Black Extras in *The Best Years of Our Lives*

The Best Years of Our Lives (William Wyler, 1946) begins with a high-angle long shot of the interior of a busy commercial airport. Groups, couples and individual passengers enter, leave and traverse its concourse as the camera tracks back to centre on the only person in military air-force uniform, who is played by Dana Andrews. This person walks toward a sales counter in the foreground as we dissolve to a closer view, with the camera now placed lower down behind a female clerk seated at a counter. Having enquired as to whether there are any flights to Boone City, he is advised by the clerk that there is currently no 'space available'. He gives the clerk his name ('Fred Derry'), and is further advised that there are no flights until 'the nineteenth', Fred is at a loss: 'The nineteenth! I just got back from overseas. I want to get home'. At this point Fred and the clerk are the principal characters in the shot, but as the shot continues we are made aware of the entry two male figures on the right: a white middle-aged businessman (who crosses the frame from right to left and stands to face the desk) and a young black airport porter (who is carrying a set of golf clubs and a large and heavy suitcase on the right). As Fred ponders his dilemma, and as the clerk informs him that 'there's a long waiting list', the businessman intervenes: 'My secretary made arrangements to have my tickets here at the airport', he says. 'Name of Gibbons, George H. Gibbons'. 'Yes sir', replies the clerk. 'They're right here'. Fred steps aside to allow the porter to weigh Gibbons' luggage. As he does so, the clerk suggests that he 'might try the ATC' (Air Transport Command) before turning to inform Gibbons that he has 'sixteen pounds excess luggage'. 'Oh that's all right. How much is it?' says Gibbons, who transfers a cigarette from his right hand to his left in order to reach into his jacket pocket for the money.

The socio-political implications of this scene have rarely been discussed. Gabriel Miller notes that Fred 'is placed in the middle of a scene that differs widely from the close-knit corps of soldiers he fought with' and that 'here, he is just one of many'. He also writes that Fred is standing next to Gibbons in a 'two-shot' and that the latter is 'the first of a number of self-satisfied, crass businessmen who will be juxtaposed to the returning servicemen throughout the film' (2013: 247). Miller is right about the businessman (whom he incorrectly describes as smoking 'a large cigar') and to that extent he draws attention to issues of status, class and gender that find articulation not only in the subsequent fortunes of the film's principal characters and their families, but in the comparisons and contrasts among and between them. However, Miller is wrong about the two-shot (which

is in fact a four-shot, with a number of additional extras in the background) because (like every other writer on the film) he ignores the presence of the clerk and the porter, and because (with one important exception later on) he ignores the extent to which the film seeks at least on occasion to include and draw attention to black people. Given that the person who plays the clerk has a speaking part it is odd that Miller does not mention her. The porter has no lines to speak. But he is framed with others in the foreground, and Wyler tries to ensure that he is noticed by having him place the bags on the scales in order to weigh them as Fred and the others watch him.

The ATC Hut

Concerns such as this are also evident in the film's next scene, which takes place in the ATC hut. As he heads towards the hut, Fred makes his way past a plane being boarded by civilian passengers (another ironic contrast between civilians and servicemen) then via two more dissolves to the hut and its interior. He is now in a room full of servicemen (a carefully balanced mix of soldiers, sailors and airmen), most of them seated on crowded benches or chairs trying to rest while waiting for news of transportation home. There is a door on the right, a window further back on the right, and a man at a counter in the foreground – a set-up that echoes that of the counter in the airport and that thus invites comparisons between the airport's rigid commercial imperatives and the helpfulness and flexibility of the ATC. Also prominent are a seated black serviceman in the foreground on the right and (as is revealed when the camera pans from right to left to follow Fred) another black serviceman at the back of the room. The latter is subsequently framed in close-up as he helps to move a large and heavy piece of equipment – 'This thing weighs a ton', he says – and he can be clearly seen in a chair leaning against the wall at the back of the room when we cut to Fred and Homer (Harold Russell) walking away from the desk in order to pick up their bags and head for a plane at the end of the scene. In these ways attention is drawn to the presence of black servicemen, and in these ways Wyler constructs an informal social space that not only includes black servicemen but that offers an implicit alternative to the practices of segregation that officially governed the U.S. armed forces at this time – and indeed for some time later.[1]

