**From Woking to New York; or, American Wars: A Short Cultural History of *War of the Worlds* in North American Translation**

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*The War of the Worlds* is an American text—if not by birth, then by naturalization. In this talk, I want to sketch the cultural and historical contexts of two North American translations of *War of the Worlds*. I know that there are many more, of course, and that I specifically promised to cover several more of them in my abstract, but I ultimately decided that it was better to give a talk concretely about two things than vaguely about several things. In calling this a history of “translation,” I’m referring not to strictly linguistic translation—although, as we will soon see, editors have substantially redacted and amended the text—but rather to the resignification that the text has undergone in different media and ideological environments. (remediation)

By the time it serialized Wells, the magazine in which *War of the Worlds* made its North American debut, *Cosmopolitan*,was not a high culture or “quality” publication of the order of *The Atlantic, Harper’s,* or *Century*.Neither did it belong to the realm of sensational fiction occupied by dime novels, story papers, and cheap libraries. *Cosmopolitan* catered instead to an educated, respectable middle class readership—a fraught position in this critical juncture in the formation of US mass culture. *War* was translated into the North American cultural idiom during a magazine revolution that intensified market competition and saw circulation rise from 18 million in 1890 to 64 million in 1905 (Ohmann). The line between high and low culture, genteel and plebian reading publics, was hardening.

Prior to serializing *War*, *Cosmopolitan* had published popular science articles by Camille Flammarion, and serialized his novel *La fin du monde* as *Omega: The End of the World* in 1893, the same year that it lowered its price to 12 ½ cents to compete with the popular magazine *Munsey’s* (Schreinov). The magazine presented Flammarion as a “French genius,” “littérateur,” and “poet-astronomer.” Following the serialization of *Omega,* Flammarion continued to contribute popular astronomy articles such as this one in the “Progress of Science” column, which editor John Brisben Walker, anticipating the goals of Hugo Gernsback, conceived as a means to teach science to the lay public. Yet in its conflicted attempt to balance educated respectability with the market imperative to capture readers’ attention for advertisers, *Cosmopolitan*’s presentation of Flammarion prefigured a fissure in the translation of *War of the Worlds.* This ad for *Omega* promised the reader “all the scientific knowledge of a great astronomer” while assuring her that the science would be mixed with “sensational effects” and portrayals of “excitement and despair.” Not everyone was convinced of the synthesis. One reviewer in the *Los Angeles Times* dismissed *Omega*’s “highly-spiced fancies” and “Frenchy illustrations.”

Similarly, this announcement of the serialization of *War of the Worlds* in *Life* magazine hails *Cosmopolitan*’sreading public as “the largest clientele of intelligent, thoughtful readers.” Wells is said to outdo Flammarion—as well as Poe, Vern, and Swift—in *imagination*, a term that confers a certain degree of aesthetic dignity, as does the company. The brief bio at the foot of the first installment of *War* in *Cosmopolitan* follows suit and presents a writer of “reputation,” stylistic nicety, and “philosophical suggestion.” The action-packed front piece, however, is hardly philosophical in appeal.

Thus, when *War* appeared in *Cosmopolitan* in 1897, after the magazine had lowered its price even further to appeal to a yet broader reading public, the story’s situation exemplified the contradictions of “dignified sensationalism,” a formulation used by one of *Cosmopolitan*’s contemporaries to describe Walker’s publishing practices (Landers 38). As one historian explains the situation, “Walker feared losing his current small pool of readers, which expected aesthetic and refined articles in the monthly publication. But if Walker wished to enlarge his readership, he needed to answer the pressures sent forth by mass market journalism, with its spiraling circulations.” Walker’s “dignified sensationalism” synthesized “two forms of periodicals—the monthly magazine and the newspaper—and two segments of the literary marketplace—the highbrow and mass-circulation” and sought “a hybrid identity somewhere in between” (Roggenkamp 29).

