The question of settlement on Mars is, for many people, not “if” but “when”. Elon Musk’s SpaceX began speaking of the Mars Colonial Transporter around 2012. Its latest incarnation, the prototype for a massive spaceship, took off from Texas in April but exploded before reaching orbit. Whether that counts as a success depends on who you ask, but it testifies to Musk’s determination.

His view that colonising the cosmos is humankind’s destiny is widely shared. The moon is not a very attractive stepping stone, but Mars is considered a much more viable place to build the first off-world settlement. Why, though, should we wish to dwell on a world that lacks what we need to survive? There’s a dismaying irrationality in the answers. Stephen Hawking claimed that “spreading out [into space] may be the only thing that saves us from ourselves” – from the threat of human-made catastrophes such as the climate crisis or nuclear war.

Well, lord knows the world has problems, but supposing they can be solved anywhere other than Earth is an escapist fantasy. The old environmentalist cliché is right: there is no Planet B, and to suggest otherwise risks lessening the urgency of preserving Planet A.

For some, the justification for planetary settlement is not existential fear but our innate drive to explore. So let’s go with that, and assume something like Musk’s big fat rocket can get us there. What might life in Mars City be like? If you want to know what to expect from colonies established by *“billionauts”* such as Musk or Jeff Bezos, perhaps ask their employees in Amazon warehouses or the Twitter offices: ethical questions such as human rights or environmental protection in space typically meet with a response of “we’ll worry about that later”.

If the notion of a “Colonial Transporter” gave you a twinge of unease, associations of space exploration with colonialism have existed ever since the 17th century. Some advocates ridicule the comparison: there are surely no indigenous people to witness the arrival of the first crewed spaceships on Mars. But the analogy gets stronger when thinking about the question of who gets to go becomes more acute. So far it has been the rich and famous.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of the “Columbus” comparison, however, is that it encourages us to believe that space is just another ocean to sail, with the lure of virgin lands to draw us. But other worlds are not the New World. Currently, a crewed mission to Mars would be prohibited by the permitted radiation limits for astronauts. We don’t have any solutions to that problem.

**Philip Ball | Monday 21 Aug 2023 | adapted from The Guardian**

**Question 1: on what grounds does the columnist dismiss the idea of space colonisation?**

**Question 2: the billionauts’ space project is a textbook case of science threatening to spiral out of control: do you think international safeguards could avoid nightmare scenarios?**

**Thème :**

Dans un futur indéterminé, à moins que ce ne soit une réalité parallèle, des hommes et des femmes ordinaires sont recrutés par l’agence spatiale canadienne. Cinq d’entre eux forment un groupe test, en miroir d’un véritable équipage d’astronautes en poste sur Mars, mais dont la mission bat de l’aile à cause de problèmes strictement humains. Conduits dans une réplique de la station au milieu du désert, ils ont pour tâche d’y vivre comme dans un jeu de rôle grandeur nature, afin d’anticiper les anicroches d’en haut et d’y remédier. Parmi eux, David (Steve Laplante), simple prof de lycée, trouve là une occasion de fuir son morne quotidien avec une telle ferveur qu’il se voue corps et âme à la simulation.

Dans son opération, le cinéaste déniche un autre sujet : la sujétion aux sociétés de surveillance mutuelle. Stéphane Lafleur aborde en effet cette mission comme un théâtre du contrôle social, où chaque geste, chaque décision, soumise à l’approbation des autres, analysée par les responsables, prend des airs incongrus. L’on y reconnaîtra une allusion, au choix, au confinement, à la télé-réalité ou aux réseaux sociaux.

Mathieu Macheret | le Monde |le 02 août 2023

**Corrigés du sujet type Mines-Ponts : ‘settlement on Mars’**

**Question 1: on what grounds does the columnist dismiss the idea of space colonisation?**

The columnist decries extra-planetary colonisation as mere escapism, based on unsound reasoning and far-fetched end-of-the-world scenarios.

Not only has science proved it is physically impossible for humans to live on Mars, but the project is ethically fraught on several grounds. First, only a privileged few would go. Then, there are suspicions about the intentions of “billionauts”, whose colonial ambitions are unpalatable to some, especially given how disrespectfully they treat their employees on earth. Finally, fantasizing about other worlds might affect the efforts urgently required to save planet earth.

(88 words)

**Question 2: the Billionauts’ space project is a textbook case of science threatening to spiral out of control: do you think international safeguards could avoid nightmare scenarios?**

The current billionauts’ colonial space ambitions are an instance of scientific research serving a largely predictable dystopian scenario, which may well widen both environmental damage and political tensions to cosmic proportions. For some, this begs for an international agreement and safeguards.

Indeed, scientific nightmares have already been avoided: for instance, even though science had provided humanity with enough power to wipe all life out of the planet, the Cuba crisis never escalated to the point of a worldwide nuclear attack. On the contrary, world leaders then launched the ‘strategic arms limitation talks’ and started de-escalation.

Still, scientific progress can also cause damage whose effect is delayed. Global warming is indeed a time-bomb and international environmental safeguards have failed to prove effective so far, all the more so as only some countries agree on them.

The bottom line is therefore that ‘science without conscience is nothing but ruin to the soul’, in other words, safeguards are reminders of a danger rather than guarantees against it.

Yet, even though the planet experiences a resurgence of wars and ever-increasing global warming, the billionauts’ space project should raise the greatest concerns, since it replicates the mistakes it promises to put right.

(198 words)

**Thème**

In an indefinite future, unless it be in a parallel reality, ordinary men and women are recruited by the Canadian space agency. Five of them form a test group, the mirror image of a real crew of astronauts posted on Mars, but whose mission is faltering because of strictly human problems. Driven together to a replica of the station in the middle of the desert, they are expected to live there as in a life-size role game, in order to anticipate and remedy any problem that may arise, up above. Among them is David (Steve Laplante), a simple high-school teacher grabbing this as an opportunity to escape his dreary everyday life with such fervour that he devotes himself body and soul to the simulation.

In his operation, the filmmaker unearths another subject: subjection to mutual monitoring. Stéphane Lafleur approaches this mission as a drama of social control, where every gesture, every decision, subject to the approval of others and analysed by the officials, proves odd. This may be interpreted as an allusion to the lockdown, reality TV or social networking, depending on the viewer’s sensitivity.