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Persistent Presence: Space and Time in the Films of William Wyler

Francis Mickus

A sense of cohesion in Wyler's films is not immediately apparent. Filmmakers like Frank Capra, Preston Sturges, and Alfred Hitchcock were closely associated with specific genres. This in turn allows critics to easily study these filmmakers simply by disregarding the narrative wrapping. Thus, a critic can focus on a given filmmaker's preoccupations, by cataloguing recurrent narrative tropes and themes. Wyler, on the other hand, switches from one genre to another with ease; his diversity of subjects complicates critical analysis and the narrative cannot simply be dismissed. One cannot study Wyler for variations in a single story. To capture the binding thread of his *œuvre*, one studies instead *how* he tells each story. Critics often explore his use of deep focus, but Wyler has a particular method of manipulating space in his films that is not limited to a single technique. How characters interact with one another, how they inhabit the space of the film, even how they are framed tell us more of the story and the characters than the specifics of dialogue and action.

Wyler learned his craft by shooting a string of two-reel westerns, which taught him how to show his stories rather than tell them. How many different ways can a man get on a horse? Once he graduated to longer formats, to avoid being typecast as a "western director," he kept his distance from the genre, shooting only three westerns between 1930 and his retirement in 1970. Be it a western (*Hell's Heroes* 1929), a comedy (*The Good Fairy* 1935), a domestic drama (*Mrs. Miniver* 1942), a film noir (*Detective Story*, 1951), a spectacle (*Ben-Hur* 1959), or a musical (*Funny Girl* 1968), the stories themselves are told so originally that they are difficult to define by traditional genre categories. Is *Roman Holiday* (1953), for example, a comedy or a drama? When watching his films, one discovers that Wyler uses aspects of personal, social, and at times meta-filmic history to convey a sense of inescapability. The past clearly plays a significant role in his films.

Many of Wyler's films are based on novels (*Wuthering Heights* 1939, *Dodsworth* 1936) or plays (*Dead End* 1937, *The Children's Hour* 1961). One would expect such literate source material to be dominated by literate aspects of storytelling, such as dialogue and dramaturgy, but Wyler is noted for his ability to make adaptations that are visual and cinematic.¹ Indeed, Wyler's films are filled with such powerfully cinematic images that few are willing to accept that he could be solely responsible for having created them; many critics and scholars are quick to point out that he made several of his greatest films with cinematographer Gregg Toland.

Toland is best remembered for his collaboration with Orson Welles on *Citizen Kane* in 1941. Wyler's collaboration with Toland consisted of only six out of the forty-odd films in Wyler's filmography. Toland also worked with many other directors, visual stylists like Frank Borzage, William Dieterle and Rouben Mamoulian, as well as more classically oriented filmmakers like Howard Hawks and John Ford. While Wyler admired and respected Toland, a good way to start an appreciation of Wyler's work is by noting both the extent of as well as the limits to the scope of their collaboration. Toland and Wyler had similar philosophies in approaching a film: both men saw how vital it was to show the story through images. While Toland indeed brought many rich ideas to Wyler's images, Wyler had a very specific visual sense of his own. Indeed, it is his sense of film space that gives form to the narrative structure of Wyler's films. Furthermore, Wyler's exploitation of space is closely linked to his manipulation of time. These aspects of Wyler's work—Toland, space, and time—help us to appreciate how the past shapes Wyler's characters and give his films their emotional as well as narrative thrust. This collaboration of style would find its fullest expression in Wyler's last film for Samuel Goldwyn, and his last time working with Toland, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946).

WYLER AND TOLAND

Gregg Toland's creative partnership with Wyler lasted as long as both men worked with Samuel Goldwyn. Toland's famed deep-focus photography, so closely associated with Welles's film *Citizen Kane*, was developed at Goldwyn's studios, particularly in his six collaborations with William Wyler. What made Toland different from other cinematographers was his desire to maintain creative freedom, which Wyler appreciated. In his early days at Universal, Wyler would tell the cinematographer what the desired set-up and angle would be, going as far as to explicitly request the required lens.

