

# **Doctor Who and Cosmic Horror: How “The Waters of Mars” explores fears around space colonisation**

## **Introduction**

On the 25th of May, 2008, the soft-lander Phoenix touched down on the surface of Mars in the Green Valley of Vastitas Borealis. On 31 July, NASA announced that water had been discovered on Mars, based on a sample collected by Phoenix<sup>1</sup>. The discovery made by Phoenix inspired the 2009 Doctor Who episode titled The Waters of Mars<sup>2</sup>.

This essay argues that The Waters of Mars explores human fears around the new space frontier through the medium of cosmic horror. The new space frontier is the human colonisation of other planets, with Mars likely being the first planet we colonise due to its positioning in the habitable zone of our solar system<sup>3</sup>. Although inspired by the discovery of water on Mars, the story is also influenced by claims that humans will soon be able to colonise Mars. The colonisation of Mars is an exciting prospect to some; however, this space-age revolution raises important philosophical questions about our place in the universe and whether we are prepared for what we find on new worlds.

Cosmic horror explores the fears of the unknown. As characters attempt to comprehend the vastness and complexity of the universe, they are left questioning humanity's relative insignificance and fragility<sup>4</sup>. One of the main themes of cosmic horror is humanity coming face to face with aliens and supernatural beings beyond human scientific understanding, often being ancient and unknowable. The horror sub-genre began in literature but has expanded into visual media.

The sci-fi show follows a centuries-old humanoid alien, known as the Doctor, who travels through the vastness of time and space. *The Waters of Mars* episode follows a fictional future in which the Doctor stumbles upon humanity's first colonists of Mars in

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<sup>1</sup> NASA. (n.d.). *Mars Phoenix Mission*. Available at: <https://science.nasa.gov/mission/mars-phoenix/> [Accessed 23 Mar. 2025].

<sup>2</sup> IMDb (2009) *Doctor Who: The Waters of Mars* - IMDb. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1481691/>

<sup>3</sup> Zimmer, C. (2015). *How to colonize Mars, 101*. Discover Magazine. Available at: <https://www.discovermagazine.com/technology/how-to-colonise-mars-101>

<sup>4</sup> Raine, S. (2024) *What is Cosmic Horror?* [online] Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/knowledge/study-guides/what-is-cosmic-horror>

the not-too-distant future of 2059<sup>5</sup>. The episode's major conflict arises when an ancient alien evil, The Flood, is awakened from a Martian glacier.

This interdisciplinary essay explores literature, media studies, and science to argue its thesis. Part one examines the villain of the episode. Part two explores the gothic sublime of our Mars environments. The final part investigates the episode's themes of human insignificance in the cosmos.

### **Part 1 – The Flood**

*The Waters of Mars* explores one of our greatest fears about space colonisation: that we are not prepared for what we might find. Through the unknown and unknowable nature of an ancient supernatural alien menace, the episode explores native hostility in the new space frontier<sup>6</sup>. Although the audience never sees the entity, we know it is part of the water that exists in an ancient Martian glacier.

The Flood is introduced to us through its hosts, beginning with botanist Andy. Hosts of The Flood are seemingly possessed by the entity virally through contact with contaminated water. Hosts of The Flood share traits with the horror icon of zombies, such as loss of humanity, determination to kill all the human-like creatures on the Mars base, and often acting in animalistic ways. In the scene where Junior Technician Roman is infected by one drop of water falling onto his face from above, we get a homage to the zombie movie classic *28 Days Later* (2002)<sup>7</sup>. In a scene mirroring Roman's infection, the character of Frank is infected by a drop of blood falling from above. Thacker (2001) notes that cosmic horror blurs biology and theology through themes of contagion and corruption—evident in how The Flood merges infection with possession<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> **BBC (2009)** *Doctor Who: The Waters of Mars*. Directed by Graeme Harper. Written by Russell T Davies and Phil Ford. [TV episode] BBC One, 15 November.

<sup>6</sup> Burger, A. (2018). Gazing upon “The Daemons of Unplumbed Space” with H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King: Theorizing Horror and Cosmic Terror. In: S. Moreland (ed.), *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>7</sup> Boyle, D. (Director) (2002). *28 Days Later*. [Film] UK: DNA Films.

<sup>8</sup> Thacker, E., 2001. In the Dust of the Planet: Horror Philosophy, vol. 1. Zero Books.