The cultural hybridity of *Cosmopolitan* is an important point of contrast to the work of translation that would soon occur in the pages of the *New York Evening Journal* and *Boston Post* under the dubious heading “Fighters from Mars.” These unauthorized versions of *War of the Worlds* violated Wells’s instructions to publish the text unaltered. When Wells got wind of the alterations, he wrote to the editors of *The* *Critic* to “protest in the most emphatic way against this manipulation of my work in order to fit it to the requirements ofthe local geography.” As David Hughes showed in his 1966 article on the *Evening Journal* and *Post* versions, the newspapersnot only changed geography—the path from Woking to London became New Jersey to New York City and Concord to Boston—they also translated the story into the reading protocols of cheap sensational fiction and yellow journalism. The plot was streamlined to underscore scenes of destruction, whose transposition to familiar locales added to their “immediacy” and “realism” (Hughes).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Hughes makes the obvious point that the *Evening Journal* and *Post* altered the text because “what the newspapers wanted was circulation, of course” (640). Walker had wanted circulation, too, but the *Evening Journal* and *Post* had no time for the balancing acts of his “dignified sensationalism.” Undignified sensationalism sold just as well, if not better. And while Wells was perfectly justified in his anger over the changes to his text, it was rather amenable to the cultural and media conditions of its North American debut. Even in the original version the first-person narrator, with his detailed accounts of carnage, sounded awfully similar to an eye-witness reporter of the yellow journalism. One American reviewer of Harper’s 1898 book version of *War* noted its “journalistic style” and called it “an Associated Press dispatch” (*The Critic*, p. 282). The *Evening Journal* and *Post* made explicit what was latent in the text, although in doing so they broke Wells’s unique balance of adventure and art.

In addition to thrills, the burgeoning mass culture industry demanded timeliness. What was on sale at the newsstands, as everywhere in consumer capitalism, was novelty. Consider this 1893 letter to an aspiring hack writer from Street and Smith, which would later become the publisher of the pulp *Astounding Science Fiction:* “What we require for our libraries is something written up-to-date, with incidents new and original with which the daily press is teeming” (qtd. in Denning, 24). What was teeming in the daily press in 1898? The conflict with Spain.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the most thorough analysis of the *Post* version of *War of the Worlds* to date, Steven Mollmann proposes that we read the *Post* of early 1898 as a whole, as a continuous discourse that encompasses Wells’s text; nonfiction articles advocating for war with Spain, which had been struggling with a rebellious Cuba for the past few years; and Garrett Serviss’s novel *Edison’s Conquest of Mars*, an unauthorized sequel to *War* that was serialized in the *Post* directly after it. Mollmann highlights the militaristic enthusiasm that pervaded the *Post*: the excitement with which the paper announced the coming serialization of *War* as “startling,” “thrilling,” “extraordinary” (slide); the loving detail with which the editors described the Martian holocaust of American landmarks in several passages that they added to the text; the aggressive, patriotic stance toward Spain in numerous nonfiction articles and editorials; and the triumphalism of the US-led retaliation against the Martians in *Edison’s Conquest of Mars*, which was in serialization when the US battleship *Maine* was sunk in Havana Harbor, triggering the Spanish-American War (slide).

In this context, Wells’s anti-imperialist narrative was translated into a fantasy of imperial awakening. While he acknowledges the ambivalences of Wells’s Darwinian thinking, John Rieder argues persuasively for reading *War of the Worlds* as a critical reversal of imperial center and colonial periphery in the tradition of European satire. But if Wells turns Britain into a Martian colony, reversing what Rieder terms the “colonial gaze,” the *Post* effected what American football calls a double reverse. In “Fighters from Mars,” the Martians retrace the destructive path of the British during the American revolutionary period, here reiterated as the founding violence of American history. But the Martians also figure as Spain, the object of metaphorical revenge in *Edison’s Conquest of Mars,* and of literal revenge in the Spanish American War, which ended with US acquisition of new colonies and announced the nation’s status as a major power alongside its old imperial masters (slide). In the *Post,* the imperatives of the emerging mass culture industry intersected with the ideological need for an enemy, the struggle against which would require the destruction of the old, but secure the birth of the new, imperial America in a righteous act of vengeance. In Mollman’s words: “What *Fighters from Mars* and *Edison’s Conquest of Mars* say about American imperialist anxieties in the late nineteenth century is that there were no United States imperialist anxieties in the late nineteenth century.” Fictional imperial war modeled, prepared for, whet the appetite for, paralleled, and justified real imperial war.