Making Westerns at Universal . . . I directed the camera work. I considered it part of my job. Well, Gregg Toland, you don't do that with a man like Gregg Toland. So we had an understanding, and I showed him the

1 scene, and then I showed him how I thought it should be photographed,
2 and maybe he had some changes, some improvement.²

3
4 However, Toland had carefully developed over the first decade of his career,
5 a reputation that Wyler could depend on. His status was indeed enviable, as
6 George Turner explains it:

7
8 At Goldwyn, Toland had a situation that was the envy of other cinema-
9 tographers. Generally, cinematographers were—and still are—forced to
10 work on most pictures with little or no preparation. Goldwyn put Toland
11 onto the pre-planning team with the director and designers as much as
12 six weeks in advance. Between pictures he was able to work in Goldwyn's
13 experimental lab, devising new lenses, filters and camera gadgets. He
14 was aware of the advantages of his situation and often expressed a wish
15 that his colleagues could work under similar conditions.³

16
17 Such was Toland's reputation and Welles's admiration that he shared the
18 same screen card with the director in the credits for *Citizen Kane* in 1941,
19 and for *The Long Voyage Home* the previous year with John Ford. Wyler was
20 always generous with credit.⁴ He would refrain from explaining the mechan-
21 ics of Toland's camerawork, but he understood many of these techniques.
22 His years at Universal taught him camerawork. He knew what lens and f/
23 stop were needed to achieve the desired effect. He achieved similar imagery
24 in films like *Dodsworth* (1936) which was shot by Rudolph Maté (Figure 4.1).
25 Wyler also carried over Toland's techniques to other cinematographers, such
26 as Joseph Ruttenberg at MGM for *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) and Leo Tover for *The*
27 *Heiress* (1949), which uses many of Wyler's previous expressionistic strategies
28 for developing a heightened sense of confinement.

29 The results of the Toland–Wyler collaboration are visually stunning.
30 Barry Salt states that in the thirties, “There is no sign of any deep focus in
31 the *Citizen Kane* sense, nor is there much sign of the ‘Tolandesque’ composi-
32 tions that typify his work in the forties.”⁵ However, such an observation must
33 be modified when viewing a film such as the 1937 *Dead End* which already
34 explores the exaggerated angles (Figure 4.2), multiple-plane and multiple-
35 frame compositions (Figure 4.3), which point directly towards *Kane*. Toland
36 even returned from his venture with Welles to bring Wyler visual solutions
37 for his staging-in-depth, most notably a deep focus to Wyler's multiple-plane
38 structure, and through lighting, fuse them in a single shot.

39 Despite Salt's observation, it is not inaccurate to say that Wyler's influ-
40 ence on Toland was as significant as Toland's influence on Wyler. Film his-
41 torians are quick to point out Toland's impact on Wyler's work, but much
42 less is made of Charlie Chaplin's collaboration with Rolland Totheroh, who



Figure 4.1 The loneliness between the end of one life and the beginning of another (*Dodsworth*, 1936)



Figure 4.2 The ominous nature of an extremely low angle (*Dead End*, 1937)



Figure 4.3 Multiple planes and multiple frames (*Dead End*, 1937)

worked as cinematographer on every Chaplin film from 1916 to 1947 (he even started on *Limelight* in 1951), or Joseph Walker who shot Frank Capra's entire Columbia output from 1930 to 1939, as well as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). The practice continues with contemporary filmmakers: Steven Spielberg has worked for years with Janus Kaminski, and Clint Eastwood worked with Jack Green until the latter's retirement. Wyler's "dependency" on his cameraman was not a unique relationship in Hollywood.

