

MARS ATTACKS!

Death and Bubble Gum from Above

Illustration by Rick Lovelace



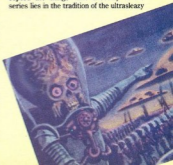
by Lou Stathis

I remember these sick things. Chances are good that most of you—even those old enough to have caught their initial appearance—don't. And if you do, you sure as hell wouldn't admit it. Lurid packages of *Mars Attacks!* cards first turned up, with a suddenness befitting their content, on a local candy-store counter sometime near the passing of my first Earthly decade. Seeing them again for the first time in twenty years, I find I'm a bit taken aback by their graphic brutality and relentless, unrestrained xenophobia. But to a bent-brained adolescent routinely frenzy-cranked by girl-chewing cinematic reptiles (and bored comatose by the static-tableau, polite formalism of baseball cards), they were hot stuff, exciting in me and my similarly twisted cronies a near-prurient, breathless awe.

That same sensitive nerve was touched in artist Rick Lovelace. A third grader when the cards hit the stores, Rick collected a complete set and, unlike the rest of us foolish mortals, hung on to the things long after they were forgotten. Rick rediscovered the cards while he was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute in the early seventies, as he was combing his image bank in search of a potent death/destruction symbol. He recalls, "I came to the number-two card, with the huge Martian head, and it just struck me immediately as the perfect icon for fear, terror, and death." Lovelace found that not many kids of his generation remembered the cards, while the few who did were blown away to see them again. After some legwork, Rick discovered that the cards hadn't penetrated the cultural psyche nearly as deeply as they had his own head, thanks to a clamorous negative reaction from distributors, retailers, and parents who discovered their little innocents

cackling gleefully over smashed skulls and incinerated corpses.

"The terror and violence were actually pretty secondary in my attraction to the cards," Lovelace says. "It was more the flamboyant colors, and the humor—I thought the Martians were real funny guys. I was totally unaware of the sexual overtones of the violence." The pop-cultural context from which the cards emerged was instrumental in the natural way kids accepted the things. The ancestry of the series lies in the tradition of the ultrasleazy





pulp magazines, a form birthed in the twenties with such "under the counter" titles as *Saucy Stories* and *Pep*, openly erupting—like adolescent acne—with the 1934 appearance of *Spicy Detective* and its host of similarly seasoned, lingerie-obsessed sister publications (*Detective*, *Western*, *Mystery*, et cetera). Popular Publications' group of *Horror Stories*, *Terror Tales*, and *Dime Mystery* soon added torture, sadism, and drooling detailed body mutilation to the brew, while sf rags like *Startling*, *Planet Stories*, and *Marvel Science Stories* served up a steady wartime diet of scantily clad females menaced by sex-crazed monsters. The Sleaze Banner passed on to the comics after the pulps' demise, waving high and free until the neurotically protective Comics Code Authority cut it down in the mid fifties.

Life for the thrill-thirsty preteenager became damn dull after that. There we were, bottle-fed on the likes of "The Twilight Zone," *Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman*, and *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*; drilled repeatedly in school for the advent of nuclear attack; and ever vigilant against the leering visage of communists behind every plot—and we were supposed to get our kicks from the wirmpish likes of Superman and Batman? No way. Enter *Mars Attacks!* cards, sexless enough to pass preliminary muster as kids' stuff, but far more explicitly violent than the tight-assed Code allowed in the pages of comic books (still...). Where else could a clean-living kid get his hands on such titillating savagery as "Burning Flesh," "Smashing the Enemy," and "Destroying a Dog" (the fiends!)? This was the real thing, dangled like a lure to snare the fickle attention of jaded juvenile TV babies such as myself. This was conflict, graphic and simple, dramatically reduced to one essential image: fifty-five frozen moments of crisis survival, joined by a frightening, powerful narrative sequence—like fifty-five pulp-magazine covers, each with a vignette behind it, each with only part of the whole story. Continuity trimmed of comic-book padding; no buildup and no heroes who always emerged from adversity unscathed. Meat only: the immediate gratification of a sucker punch with a delivery less subtle than a Bowery bookie's come-on.

The artist hired for the job by the Topps trading-card company (who published them as "Bubbles, Inc.," probably to avoid any association of their wholesome baseball cards with these satanic atrocities) was Norman Saunders, a veteran pulpster (now dead) whose cover work had appeared at least as early as the premier issue of *Marvel Science Stories* in 1938 (E. C. Comics great Wally Wood apparently did some preliminary work). Saunders nicked the wrinkle-domed aliens from the film *This Island Earth*, modeled the ships after those in Harryhausen's *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, and borrowed much of the scenario from George Pal's adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*.

The idea of a Martian invasion wasn't new, of course. It dated back at least to Nostradamus's sixteenth-century prediction of the event for 1999, and more recently to the 1898 Wells novel, Orson Welles's 1938 radio drama (itself legendary in the annals of alien-fear scenarios), and the monumentally paranoid *Invasions from Mars* (1953). What is it about the Red Planet that makes it such a powerful symbol of menace? Presumably, it begins with the mythic resonance (Mars=war god, for you sixth-grade dropouts) and rises to push all the contemporary, invading-race fear buttons lurking just beneath the surface of tense times. The post-World War II popular culture had already prepared us to accept this scenario. After the howling yellow hordes of suicidal Nips, the coldly inhuman, machine-efficient Nazi juggernaut, and the devious, mole-burrowing commie cancer, who on Earth remained for us to fear? Metaphorically, Mars is no farther away than Moscow, and to a nation obsessed with security and the preservation of a lifestyle, the sky becomes an unplumbed well of paranoid delusion.

