



Among My Souvenirs: Couples, Conventions and the America to Come in *The Best Years of Our Lives*

In this discussion of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946; hereafter '*Best Years*'), I aim in part to interrogate the literature around the film that characterises it either as a document of American societal concerns in 1946, or as a model of formal innovation, critical strategies which tend to rely on elevating the film over a typified Hollywood product, while also attributing any shortcomings to its status as such a product. In 1948, the film's script-to-screen process had been portrayed in the CBS radio documentary *The Hollywood Picture* as an exemplar of 'the Hollywood product at its best' (Lyon 1948: 342). Meanwhile, James Agee's two-part review for *The Nation* was headed 'What Hollywood Can Do', taking the film's aspirations to social commentary as a way to define the limitations of studio film-making. Yet those perceived limitations, shared by reviewers other than Agee, depend upon quite narrow definitions precisely of 'what Hollywood can do'. In particular, they often rely on a too-hasty opposition between the supposedly restrictive conventions of popular American filmmaking, and more highly valued ideals of either social or formal 'realism'. I suggest that we might reach a fuller understanding of *Best Years*' achievements by attending to what the film accomplishes through its uses of familiar conventions, rather than in spite of them. In what follows I am concerned to address especially conventions relating to the depiction of the romantic couple, masculine and feminine roles, star persona, and the nostalgic power of song. The inflections the film offers on these conventional materials are related in turn to the film's concern with post-war America, in particular its projection of this historical moment onto the state of marriage.

The evident reliance of *Best Years*' narrative on the romantic couple, especially at its conclusion, has been at the centre of various criticisms made of the film.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly true that, like most Hollywood movies, *Best Years* assumes the heterosexual couple to be the basic unit of American life. Its story of social reintegration in peacetime is presented as a modern-day fable, and its tale of three servicemen (an airman, a soldier and a sailor) returning to a world changed in their absence is defined in large part also as a tale of domestic reintegration. Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), who spent the war looking through a bombsight, returns both to limited job prospects and a wife he hardly knows, Marie (Virginia Mayo). Al Stephenson (Fredric March), sergeant in the Pacific, kicks against the complacency of his pre-war bank job as well as the comforts associated with his tolerant wife Milly (Myrna Loy) and two grown children who have become, in his words, 'like strangers'. Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), who lost his hands when his ship was torpedoed, fears the terrible effect his disability will have upon both his family and his childhood sweetheart Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell). In the film's final scenes, marriage is posited as a means to overcome the discontinuities of post-war America. A tentative happy ending presents us with three final couples: Al and Milly, Homer and Wilma, Fred and Peggy (Teresa Wright), the Stephenson's daughter. The conventional quality of such a narrative focus on the heterosexual couple is undeniable. However, it is also to a great extent via variations offered on depictions of the romantic couple that the film is able to engage with the social changes of a post-war America, to offer the sense that something has

passed and that something new is happening. *Best Years* proposes a series of alternatives for how couples might exist in this particular national and historical moment – how they might negotiate their pasts in order to create a future.

In their critiques of *Best Years*, Agee and Robert Warshow aver that Hollywood melodrama is inherently incapable of satisfactorily addressing the social problem of returning veterans. Agee mercilessly skewers what he sees as the film's 'patness, its timidity, its slithering attempts to pretend to face and by that pretense to dodge in the most shameful way possible its own fullest meanings and possibilities' (1963: 230). By playing Al's drunken celebrations as 'broad comic relief', for instance, Agee suggests the film masks its deeper implications from all but the 'psychologically sophisticated' (1963: 231). This perceived concession, and others like it (the convenience of Butch's bar as meeting place, elision of the class differences between the servicemen, Marie's divorce of Fred, Al's triumphant speech at the banker's dinner), are, for Agee, 'limitations which will be inevitable in any Hollywood film', however exceptional. Warshow argues that the film cynically employs notions of American democracy in order to placate its post-war audience, but departs from Agee in his dismissal of the film's technical achievements, characterising it as 'flat and boring, unless one is ready to accept its pretensions or to delight in its virtuosity' ([1962] 2001: 127). This stylistic drabness, described by Warshow as 'the limitations of the realistic technique', is compounded by the assumption that all social problems may be reduced to questions of 'personal morality' (128-9).