The screenplay reinforces this unknowable terror when the Doctor is talking about an ancient Martian race, as its history is lost to the sands of time. He says, “Perhaps they found something down there. Used their might and their wisdom to freeze it.” The unknown nature of this creature is also highlighted by the camerawork. The possession of Andy and the subsequent possession of Maggie are filmed with a split shot where the host is blurred, and the unknowing human is in deep focus. The audience is shielded from seeing The Flood take hold, only seeing the blurry body twitch. The most popular writer of cosmic horror, H. P. Lovecraft, said, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”<sup>9</sup>

The episode also utilises body horror to convey the horror of the contagion/possession. *Far Out* magazine describes body horror as a “subgenre of horror that explores the potential transformation, mutation, or degeneration of the human body in a graphic and grotesque means”<sup>10</sup>. Victims of The Flood undergo grotesque transformations, with water seeping endlessly from their mouths. Piatti-Farnell argues in *Horror Matters: Abominable Substances and the Revulsions of Orality* that “the outflux of fluids, in particular, is commonly and culturally identified as disgusting and deplorable”<sup>11</sup>. These mutations are an unsettling blend of body horror and supernatural corruption.

The Flood mirrors other supernatural entities in Lovecraft’s work of cosmic horror fiction. One could argue that The Flood parallels the eponymous Colour in *The Colour Out of Space*, a story that also contains themes of supernatural corruption and infection<sup>12,13</sup>. The story depicts an asteroid containing a cosmic entity (The Colour) hitting a rural town in New England, subsequently causing the surrounding area to become contaminated. Plants, animals, and people begin to change, with some humans going mad and others mutating beyond something human. Like the *Doctor*

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<sup>9</sup> Lovecraft, H.P. (1973) *Supernatural horror in literature*. 1st reprint. London;New York;: Dover Publications.

<sup>10</sup> Leatham, T. (2021) 'What is body horror?', *Far Out Magazine*, 9 March. Available at: <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/what-is-body-horror/>

<sup>11</sup> Piatti-Farnell, L. (2017) 'Horror matters: abominable substances and the revulsions of orality', in *Consuming Gothic*. Palgrave Gothic. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 35-51.

<sup>12</sup> Lovecraft, H.P., 1927. *The Colour Out of Space*. [online] Available at: <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cs.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> Newell, J., 2020. *A Century of Weird Fiction, 1832-1937: Disgust, Metaphysics and the Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror*. Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru / University of Wales Press.

*Who* episode, a major vessel of contamination is through the water, which is described as evil. Lovecraft writes, “Thaddeus went mad in September after a visit to the well<sup>14</sup>.” The shared theme of ‘evil’ water (a theme also employed in the body horror elements) as an agent of supernatural infection and corruption underscores a primal fear: that an element essential to life can also bring devastation and death.

The Flood contains key elements of cosmic horror - its unknown nature, infectious qualities, and corruption of essential elements. These elements reflect human fears surrounding space colonisation. The Lovecraftian unknown of our creature reflects our fear of the potentially unknown hostile entity that waits for us to touch down. The cosmic Flood fully embodies the fear that space may hold untold horrors beyond human comprehension—threats we cannot predict or control. Fear surrounding the potential for hostility from alien life has even permeated the academic realm, like the articles *MAD with Aliens? Interstellar Deterrence and Its Implications* and *Meeting Extraterrestrials: Scenarios of First Contact from the Perspective of the Social Sciences*<sup>1516</sup>. The first explores the application of mutually assured destruction in interactions with alien life, and the second explores the potential conflict from a social science perspective. Preparation for conflict has already begun.

Furthermore, the infectious element of The Flood reflects our understanding that colonisation can spread disease, such as the diseases spread to Native Americans during the British colonisation of America<sup>17</sup>. Cockell argues in *Planetary Protection—A Microbial Ethics Approach* that we should prepare for the possibility of new diseases from Mars<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Lovecraft, H.P., 1927. *The Colour Out of Space*. [online] Available at: <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cs.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> Korhonen, J.M. (2013) ‘MAD with aliens? Interstellar deterrence and its implications’, *Acta astronautica*, 86, pp. 201–210.

<sup>16</sup> Anton, A., Elliott, J. and Schetsche, M. (2024) ‘Meeting extraterrestrials: Scenarios of first contact from the perspective of exosociology’, *Acta astronautica*, 215, pp. 308–314.

<sup>17</sup> Powell, J.F. (2005) *The first Americans: race, evolution, and the origin of Native Americans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Cockell, C.S. (2005) ‘Planetary protection—A microbial ethics approach’, *Space policy*, 21(4), pp. 287–292

Overall, it is clear that *The Waters of Mars* utilises cosmic horror through The Flood to highlight our fears that we are not prepared for what we find in space.

## **Part 2 – Our Sublime Environment**

*The Waters of Mars* explores another fear surrounding space colonisation: hostile environments. The episode uses the gothic sublime of both the Martian wilderness and Bowie Base One's Biodome to heighten the sense of cosmic horror. The sublime is a philosophical concept describing something that is awe-inducing and makes us feel small in comparison, such as the ocean or the vast cosmos<sup>19</sup>. The Gothic sublime is a concept that merges the sublime with gothic themes of horror and the grotesque, such as the icy landscapes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or the Transylvanian wilderness of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*<sup>20,21</sup>. The Gothic sublime is often associated with cosmic horror, with Ralickas (2007) arguing that Lovecraftian characters "encounter expansive, indifferent natural environments that evoke feelings of insignificance and dread, aligning with his concept of cosmic horror<sup>22</sup>."