In addition to the comparisons between the ATC and the airport and between the servicemen and (white) civilians, and in addition to the inclusion (and momentary prominence) of the two black extras, the principal aims of the scene in the ATC hut include the introduction of Homer and the fact that Homer, like Fred, lives in Boone City and has, like Fred, been waiting for a plane. It should be pointed out that none of the black figures in these opening scenes and none of the actors playing them are cited in the credits. However, the same is true of other 'minor' roles such as that of the female clerk at the airport, George H. Gibbons, the Corporal at the ATC counter who is trying to get to Detroit, and the Sergeant who tries to help him and who eventually manages to locate a flight to Boone City for Homer and Fred. Relatively sparse cast lists are a feature of nearly all Hollywood films made before the 1970s. However the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) has compiled lists of minor parts and players in a number of earlier films, among which are *The Best Years of Our Lives* and among whom are George H. Gibbons (Ralph Stanford), the ATC Sergeant

(Bert Conway), the Corporal at the ATC Counter (Blake Edwards), a minor character it calls 'Black Soldier at Airfield' (Caleb Peterson) (who is one of the black extras in the ATC hut) and a minor figure it identifies as 'Ladies Room Attendant' (Louise Franklin), of whom more below.[2]

Boone City and the Midway Drug Store

In the interim we follow Fred and Homer to the plane, where they meet Al Stephenson (Fredric March), discuss their wartime experiences, and anticipate going home with a mix of excitement and nervousness. Flying over Boone City the following morning, Fred, Homer and Al catch a bird's eye view of the city as they gaze through the glass in the bomb aimer's turret, thus establishing a looking-through-glass (and later rear-view-mirror) motif that dominates the following taxi ride through the city and onto the homes of Homer and Al. These motifs reappear when Fred is driven to his wife's apartment by Peggy Stephenson (Teresa Wright) later that night, and reappear again when Peggy drives Fred to the apartment the following morning and when Homer plunges his hooks through the window of his shed when Luella (Marlene Aames) and her friends express their curiosity about them. Meanwhile, and indeed for some time after, the only black figures we see are two men standing in a shoeshine stand as the taxi wends its way to Homer's home. These figures are part of a montage of diverse citizens and venues on the streets (two teenage boys riding in a hot rod, a Woolworths store, a steak house, a young woman pushing a child in a buggy, and so on and so forth). They are fleeting and stereotypical: like carrying golf clubs and bags, shining shoes is the kind of work that black men would be expected to do. However, there is a difference between the representation of the men in the shoeshine stand and the porter who carries Gibbons' bags in the opening scene: the porter is undertaking stereotypically menial work too, but Gibbons' sense of status invites us to notice the ways in which the person who undertakes this work is treated.

One by one, Homer, Al and Fred are dropped off by the taxi driver, and from here the film focuses on each of them in turn. The key issues at stake are class and military rank (and the differences between them), Homer's injuries and Fred's nightmares, and the reaction of the men's families, wives and loved ones. For Fred and his wife Marie (Virginia Mayo), these differences are especially important, and this is underlined when Fred returns in his air-force uniform to Bullard's Drug Store in order to pay his respects to Mr. Bullard (Erskine Sanford), for whom he worked as a soda jerk before the war. Fred and Bullard greet each other warmly. But, as Fred has already noticed, things have changed. Bullard's Drug Store has been taken over by the Midway chain and Bullard himself now works as an employee (as barbed a swipe at the spread of large corporations and their values as Al's later speech about banking, risk and loaning money to former servicemen). It is during the course of this scene, just under an hour since the film's initial sequences, that we encounter more black extras: one of the soda jerks at the back of the counter in the distance to the right is black, and a black male in military uniform is prominently framed with his black wife and two black children centre-left as Fred converses in the foreground with a saleswoman about the store's change of ownership. The soda jerk is barely visible (though we are prompted to notice him in subsequent scenes set in the

store). But although the presence of the black family is fleeting, its members are framed in a much more prominent way. Moreover, it is the only point in the film at which we glimpse black people off-duty so to speak, shopping in a store alongside the other (white) consumers.

