BOOK REVIEW: Keith Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), viii + 279 pp., ISBN 978-1-84631-060-7 (PB) £16.95 / ISBN 978-184631-059-1 (HB) £50. [John S. Partington]

In *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies*, Keith Williams provides a cultural study of Wells's works and aesthetic in relation to the origins and development of cinema. Although several books have been published on Wells and film, Williams's contribution joins Thomas C. Renzi's *H. G. Wells: Six Scientific Romances Adapted for Film* (2nd edn, 2004) as only the second deserving of serious consideration.

In his introduction, Williams gives an overview of the history of early cinematic development, and makes the case emphatically for Wells's place as an intellectual pioneer. Williams notes that

> Time travelling, in literal or psychological senses, is endemic in both 'high' and 'low' Modernism, but seems to derive from a kind of Wellsian relativisation (accelerated, dilated, reversed, subjectivised) towards the turn of the century. Consequently, in this study, I intend focusing on the complex intertextuality between Wells and the movies, not least in terms of parallelism in their respective handling of space and time.

This consideration of the 'handling of space and time' is not limited to Wells's obvious works, such as *The Time Machine* (1895) and 'The New Accelerator' (1901), however, but also includes such themes as political propaganda and advertising.

Regarding the former, Williams writes,

> Cinema's many genres revealed that much more was at stake on screen than new aesthetic potential. Wells already realised that it was going to be an ideological force to be reckoned with in the 1890s. This awareness runs from Ostrog's media manipulations (especially Graham's political 'resurrection' by live world broadcast [in *When the Sleeper Wakes*, 1899]) and culminated in his own late interventions in film-making itself in the 1930s.

Wells's interest in film reached a pinnacle with his collaboration with Alexander Korda in the making of *Man Who Could Work Miracles* (1937) and especially *Things to Come* (1936), of which Williams notes, 'Wells's validation in his 1930s film-making would be his own brand of technocratic progressivism, with its objective of a "World State". This, he came to believe, would be communicated more urgently and effectively through the medium itself rather than the most "film-minded" literary text'.

As well as his awareness of cinematic political propaganda, Wells foresaw commercial propaganda in *When the Sleeper Wakes*, as 'Late-Victorian moral panic is reflected in *WTSW*'s erotic "videos", but its advertisements, huckstering evangelical filmshows and giant moving images of the crucifixion also anticipate the other side of the question: a modern medium need not entail use for progressive purposes'.

As significant as Wells was as a pioneer of cinematic themes, Williams acknowledges that he was by no means the first such in literary history:

Wells's predecessors were already beginning to 'dream' cinematic narrative into being ekphrastically, as a new mode of visual imaginary […]. In this, he joined not just Dickens and Verne but also Flaubert, Tolstoy, Zola, Kipling, Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle and others, in pioneering close-ups, slow-motion, moving viewpoints, cross-cutting, etc, on the page. However, Wells's significance lies not just in continuing this process, but also in the astonishing range and accuracy of what he added to it.

In contributing another study of Wells and cinema to those already published, Williams states his justification thus:

> most discussion, by largely restricting itself to historicising Wells's connections with cinema per se […], neglects its embeddedness in the connective tissue of film's wider technical context and cultural prehistory. Wells made a crucial contribution to understanding and advancing not just the possibilities of cinematic narrative, but also the impact of other forms of recording technologies. […] Consequently, this book also examines how his interaction with cinema's wider context makes him a principle pioneer of the media-determined parameters of modern subjectivity.

Williams's study captures Wells's interaction with cinema comprehensively, in terms of filmic references in his stories and Wells's own involvement in scriptwriting to independent adaptations of Wells's works for the screen. As is well known, *The Time Machine* contains many filmic references, with Williams noting, 'While voyaging, the Time Traveller, like a filmgoer, is paradoxically static, invisible, sitting in the dark, watching things happening outside his own time but proximate in space. […] As the machine's dials spin faster, the effects of temporal condensation increasingly resemble rapid cutting (though the alternation of light and darkness might also suggest the crude flickering of an early projector itself), slow fade-out and double-exposure'. In reference to the short story 'The Man Who Could Work Miracles' (1898), Williams writes,

> full of 'interference with normal causation', this comic text was a gift for stop-motion special effects which 'edit out' manipulation by human agency, as in [*The Invisible Man*], especially for object animation which was a staple of primitive trickfilms […]. The closing temporal reversal undoes the chaos (again like a film run backwards), but also replays the opening in the pub. In Korda's version, Fotheringay's attempt to conjure with the lamp now fails, because he has wished away his powers. However, Wells's short story leaves the ending open, creating a *mise en abyme* suggestion that the narrative might endlessly replay itself, just like a film-loop.

