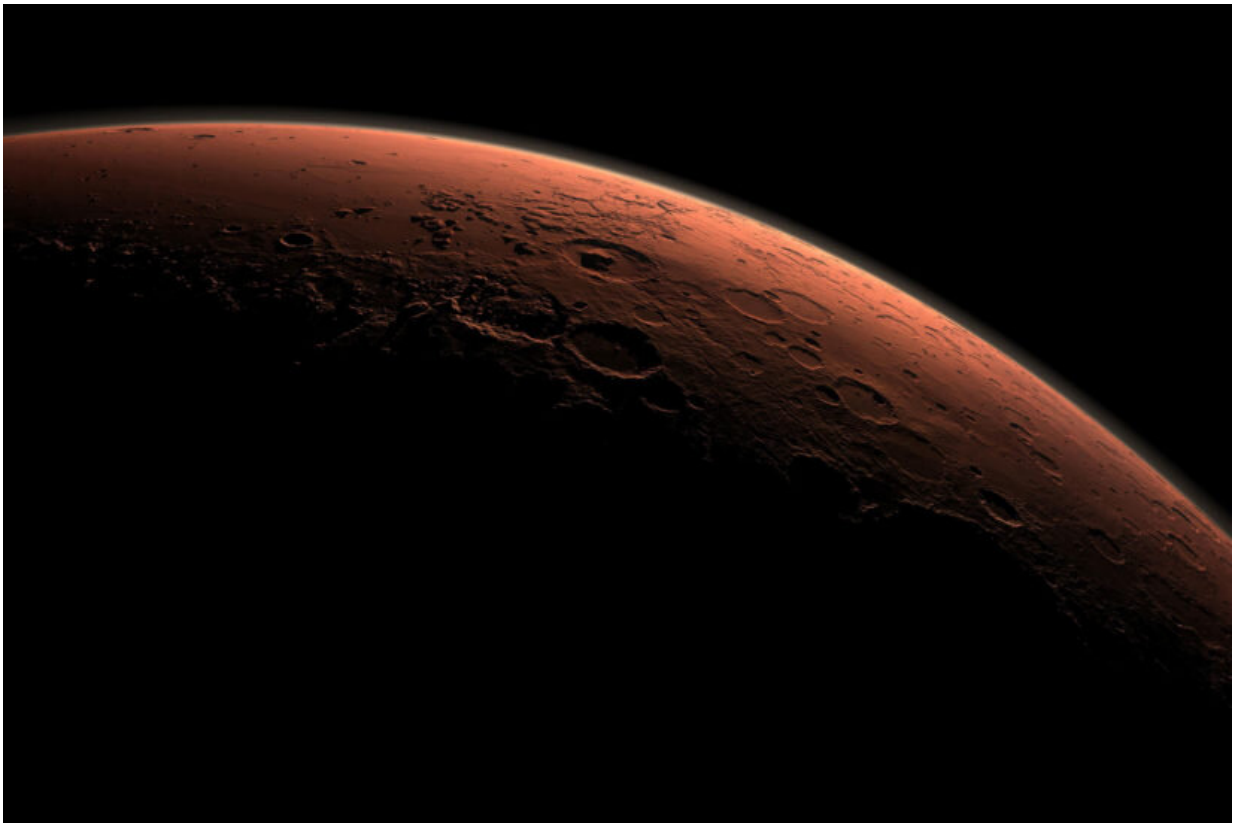


For hundreds of years, the mysteries of Mars have fascinated humans

July 30 2020, by Gary Polakovic



A rendering of Mars at the boundary between darkness and daylight. Credit: NASA JPL-Caltech

Mars seems so far away, even though it's been close to people for so long.

Even before spaceflight was possible, the red dot in the night sky captured human fascination as reflected in stories. Throughout [human history](#), Mars has been embraced in myths, religion, literature and cinema. It has been an icon for nations, a spot on the calendar, an erotic symbol, a god of warfare and the potential home of little green men.