The Ladies Powder Room

Much to the annoyance of Marie, and much to his own frustration, the only job Fred is able to find is as a poorly-paid assistant at the store. It is here that we are invited to notice the soda jerk and it is here that Fred re-encounters Peggy, takes her to lunch at a small Italian restaurant, declares his love for her, and kisses her prior to parting outside in the street. Peggy is as in love with Fred as he is with her. Along with a neighbour (Woody Merrill, who is played by Victor Cutler), she invites Marie and Fred to a double-date in a night club in order to determine her feelings for Fred and in order to decide what to do. This is an interesting sequence, not just because it reveals the extent to which Fred and Marie are incompatible, nor just because it underlines the superficial nature of Marie's character (she is only interested in money, make-up, clothes and men), but because it contains what cinematographer Gregg Toland called 'the powder room scene' (Koenig 1947: 27), one of the most elaborate scenes in the film – and one of the most striking instances of the inclusion of a black extra (the aforementioned Louise Franklin) in the film.

The scene begins when Marie suggests to Peggy that they should 'powder their noses'. They cross the crowded dance floor, stand briefly outside, then enter as we dissolve to the room's interior. Marie and Peggy are now seated in front of a mirror, with Marie in the foreground emptying her make-up bag and Peggy behind her on the left leaning forward to fix her hair. As they do so, the Ladies Room Attendant enters the frame from the left and leans across to place fresh towels in front of them, thus making us aware of her presence, work and colour. As the attendant steps back, two women in black dresses enter the frame from right to centre-left on their way out. Their images are reflected in the mirror in front of Peggy and Marie as the attendant walks out of shot on the right and as Marie begins extolling the virtues of Woody, advising Peggy to grab him 'but quick' as the attendant, who is now seated off-frame, is reflected in the mirror on the exit door.

So far, so clear. But as the conversation continues the camera begins to pan from left to right, and as it does so we realise that everything we have seen so far has been mediated not just by the mirrors of which we have been made were aware, but by those of which we have not. At this point the camera stops to focus on Peggy and Marie. Marie is seated in the foreground on the left. She is leaning toward the mirror as she applies her lipstick, her mirror image on the right. Peggy is off-frame left. But her reflection is clearly visible, framed between Marie and Marie's mirror image as Marie complains about Fred's low wages ('thirty-two fifty a week') and his apparent lack of prospects and ambition. Peggy defends him: 'Fred isn't going to be satisfied with his job at the drug store', she says, 'He'll get something better'. But Marie is unconvinced: 'Oh sure. Maybe in five years he'll be drawing on forty or fifty dollars a week. You can't have a happy marriage on that kind of dough'. It is precisely at this point that the camera pans further left to remind us of the presence of the attendant. Her reflection is framed in yet another mirror

between Peggy on the left and Peggy's reflection on the right, and her presence at this point invites us not only to notice her, but to surmise that her income would have been far less than thirty-two fifty a week (let alone forty or fifty dollars) – whether or not the tip that Peggy leaves for her as she and Marie get up to depart is an addition to her pay or her only source of income.

