

Panic over Alien tripods and Martians on the M62



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By The Huddersfield Daily Examiner

TOM Cruise is fighting for survival in Steven Spielberg's latest blockbuster film War Of The Worlds.

The H G Wells novel has been given the full treatment from the master movie maker. It has been updated and, of course, relocated in America.

And not for the first time.

Orson Welles famously broadcast a version on American radio in 1938 with devastating results: millions of listeners believed an invasion was really taking place and fled from their homes.

The novel told of an invasion from Mars. Aliens in giant metal tripods shot beams of fire and poison gas and laid waste all in their path.

Welles' dramatisation treated it as a breaking news story. A programme of orchestra music was repeatedly interrupted by excited newsmen giving eye- witness accounts of aliens landing in New Jersey.

Real life panic spread.

The tenants of one New Jersey apartment block fled en masse with wet towels wrapped around their heads for fear of gas. New York traffic became gridlocked as citizens tried to escape to the country. A chap in Dayton, Ohio, phoned the New York Times and asked: "What time will it be the end of the world?"

How could so few in a radio studio, fool so many, so completely?

Actually, quite easily.

A new DVD, The Day That Panicked America: The H G Wells War

Of The Worlds Scandal, explains how it happened.

For a start, the United States was ripe for it.

Science fiction and space ship invasion had been popular in pulp fiction and the cinema during the previous decade. The rise of Nazis in Europe had filled the whole world with trepidation. A year before, the Hindenburg airship exploded as it landed in New York and the radio broadcast had gripped millions.

But, the crucial element was that Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre of the Air, began their broadcast at 8.15pm with a clear announcement that what was to follow was fiction. Unfortunately, another popular radio programme on a different channel, did not finish until 8.20pm.

Many listeners switched over to Orson Welles after the warning had been given and believed they were listening to real-life on-the-spot news reports, in the Hindenburg mode, but describing a disaster of far greater proportions.

Still not convinced?

Well, more than 20 years ago, the BBC caused a similar panic, but on a smaller scale.

They transmitted a test teletext broadcast that reported Martians had landed on the M62. A mother in Honley telephoned the Examiner in a panic to ask if it was true and should she go and collect her children from school?

Crime reporter Neil Atkinson telephoned Huddersfield police and, rather self consciously, asked: "Has there been an alien invasion? On the M62?"

I know this is true because the mum in a panic was my wife Maria. The teletext message was real but what she had failed to notice was a line across the top that said, "What if ...?"

Besides, is it so unlikely that we could be a target for invasion? We are surely not the only planet that has life.

Physicist Enrico Fermi worked out that if only one in 100 solar systems had life, and only one in 1,000 of these had intelligent life, then our galaxy alone would have five million civilisations. And there are an endless number of galaxies.

Mind you, the nearest possible life is 24 trillion miles away so even if they were as advanced as us and were killing each other off in wars based on religion, oil supplies and world power, they would need Star Trek's Warp Factor 10 to get here.

Anyway, how would they know of our existence in this far-off corner of the universe?

Because we have told them, that's how. We have sent radio messages into space and a space ship carrying the history of the Earth, music from the Beatles to Beethoven, anatomical diagrams of man and directions on how to get here. Straight on past Alpha

Centauri and turn left at Jupiter.

The odds are that rather than man colonising space, we will be the ones who will eventually be visited by creatures from another world.

Let's hope they will be friendlier than the Martians of H G Wells.