These accusations might be met with reference to André Bazin's famous account of the film:

The real action is overlaid with the action of the mise-en-scène itself, which consists of dividing the attention of spectators against their will, of guiding it in the right direction, and thus of making them participate in their own right in the drama created by the director. (1958: 80)

Bazin offers a more sophisticated conception of the relationship between film and audiences than Agee or Warshow, allowing for a measure of ambiguity in interpretation. Wyler himself warned of reading the film for realism:

That is why people say they like the picture because it's so real. But don't misunderstand. A picture of reality alone is nothing. It is dull. Only when reality has been molded into a dramatic pattern can it hold an audience. When they say 'it is real' they are saying first of all – maybe to themselves – 'it is good.' (Isaacs 1947: 22-3)

My reading of *Best Years* sees the film's 'dramatic pattern' as a natural result of its ideology of integration. The cross-pollination of genre (the Hollywood idiom) allows the film to communicate with far more nuance than Agee or Warshow credit, the co-existence of melodrama and comedy (I do not take these to be pejorative terms) reflected too in the film's 'odd assortment of veteran actors, bright newcomers and amateurs' (Jackson 1988: 152), to which we shall return.

### Three homecomings

On their arrival at Boone City, the three men share a cab which will drop each of them off at home. Each consecutive homecoming will offer variations on the return to family

and the ensuing greetings and embraces construct each serviceman's relation to the domestic space differently.

The excited but anxious cab journey sees Al using the language of combat: 'I feel like I'm going in to hit a beach.' As Michael A. Anderegg notes, the framing during the cab journey isolates the men from the city through a series of process shots (1979: 129). Homer makes his companions look back at Butch's, a bar run by what we are told is his disreputable uncle (we do not see its exterior). Accompanied by the look out the back window, this recommendation associates a masculine space with the past, and by implication, femininity with the anxious future. As the cab draws up to Homer's house, he will hopelessly suggest they return to Butch's for one last drink. For Mike Chopra-Gant, the structuring opposition of the film is between male camaraderie and the feminised domestic space, 'the primacy of the family over the all-male group' (2006: 169). In Homer's case, the space of family is given a tragic inflection.

After the jaunty theme that has accompanied the servicemen's drive through the city, Hugo Friedhofer's score slows down, evoking Homer's growing anticipation. 'This is my street', he says mournfully, and as the cab driver counts down the house numbers, suspense builds. The unchanged landscape of residential America is set against the damage done to Homer's innocence. As the cab draws up, Homer's young sister Luella (Marlene Aames) comes out onto the porch and, seeing him, sounds the alarm. After calling back into the house, she leaps over the hedge to the adjoining house, shouts for Wilma and then runs back to embrace Homer. Luella's movements are shown in one camera movement, panning left to right, and back again. Homer's street is defined along a horizontal plane, the permeation between houses creating a sense of open community linked by white picket fences, of a home extending beyond one house. The ending of the scene presents reintegration into the family as dependent upon Homer negotiating his love for Wilma. Watching Homer standing stiffly with his arms at his sides while Wilma embraces him, Al remarks to Fred that the navy couldn't train Homer 'to put his arms around his girl, to stroke her hair'. To modify Chopra-Gant's opposition, the success of the family is measured by continuing masculine concern. Equally, despite Warshow's claim that the film reduces societal problems to the personal, Homer's reintegration is presented as a problem for both the couple and the community. How can he rejoin a world that seems unchanged when he has been so transformed? How can he



marry Wilma when he harbours such anger and self-loathing? Of Homer, Warshow writes,

His problem is at least quite clear, and the necessary moral patterns have already been established in a hundred movies: virtue for the sailor consists in assuming that his girl will marry him only out of pity and a sense of obligation; virtue for the girl consists in 'really' loving him, so that the loss of his hands can make no difference. ([1962] 2001: 130)

Yet this scene of homecoming establishes that, for both Homer and Wilma, 'virtue' may be a bitter pill and that Homer's passivity will not permit a true embrace.

