



The Best Years of Our Lives A Dossier

For a movie that has been called ‘one of the most celebrated feature films ever made by Hollywood’ (Culbert 2006: 227), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946; hereafter *Best Years*) nonetheless seems to occupy an intriguing critical position in 2015. Astonishingly successful both financially and (largely) critically upon its release, it is also one of the few canonised Hollywood ‘classics’ I regularly teach with which undergraduate students tend to be entirely unfamiliar. As Sarah Kozloff notes, ‘although it won more academy awards in its day (seven) than *Casablanca* (1942), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Citizen Kane* (1941) put together, many people have never heard of it’ (2011: 9).

Yet perhaps this film’s critical reputation was never quite so secure as William Wyler, Samuel Goldwyn, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences might once have been forgiven for believing. Around the time of its release, poised to win its tranche of Oscars, *Best Years* was being pilloried by several left-wing voices for de-politicising the plight of returning veterans (e.g.: Polonsky [1947]), while the right-wing Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals would soon denounce it for containing ‘sizeable doses of Communist propaganda’ (in Krutnik et al, 2007: 191). Even many reviewers concerned largely to applaud the film, such as James Agee (1958), appeared to focus as much critical energy on its limitations as its achievements; one write-up in *Life* magazine seems somewhat representative, describing the movie simultaneously as ‘honest, adult, and absorbing,’ as containing its share of ‘hokum’, and as ‘considerably overlong’ (Anon 1946: 171).

If *Best Years* may pose some critical difficulties, this could be due in part to its appearing to be the epitome of the studio Hollywood ‘prestige’ picture – a kind of film perhaps not prone to inspire critical enthusiasm precisely because it seems already to insist so enthusiastically upon its own ‘greatness’.¹ One of the movie’s contemporaneous [trailers](#), for instance, stresses its ‘Pulitzer Prize winning writer’ (Robert E. Sherwood), ‘Academy Award-winning director’, ‘masterful production’, and ‘coast-to-coast’ acclaim, while also including these extraordinary three successive intertitles:

Through the years, great motion pictures have been made ...
But now Samuel Goldwyn presents ...
The best thing that ever happened!

Such rhetoric seems liable only to prompt critical scepticism at best and derision at worst – the possibility of unqualified assent being, in any case, surely foreclosed. The problem with ‘prestige’ pictures for criticism is their tendency to provoke the suspicion that they might, as Manny Farber puts it, ‘sustain their place in the hall of fame simply because they bear the label of ART in every inch of their reelage’ ([1971] 1998: 15).

While *Best Years* has assuredly had notable cinephilic and scholarly champions over the years – from André Bazin ([1958] 1997) to Sarah Kozloff’s recent BFI Classic – it has never become a staple title on high-profile critics’ poles like those of *Sight and Sound* or *Cahiers du Cinéma*, nor in fact – outside of certain proscribed boundaries – within film scholarship. One reason for this may be its director, Wyler – described by David Thomson as ‘Hollywood’s idea of a great director – respectable, diligent, tasteful, a servant of stars and box-office potential, and a reliable master of big projects’ (1994: 832; emphasis mine). Few of these underwhelming descriptors seem designed to send one rushing to the screen, or to spur critics to passionate action, and I would suggest that together they do paint an accurate picture of Wyler’s standing among many cinephiles and scholars.² Even Kozloff’s valuable and generally laudatory monograph, which praises Wyler’s direction and calls *Best Years* an ‘extraordinary film’ (2011: 9), nevertheless feels bound to note that it ‘is not – like many famous examples [...] included in this BFI series – a “difficult” film’ (8).

None of this is to say, however, that *Best Years* could ever be described as significantly undervalued, and certainly not overlooked. Scholarly work devoting some attention to the film does still appear, and obscurity amongst current UK film students hardly translates to invisibility within film culture at large. The purpose of this dossier, then, cannot be to ‘rediscover’ Wyler’s film, nor does it aim to overturn critical consensus on its successes or flaws. It does, however, hope to reinvigorate critical thinking about the film by moving beyond, or in alternative directions than, some more familiar approaches. These four original pieces attempt as far as possible to appraise *Best Years* for what it contains rather than what its reputation seems to promise, while also shifting the terms of debate away from certain conventional scholarly frameworks – for instance, those that treat the film largely as a historical post-WWII document, a representation of disability (e.g.: Gerber 2000), or as an illustration of Bazin’s theories of deep focus cinematography. While all these critical strands have produced important insights, the articles presented here find new routes into and through the film.

Nicolas Pillai takes as his focus some of the features that for numerous critics constitute *Best Years*' limitations – primarily, its significant reliance on certain generic, narrative, and ideological conventions – and argues that we may better understand the film by attending to the varied uses it makes of such materials, rather than condemning them relative to all that makes it *less* like a 'Hollywood film'. Sarah Thomas explores a surprisingly under-appreciated aspect of *Best Years* – its performances – and argues that the film's style is required to be modified in numerous subtle ways in order to exploit, mitigate, or contend with the very different performance styles of its three male leads. Steve Neale examines the uses made of African American players within the spaces and at the edges of *Best Years*, tracing patterns in the film's representation of extras to reveal its slight but nonetheless evident concern to dramatise the presence of black figures in its social world, even while these figures are destined to remain marginalised. Finally, Edward Gallafent offers an account of a film released four months before *Best Years* which treats similar subject matter, *Till the End of Time* (Edward Dmytryk, 1946), suggesting that, although this lesser-known film may also be a lesser work, it is nonetheless revealing both of the historical moment in which the films were made, and of particular choices either taken or circumvented by Wyler and his collaborators.

These essays complement not only the more established critical accounts, but also one another. They approach what is for many a familiar film with a spirit of curiosity, drawing connections and contrasts between aspects of the film that have received much focus, and some that have until now largely escaped critical attention. Ultimately, the ambition of this dossier is simply to help us to appreciate, interpret, and reflect on *The Best Years of Our Lives* anew.

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¹ On this category, see Cagle (2007), who also notes that 'William Wyler was one of the classical Hollywood directors most associated with the prestige film' (292).

² It is worth noting that Wyler was one of the directors whose work Andrew Sarris described as offering 'less than meets the eye' in *The American Cinema* (1968); his name was also included under the heading of 'competent or ambitious' by *Movie* (1962) in its inaugural issue's notorious 'talent histogram', designed to indicate the magazine's favoured (and less-favoured) British and American filmmakers.