This is an astonishing scene, one as worthy of detailed attention as the much-discussed scene in Butch's bar in which Fred telephones Peggy to discontinue their relationship.[3] However it has only been discussed in one of the numerous books on Wyler (Miller 2013: 252), and while Miller draws attention to the presence of the maid, his description is inaccurate (he only notes her presence at a single point and he only notes one mirror) and he does not link her presence to that of the other black extras in the film.[4]

There are two such extras in later scenes. The first is the aforementioned soda jerk in the Midway store where Fred still works, who is initially revealed washing up behind the counter as Fred (who has now left Marie) returns to make sundaes for two young teenage children. At this point a man who is listed in the credits as Mr. Mollett (Ray Teal) walks into frame, takes a seat foreground centre (thus momentarily obscuring the presence of the soda jerk), orders a sandwich from Fred, and opens his newspaper. We cut to a closer shot of Fred preparing the sundaes for the children, and the soda jerk is revealed again when the camera pans left to frame

Fred as he delivers the sundaes to the children. Fred then looks off right, and we cut to a reverse-angle wide shot as Homer walks forward toward the counter. Then we cut to a closer view as Homer takes a seat near Mollett, orders a sundae from Fred, and engages Mollet (who has noticed his hooks) in conversation. Fred hands Mollett his sandwich and walks off left as we focus on the conversation between Mollett and Homer. Mollett, who is clearly right-wing, isolationist and probably neo-fascist, is now in full flow. 'We let ourselves get sold down the river', he says. 'We were pushed into war …. The Germans and the Japs had nothing against us. They just wanted to fight the Limeys and the Reds, and they would've whipped 'em too if we didn't get deceived by a bunch of radicals in Washington … We fought the wrong people'. At this point Fred asks Mollett to leave. Mollett complains that 'every soda jerk in the country thinks he's someone'; Homer snatches the pin (in the shape of the US flag) from Mollett's lapel; and Fred jumps the counter and knocks Mollett out cold as we note the nearby presence of the soda jerk again.[5]

Fred is sacked and is now without a job. Following a brief conversation with Homer in the street outside the drug store, we see him next when we cut from the scene in which Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell) puts Homer to bed to a single-shot scene in a dole office. Here the camera is placed just above head height framing two lines of unemployed men and women, one of them stretching from foreground left to a counter in the background centre-left, the other from foreground right to a counter in the background on the right. The nature of the composition (the fact that our eye tends to be drawn from foreground to background along the lines of queuing people) is such that we may not initially notice Fred, who is at the back of the queue nearest the camera on the left. However, another man is walking between the queues toward the camera clutching his dole cheque, thus helping to draw our attention to Fred (who looks up from his newspaper as the man brushes past him on the left) then (more or less simultaneously) to the entry of another man at the back of the queue on the right. This man turns his head to the left to reveal that he is wearing dark glasses and that he is black. Just in case we do not notice him, he takes his hat off and leans across centre-left to gauge the length of the queue.

Black Characters and Extras in Hollywood in the 1940s

The man in the dole queue is the last black extra we encounter in the film and the fate of this particular figure – like that of the other black figures in the film – is not pursued further. To that extent, *The Best Years of Our Lives* could be viewed as somewhat timid. A number of Hollywood films with more prominent and less traditionally stereotyped (if largely subordinate) black characters had been made during the course of World War II, among them *In This Our Life* (John Huston, 1941), *Bataan* (Tay Garnett), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz), *Crash Dive* (Archie Mayo), *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William A. Wellman), *Sahara* (Zoltan Korda), *Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell) (all 1943) and *The Curse of the Cat People* (Robert Wise) and *Lifeboat* (Alfred Hitchcock) (both 1944). The presence of these characters was largely prompted by the War, which was construed by the U.S. government as anti-fascist and therefore anti-racist and whose liberal tenets were promoted in particular by the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI was established on 13 June, 1942. It was staffed by New Dealers and liberal Republicans and was seen both as a means of securing recognition for the contribution made by black people to the war effort and as means of securing their loyalty at time when anti-black racism in the U.S. was rampant. (Polls showed that 92 percent of the public favoured the continuation of racial segregation.)[6] A Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) under Lowell Mellet, who oversaw the production of documentaries, newsreels and propaganda films, and his deputy Nelson Poyner, who liaised with Hollywood over the nature and content of its feature films, was established shortly thereafter. By 1943, and with the single exception of Paramount Pictures, every Hollywood studio allowed the OWI to vet its scripts and to suggest liberal topics and pro-black themes. (Aside from *In This Our Life*, which was made before the advent of the BMP, and *I Walked with a Zombie* and *The Curse of the Cat People*, which appear to have been overlooked, all the films cited above were marked by OWI and BMP initiatives and suggestions).[7]