It is important that Homer is, of course, portrayed by one of the film's 'amateurs': Harold Russell, a double amputee whose skillful manipulation of his prostheses will become one of the film's spectacles. Wyler took many scenes of this kind (lighting a cigarette, handling and breaking a glass, firing a gun, drinking a malt) from the docufiction short that had starred Russell, *Diary of a Sergeant* (Joseph M. Newman, 1946). In that film, a halting romance with a woman Russell meets on a train links growing aptitude with his prostheses to increased sexual confidence. Writing of Russell's performance in *Best Years*, Warshow – again attributing limitations to the film's status as a Hollywood product – identifies 'an unusually clear projection of the familiar Hollywood (and American) dream of male passivity [...] in which the sailor's misfortune becomes a kind of wish-fulfillment, as one might actually dream it: he must be passive; therefore he can be passive without guilt' ([1962] 2001: 131). One is certainly struck, when comparing *Best Years* to *Diary of a Sergeant*, by the many close-ups in both films of Russell's face in repose, where the stillness of the untrained actor is observed for documentary effect. Yet throughout *Best Years*, Homer will also be surrounded by people who express sometimes cloying concern for his condition. Warshow's dream is really a nightmare for Homer, at least until he achieves the maturity to accept help from those who love him. His buddies Fred and Al, however, leave these concerns largely unspoken – they are expressed in glances which express a depth of shared experience and understanding of the guilt that comes with survival.



Al's scene of homecoming begins with a long shot that shows us his apartment building, spacious and well appointed, rising above the city. Where Homer's return was marked by the coming together of a community, mapped

along horizontal lines, here Al ascends alone in an elevator. Hesitantly, he rings the doorbell, and is met by his son Rob (Michael Hall), then Peggy. He silences each of them with a hand across their mouths, reversing Luella's announcement of Homer's arrival. Al and Milly's reunion is, like Homer and Wilma's, observed by a family and by us. However, the nature of that observation is somewhat different. While Homer and Wilma's embrace exaggerated their distance, the reunion of Al and Milly is presented as a communion. The shot runs in one unbroken take as Milly appears at the end of the hall, they stop to take each other in, then are slowly drawn together. It is a beautifully judged sequence, the combination of action and music creating a sense of choreographed movement, almost of dance, a metaphor that will soon be returned to with regard to the couple's past.

As Al and Milly kiss, the camera holds the shot at the far end of the hall. Rob and Peggy disappear at either side of the frame, only to reappear seconds later. Like us, their respect for the couple's intimacy brings attendant



fascination. The next shots show us the children's reactions, linking our experience with theirs (distanced but involved) before cutting in closer to the embracing couple. Here, at least for an instant, and in further contrast to Homer's return, it seems that *nothing* has changed, and that Al and Milly will effortlessly revive what later aspects of the relationship will suggest was a witty and fulfilling pre-war union. At this moment, all we know of the Stephenson marriage is its duration and Al's anxiety over his return. Nevertheless, the film benefits from associations made possible by the personas of these two stars. In particular, the *Thin Man* series is evoked, partly by the couple's financial comfort, the casting of Loy, and the passing resemblance between March and William Powell.<sup>2</sup> March's persona, meanwhile, prepares us for the possibility of dissolution, duality, and heartbreak due to his famous roles in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931) and *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937). My sense that the film intends us to remember such roles is strengthened by the later moment when Al looks at a picture of his younger self, which is also March looking at a 1930s studio portrait of himself.

Following Al's embrace with Milly, his awareness of his children's growth reveals underlying tensions. This is displayed as a visual disruption, what we might call the film's denial of a family portrait. While Al's embrace of Peggy takes place in a close three-shot with Milly (excluding Rob), his embrace of Rob is accompanied by a cut that moves the camera to a more distanced position (as

Milly departs to the kitchen). Overcome with emotion but desperate not to show it, Rob hurries off with his father's bag. In a later scene, Rob's embarrassment and incomprehension at Al's ill-chosen gifts will show how they have grown apart. Again, the difficulty of reconciling the passage of time is linked to male relationships. Al's homecoming ends on an uncomfortable note, dividing the family once more. In another room, Milly is calling up friends to cancel previous dinner plans. Flustered, she stumbles over her words: 'I'm terribly sorry but we can't be over ... I mean, I'm terribly happy ... you see, Al... my husband ... yes, he's home. Yes ... Yes!' Out in the hallway, Al looks bemusedly at Peggy as he listens to Milly's one-sided conversation. Suddenly he seems a stranger, disrupting his family's social routine. His perplexed look wonders at this world of leisure apparently untouched by war, carrying on 'just as if nothing had ever happened'.<sup>3</sup>