What makes the collaboration between the two men of particular interest is that both worked with the objective of telling the film's story as the primary concern. Toland would tell young cameramen to

Forget the camera. The nature of the story determines the photographic style. Understand the story and make the most out of it. If the audience is conscious of tricks and effects, the cameraman's genius, no matter how great it is, is wasted.⁶

Wyler's attitude was similar: "A director should not attract attention to himself away from the actors and away from the story."⁷ For both men the story was to be told visually, in way that explored the image in the frame and the space that

characters occupied. Wyler's interest in the space characters occupy predates Toland. The importance of space permeates Wyler's filmography, as he would get many of his cinematographers to actively explore the images they made.

A SENSE OF SPACE

There are three types of space in film: the space of the screen, the space of the set, and the space of the action, which Éric Rohmer designates as Pictorial Space (*espace picturale*), Architectural Space (*espace architecturale*), and Filmic Space (*espace filmique*).⁸ Making a film consists of manipulating the interplay between these three spaces. Even in his early films for Universal, Wyler would explore the psychological significance of framing, depth of field, and spatial distance between characters. For instance, in the 1929 film *The Love Trap*, as historian Neil Sinyard describes,

The shot of [the young married couple] as they stare across at each other from either side of the room conveys mutual social embarrassment at its most acute, with camera position behind Evelyn emphasizing the space between them, which now looks vast—physically, emotionally, and socially.⁹

When discussing space in film, one must keep in mind the diverse nature of the concept. "Capra and Wyler," notes Barbara Bowman, "use space in an overt manner, making emotional and intellectual confrontations apparent in that space."¹⁰ Where analyses of other directors will focus on the lighting (Josef von Sternberg), the pacing (Sturges), or even effective visual flourishes (Hitchcock and Welles), Wyler's films are often explored specifically through his staging and directing of actors—that is, his manipulation of *architectural* space. Bowman's general thesis follows this trend by focusing only on the second of Rohmer's three film spaces. She disregards the spatial aspects of the 1950s films such as *Roman Holiday* which "just sprawls in a travel log sort of laxness as the couple wanders through it,"¹¹ or *Detective Story*, which in her eyes is little more than well-filmed theater.¹² Bowman finds the spatial dynamics in these films more conventional. Few filmmakers are as acutely aware as Wyler of the plasticity of *space* in a film, which is an expressive thread throughout his career. It is a plasticity which goes beyond the business staging of actors and the use of props. Jean Housen's evaluation of the nature of filmic space aptly describes Wyler's philosophy.

The way the frame is filled, measured, occupied, abandoned determines an internal spatiality which reinforces or contradicts the visual spatiality, that of the lens' perspective (with its effect on focal length, the width of framing) and that of the set, the "real" space where the action takes place.¹³

1 The sophistication in Wyler's approach to images increases over time. Much
 2 of this may be a result of the technological possibilities available to him. Ear-
 3 lier films develop characters' relationship through the staging: essentially, their
 4 relationship with the set. In *Jezebel* (1938), Julie Marsden's (Bette Davis) down-
 5 fall is most effectively marked by the tremendous space all the other dancers
 6 create when abandoning the floor. Preston Dillard (Henry Fonda), her suitor,
 7 to press the impropriety of her gesture (she had insisted on coming to the ball
 8 in a red dress instead of the customary white), first demands that they dance
 9 despite Julie's public humiliation, only to put an end to their relationship when
 10 he brings her home.

11 One should not disregard Wyler's use of the other filmic spaces. The 1958
 12 western *The Big Country* is "big" precisely because Wyler shoots it in such
 13 a way that the characters are dwarfed by the surrounding space. Not only is
 14 the VistaVision frame itself vast, but Wyler augments the vastness by push-
 15 ing characters away from the camera. The fight between McKay (Gregory
 16 Peck) and Leech (Charlton Heston) is reduced to insignificance by the fact
 17 that Wyler insists on shooting in an extremely long shot. Close-ups in the film
 18 become all the more violent, such as Buck's (Chuck Connors) attempt to rape
 19 Julie (Jean Simmons), which is interrupted by his father Rufus's (Burl Ives)
 20 intervention. The entire sequence is shot in a closed and cluttered space, with
 21 Julie's bed in the foreground, only to cut into the two men's confrontation with
 22 a double close-up. Throughout the film, Rufus's entries are shot in close-up,
 23 giving them a sense of overpowering invasiveness in scenes otherwise shot in
 24 more social scales of the half and three-quarter shot, often grouping two or
 25 more characters. *The Big Country* explores our own engagement in the film
 26 through the distances Wyler maintains. (The French translated the film title as
 27 *Les Grands Espaces*, which literally means *The Vast Spaces*.)