Considering this aspect of Wells's short story further, Williams notes that 'the mechanisation of magic by cinema seems to be reflected in many early Wells stories, epitomised by "The Man Who Could Work Miracles". This comic text was a gift for stop-motion special effects which render human manipulation invisible'.

Although Wells's creative relationship with the cinema ended around the turn of the century, not to re-emerge until the late-1920s, his interest in the medium did not completely evaporate. He 'was a founding member of the London Film Society in the 1920s and signed major contracts with two studios to adapt his work (British Gaumont in 1914 and Stoll in 1922)', though one suspects commercial motivation for this latter involvement, rather than a concern for the 'aesthetic' projection of his works on the cinema screen…

In considering James Whale's filmic rendition of *The Invisible Man* (1933), Williams identifies many aspects of Wells's eponymous novella which lend themselves to direct cinematic usage. Indeed, Williams notes that 'It was in *IM* that Wells both came closest to the editorial basis of film narrative and, in turn, created one of his most intriguing commentaries on, and opportunities for, cinema itself', and he emphasises this point in greater detail thus:

> Many of Wells's examples of quasi-cinematic effects were actually reproduced directly in Whale's film, proving that film-minded technique as much as sensory storyline must have caught the director's notice. Particular examples of the dis/appearance of agency, such as the animated suit of clothes and uninhabited shirt, must have seemed too good to miss; likewise […] the implications of the landlady's horrified exclamation, 'He's put the sperrits into the furniture'. […] For its climactic *coup de cinéma* – Griffin's simultaneous rematerialisation and death – Whale's movie simply followed the detail of Wells's text, virtually word for image, as a kind of anatomisation in reverse motion.

Given the nature of the film's protagonist, Williams also suggests how Whale borrowed from media other than literature, for while 'We still think of film as a primarily visual medium […] playing Whale's Griffin, reduced to a bodiless voice, paradoxically called for an approach from Whale's actor unexpectedly closer to radio drama, because of the role's dependence on virtuoso inflection and rhythm for emotional expression'.

According to Williams (and in conscious sympathy with Nicoletta Vallorani), *When the Sleeper Wakes* is Wells's most filmic scientific romance as it not only portrayed advanced mass-media technology in abundance, and described many scenes filmically, but also directly inspired later inventors and filmmakers. Thus, 'John Logie Baird referred to Wells as the "demi-god" of his youth and was inspired by *WTSW*'s predictions of television and its effects on viewers in his own

pioneering experiments' while Fritz Lang borrowed an astounding number of themes and technologies from the story in his *Metropolis* (1926) (a fact Wells embarrassedly admittedly in his review of the film in 1927). In terms of technologies, Williams notes of *When the Sleeper Wakes*, 'Its anti-capitalist dystopia envisions not just two-way TV broadcasting to, but panoptic surveillance of, whole populations, among other sinister developments in the year 2100'. Further, 'In this hyper-urbanised world state, of which a megalopolitan London is capital, media technology is an overwhelming ideological force: "After telephone, kinematograph and phonograph had replaced newspaper, book, schoolmaster and letter, to live outside the range of the electric cables was to live an isolated savage"'. And again,

> Exploitation of communications technology has 'created a universality of power'. Information is transmitted instantly by videophone to manage the emergency of Graham's unexpected awakening. Just as the workers' levels are saturated with mind-numbing 'babble machines' (giant phonographs blaring propaganda and commands), 'The Boss', Ostrog […], operates a ubiquitous network of surveillance and intelligence-gathering for repressive ends half a century before Orwell's all-seeing 'Big Brother' and his 'telescreen'.

All these representations considered, *When the Sleeper Wakes* 'is perhaps the most important of what Tim Armstrong calls "the fantasies of control produced by an emergent modernity"'.

In considering the presence of Wells's works on the cinema screen, Williams states that,

> Although the screening of Wellsian themes and motifs (if not whole narratives as such) goes back as far as Méliès, and invisible men were rife in the late 1900s, it is unlikely that they were legally sourced, copyright law lagging behind the new medium. […] Arguable silents of the 1900s and early 1910s were saturated with uncredited Wellsian influences. Capitalising on the scaremongering 'invasion' fiction trend, they often featured futuristic vehicles, 'inhuman' foes and super-weapons such as airships, Martians, flying torpedoes and death rays.

Thus, as well as writing filmic fiction, Wells's presence in early cinema was literally onscreen from the start.