Fred is alone on his return. Despite taking place outside during daylight, the scene is very dark. An oppressive flyover closes in the frame, quite unlike the spacious community of Homer's street or the busy road that passed by Al's apartment block. In the distance, a goods train clanks past, heading elsewhere. This is the forgotten America, passed over and left to rot, closer to the America of the Depression. Fred wanders through the deserted area, stepping over discarded garbage. We begin to see how going to war might have been an escape, even an opportunity, for Fred. Chopra-Gant uses Fred's homecoming to categorise him as a 'class Cinderella':

This scene goes further than merely identifying Fred as working class; it denies him respectability or dignity as a member of the working class, using the characters of his 'blowsy stepmother' and his alcoholic father who 'lives in frowsy gin-reeking existence' (*Variety*, review of *Best Years of Our Lives*, 27 November 1946) to convey a strong impression of Fred's family as morally delinquent members of that class, largely responsible for their own impoverished condition because of their personal weakness. (2006: 32)

Recalling Warshow, Chopra-Gant sees the film as resolving 'the binary opposition formed by the different classes' by creating a 'vision of America as an egalitarian society by reinvigorating the myth of classlessness' (33). However, by reproducing *Variety*'s descriptions of the family without comment, Chopra-Gant insensitively reduces Fred's father Pat (Roman Bohnen) and stepmother Hortense (Gladys

George) to ciphers. When Fred enters the two-room shack, Hortense is transferring laundry from a basin onto a line that crosses the kitchen. Unlike Milly, who has learned to wash dishes after her maid left, Hortense has clearly done this all her life. Pat is drinking in the next room. It is a ramshackle, functional space, a room in which a picture frame is obscured by the stove chimney. However, its meagre hospitality is not condemned. Witness the warmth of Hortense's greeting, and the way she speaks for Pat, who does not have the words for his feelings. These people may not have the luxury of sentiment, but they are not insensitive. Indeed, the film suggests deeper connections across class through the detail of Hortense discreetly taking the bottle from Pat's hand (Milly will do the same for Al many times over). George and Bohnen's performances deftly convey their characters' desire to protect Fred from the reality of Marie's desertion, George picking nervously at the elbow of her robe, Bohnen standing stiffly with his arms crossed in front of him. In a telling, touching gesture at the end of the scene, Pat catches the swing door from slamming as his son leaves him once more.



Homer and Al's homecomings have delineated a spatial and psychological relationship to the idea of home. Homer's romantic future is just across the hedge in the house next door, if he can but step away from an enforced infantilisation. Al's later restlessness physicalises his discomfort with the role of paterfamilias, unable to settle back in his armchair and leaning awkwardly at the mantel. By contrast, Fred is shown to have no attachment to Pat and Hortense's house. He casually races off in search of Marie,

with hardly a look back at his 'old man'. We might guess that Fred grew up quickly and that childhood is closed off from him. Of the three servicemen, it is Fred who has no space of his own, no bedroom, and no sporting photos. He moves restlessly from Pat and Hortense, to the Stephensons, to Marie, unable to find a space for himself in this new world. It is only the eventual return to, and reclamation of, the airplane that was his 'office' that later permits the possibility of a home with Peggy.

### Butch's Place

Butch's bar, glimpsed by the three servicemen from their cab, symbolises a familiar, welcoming past. As such, a particular criticism made by Agee of the location strikes to the heart of the film. Working towards his definition of social realism, he suggests that the location is dishonest.

Perhaps one shouldn't kick too hard at a mere device, but I feel very dubious about the invention of a nice bar in which the veterans keep meeting each other, perhaps because I suspect that one of the dodged truths is that once they become civilians again, most men of such disparate classes or worlds would meet seldom, with greater embarrassment than friendliness, and that the picture is here presenting, instead of the unhappy likelihood, a hopeful and barely plausible lie. (1963: 230)