Although the BMP's budget and that of the Domestic Branch of OWI were cut by Congress in the Spring of 1943, Hollywood relied more and more on the advice of the OWI's liaison office regarding the ideological suitability of feature films for neutral, allied and liberated markets abroad. However, President Truman abolished the OWI and the BMP on 31 August 1945 and the immediate post-war years in Hollywood, particularly those between 1945 and the onset of the Cold War, were fraught with commercial and political uncertainty. With the exception of *Till the End of Time* (Edward Dmytryk, 1946), it was not until the 1948-9 and 1949-50 seasons that films such as *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen) and *Moonrise* (Frank Borzage) (both 1948), *Pinky* (Elia Kazan), *Anna Lucasta* (Irving Rapper), *The Reckless Moment* (Max Ophuls) and *Intruder in the Dust* (Clarence Brown) (all 1949) and *The Jackie Robinson Story* (Alfred E. Green) and *No Way Out* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz) (both 1950) were made. Some of these films were 'message' pictures of one kind or another, some starred black actors and actresses, and some were marked by the presence of black actors and actresses in subordinate but un-stereotypical roles, thus marking a renewed preoccupation with prejudice and race – and thus inaugurating, albeit cautiously and partially, a renewed

attempt to provide black actors and actresses with a wider range of roles.[8] Given that *The Best Years of Our Lives* was produced amidst the aforementioned uncertainties of 1946, given the extent to which it includes black extras, and given the desegregated nature of the ATC scene and the attention drawn to the attendant in the ladies room and black man in the dole queue in particular, it should perhaps be added to the list.

Coda

In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey discusses a number of details in the opening scene of the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk). She writes that the film 'opens in Coney Island' and that following 'an establishing shot of the crowded beach, a complex and carefully choreographed crane movement introduces Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) as she hurries along the boardwalk, pushing through a crowd of passers-by' (2006: 151). Shortly thereafter Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore) makes her first appearance, seeming to be 'the only black figure among a mass of white extras' (156). However, 'closer scrutiny of the scene reveals […] that black extras both foreshadow and accompany her first appearance', and Mulvey continues as follows:

> The extras are not only on the screen so fleetingly that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to register their presence at 24 frames a second, but they are also placed at the edge of the frame. Since the spectator's eye is concentrated on the action of the central character in the centre of the frame, it is only when the film is halted and frame can be scanned that these significant details become visible. First of all, in the closing seconds of the first crane shot, a single figure creates a remarkable pivotal point between Annie and Lora, perhaps subtly questioning the accuracy of the antinomy between them. At the very end of the first shot, the camera follows Lora's movement back towards Steve [John Gavin]. Literally seconds before the cut, an elegant young black woman appears descending the steps, but is only just visible on the very far right edge of the frame. […]. [A] new frame shows Lora and Steve close together in a two-shot. […]. As Steve turns Lora round to face the police, now standing in the middle of the steps, a black woman extra, with her back to camera, leads its upward movement to where Annie is reporting that Susie [Lora's momentarily lost child, who is played by Terry Burnham] has been found. At the same time, two black extras move through the top left-hand corner of the frame. This detail is, once again, impossible to detect at 24 frames per second. […]. Inscribed onto the screen but only subliminally visible, the fleeting presence of the extras relates to Annie's invisibility as the worker on whom Lora's visibility depends. But the extras have further significance for the theme of race that is so central to the film. With the image halted, the appearance of the black figures on the screen takes on added power and weightiness, standing in for and conjuring up the mass of 'coloured people' rendered invisible by racism and oppression, very particularly by Hollywood's culture and representation. They also foreshadow the apartheid society to which Annie belongs but is unknown to Lora. […]. This is the world that finds visibility, filling and overwhelming the screen during the film's final spectacle, Annie's funeral. Here black people line the streets and walk as mourners in the funeral procession and black culture appears with the church service and Mahalia Jackson's singing. The fleeting image of the extras in the opening moments of the film refer to a social unconscious, the 'unspeakable' nature of race. […]. And their presence also makes a gesture towards the unconscious of the story itself and Annie's place within it. (156-8)