It was precisely these images of fifties fear obsessions, serving the function of subconscious exorcism in the popular culture, that formed the satirical vocabulary of

sixties camp. Mundane images, torn from their context and ballooned absurdly out of all proportion—a la Lichtenstein, Warhol, et al.—present an ironic commentary on the emotional subcurrents of more serious times. And this is the work to which Rick Lovelace puts the *Mars Attacks!* imagery, moving the natural step beyond collage into transforming the entire artwork into huge silkscreened prints, and altering the colors to suit his vision. Purple seems to be a favorite, its gauzy softness humorously counterpointing the cards' hard-edged garishness. Rick has also taken to hand-tinting the serigraph prints with an airbrush, occasionally using a stencil, but for the most part free-handing it. After forming his own screen-printing business, Vision Magic, in 1977, Rick began to arrange for the marketing of his prints. He's also set up an operation devoted to rescuing great pulp, art from obscurity, called the Red Planet

Project, establishing and exploiting the emerging interface between the pop and fine-art sensibilities. The prints—much—are for sale, and you can get more information about them and about future undertakings of the Red Planet Project by writing to Rick Lovelace, Red Planet Project, 2300 Adeline St., Suite 340, U.F. Oakland, CA 94607; or to The Will Stone Collection, 560 Sutter Street, Suite 201, San Francisco, CA 94102. Watch the skies. ●

HE BEAUTY
The long journey through space was over and they were eager to start the attack. Finally at rest after 6000 miles, the saucers awaited the instructions from Mars. Powerful weapons had been brought along with them. Centuries ago the Martians had spent their time perfecting their weapons. This solar energy now gave them the power to build beautiful cities and improve their environment. All this was changed now. Earth was to be conquered.

SEE CARD 3
ATTACKING AN ARMY OF 55

PAPER TUMBLER
The Martians not only attacked the big cities, but also struck at the less populated sections of the country. Frigidated citizens had to flee into the woods for safety or be burned with their homes. The invaders would leave their saucers and search small caves. Looking for signs of six people hidden together in fear, a Martian invader could use his death weapons, a dog lapped by the alien and its young energy. The invader then turned his deadly ray on the barking dog, destroying it as the young boy cried out in horror.

SEE CARD 37
VENICE OF 55 CARDS

ROBOT TERROR
The Martians in hand to hand combat on the city streets became an impending disaster during the Martian invasion. The Martians destroyed everything in its path. The streets were destroyed, the controls of the side walk were broken, and the people were left in a state of panic. A Martian invader captured a man in a death ray and took him to his ship. The invader then turned his deadly ray on the man and he died.

SEE CARD 51
CRUSHING THE MARTIANS OF 55 CARDS

WATCHING FROM MARS
From their observation post in the capital city of Mars, the Martians watched the progress of the invasion which they had developed. TV cameras which were capable of sending pictures millions of miles through space rays from their long range. The viewers watched the Earth's progress through their long range. The viewers watched the Earth's progress through their long range. The viewers watched the Earth's progress through their long range.

SEE CARD 14
CHARGED BY MARTIANS OF THE SET OF 55 CARDS

DE CHINA
The Martians in hand to hand combat on the city streets became an impending disaster during the Martian invasion. The Martians destroyed everything in its path. The streets were destroyed, the controls of the side walk were broken, and the people were left in a state of panic. A Martian invader captured a man in a death ray and took him to his ship. The invader then turned his deadly ray on the man and he died.

SEE CARD 19
THE MONSTER REAR OF THE SET OF 55 CARDS

THE BEAUTY
The long journey through space was over and they were eager to start the attack. Finally at rest after 6000 miles, the saucers awaited the instructions from Mars. Powerful weapons had been brought along with them. Centuries ago the Martians had spent their time perfecting their weapons. This solar energy now gave them the power to build beautiful cities and improve their environment. All this was changed now. Earth was to be conquered.

SEE CARD 17
BEAT THE MARTIANS OF 55 CARDS

ROBOT TERROR
The Martians in hand to hand combat on the city streets became an impending disaster during the Martian invasion. The Martians destroyed everything in its path. The streets were destroyed, the controls of the side walk were broken, and the people were left in a state of panic. A Martian invader captured a man in a death ray and took him to his ship. The invader then turned his deadly ray on the man and he died.

SEE CARD 36
THE MARTIANS OF 55 CARDS

WATCHING FROM MARS
From their observation post in the capital city of Mars, the Martians watched the progress of the invasion which they had developed. TV cameras which were capable of sending pictures millions of miles through space rays from their long range. The viewers watched the Earth's progress through their long range. The viewers watched the Earth's progress through their long range.

SEE CARD 13
FROM THE SET OF 55 CARDS

DE CHINA
The Martians in hand to hand combat on the city streets became an impending disaster during the Martian invasion. The Martians destroyed everything in its path. The streets were destroyed, the controls of the side walk were broken, and the people were left in a state of panic. A Martian invader captured a man in a death ray and took him to his ship. The invader then turned his deadly ray on the man and he died.

SEE CARD 19
THE MONSTER REAR OF THE SET OF 55 CARDS

THE BEAUTY
The long journey through space was over and they were eager to start the attack. Finally at rest after 6000 miles, the saucers awaited the instructions from Mars. Powerful weapons had been brought along with them. Centuries ago the Martians had spent their time perfecting their weapons. This solar energy now gave them the power to build beautiful cities and improve their environment. All this was changed now. Earth was to be conquered.

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