Leaving aside the considerable embarrassment with which the film's plot burdens the friendship between Fred and Al, it is worth noting that here Agee misses the way *Best Years* addresses this 'unhappy likelihood.' This 'mere device', the space of Butch's bar, articulates the anxiety that such

meetings would *not* happen. The convention of men falling hungrily upon a shared space is reproduced in other films dealing with the legacy of WWII: for instance, there are equivalent meeting places in both *Till the End of Time* (Edward Dmytryk, 1946) and *It's Always Fair Weather* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1955). Far from creating an atmosphere of forced chumminess, in such films the bar suggests the loneliness of the city for the returning serviceman. Outside of his immediate family, he has no other friends (a reminder of death, and of those who have not returned). Importantly, the friendship between Fred, Homer and Al is not one forged by war, like that between Cliff (Guy Madison) and William (Robert Mitchum) in *Till the End of Time*; rather, the three servicemen meet only after demobilisation. With each coming from a different branch of the service and from different class backgrounds, the film implies that their stories are intended to be representative of a larger national experience, and the 'device' of Butch's bar seems designed to address the widespread concern that veterans of disparate classes and experience would not be able to continue friendships in the civilian world.

Through one of those plausible coincidences to which Agee objected, the Stephensons happen upon Homer and Fred at Butch's bar on their first night home. Seeing the bar's owner, Butch (Hoagy Carmichael), play a favourite tune for Homer, Al requests 'Among my Souvenirs', a song of special significance to the Stephensons. In keeping with the film's respect for their privacy, we never find out just what makes this song special. It is enough to know its romantic pre-war association, and that Milly is charmed by the gesture.<sup>4</sup> As they dance together, we see Al's eyes closed in reverie, and Milly's full of emotion. Dancing's expression of romance and nostalgia is swiftly superseded, though, by



its comic potential: when ‘Among my Souvenirs’ ends, ‘Roll Out the Barrel’ starts up and Al enthusiastically launches them both around the floor. ‘It’s nice to see the young people enjoying themselves,’ laughs Peggy, as Fred tries to flirt with her. Unfortunately, he keeps forgetting her name, anticipating the following, potentially catastrophic, conversation between Al and Milly.

As they dance together, Al suddenly pulls back, looking at Milly as if for the first time. Seemingly confused, he begins to talk about his ‘little woman and two kids, back home’. Milly gamely takes on the role of the ‘bewitching little creature’, smiling tolerantly as Al dances her away. By presenting the question of infidelity overseas in this comic vein (a shift in emphasis signalled by the change of song), the film allows room for non-specificity. We cannot be sure to what extent Al is kidding Milly, especially given an earlier joke assigning Peggy the role of cab driver. In this respect, my earlier nod to the *Thin Man* films provides another instructive comparison. Those movies used Nick Charles’ sexual interest in other women as an index of his



occupies an unassuming yet central role in the lives of the protagonists, reinforced by his extra-textual musical authority (Garwood 2013: 38; see also Pillai 2014: 8-14). Indeed, it is Carmichael’s almost ethereal screen persona that permits a space in which the film’s three servicemen can resolve the shadows of the past with the promise of the future. As Garwood notes, Butch regulates the space of the bar so that ‘[wartime] experience is not framed as a marker of difference’, with Wyler shooting in long takes here that are more aligned with the domestic scenes than with other frantic night-spots (32, 34).

Later in the film, Butch’s will be the venue for a bitter, clenched encounter between Al and Fred, in which the former warns the latter away from Peggy. It is a moment in which Al’s insecure patriarchy and Fred’s class status strain homosocial friendship to breaking point. In a famous analysis of Wyler and Toland’s use of depth of field, Bazin chose the moment that ends this scene as illustrative. After their difficult conversation, Al watches Butch teaching Homer a tune on the piano as, in the background, Fred sits in a telephone booth, making the call to end it with Peggy. Bazin reads the shot as directing us as viewers toward the action in the background, with Homer’s accomplishment at the piano merely a pretext for extending shot duration (1948: 15).<sup>5</sup> It is more than that; as the split between Al and Fred grows, so Homer’s achievement at the piano signals a reconciliation with, and mastery of, his circumstances. In music – amateurish, good-humoured, fun – Homer finds himself, so of course it is Butch who essays the wedding march in the film’s final scenes. Homer and Wilma are married at home, but a home to which Butch, the black



regard for Nora, contingent on our understanding that he has no interest in actual infidelity. Here we have no such assurance, but the humorous treatment allows the suggestion to get past the Production Code Office, and its vagueness allows us to speculate without confirmation. Similarly, Fred’s sexual experience will later be suggested when he drunkenly pulls Peggy down onto him, in what we can infer is a well-practiced routine for waking up in a strange bed, as well as in the silence that meets his wife Marie’s question: ‘What were you up to in London and Paris and all those places?’ Each of these cases is permissible through a degree of obliqueness, particularly in the way that assumptions are attributed to Peggy (‘I’m not *that* Peggy!’) and Marie, rather than confessed by Fred. However we choose to read Al’s mistake / confession in Butch’s, Milly’s acceptance is deeply moving. By couching her response as she does (‘But let’s not think of them now ...’), the film allows infidelity to be both comically and touchingly present, if not exactly addressed.