On Thursday, NASA is scheduled to launch a [new rocket](#) to Mars to learn more about this mysterious rock orbiting near Earth. The rocket carries a rover, Perseverance, that will collect samples and conduct tests to help determine if the planet ever harbored life in the past or could accommodate human visitors in the future.

"Mars has filtered into our unconscious cultural matrix," said Brandon Bourgeois, assistant professor of classics at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. "Mars has always been with us, in how we conceptualize gender and its roles, militarism and pop culture."

Scorned by the Greeks, the war god Ares got a makeover by the Romans, who intertwined the story of Mars with the city's foundation. The Romans rebranded him not only as a force for carnage but also as a god of agriculture, a father figure and a martial and civic emblem of virility—the divine mascot for Rome's empire and civilized life. Blood red and hovering overhead, Mars was represented in mythology by shield and spear, which later became the iconic circle and arrow symbol for male gender, Bourgeois explained.

Technology, popular culture raise Mars' stature

Modern fascination with Mars grew with technology advances. Telescopes brought the red planet nearer, human-powered flight opened the possibility of space travel and mass media distributed [science fiction](#) far and wide.

By the early 19th century, most people believed that all the planets in the solar system were inhabited by strange creatures. Mars in particular fascinated people; it was near enough to see yet far enough to be beyond verification, a blank canvas for projecting human imagination, explained Vahe Perroomian, associate professor of physics and astronomy at USC Dornsife.

"Mars became a blank slate, and you could imagine there might be a more advanced civilization and so many different imaginings of life on Mars and how it affects Earth," he said.

In 1877, Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli saw what appeared to be channels on Mars. The U.S. astronomer Percival Lowell later mistakenly interpreted them as canals built by ancient Martian civilizations to survive a dying planet. That notion inspired English author H.G. Wells to write *War of the Worlds* in 1898, which became the famous radio broadcast about a Martian invasion on Halloween in 1938.

Meanwhile, in 1911 author Edgar Rice Burroughs produced the first of several science fiction novels, *A Princess of Mars*, about a Confederate soldier who awakens on Mars endowed with superpowers to fight space aliens and woo women.

In 1949, author Joseph Campbell published *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a review of the structure of mythical hero stories worldwide. Core to such tales is a hero who breaks from the mundane world into a realm of supernatural wonder and extraordinary forces where he achieves victory and returns with powers to help others. The book was a direct inspiration to George Lucas and his *Star Wars* films.

The following year, Ray Bradbury published *The Martian Chronicles*, a set of short stories about the conflict between Earthlings and Martians as

humans seek to colonize Mars because they ruined Earth.

These landmark works of science fiction, astronomy and mythology inspired generations of comic book superheroes and blockbuster movies. John Carter, Superman and Luke Skywalker trace their DNA to such works, USC experts say.

What does Mars represent for humanity?

"Today, many Americans believe that aliens have visited Earth to help create the world," said Tok Thompson, USC Dornsife professor of anthropology and communications. "Interplanetary travel and space aliens are a very strong belief, parts religion and a sacred modern mythological story, stories that tell how the world was created or developed. On a cultural level, this is very hot stuff and explains how Americans view this."

Indeed, beyond the mythological and metaphysical, Mars also represents the metaphorical aspiration of something beyond us, something "up there" and "above us" and "in the heavens," said Thompson, an expert in mythology, folklore, superstitions and beliefs.

"Up is like heaven; it has divine blessing, the notion that if we go there, we're doing something closer to the heavens and to God," he added. "It's part of an escapist fantasy, to leave Earth and recreate a more perfect life somewhere else, the anthropocentric vision of getting off our planet to reach higher ground. Getting to Mars is not just about science; it is a cultural priority."

When the Mars rocket launches at 4:50 a.m. PDT, it will blast off from one world to another, though the two have long been connected by human imagination.

Provided by University of Southern California

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