28 When Rohmer suggested that the frame itself was a space to be filled
 29 (*l'espace picturale*), he reminds us of the physical reality of a film. To watch a
 30 film is to see a screen filled with visual information, shape, shade, and color,
 31 that in our minds are converted into objects, action, and events which we as
 32 an audience react to emotionally and intellectually. The screen itself remains a
 33 fixed surface that receives this information. What is often discussed as "fram-
 34 ing" is the study of the proxemics established between characters (as in the
 35 case of Buck's attempted rape), and the proxemics with the audience through
 36 the evolution of camera placements. To state that the space of the frame is a
 37 real space, which must be dealt with, is to remind us that it is, in fact, the only
 38 reality to which we are privy. Welles's *Othello* (1953) is a stark reminder of the
 39 fact that a reverse angle can be shot a thousand miles away. The only reality of
 40 space is the shot itself.

41 Welles's Kuleshovian reinvention of architectural space through editing
 42 finds a curious confirmation a year later with the invention of the crab dolly

that allowed Wyler to design the film *Detective Story* the way he did. The crab dolly is a multi-wheeled tripod that can move the camera in any direction. By choosing to place the entire film in virtually a single set, he effectively neutralizes the set as a dramatically evolving element of the film. Its cramped nature is there to “set the stage” for the even more cramped psychological realities that exist within the space of the frame. The film is an exploration of pictorial space. In the film, Wyler makes the actors move within the frame as if they were stuck in a very tight box. When Detective McLeod (Kirk Douglas) rises to taunt his suspect, he must bend over to remain visible within the frame (Figure 4.4).

Wyler constantly makes the tight spaces even tighter through framing. Interrogations are regularly carried out with the detective crowding the space of their suspects and the camera following suit. In one shot, three policemen and the criminal, who they manage to “turn” informant, are bunched into a single frame (Figure 4.5). The suspect is surrounded by the cops, within both the set and the frame. He is seated on the bench against a wall with a policeman sitting on either side. The third cop is standing in front of him blocking the possibility of his bursting from his seat. The camera itself closes any visual breathing space (or escape route) as the four people can barely stay within the



Figure 4.4 Hemming in the characters (*Detective Story*, 1951)



Figure 4.5 Hemming in the suspect (*Detective Story*, 1951)

shot. The standing policeman has to bend forward, pushing even further into the suspect's space. When the suspect does turn, the camera suddenly pulls back to show the room. The characters of this sequence then leave the precinct, allowing the camera to close in on another case. Throughout the film, the camera remains at eye level, placing audience and characters on an equal footing. That is until James McLeod finds out about his wife's (Eleanor Parker) past. Then the image vacillates between high and low angles. McLeod's life and certainties visually lose balance.

Rohmer's architectural and pictorial spaces, as applied by Wyler, naturally inform the third, filmic space. The first two show us where and how characters live, but, as we have just seen, they also point to the world they live in. The cops in *Detective Story* are hardly any better than the robbers they arrest (they are often worse). However, in the sense that McLeod feels his moral superiority through a sense of moral certainty, we see his tragic flaw. McLeod's world view is one of binary oppositions. There are cops and there are robbers; women are either virtuous or they are tramps. There are no in-betweens and redemption is impossible, which is a particularly curious trait in McLeod's character, for what is the value of arresting criminals if they cannot thereafter redeem themselves and follow honest pursuits? The revelation of his wife's

past destroys McLeod, as he cannot accept the redemptive value of her life with him. McLeod's world is the neutral grey of the film stock. It is not even the black and white of good versus evil (though McLeod would like to believe so); but he cannot see the shades of color—the moral variety of life. These are just some examples of Wyler's deft handling of space.