It is important to this scene that Homer’s uncle Butch, the owner of the bar, is played by the composer and musician Hoagy Carmichael. In a fine analysis of Carmichael’s role in *Best Years*, Ian Garwood argues that Butch ‘embodies a continuing normality which transcends the disruptions and transformations wrought by war, and a matter-of-factness in relation to everyday life that the main characters have to fight to reassert’ (2013: 32). In common with other screen appearances, Carmichael’s character here



sheep, has returned, his regulation of the unskilled choir of children bringing a little of the bar to a chintzy living room.

### Three women

Butch's is not simply a place to which men escape. Milly and Peggy are made welcome, even if their smart evening wear seems a little out of place amongst the beer swillers and whisky suppers. Nevertheless, the scenes that follow the first night in Butch's, as Milly and Peggy take the snoozing drunks home and put them to bed, position the women in nurturing roles. Milly's undressing of her husband, and the sentimental kiss that is drunkenly rebuffed, exaggerates her maternal side, just as Peggy's amused rejection of Fred's advances is balanced by nursing him through his nightmare. Unlike Milly or Peggy, Fred's wife Marie is neither wise nor nurturing.

Fred's incompatibility with Marie is established by their delayed reunion taking place on Fred's second day in Boone, and the disruption it offers of the film's established tropes regarding domestic routine. All three preceding homecomings involved the interruption of female activity: Luella playing, Milly preparing for dinner, Hortense hanging laundry. In contrast, Marie is sleeping. Irritably rising to answer Fred's knock at the door, her crumpled sheets and disarrayed hair convey a sulky carnality. Throughout the film, Marie is often seen in repose, legs hooked over the arm of a chair or lying back on the sofa. Like the clothes that lie draped over the furniture or the fold-down bed, Marie is associated with the casual and the temporary. She is a woman of the moment, untroubled by the past (save for a mention of Texas, we never find out about her family or her upbringing). Unlike Milly, she doesn't express concern over Fred's health – she is pleased to see him looking so handsome in his uniform. Their immediate embrace and implied sexual coupling has none of the hesitation of Al and Milly in the preceding scene.



Intimacy can be both a blessing and a curse. More insistent problems emerge through the mise-en-scène of Marie's two-room apartment. Unsited for co-habitation, always messy, it's clearly a bachelor girl apartment (or as close as the film can get to saying this). Hortense avoided specifically describing Marie's work at the suggestively named Blue Devil club (is she a dancer, a hostess, a B-girl?); what seems clear is that the apartment represents professional and, we must assume, sexual convenience. It is unsurprising that Fred never seems at ease in the space. He often stands at the edge of the room, or framed in the doorway. To get to his clothes, he must reach into the

wardrobe, pushing past the fold-down bed. This emphasis on restricted movement makes Marie's apartment seem like a place to flop, rather than a place to live. When Fred tries to cook dinner in the kitchen, it seems eccentric.



The diegetic jazz that accompanies Marie in many of her scenes associates her with a night-time world outside the purview of this film and with the uncomplicated sexual comfort of the American glamour girl. The contemporaneous *It's A Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) has a comparable character in Violet Bick (Gloria Grahame), the small town sex-pot. Like Marie, Violet is a lively young woman, rushing toward the liberation afforded by a post-war America. Both draw lustful attention from admiring males: Violet when she walks down the street, Marie when her husband shows her photo to 'the boys'. Each of them leaves town during their films, tired of its constrictions, but Violet returns, tragically inflected through illegitimate pregnancy. In George Bailey's nightmare vision of Pottersville, Violet has been reduced to a dime-a-dance tramp. It is a cruel fantasy of what awaits the liberated woman in a world that abuses her sexual freedom. By contrast, Marie's association with the big city is shown to be on her own terms. She knows people in the black market, is wooed by the proprietors of The Blue Devil, and she imperiously snubs admiring wolves like Cliff (Steve Cochran) at The Embassy Club. Witness Marie's delight at Fred's report of his squadron's reaction to her photograph: 'Nobody's got a *wife* looks like that!' Marie's discomfort with the role of drudge, her desire to reach beyond the lives of Fred's parents, lead to her self-identification with 'the other woman'.

