

The Martian: A modern Robinson Crusoe

David Walsh
7 October 2015

Directed by Ridley Scott, written by Drew Goddard, based on the novel by Andy Weir

Veteran director Ridley Scott's science fiction film *The Martian* is based on the 2011 novel by American author Andy Weir. In the movie's opening scene the crew of the Ares III manned mission to Mars is forced to abandon their plans and leave the planet when a severe, hurricane-like sandstorm descends on them. Unavoidably left behind is crew member Mark Watney (Matt Damon), presumed to be dead after being struck by communications equipment and separated from the others during the storm.

Watney, in fact, survives the disaster and is able to treat his injuries. He finds the living and working quarters the crew had set up ("the Hab") intact and has enough food for several hundred Martian days, or *sols* (each *sol* is some 24 hours, 40 minutes). However, he is alone on the desolate planet, tens of millions of kilometers from home. Watney has no means of communicating with Earth, because of the destruction of the communication gear in the tempest, and the next manned mission is not scheduled for another four years. How can he survive that long and how can he travel to the location of that mission's landing, some 3,200 kilometers away?

A botanist (and a mechanical engineer, at least in the Weir novel), Watney sets about solving his various problems. He grows potatoes inside the habitat's artificial environment and begins to modify his only vehicle, a rover, to make possible much longer trips.

Meanwhile, on Earth, satellite photos of Mars make clear to NASA engineers in Houston, Texas that Watney is alive and moving around. NASA director Terry Sanders (Jeff Daniels) orders his staff not to inform the surviving members of the Ares mission, now on board the Hermes spacecraft heading home, that Watney is alive, for fear of distracting them. Watney cleverly locates and digs up the Pathfinder probe, inactive since 1997 and uses it to begin communicating with NASA.

NASA officials and engineers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California debate various plans for rescuing the stranded astronaut. They agree to send a probe to Mars to resupply Watney so he can last another several years on the planet. In their efforts to speed up the process, however, they take shortcuts that result in disaster. Watney experiences his own disaster on Mars, which wipes out his potato crop.

Now what? The Chinese space program then enters the picture, as does a young, brilliant astrodynamist. The Ares III crew itself has a life-and-death decision to make ...

Although *The Martian* grows tedious from time to time in the course of its two hours and 20 minutes, its central motif—the

massive effort, which is eventually followed by masses of people all over the globe, to save one man—is a humane and intriguing one. A large number of people cooperate, and not in pursuit of money or celebrity, to save a single life.

In his novel, Weir writes: "If a hiker gets lost in the mountains, people will coordinate a search. If a train crashes, people will line up to give blood. If an earthquake levels a city, people all over the world will send emergency supplies. This is so fundamentally human that it's found in every culture without exception."

It is moving when the film reaches its denouement and Watney's fate, along with the fate of the rest of the Ares III crew, is decided. One certainly feels for his situation and emphatically hopes for his safe return.

As opposed to *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón), with its quasi-religious imagery, and *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan), with its murky dystopianism, *The Martian* (aside from one brief flirtation with a crucifix) aspires to be an eminently practical film, with its paean to "Yankee ingenuity" and stick-to-itiveness. Having decided that "I am not going to die on this planet," Watney sets out his various tasks and performs them, one by one.

The scientific-technical challenges and solutions are interesting, occasionally fascinating: Watney's agricultural experiments, his discovery of a method to create water, his transformation of his rover vehicle, his retrieval of the Pathfinder probe and his re-establishing of communication with Earth, NASA's various rescue plans, the final effort to intercept him in space. (The decision to paint the Chinese space program and officials in a positive light, given current US government policies, has to be considered almost an act of bravery.)

Unfortunately, when the film goes beyond the limits of depicting those practical tasks, it falters badly. One of the considerable difficulties *The Martian* faces is its literary-intellectual source. Weir, the son of an accelerator physicist and an electrical engineer, is a capable organizer-summarizer of materials and problems, and apparently knows his science (according to various publications), but he is not an artistically gifted writer.

Much of the novel consists of descriptions of various physical and chemical processes and Watney's interventions in those processes, a sort of "How-to" manual for surviving in an enormously hostile environment, interspersed with essentially puerile monologues (Watney's) or dialogue. The labored "jokiness" is particularly grating.