The Martian landscape is introduced through a wide shot of a vast, empty desert wilderness. Wilderness landscapes are a typical example of the Gothic sublime. Franck (2020) argues that the wilderness landscape evokes both fear and awe because it is something to be "tamed, overcome, and survived," having the power to "transform and consume the human subject, making them only object<sup>23</sup>." Wilderness settings are prevalent in cosmic horror because they strip away the comforts of civilisation, leaving the individual exposed to vast, unknowable forces<sup>24</sup>. One example is the Arctic

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, A. (2000). The Gothic and the Sublime. In: Gothic Radicalism. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230598706\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230598706_2)

<sup>20</sup> Shelley, M.W. (2003) *Frankenstein, or, The modern Prometheus*. Rev. London;New York;: Penguin Books.

<sup>21</sup> Stoker, B. (2011) *Dracula*. [New]. New York;Oxford;: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Ralickas, V. (2007) "'Cosmic Horror' and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft", *Journal of the fantastic in the arts*, 18(3 (71), pp. 364–398.

<sup>23</sup> Franck, K. (2020). The Wilderness. In: Bloom, C. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33136-8\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33136-8_15)

<sup>24</sup> Blanc, F. (2021). 'It Was the Vegetation': Ecophobia and Monstrous Wilderness in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. In *Lovecraft in the 21st Century* (1st ed., pp. 14). Routledge.

wilderness environment depicted in Lovecraft's science fiction novella *At the Mountains of Madness*<sup>25</sup>. This serves as an isolating backdrop for the horrifying revelations the scientist makes about Earth's history. The Arctic wilderness and Martian wilderness align with the idea that characters are forced to confront an environment beyond their control.

The Gothic sublime of the Martian wilderness is emphasised through visual storytelling. In terms of cinematography, when the Doctor first sets foot on Martian soil, he is framed in the centre, appearing tiny, which highlights the immense scale around him. Mars is metaphorically consuming him from all sides. We also see the element of having to "survive" the Martian wilderness through costuming. Both the Doctor and the inhabitants of Bowie Base One must use space suits to survive the oxygen-less environment. This heightens dread, as the protections the natural environment typically provides (such as shelter from hostility and clean oxygen) are absent from this setting.

The Biodome is the second environment that explores fears surrounding hostile environments through the Gothic sublime. The Biodome is a man-made nature hub on Mars that produces vegetation and oxygen for the residents of the human base. Although less outwardly hostile in appearance than Mars' surface, the contaminated water from the Martian glacier infects humans through the Biodome, with botanist Andy washing a carrot and then eating it.

The Biodome embodies the essence of the Gothic sublime: nature that "threatens to transform and consume the human subject, making them an object," which is what happens during the zombification of the hosts. The characters can protect themselves from the harsh wilderness of Mars with space suits, but nature has turned against them within their own home, where they are most vulnerable. The idea of nature consuming humanity is exemplified through the *mise-en-scène* (the presentation of visual elements) of the moment Andy infects/possesses the crew's doctor, Karak. We see a mid-shot (the possessed and its victim), one standing and the other on his knees. The positioning is reminiscent of a ceremonial setting. During the possession, the

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<sup>25</sup> Lovecraft, H.P. (2017) *At the mountains of madness*. New York, New York: Open Road Integrated Media.

characters are surrounded by the lush, dense greenery of the Biodome, which visually represents nature's overpowering and consuming force.

The Gothic sublime of the Martian environments in *The Waters of Mars* transcends human understanding and control, highlighting our fears of encountering hostile environments during the new space frontier. Mars has a harsh climate for humans. Temperatures fall to -153 degrees Celsius, oxygen levels are as low as 0.13%, and there is no Earth-like magnetic field to protect against harmful cosmic radiation<sup>2627</sup>. Yet, the cosmic horror twist of human-made nature turning against humans strengthens the idea that humans don't belong there.

### **Part 3 – Human Insignificance**

The final fear that *The Waters of Mars* explores surrounding the new space frontier is that we discover our own insignificance. Although cosmic horror explores themes such as vast unknown horrors and supernatural evil, it also delves into themes surrounding human insignificance. Joshi (1997) argues that H.P. Lovecraft's personal belief in "cosmic indifferentism" inspired him to explore human insignificance in his horror writing, typically positioning his human characters alongside "titanic gulfs of space and time" and unfathomable entities. An early example of human insignificance in cosmic horror appears in *At the Mountains of Madness*, where humans discover that their species was not created by divine intervention but is the result of an accidental experiment by the "old ones". The theme of cosmic indifferentism has become central to the genre, as seen in *Prometheus* (2012), which explores a similar revelation—that humanity was a byproduct of alien biological warfare testing by the "engineers"<sup>28</sup>.

