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Planet Celluloid

Mars Movie Night

The monthly movie night of the Mars Society wasn't a big hit to start. "I just threw it together in my studio in Golden Hill," said filmmaker Gerry Williams: "I was just thinking it would be a good way for society members to get together socially. We showed *Total Recall* the first night. That was in November 2001. Two people showed up. But I just kept it up every month, and now we're often filled to capacity."

The aim of the Mars Society is to promote the idea of "the exploration and settlement of the Red Planet," according to the society's website (*marssociety.org*). Its founder, Robert Zubrin, is author of the 1996 book The *Case for Mars: The Plan to Settle the Red Planet and Why We Must.*

LOCAL EVENTS

"Zubrin outlines very specifically how to get to Mars, how to live on the surface," said Williams, who cofounded the society's San Diego chapter. "I thought, 'This guy knows what he's talking about.'"

Why the fascination with Mars? Why not, say, Venus? (We were speaking just an hour after the transit of Venus was seen as a small black dot crossing the sun.) True, Venus is closer to Earth. But it's also very hot, he said. It's not the type of planet that could ever be thought of as sustaining human life. Mars, with its ice caps and 24-hour rotation, is probably the most Earth-like planet in the solar system.

There are 110 feature films about Mars in Williams's online movie guide *(marsmovieguide.com)*, starting with *A Message from Mars* (1913). Why have filmmakers been so fascinated with Mars for all these years? Have many of them, like Mars Society members, been convinced of its habitability? "A lot of them have," said Williams, "but others are just trying to make a buck, and Mars has a mystique that they can build on."

Do these fictional portrayals of Mars help or hinder the society's goals? Another society member, Jeff Berkwits, answered: "In a grand scheme, they help, in terms of firing the public's imagination, even though they often take a lot of artistic liberties. During the 1950s, for example, filmmakers didn't have huge budgets, so sometimes you'll see guys on Mars with just a pup tent."

Berkwits, a science fiction writer, created this Friday night's program, a collection of 1950s TV episodes featuring Mars. "These are early views of Mars prior to the space program — in some cases years before *Sputnik* [1957]," said Berkwits, who, at 42, is too young to have seen these shows when they first aired. One selection is from the 1951–1953 series *Tales of Tomorrow,* which Berkwits characterized as "the first ongoing adult-oriented TV series specifically devoted to science fiction." Also scheduled is *Mars and Beyond,* one of a three-part collaboration between Walt Disney and Wernher Von Braun. "Von Braun worked for the Nazis," said Berkwits. "And at the end of World War II, the U.S. and the Russians divided up the rocket scientists, and we got Von Braun and a bunch of others. This series aired in 1957. It was very influential in its time. It really fired up young folks and adults about the possibilities of space exploration."

The venue for these Friday-evening screenings, Williams's studio, is small — the size of a two-car garage. Reservations are recommended. Williams supplies the popcorn; everyone else should bring some other form of munchies.

Asked to name the best Mars film of all time, Williams didn't hesitate: "The best Mars film yet is a very recent one, which surprised me. It's called *Stranded* [2002]. It was actually a $4 million, low-budget feature about the first people who go to Mars. It was done mostly with a Spanish crew, although it's in English. It's one of the best 'logical' films."

Williams, who has a physics degree in nuclear engineering, meant that the movie's science made sense. Critiquing that aspect of the films is one of the activities at Mars Movie Night, he added. "After the movie's over, we sit around and rip it apart. 'Could this happen? Could this not happen?' That's part of what's fun about it."

Another film that still holds up is *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964), he said. He also named *The War of the Worlds* (1953), especially if seen on the big screen.

As for bad Mars films, Williams named Tobe Hooper's 1986 remake of *Invaders from Mars* and one simply called *Mars* (1998), starring Oliver Gruner. The latter, said Williams, is not only a bad Mars film but an equally bad martial arts film "with cheap sets and pathetic acting."

And the worst one of all time? Again, no hesitation: *Attack from Mars* (1988). "Putrid. We showed it a couple of months ago. It was originally released as *Midnight Movie Massacre.* I wished I had previewed it, because I wouldn't have shown it. I mean, I've worked on some really low-budget films. That one puts them all to shame."

— *Jeanne Schinto*

The Mars Society San Diego chapter's "Mars Movie Night"
Friday, June 18
7 p.m.
Studio 106
Art Union Building
2323 Broadway
Golden Hill
Free
Info: 619-233-9779 or *http://marssandiego.org/*