

Book Review: Thomas C. Renzi, *H. G. Wells: Six Scientific Romances Adapted for Film*, 2nd edn (Lanham, Toronto and Oxford: Scarecrow, 2004). xxii, 229 pp. ISBN 0-8108-4989-5. £25. (approx.) / US \$35. / €45.15 (approx.). [By John S. Partington]

Thomas C. Renzi's study of six of Wells's scientific romances adapted for film has now rightfully entered a second edition. 'Rightfully' because his first edition, published in 1992, never received the attention it deserved as a splendid study of filmic versions of Wells's science fiction – hopefully this cheaper paperback will be more widely read – and because since that first publication we have seen new film-versions of *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1996) and *The Time Machine* (2002) (and Renzi also discusses such new marginal efforts as *Mars Attacks!* [1996], *Independence Day* [1996], *The Hollow Man* [2000] and *Signs* [2002]). Although one wonders if he might have delayed publication of the volume until after the release of DreamWorks's *The*

War of the Worlds and Pendragon Pictures's *H. G. Wells's The War of the Worlds* (both due out this year, the former even mentioned by Renzi as forthcoming), the quantity of Wells-inspired movies coming out every couple of years or so suggests he might have ended up delaying this second edition indefinitely!

The six scientific romances that Renzi focuses on are *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) and *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth* (1904), though an appendix also discusses Wells's own involvement in film, *Things to Come* (1936) and *Man Who Could Work Miracles* (1937).

In his introduction, Renzi notes that Wells was not an initiator in film, but was appreciative of its potential; positively in relation to his interest in Robert Paul's time machine patent (1895), and negatively in his portrayal of the oppressive use of televisual devices such as 'Babble Machines' in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) (vii-viii). Renzi disregards Wells's own theorising about film (in, for example, his introductions to *The King Who Was A King* [1929] and *Things to Come*) as he gives Wells little credit as a film critic (seeing Wells's attack on *Metropolis* in 1927 as in the same vein as Jules Verne's attack on Wells's scientific romances in 1903 [viii]). Wells's most important contribution to film, according to Renzi, lies in his filmic descriptions, which 'imitate filmmaking techniques, camera angles, and the use of special effects' (ix). Thus, in *The Time Machine*, fast-forward and reverse-action is used, in 'The New Accelerator' we find slow-motion, and in *When the Sleeper Wakes* high-angle shots appear (ix).

Although a detailed review of Renzi's observations about the film-versions of Wells's stories is not here possible, it is worth recording a number of his particularly prescient observations. Beginning with George Pal's 1960 version of *The Time Machine*, Renzi notes that the director addresses Wells's later concerns with peace and war, while offering a contemporary relevance to the story (*vis-à-vis* the Cold War) by suggesting that species-division in the film has occurred following a cycle of horrendous wars (the Time Traveller stops in 1917, 1940 and 1966 on his way to the world of the Eloi and Morlocks, only to witness air raids on London at each stop) (3). Although Renzi acknowledges the Eloi victory over the Morlocks at the end of Pal's film, he alerts us to the fact that the Time Traveller, George, in inspiring Eloi aggression, 'has

rekindles a “hidden spark” in the Eloi, a passion for living, but he has also reawakened the negative emotions that must accompany that passion’ (19).

Turning to Simon Wells’s 2002 version of *The Time Machine*, Renzi points out that this purports to be a rewrite of the 1960 version in its credits, not an adaptation of Wells’s original, and this accounts for the film’s further deviation from the story. Renzi criticises the logical holes in the narrative. The Time Traveller, Alex, for instance, builds his machine in order to alter the past and therefore the future (he wants to save the life of his murdered lover), but he ultimately becomes a technophobe destroying his machine in order to destroy the Morlocks, thus locking himself in the ‘future’. The excitement of his invention is thus wasted on a reactionary conclusion, ending in a Morrisian ‘epoch of rest’ comparable to Passworthy’s questioning of progress at the end of *Things to Come* (33). It is interesting to note that Simon Wells’s film introduces the ‘Uber-Morlock’ into *The Time Machine*, an intertextual character who plays both an Ostrog role and, with his large brain expanded beyond his cranium, is reminiscent of the Grand Lunar or, more chronologically accurate, the future humans Wells described in ‘The Man of the Year Million’ (1893) (38).

In discussing *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Renzi bravely defends the effort made by John Frankenheimer (1996), a director with ‘too impressive a record to be dismissed so easily’ as ‘most of his work, even when substandard, contains social commentary that deserves scrutiny. Such is the case with his adaptation of Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*’ (73). Renzi feels that Frankenheimer does address Wells’s concerns in the scientific romance about the nature of power and the ethics of scientific experiment for its own sake, but concludes that ‘the performances by [Marlon] Brando [as Moreau] and [Val] Kilmer [as Montgomery] are so bizarre and incompatible with the circumstances that they distract from the gravity of the story and leave us feeling irritated and frustrated’ (76).