As one would expect, there is a lot of perceptive observation here, and a carefully considered and convincing analysis of the ways in which black people figure in the film, especially in its opening and closing scenes. However there are a number of questionable assumptions as to what 'the spectator's eye' does or does not, can or cannot see, and a number of questionable assumptions too about 'the spectator's' identity. First of all it should be noted that the film opens with four shots of crowds on the beach at Coney Island, not one. Moreover, while these shots are long shots, they are each framed progressively closer to the crowds from different positions, and this makes it possible to pick out several black people on the beach in shot four, which includes the boardwalk to which we dissolve and which was filmed at Long Beach under Sirk's supervision (Staggs 2009: 112-13). The extent to which we notice the black people in the fourth shot is of course dependent on viewing conditions as well as on the nature, identity and the capacity of audiences and spectators to notice details. But here as elsewhere, the fixation on viewing tables and DVDs and their capacity for freezing the image, the omission of any consideration of the size of projected images in movie theatres in the late 1950s and early 1960s (which were usually fairly large, and which might well have facilitated the noticing of extras, black or otherwise), and the omission of any consideration of the ethnic and racial make-up of audiences for *Imitation of Life* (who may well have attended the film in higher numbers than usual, and who may well have been particularly aware of the presence of black extras, however fleeting) is puzzling. Similar considerations apply to the appearance of 'the elegant young black woman' (to whom attention is drawn when Steve points his camera at

her, as Mulvey notes), the two black male extras at the top of the steps, and the black woman extra with her back to the camera who leads the camera's upward movement. These particular extras clearly form a momentary group of black people on the left hand side of the frame, leaving the white people grouped together on the right. Once again this might not be noticed. But once again the composition of the shot, the blocking of the extras, and the racial identity of at least some audience members invite us to do so.

As with the examples in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the extent to which details such as this are noticed is speculation. In the tradition of close analysis established by *Movie*, all we can do is point these details out, suggest their significance, and relate them to other details and their contexts. Having briefly drawn attention to the presence of black extras in the opening scene and closing scenes in *Imitation of Life*, and having drawn attention to the presence of black extras in various scenes in *The Best Years of Our Lives* at greater length, it is important, as a final point, to underline the contrast between the funeral scene that ends former with the wedding scene that ends the latter. The tone and purpose of these scenes are clearly very different. One is tragic, the other joyful. But as well as this the filling of the screen with the black people in the former contrasts with absence of black people – extras or otherwise – in the latter. This does not mean that *The Best Years of Our Lives* is racist. But it does mean that in 1946, Wyler felt able only to include black people at its margins.

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[1] The army and the air force were rigidly segregated. Because the exigencies of life on ship, the navy was not segregated in the same kinds of ways, but there were no black officers and black personnel were usually assigned to menial roles. In 1948, President Truman ordered the integration of all the armed services, but it was not until the early-mid 1950s that desegregation began to be practised in earnest. See Domfield (1998), and Marshon & Schlosoman (2002).