Given such a pedigree, it is interesting just how marvellous cinema remained in Wells's estimation. As Williams endnotes, 'when Charlie Chaplin criticised Elvey's [sic] cinematography at a private showing [of *Kipps*, 1922], Wells's

attitude "was an affected tolerance". As if Wells had never got past film's initial fascination, Chaplin recalled him saying, "There is no such thing as a bad film … the fact that they move is wonderful"'.

Also, despite Wells's anticipation of cinematic techniques in his early fiction, it has been noted how lacking he was in the ability to script visually:

> [Sylvia] Hardy makes the point that the 222 'shots' of Frank [Wells]'s *Bluebottles* script correspond in every detail to the finished movie. However, *[The] K[ing] W[ho] W[as] A K[ing]* depends far more on textuality (its first part alone containing 62 expository and 211 dialogue titles, plus inserted posters, newsbills, banners, telegrams, etc.) This indicates Wells's difficulty in finally abandoning narration for visualisation, or 'telling' for 'showing'. From this standpoint, her conclusion that, despite the ekphrastic brilliance of his many anticipations of film technique, Wells presents something of a paradox in relation to silent film is right.

Williams observes that, 'After the bruising experience of *T[hings] T[o] C[ome]*, Wells would retrospectively dismiss *KWWAK*'s technical experiments as "entirely amateurish". Nonetheless, it contains many ingenious ekphrastic strategies which emulate camera movement and editing and prefigure key themes, motifs and techniques in his 1930s film-scripting'. And despite his struggle with effective scripting, 'Far from "dumbing down", or selling out Culture to "mass civilisation", Wells remained committed to the belief that the screen could state a "fairly complex argument … more clearly and more effectively" than any other medium'.

Despite his struggles to come to terms with scripting for the silent cinema, Wells nonetheless attacked the medium anew in the mid-1930s in collaboration with Alexander Korda. Although improved with experience, Williams asserts that 'The fraught history of treatment and revisions [of *Things to Come*] showed that though as gifted amateur he often emulated film techniques and speculated about their possible development, this did not automatically make him an experienced scenarist'. The failure of the film to be a box-office success and, less apparently, an artistic one, Williams puts down to three main reasons:

> a) as imaginative writer, the 69-year-old could not travel backwards to his moment of greatest possibility; b) he wanted the film consciously to subserve a creed, discarding parabolic subtexts for top-heavy didacticism, creative ambiguity for an overreaching socio-political programme; c) Wells had given up fantastic invention for more limited technical feasibility.

Despite its general disappointment, however, Williams acknowledges that its 'art direction, sets and effects (employing cutting-edge designs […]) certainly make

TTC visually stylish and, in that sense at least, one of the most influential films in the genre', but otherwise 'Compared to the sheer creative energy of Wells's early intuitions about the possibility of new subjects and modes for visual narration, his actual achievement in terms of film-making in the mid-1930s inevitably seems disappointing'. Indeed, Williams points out that some of the most successful aspects of *Things to Come* borrow from *When the Sleeper Wakes*: 'Its brightly lit and air-conditioned galleries, elevated "moving-ways", monorails and perspex lift-tubes were […] a benevolent version of the multi-levelled, teeming Babylon of *WTSW*' and 'Like *WTSW* and *Metropolis*, *TTC* features multiple forms of media technology, but now serving Wells's "enlightened" global state, which even its opponents can access to broadcast their protest against unremitting "progress"'.

Williams selectively analyses film-versions of Wells's stories, in greater or lesser detail, including the three *War of the Worlds* efforts (1953 and 2005 [twice]) and the two *Time Machine* adaptations (1960 and 2002), and he makes some useful observations. Regarding the 1960 George Pal-version of *The Time Machine*, for instance, he writes of the Eloi, they,

> are shown as *potentially* rehumanisable in every way: Weena falls in love and assists George's plans for resistance; he inspires Eloi males to fight back; and the Eloi can still use technology – Weena shows George electronic recording 'rings' through which historical memory and intellectual curiosity might be restored. Having recounted his story to Filby, George goes 'back to the future', armed with all the necessary kit (weapons, tools and books) to rescue them from bondage. (Thus he also undercuts any pacifist message which the film might otherwise suggest by restarting the cycle of aggression that led to the arms race originally and brought humanity to this state.)

Moving on from such well-known adaptations to lesser-known films and TV programmes (American, British, Continental European and Japanese), Williams concludes that 'Wells's texts have constituted a rich and nurturing rhizome for film, television and other media, which shows no sign of withering well over a century since *TM* first inspired R. W. Paul', and furthermore, 'The sheer ingenuity and range of optical speculations in Wells's early writings, and their refraction of the manifold political, social and cultural implications of cinema, undoubtedly makes him the unjustly neglected precursor of High Modernist interest in and influence on both avant-garde and popular aspects of the new medium'.