A few examples:

"Problem is (follow me closely here, the science is pretty complicated), if I cut a hole in the Hab, the air won't stay inside anymore."

“I tested the brackets by hitting them with rocks. This kind of sophistication is what we interplanetary scientists are known for.”

“But in the end, if everything goes to plan, I’ll have 92 square meters of crop-able soil. Hell yeah I’m a botanist! Fear my botany powers!”

“Back on Earth, universities and governments are willing to pay millions to get their hands on Mars rocks. I’m using them as ballast.”

This sort of wittiness, which is genuinely amusing one-tenth of the time, goes on ad infinitum. Along with references to disco music, *Star Wars*, *Iron Man*, *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *Three’s Company*. Reading the novel is too much like spending a number of hours with a precocious and especially self-approving undergraduate science student who aspires to be a stand-up comic.

It is hard to believe that any human being could go through the terrifying and life-altering experiences Weir describes and remain so unrelentingly shallow. The various astronauts and cosmonauts to date may not have always been the most articulate or cultured individuals, but one has the impression that they responded with considerable seriousness to the immensity of space and the significance of their own activities.

Why the heavy-handed humor in the original novel? Perhaps Weir felt that only through such an approach could he “make the medicine go down,” i.e., render palatable to the public a complex story about the science of space travel and space survival. If that is the case, then he underestimated his audience.

Perhaps more to the point, the contrast between the remarkable scientific achievements, on the one hand, and the unserious depiction of the human interactions, on the other, speaks to an American malaise at present: technological abundance combined with a terrible cultural and intellectual deficiency.

Although Scott and screenwriter Drew Goddard, to their credit, have dropped a good deal of the juvenilia and their work has a generally more sober tone than the novel, a portion of the book’s flippancy makes its way into the film too (including at certain critical moments!). Fortunately for the filmmakers, Matt Damon is appealing enough to render *some* of the silliness unobjectionable.

The screenplay, unhappily, has retained the general flatness of the scenes on Earth, or added its own. Scott has a number of talented performers at his disposal, who struggle to make something of the oddly colorless and often drama-less dialogue and sequences, including Daniels as the NASA chief, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Sean Bean as NASA mission directors and Kristen Wiig as the agency’s spokesperson. Wiig has almost nothing to do, except occasionally shoot a quizzical or bemused glance at one character or another, in a seeming reference to the comic films she is normally in, but which has nothing to do with *The Martian*.

In two small parts, Mackenzie Davis (as a satellite planner in NASA’s Mission Control Center) and Donald Glover (as the NASA astrodynamacist) are least touched by the “canned,” bureaucratic character of the NASA-JPL scenes.

Scott has now been making feature films long enough, since the late 1970s, that he is referred to in some quarters as a great director. Such a characterization confuses artistic greatness with canniness and box office success. Scott’s films are essentially products of the Hollywood blockbuster era that began in 1975,

albeit seasoned with a somewhat “outsider” (British), quasi-artistic sensibility. *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Gladiator*, *Hannibal*, *American Gangster* and *The Counselor* are distinguished by their “dark” and “edgy” visual flair, and often excessive brutality, but not by any important thematic confrontation with contemporary life.

In any event, Scott’s new film portrays a manned mission to Mars some time in the not too distant future. Science fiction indeed! No critic or anyone involved in the production has referred to the fact that the US shut down its manned space effort in 2011 for an indefinite period of time, thanks in large part to budget cuts, an event, as the WSWS noted at the time, of “considerable historical significance.”

Shortly after coming to office, the Obama administration cancelled a project that envisioned a return to the Moon by 2020, followed by a Mars mission using the Moon as a jumping-off point. The WSWS commented that the administration “proposed a manned mission to the asteroid belt by 2025, followed by a Mars flight, but pushed out so far into the future that it amounted to the tacit abandonment of any serious effort at manned space flight.”

The *Christian Science Monitor*, in July 2014, asked: “Will the US ever have [a] manned space program again?” The article noted that with its Space Launch System, a rocket system designed for launches into deep space, “NASA hopes to take a giant leap into deep space, but the US Government Accountability Office says that the space agency may not have enough money. According to a GAO estimate released Wednesday, NASA may be \$400 million short to complete the project.” Billions and billions for the destruction of peoples and societies around the world, but not hundreds of millions for the exploration of space.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact