

# Faith in american power: space travel on film in 'the martian'



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

When comparing the way two mediums depict the same story, one has to take into account the limitations of each medium. Films are generally limited by length, while books are generally limited by each reader's individual imagination. In the case of "The Martian", this length limitation on the film not only cuts out interesting parts of the narrative, but shifts the overall tone of the text. While the bones of each text read the same, the film's deviations from the novel shift the message from emphasizing the intelligence and luck of one man to an affirmation of American imperialism and ingenuity.

This shift establishes itself primarily in the amount of time the audience spends with the group of people on Earth. In the novel, the majority of the story happens on Mars with Mark, with some scenes from the crew of Hermes and a few scenes about NASA on Earth. In the film, NASA gets a lot more focus, perhaps to make the audience feel like they are watching it happen like everyone else on Earth. Regardless of the reasoning behind this choice, the proportion of time spent on each planet balances out to almost equal in the film, which means less focus on Mark than in the novel. Many of his significant scenes are cut in the name of a shorter runtime, which makes it more difficult to emotionally connect with his character and fails to show many of the ways in which he exemplifies his intellect and resourcefulness. Instead, the film focuses on the abilities of the scientists who are working to save him, emphasizing this group effort and a positive ideal of teamwork. While this gives the audience faith in the ability of institutions like NASA to solve these devastating problems, it also gives it a slight taint of propaganda. The scientists are shown to be incredibly intelligent and great problem-solvers, but this is a real institution being portrayed fictionally. Their

ability in both the novel and the film is speculation and potentially places false hope in the American people that our scientists are smart enough to solve any problem. It takes away a lot of the responsibility that lies with Mark and subsequently, minimizes his individual importance.

This minimization becomes more prominent when Mark does not lose contact with Earth in the film. Because he consistently has people to talk to and scientists to figure things out, he seems less isolated. The film even downplays the resentment he feels toward the scientists and their tendency to micromanage him. In the novel, this resentment highlights how competent he is and paints NASA as unnecessarily controlling. He is able to function with or without them on a scientific level, and some of the biggest help they provide is actually the psychological help of human communication.

Conversely, the film never takes away this communication, which makes him a weaker character. Through this, the audience does not see the full extent to which his isolation affects him mentally and does not know the problems he can solve on his own. His individual greatness is taken away in favor of this teamwork theme which highlights the greatness of the scientists and America. A lot of the significance of the novel is his utter isolation and how that affects a person, which is lost in the film. This also means some of Mark's strength is taken away, and the audience does not see that his mental state is a big part of the reason he is able to survive for so long on Mars.

The audience is also less involved with Mark personally because of the way the film chose to do his logs. Instead of being written like in the novel, they become video journals in the film and they are not the only way through <https://assignbuster.com/faith-in-american-power-space-travel-on-film-in-the-martian/>

which the audience experiences him. Viewers see what he experiences directly through the cameras observing him instead of through his accounts of his activities. In losing him as the middleman, the audience becomes disconnected from him. While in the novel, the reader feels like they are on Mars with Mark, the film makes viewers feel like they are watching surveillance tapes and it makes the experience impersonal. It does not give Mark the opportunity to grow on the viewers in the same way he does in the novel. It also does not allow him to show emotional vulnerability the way he does in the novel. When he writes, it is easier to see how he feels compared to the film, where he seems to be putting up a front in his logs to appear strong and less pessimistic. He uses more jokes and sarcasm to cover his sadness. He does have moments where the observational cameras catch moments of him being truly upset, but these moments are so few that they do not make him as sympathetic as he is in the novel. Losing this connection takes away from impact of the story because he becomes more of an icon that needs saving rather than an actual person the audience can identify with.

This diminution of character happens to nearly all the characters in the film. Annie is less aggressive, Mitch has less of a fiery personality, and all of the astronauts on the Hermes lack the roundness of character they have in the novel. The filmmakers deemed these cuts necessary to make the movie fall within an expected time frame and send the message they wanted to send. In diminishing each individual, the group as a whole becomes slightly more cohesive. In reducing the conflicting personalities, discussions can take less time while dually emphasizing this idea of all working together toward a

national goal. The most discursive of the administrators is Mitch, and he has a British accent, potentially to delineate him from the group and further justify his insubordination. The other administrators are connected by their American nationality and their belief in the greatness of space missions. These two elements combined create this theme of imperialism that exists throughout both the film and the novel.

The novel's references to imperialism are more understated than those in the film, but the most poignant is the fact that Mark "colonized" Mars by planting potatoes on it. He also names a few things on Mars, which also follows the imperialism theme. Because this is such a common theme in science fiction, it would be odd if it were not present. The book does a better job of painting these actions as unnecessary, and highlights all the dangers mankind puts itself through in order to obtain this goal. In contrast, the movie writes these space travels as proof of outstanding American power. The director of the Mars missions knows that if he tells Teddy he wants to use the satellites so they could potentially have another mission, Teddy will be more likely to allow it. This betrays the NASA director's insatiable desire for space travel. He always wants more, which is again seen when he decides the Hermes crew should not go back for Mark. He says, "We still have a chance to bring five astronauts home safe and sound. I'm not risking their lives," he is essentially saying that he is not willing to take the risk of an entire mission crew dying, even if it is the safest option, because he will not be able to do any further missions (The Martian). This is imperialism masked by strict logic. While there is a logical explanation for not risking these lives, his motivations for making this choice are unfortunately driven by public

perception. He knows that if powerful Americans do not back the idea of space exploration, he will no longer be able to do it. And finally, at the end of the film, another Ares mission is being sent to Mars, showing that Americans are still willing to spend insane amounts of money and risk lives to go to a planet seventeen people have already been to. While there are scientific discoveries to be made, one must question if those discoveries are worth the effort put into the program.

The film celebrates this progress, even in the wake of all the problems it had caused. In contrast, the novel seems to have the idea that getting one person trapped on Mars is enough for a lifetime. It emphasizes that this imperialistic drive towards space is, in some ways, doomed because no country can own things from space. All of this work and money is in the name of science and bragging rights. While it is not as bad as it could be, this theme of imperialism in the movie makes the story feel less authentic and diminishes Mark Watney's character to a shell of what it could have been. The filmmakers chose to cut significant character development to send a positive message about American space travel, sacrificing crucial plot points to serve an agenda. The novel (especially with the original ending) seems to better represent the thoughts of an individual, instead of the thoughts of a production company that are emphasized in the film. The novel does not shy away from the gritty and difficult parts of the story, but the film glosses over them to encourage further space travel and faith in American power.