To be sure, “Fighters from Mars” preserves a crucial observation from the opening chapter of Wells’s *War:* “And before we judge of them [the Martians] too harshly in their attempt, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races.” But whereas Wells’s narrator then makes the all-important reference to Britain’s settler colonial genocide of the Tasmanians, and explicitly calls the Martians “colonists,” “Fighters from Mars” omits these sentences. If the text had been translated for the sake of maintaining Wells’s viewpoint, if not his geography, a critical American editor would have taken this golden opportunity to compare Martian colonialism to the US genocide of Native Americans and the settler colonialism of the Mexican American War. The opening of Byron Haskin’s and George Pal’s *War of the Worlds*, released by Paramount Pictures in 1953, also omits the imperial framing, but with different consequences. For the US was no longer a brash imperial upstart. It had just rescued Europe from fascism. It was not just an imperial power, but a superpower, rivaled only by the Soviet Union. The 1953 *War of the Worlds* suggests a deep skepticism toward the legitimacy of this power, but its skepticism is not particularly Wellsian.

Haskin’s and Pal’s *War* keeps only the first few sentences of Wells’s opening chapter before the narrator diverts to a gratuitous astronomy lesson of the sort that one hears in many science fiction films of the period. The Martians are said to be searching for a planet to which to “migrate,” not colonize. More important to the film’s ideological framing is the sequence that precedes the narration, which presents stock footage of World Wars I and II before announcing the “War of the Worlds” as a figurative World War III. Although I cannot comment on the media environment with as much detail as before, I want to note in passing the transition from black and white to color here. This film was part of a new genre cycle of blockbuster science fiction films that relied on the technicolor spectacle of cinema—termed the “aesthetics of destruction” in Susan Sontag’s brilliant essay from this period—to ward off a powerful and disruptive new medium, television.

The voiceover tells us that the War of the Worlds will be fought with the “weapons of super science,” that is, nuclear weapons. In the months prior to the film’s release, the US tested the first hydrogen bomb, prompting the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* to set its doomsday clock to a mere two minutes (slide). By then, the Soviets had developed a hydrogen bomb, too. In Haskin’s and Pal’s *War*, the Martians no longer function as the return of a repressed imperial unconscious, nor as an excuse to embark on imperial adventures, but as a figure of a thermonuclear world war that the United States cannot win, and whose only “solution” is absolute faith in the transcendent power of God.

The Martian invasion foregrounds two grave forms of arrogance in postwar America. The first, and most obvious, is false faith in military power. In their final desperate attempt to defeat the Martians, the United States use not only a nuclear weapon, but a new and especially destructive nuclear weapon—a hydrogen bomb, though it isn’t named as such—which of course still has no effect. Perhaps at this point an anti-imperial message can slip through the cracks. Prior to using the weapon, the United States are presented as the last unconquered nation on the planet. The voiceover informs us that Britain, the second to last, put up a valiant, but ultimately futile, fight. The Martians thus seem to be proceeding in historical sequence, destroying the old imperial powers before the final confrontation with the American superpower. But since the film renders the nation’s settler colonial and imperial past invisible, the defeat of the United States isn’t a satirical reversal of imperial history, but a means of tempering ambitions to redeem the world—a task better left not to politics, but to religion proper. As many intellectuals of the period argued—including Reinhold Niebuhr, to whom I will return shortly—it was communism that heretically turned politics into religion.