Rather uncharitably, Agee calls Marie 'a bag' (1963: 230), and Reisz labels her 'an unfaithful floozie' (1951: 27). Warshow writes,

[Marie] is the one 'bad' woman, and her badness consists essentially in being less instead of more mature than her husband; she is a problem and she should be a mother. ([1962] 2001: 131)

There is a sense of reservation in Warshow's assertion, especially in his use of quotation marks and the word 'essentially'. Chopra-Gant more judiciously observes, 'great care is taken in the film to construct Peggy's character as thoroughly respectable and to strike a contrast between her character and Fred's sexually promiscuous wife' (2006: 34). Yet, despite her impatience with Fred's trauma, Marie remains sympathetic through her constructive efforts to



bolster their marriage and her initial surrender of autonomy. Indeed, there is something unpleasantly self-righteous in Fred's scenes with Marie. 'When we were married, babe, that Justice of the Peace said something about "for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse", remember?' he asks, and it is difficult not to commend Marie's response: 'Well, when do we get going on the better?' It is to the film's credit that it allows for the possibility of both Peggys and Maries in the post-war world, with some measure of sympathy allowed for Marie's resonant complaint to Fred, 'I gave you the best years of my life!'

If we accept that Marie consciously enacts roles available to her, this is no less the case with Peggy. Arriving home after a dismal night out with the Derrys, Peggy makes an announcement to her parents that troubled the Breen Office at the screenplay stage:

Peggy should not indicate that her purpose is 'to break the marriage up.' The line, 'I can't stand it, seeing Fred tied to a woman he doesn't love,' should be eliminated. [...] The break-up of the marriage between Fred and Marie cannot avoid the flavour of being justifiable. We feel that the present ending is a definite indication and justification of the break-up of a marriage. We ask that such indication should be eliminated. (Lyon 1948: 355-6)

It is unsurprising that Wyler (successfully) fought for the scene to remain intact. As well as its effect upon the Fred-Marie-Peggy triangle, it also shows us the cracks in the Stephenson marriage and Al's limitations as a father. Frustrated at not being taken seriously, Peggy naïvely



contrasts Fred and Marie's bad marriage to the good marriage of her parents, throwing herself down upon their bed and sobbing uncontrollably. Without really answering her, Al and Milly replace her idealised imagination of their past with their own, in which they continually argue then 'fall in love all over again'. This talking at cross-purposes is a diversionary tactic, recalling the dangerous territory approached when Al and Milly danced at Butch's. The troubling aspects of the Stephenson marriage are acknowledged without condemnation. By re-introducing Friedhofer's *Best Years* theme at this point, a luxurious sense of nostalgia is invoked, implying that repeated discord and reconciliation is somehow romantic and necessary. However, it also asserts Al and Milly's irrelevance to their daughter's future, confining them to a rosy past. It is implied that Fred and Peggy must confront the future together, without reliance on the props (or musical souvenirs) of the past.<sup>6</sup>

To return to Warshow's observation concerning 'male passivity' in *Best Years*, we might note that, in Peggy and Wilma, Fred and Homer find women with whom domesticity is inevitable. Writing of Homer and Wilma's reconciliation in his childhood bedroom, Warshow describes their coupling as a ceding of masculine authority:

He is the man (the real man) who has lost his hands – and with them his power to be sexually aggressive [...]. Every night, his wife will have to put him to bed, and then it will be her hands that must be used in making love. Beneath the pathos of the scene (certainly the most dramatic scene in the movie), one feels a current of excitement, in which the sailor's misfortune becomes a



kind of wish-fulfillment, as one might actually dream it: he *must* be passive; therefore he can be passive without guilt. ([1962] 2001: 131)

Warshow's mention of Homer's missing hands does not quite accurately represent the detail of the scene. Unchaperoned, Homer and Wilma embrace passionately. Through this act, achieved together, the scene answers the question that Al posed at the beginning of the film – now Homer *can* put his arms around Wilma, and her joy is registered in close-up. Shared achievement, and the possibilities it affords, comes to define both Homer-Wilma and Fred-Peggy as couples at the end of the film.