In assessing James Whale’s *The Invisible Man* (1933), a film Renzi highly admires, he notes the change in the nature of Griffin, from a twisted scientist who pursues research into invisibility for selfish, criminal ends (in Wells’s story) to a man who explores invisibility for positive reasons, only to degenerate as a result of the invisibility drug he is taking. With Whale’s invisible man, Jack Griffin, ‘all the time we are aware that this is not Jack the Man committing these crimes, but Jack the Monster. As in the three film versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, he is

a benevolent scientist whose miscalculation makes him as much a victim as the people he kills' (90). Renzi does see fault in the film in its ignoring Wells's use of scientific patter to explain the way to invisibility: 'There appears no clear reason why Wells's more "realistic" scientific explanation could not have been incorporated into the film' (91) which would have gained it acknowledgement as a great science fiction film, rather than a horror as it is usually classified.

Another film which Renzi has great appreciation for is the 1953 *War of the Worlds*. Of it, Renzi notes, 'In the film, the appearance and the nature of the Martians and their machines deviate radically from the Wells account. Some of these refinements may diminish the story's original terror, such as the deletion of the Martian enslavement of humans and their vampiric method of nourishing themselves, but despite these changes the film manages to complement most of the novel's intentions' (113-14). Renzi does observe the shift in the film from Darwinian ethics to (Cold War) Christian ethics, writing of the demise of the Martians at the close of the film, 'Conspicuously absent from these shots is one showing a machine crashing in Russia, say, near the Kremlin. The aliens then are loosely identified with the secretive communist regime that, known for its atheistic ideology, cannot expect to repudiate the free world's all-powerful God' (121-22). Unlike many Cold War films, however, the ideology of *The War of the Worlds* does not detract from its intellectual content or its entertainment value.

Looking at the 1964 film version of *The First Men in the Moon*, Renzi states that 'The film's humor, at times farcical, receives most of the criticism, although in this regard it actually mimics the novel (in much the same way that James Whale imitates Wells's slapstick in *The Invisible Man*)' and 'The important thing is that, underlying the humor, the film recaptures many of the more serious themes of the novel' (148). As with the 2002 *Time Machine*, Renzi observes an intertextual reference in *The First Men in the Moon* too. Referring to the concluding scene of the film, in which a 1960s space mission rediscovers the Selenites' deserted subterranean habitat, he writes: 'Suddenly the capacious vaults collapse around the explorers, and the commentator offers several theories for the deterioration, one of which is that the race had been wiped out by "some all-conquering virus". Obviously, the film makes an ironic allusion to Wells's *War of the Worlds*: here men take their germs to the aliens instead of waiting for the aliens to come to them' (150).

In concluding his study, Renzi notes that ‘Most of the major adaptations of H. G. Wells’s scientific romances consistently incorporate two particular narrative elements from film to film. The first, deviating from the novels, is a love interest, which Wells omits, at least literally, in his novels. [...] The second, imitating Wells, is avoiding closure by ending the story with ambiguous implications’ (187). Paying homage to Wells’s ability as a storyteller, Renzi notes, regarding the lack of love-interest in Wells’s science fiction, ‘Wells was deliberate in his omission. He kept the romance in the thrill of the experience, not in the boy-girl relationship’ (188). He also states that Wells’s ‘slippery definiteness becomes his greatest virtue, for it allows writers and filmmakers to reconceptualize and reshape his ideas for their own purpose. Reading his works, one sees that his reservoir of ideas has not been, and may never be, depleted’ (191).

In two appendices, looking at Wells’s own efforts at scripting films, Renzi disagrees with the majority opinion regarding the extent of Wells’s input into *Things to Come*. He writes that ‘Wells’s influence on everything from music (he insisted on composer Arthur Bliss) to costumes (his samurai designs) to script suggests the work is predominantly his. Despite accounts that he contested the final product, the film vividly reflects his personal vision of humankind and its potential for accomplishment’ (197). Similarly, regarding *Man Who Could Work Miracles*, ‘The chief differences [between the film and the 1898 short story] concern additional motifs and characters, which increase the complications. As a result, the film appears more as a complex rendering of the short story than as a deviation from it’ (202). Despite the loss of Fotheringay’s miraculous powers at the end of the film, Renzi does not see the conclusion as hopeless: ‘The power-giver’s plan, to give earthlings power bit by bit, indicates the Darwinian influence on Wells, with the hopeful prognosis that humans will develop in time’ (209).

Given Renzi’s continued interest in filmic versions of Wells’s science fiction between 1992 and the present, it is to be hoped that he will ultimately attempt a full study of the film versions of Wells’s works. The two such works that have been attempted to date, Alan Wykes’s *H. G. Wells in the Cinema* (1977) and Don G. Smith’s *H. G. Wells on Film: The Utopian Nightmare* (2002) are, for their own reasons, unsatisfactory. Wykes’s book, now nearly thirty years out of date, is an enthusiasts effort, more concerned with presenting stills from the films than discussing the quality of the movies. And Smith’s effort shows very little understanding of Wells as a writer, and, despite Smith’s academic credentials, is not a satisfying analysis of Wells on film. In this book Renzi shows both a detailed understanding of Wells’s work (and the latest

criticism concerning it) and is clearly a skilled film critic and analyst. It is just such a scholar who should tackle Wells and the cinema and produce a work to enthuse viewers and readers to analyse Wells's works and the filmic interpretations made of them.