This brings us to the second, less obvious arrogance about which *War of the Worlds* warns postwar America, namely, a version of Christianity that naively believes in secular progress. Shortly after the Martians have landed in what is, again, an Americanized locale, Pastor Mathew Collins attempts to dissuade the military from using force (slide). He believes that the Martians are acting aggressively only because nobody has attempted to communicate peacefully with them (an opinion that the film has already disproven in a previous sequence that shows three men killed by the Martian heat ray as they wave a white flag). Collins is so mesmerized by the Martians that he fails to recognize their bellicosity; as their warships begin to advance, he can only mutter in astonishment about “beings from another world.” Crucially, when his niece tries to warn him that the Martians may not belong to the same order of creation as humans, Collins reasons that “if they’re more advanced than us, they should be nearer the Creator.” Reciting the twenty-third Psalm, the glassy-eyed, deranged-looking pastor walks up to the lead warship and raises a Bible. The heat ray strikes again, incinerating Collins and his Bible, and the war begins.

The pastor approaches the Martians because he falsely believes that the more highly developed a civilization, the closer its relationship to the divine. In other words, Collins dies for his false identification of technological progress and divinity. The film reminds the Cold War viewer that there is nothing inherent in the Martians’—or in America’s—technological power that makes them ethically good. Indeed, it is this belief in progress that blinds Collins to the Martians’ sheer evil. As we see in the closing sequences, the only true ethics is one that recognizes God’s absolute sovereignty over earthly and extraterrestrial affairs.

In his popular 1952 treatise *The Irony of American History*, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr tempered the nation’s rise to global power with the warning that “the evils against which we contend are frequently the fruit of illusions which are similar to our own.” Niebuhr believed that liberalism and communism shared myths of secular perfection, and he called on the United States to distinguish themselves from the enemy by learning from history’s ironic frustrations of American ambition, by acknowledging the stain of sin on all attempts at virtue, and by accepting the limits of secular power. *War of the Worlds* translates Wells’s anti-colonial satire into Niebuhr’s irony. The film depicts the failure of the Redeemer Nation, its inability to rescue itself and the planet from the Martian invasion, no matter its unprecedented military, scientific, and technological might. The final sequences show survivors huddled in churches, praying for “the miracle of divine intervention” (slide). The only true faith is utter surrender, which God rewards by answering the prayers and ironically striking down the Martians with the most seemingly trivial of means, germs. Again, we have a message that is latent in Wells’s text—the Christian message of God’s omnipotence—but that under particular cultural conditions is enlarged, totalized into a dominant ideological framework. The collectively sung *Amen* that closes the film can thus be interpreted as a reply to the final homily of Niebuhr’s book, in which he beseeches the nation to develop “a sense of awe before the vastness of the historical drama,” “modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us for the resolution of its perplexities,” “contrition about the common human frailties and foibles,” and “gratitude for the divine mercies which are promised to those who humble themselves.” Only God can defeat the Martians, or communism, for that matter. America’s greatest strength during the Cold War is neither its military nor its technology, but its faith.

North American translations of *War of the Worlds* have never been faithful to the original, if that were ever possible. I have tried to sketch some of the specific cultural, media, and ideological conditions under which the inevitable inflections of translation have occurred. I began by describing this history of translation as a process of Americanization or naturalization. But as my own people know all too well in the days of Trump, the United States doesn’t welcome everyone. So what explains the peculiar American enthusiasm for *War of the Worlds*? Why this repetitive desire to make it our own? Part of the answer surely has to do with the profitability of the tale, that is, with the dynamics of the mass culture industry and of media competition for our lucrative attention. But that answer is incomplete without an account of the story’s status as a massive cultural trope for mediating, deflecting, and rechanneling the United States’s colonial and imperial history. In short, we need the Martians in order to avoid the fact that *we* are the Martians.

1. One reader from NY wrote in and had his letter published in the Jan. 26, 1898 issue of the *New York Journal.* He/she didn’t like *War* because it made the US look stupid. He praised *Conquest* in contrast: “He wasn’t patriotic. He made us appear like a nation of blockheads—we, the champion fighting nation on this planet. ‘The Conquest of Mars’ is excellent. Let’s have more like it.” D.D. Russell, “Fifth Prize Letter,” p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Along with the final installment of *War,* the December 1897 also featured a speculative future war story, “A Brief History of Our Late War with Spain.” (Landers speculates that Walker himself wrote it.) So the connection between the US version of *War* and the Spanish American War played out not only in the *Post*, but in *Cosmopolitan* too. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)