Bazin writes that '[the] gaze always forms the skeleton of Wyler's mise-en-scène' (1958: 82). As Homer and Wilma's marriage takes place in the film's final sequence, Fred and Peggy realise their irresistible attraction through an exchange of looks. As Homer and Peggy vocalise their social contract, Fred and Peggy gaze at one another, privately affirming their own vows. Wyler's composition positions Fred at the extreme left of frame, his turned head focusing us away from the ceremony occurring right of frame. The private moment between Fred and Peggy recalls an earlier sequence in which Peggy had driven Fred to Marie's apartment for the first time (his second, delayed homecoming). In that scene, Fred had mimed falling asleep at the buzzer, making light of his drunkenness the previous evening. Peggy's laughter at his clowning was offset by a shot through her car window which recalled Homer's anxious homecoming. Eloquently, it had implied that Fred might have already come home without realising it, that Peggy might be home to him.

At Homer and Wilma's wedding, Fred walks over to Peggy and kisses her. This is not an assertion of dominance; rather, the act of crossing the room affirms the strides he has made away from a traumatic past. Holding her, he says, 'You know what it'll be, don't you, Peggy? It may take us years to get anywhere – we'll have no money, no decent place to live, we'll have to work, to get kicked around ...'. The ellipsis, their knowledge that this future can only be an unfinished sentence, makes this concluding scene seem like a beginning. So while Chopra-Gant views the conclusion as 'Fred's ultimate attainment of middle-class status' (Chopra-Gant 2006: 36), we might see this instead as the couple defining themselves *against* comfortable, conventional middle-class values. The reprise of Friedhofer's score highlights the young couple's difference from Al and Milly's rose-tinted narrative of their marriage. Rather than end the film with them joining the crowd, Wyler keeps Fred and Peggy separate from it. As they kiss for a



second time, the symbol of Peggy's middle-class elegance, her hat, topples back. Without recourse to the securities of the past, Fred and Peggy must build a future together.

One is struck, when reviewing the film's final three couples, how uninterested *Best Years* seems in providing its audience with resolution. As James MacDowell has noted, 'Each of the film's three romantic strands [...] incorporates important degrees of continuation' (2013: 84). For this reason, if no other, we might look with suspicion at writing on the film that views its depiction of marriage as inherently conservative. By doing so, we also avoid closing down the numerous meanings which the state of marriage afforded the Hollywood film in this period of American life.

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I am grateful to Edward Gallafent, who first encouraged me to write about *Best Years*, and to my editor, James MacDowell, who invited me to publish that writing, for their insight and enthusiasm.

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[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 6



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<sup>1</sup> Disdain for a romantic conclusion perceived to be conservative and simplistic is common to Reisz (1951), Warshow ([1962] 2001), Agee (1963) and Chopra-Gant (2006).

<sup>2</sup> *The Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1934), *After the Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1936), *Another Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1939), *Shadow of the Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1941), *The Thin Man Goes Home* (Richard Thorpe, 1945) and *Song of the Thin Man* (Edward Buzzell, 1947). Based on characters created by Dashiell Hammett, these films starred William Powell and Myrna Loy as married detectives Nick and Nora Charles.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to a line in an earlier scene in which the three servicemen gather in the nose-cone of the B-52 taking them home, watching a fairway below, complete with 'people playing golf – just as if nothing had ever happened'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Among My Souvenirs' (music: Lawrence Wright [as Horatio Nicholls], lyric: Edgar Leslie) had been a number one hit for Paul Whiteman and his Concert Orchestra in 1928 and was revived by Bing Crosby and Russ Morgan's Orchestra in 1946.

<sup>5</sup> For one challenge to Bazin's reading, see Reisz (1951: 29).

<sup>6</sup> Al and Milly's reminiscence is rearticulated in sheet music published by The Sterling Music Publishing Co. of St. George Street, London. The song, 'inspired' by the film, contains the following soupy lyric: 'And we'll walk together, Through moments of our yesterdays, Rememb'ring forever, The corners we turn'd on our way' (Hart & Fishman n.d.: 2-3).