[2] From the 1910s on, actors, bit-part players, character actors, extras and stars were categorised in various ways and employed and paid accordingly. For details, see Balio (1993: 143-77), Bowser (1990: 106-19), Friedman (1937), Koszarski (1990: 108-16, 130-33, 259-314), Lewis (1933: 117-24), Schatz (1997: 96-116, 206-221, 353-68), and Stills (1927: 175-202).

[3] Given the difficulty of attributing shots, compositions and camera movements to directors and cinematographers in Hollywood films, it is worth quoting cinematographer Gregg Toland on his work with Wyler on *The Best Years of Our Lives* and on 'the powder room scene' in particular: 'Willy left me pretty much alone,' he says. 'While he rehearsed, I would try to find a method of shooing it. Usually he liked it. When he didn't, he was the boss and he did it his way. [...] The only time I held my breath was in the powder room scene when we might be getting arty and trying to prove how damn clever we were instead of playing a scene. But Willy was right. It worked for us' (Koenig 1947: 27).

[4] The other books on Wyler and *The Best Years of Our Lives* are Anderegg (1977), Herman (1997), Kozloff (2011), and Sinyard (2013).

[5] As is well known (and is evident throughout *The Best Years of Our Lives*), Wyler was a liberal. Along with Philip Dunne, John Huston and others, he was prominent in the founding the Committee for the First Amendment in opposition to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and its hearings on 'alleged subversive influence in motion pictures' in October 1947 (though not in support of Communism and Communists). Whether he knew it or not, *The Best Years of Our Lives* had been listed alongside *Pride of the Marines* (1945), *Body and Soul*, *Brute Force*, *Crossfire*, *The Farmer's Daughter* (all 1947) and *All My Sons* (1948), as 'obviously of a Communist propaganda nature' by the Los Angeles field office of the FBI in August 1947. (*All My Sons* must have been seen in preview or a copy of the print or script must have been made available to Richard Hood, Special Agent in Charge at the field office, or the group of motion picture producers, directors or writers 'who had been alerted to the common menace within the industry' and who formally reviewed the films) (Noakes, 1998: 314). *It's a Wonderful Life*, which had begun production on the same day as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (8 April 1946), shared a preoccupation, among other things, with bankers and banking. Noakes argues that the former pulls its punches by contrasting Potter (Lionel Barrymore) with 'the extremely positive portrayal of two generations of Baileys and their stewardship of a small Building and Loan' (Noakes, 1998: 314-15). Similar things might be said of the contrast between Mr. Milton (Ray Collins) and Al in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Al succeeds in providing Novak (Dean White) with his loan and in satirising Milton's fetish for collateral and caution in his after-dinner speech. However, we sense that Al's victory is temporary and that battles like this will have to be fought again. An additional point of comparison (which may well have added to the concerns of Hood and his reviewers) is the presence of black characters. Here I would argue that although Annie (Lillian Randolph), the black maid in *It's a Wonderful Life*, is much more prominent than the black extras in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, her happy-go-lucky role is vivid but still stereotyped. For more on Wyler, HUAC and the FBI, see Miller (2013: 297-333), Kozloff (2008) and (2011: 55-7).

[6] Koppes and Black (1986: 383-90). See also, Koppes and Black (1987: 179-84), which notes on page 184 that a 'Columbia University study in 1945 found that of 100 black appearances in wartime films, 75 perpetuated old stereotypes, 13 were neutral, and only 12 were positive', and argues on page 180 that blacks 'escaped conventional limits more fully in combat pictures more fully than in any other genre'.

[7] Koppes and Black (1986) and (1987: 113-83). See also Koppes (1997). It should be noted that Robert E. Sherwood, who wrote the script for *The Best Years of Our Lives*, was a well-known New Deal liberal who also wrote speeches for President Roosevelt and worked for the overseas branch of the OWI throughout the War. For more on these aspects of Sherwood's life, see Alonso (2007: 218-87).

[8] The most comprehensive account of black actors and their roles in Hollywood films in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s can be found in Cripps (1993). See also Cripps (1977) and Regester (2010).