One way in which human insignificance is explored in the story is through the knowledge that our human characters are doomed from the beginning. As our protagonist, the Doctor, is a time traveller, he is aware that Bowie Base One is doomed

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<sup>26</sup> NASA, (2025). *Mars Facts*. [online] Available at: <https://science.nasa.gov/mars/facts/>

<sup>27</sup> Seedhouse, E. (2009) *Martian outpost: the challenges of establishing a human settlement on Mars*. Chichester, UK;New York;Berlin;; Springer.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, R. (director), 2012. *Prometheus*. 20th Century Fox.

to be destroyed. This chilling revelation is presented at the start of the story through what could be seen as both analepsis and prolepsis (commonly referred to in film and television as "flashback" and "flashforward"). We are shown newspaper clippings of the future (flashforward), yet they are presented as flashbacks for the Doctor. The newspapers reveal that the entire crew is destined to die in a nuclear blast, showing the limited control humans have over their own destiny. This technique not only builds suspense but also reinforces the core idea of cosmic horror: that humanity is powerless against the greater forces of the universe, whether that be The Flood or time itself.

In the final act of the episode, the Doctor decides to break his own rules on fixed points in time and attempts to rescue the survivors. The remaining humans are only rescued due to the intervention of a higher being, further hammering home the idea that humans are powerless in the story. The image of the Doctor being a higher being is reinforced through the cinematography and lighting of the scene in which he returns to the base. He is lit with angelic lighting, a bold backlight that appears to spawn from the heavens. Block (2020) describes angelic lighting as a technique that creates a divine or heavenly effect<sup>29</sup>. The Doctor is also shot from a low-angle camera angle, placing him above the characters and above the audience.

However, his hubris is ultimately punished through Adelaide's suicide at the end of the episode, after she tells him "This is wrong, Doctor. I don't care who you are. The Time Lord Victorious is wrong"<sup>30</sup>. Clearly, she viewed his intervention as an abomination. One could view this as humanity taking control. However, after Adelaide dies, the Doctor realises that attempting to control cosmic forces like time is a disruption of the universe's natural order, saying, "...I've gone too far." This realisation reaffirms time as the great ruler of all and that we are merely its subjects. This recognition reaffirms a central theme of cosmic horror: we are powerless in the face of forces larger than us.

This episode's core theme, exploring human insignificance in comparison to colossal cosmic forces, could be seen as an exploration of humanity's diminishing significance

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<sup>29</sup> Block, B. (2020). *The Visual Story: Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV, and Digital Media* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315794839>

<sup>30</sup> Davies, R.T. (2009) *Doctor Who: The Waters of Mars*. Shooting script. London: BBC. Available at: [https://thescriptsavant.com/tv/Doctor\\_Who\\_4x16\\_-\\_The\\_Waters\\_of\\_Mars.pdf](https://thescriptsavant.com/tv/Doctor_Who_4x16_-_The_Waters_of_Mars.pdf)



in an increasingly secular society. Philosopher Kahane argues in 2014 that “The decline of religion, and the vast, indifferent universe revealed to us by natural science, have been a source of a distinctive kind of cosmic anxiety, a crushing sense that we are utterly insignificant<sup>31</sup>.” For centuries, humans had a heliocentric view of Earth, based on religious beliefs such as the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). We were central to the universe, as we were central to God's divine plan. The more we conquer space, the more the scale of the universe and humans’ smallness come into focus. Astronomer Carl Sagan compared our existence to “a mote of dust in the morning sky<sup>32</sup>.” *The Waters of Mars* ultimately highlights our fear of being merely “dust in the morning sky,” with the true horror of the episode being human insignificance in the face of grand cosmic forces—chess pieces in a cosmic game between higher forces.

### **Conclusion**

*The Waters of Mars* employs cosmic horror to masterfully explore our fears surrounding a possible future of space colonisation. The first two fears this essay explores (hostile alien life and harsh environment) are grounded in a rational fear for our own survival. The terrifying Flood explores our fear of both hostile natives and new diseases. The gothic sublime of the Mars environment highlights our fears of hostile environments. The final fear (human insignificance) is philosophical in nature, leaving the audience to question their position in the universe as the characters are forced to confront the monolith of time. At the end of the episode, the audience is left questioning whether we should be venturing out into the stars at all.

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<sup>31</sup> Kahane, G., (2014). 'Our Cosmic Insignificance'. *Noûs*, 48(4), pp. 745–772. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43828899>

<sup>32</sup> Sagan, C. (1994). *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (1st ed.). New York: Random House.

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