. If the aliens were to get even one war machine in the series, they would be almost unbeatable and this would tip the scales somewhat. The craft do make an appearance in the plot, though only briefly at the climax, and are expertly done. They are identical in every way to the originals, even down to the dome shaped force shields surrounding them and the chilling hissing noise which accompanies them. Will the war machines

return though? I suspect that audiences will demand it.

The creators and writers have not shied away from the many questions which arise from the audience. The aliens have been given a quite convincing background, small snippets of which are gradually revealed. It is also interesting to note that the government itself is more often than not seen as an enemy: refusing support and blocking information. **War Of The Worlds** is a skillfully crafted mixture of old and new ideas. On the surface it is purely an invasion-of-Earth scenario, but underneath there is a depth of subtlety in characterisation and plotting, not often seen in Science Fiction.

The series as a whole develops, each episode builds upon the last, but moving toward what? A static war, even a cold one becomes boring after a while. There can be a certain amount of give and take, but nobody must be allowed to get the upper hand. So far, the series is moving well but how long will it be before the writers run out of good ideas and the plots start to degenerate? Will the producers take the daring step of allowing an all-out war with the aliens? This would present new ideas and would allow the series to develop still further, we will have to wait and see.