A MATTER OF TIME

Space becomes the external landscape that illustrates internal turmoil, a turmoil which for Wyler is anchored in time. Wyler's films show how time in film can be explored along lines that approximate those that Rohmer established when discussing space. There is screen time (the time to watch the movie), narrative time (the arc from the beginning of events to their conclusion), and filmic time (the time that frames the characters' lives). Films often explore the tensions between screen time and narrative time. Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) pushed such tensions to their limits, by binding the very ribbon of film to the sense of time. The Fox television series **24** (2001–10) tells a story that runs through twenty-four hours and is segmented into twenty-four-hour long episodes in the season.¹⁴

It is a truism to say that all that is needed to understand a film is stated in the film. However, what that usually implies is that the audience registers the characters' natures and personalities by analyzing how they react to the present situations that occur over the course of the film. Everything we need to know about the characters in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) can be derived by what they do in the space and timespan of the plot. We know surprisingly little about their past, besides the few bits of information that establish the basic situation. Similarly, a **Hawks's** film is often concerned with the idea of existential redemption, but what needs redemption can be summarized in a few sentences of dialogue.

In most cases, filmic time is relegated to backstory. While this can be an important element in characterization and narrative structure, giving psychological depth to the crisis, it is the present problems that maintain the film's thrust. Backstory moreover tends to partition the characters. Each has a past that is independent from the other characters' histories. The film becomes the crossroads where these various trajectories meet. Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* (1952) is structured around Frank Miller's (Ian MacDonald) desire to avenge himself against the town, and it is the marshal, Will Kane (Gary Cooper), who sent him to prison. Past events are vital to understanding the film's present situation, but it is the present situation that matters.

What Wyler does is something more unusual and more intricate. He explores the relationships between narrative time and filmic time. A Wyler

1 film carries the weight of all that is outside the narrative. The “travel log”
 2 atmosphere Bowman sees in *Roman Holiday* stands in direct contrast to the
 3 weight of the realities that life has erected for these characters, realities which
 4 are illustrated by Joe Bradley’s (Gregory Peck) noisy, crowded newsroom and
 5 Ann’s (Audrey Hepburn’s) ornate royal gilded cage. “Were I not completely
 6 aware of my duty to my family and my country,” Ann explains to the servants
 7 who previously dictated the movements in her life, “I would not have returned
 8 tonight—or ever.” Ann’s holiday allows her to assume the initiative in her life,
 9 but her assessment of the situation underscores the emptiness at the core of
 10 the future that awaits her. The weight of generations of tradition dictates her
 11 entire life. Consequently, Ann and Joe’s final meeting is with a gap of stately
 12 protocol separating them.

13 Space bears the scars of time. The evolving reuse of space in Wyler’s films
 14 becomes the dramatic expression of the film’s core emotional thrust. “[I]n his
 15 [Wyler’s] *Mrs. Miniver*,” notes Barbara Bowman,

16
 17 space does not simply function as location. It does not simply provide
 18 a stage. Instead, it is an intimate carrier of the thematic implications of
 19 the scene, not just by controlling the movement of the characters but
 20 by implying their presence even in their absence. A number of crises in
 21 the film converge in the space of the front hall . . . The severe control of
 22 feeling in this space especially when Carol [Teresa Wright] dies, informs
 23 all the returns to it.¹⁵

24
 25 The changes in the structure of the church in *Mrs. Miniver* offer another image
 26 which has filmic and even meta-filmic temporal value. It becomes a metaphor
 27 for the hardships that the English lived through during the Blitz. At the outset
 28 of the film, it is a magnificent gothic structure that underlines the permanence
 29 of the community and the coherence of it denizens. At the end of the film, the
 30 church is a shattered hulk reflecting the now-shattered world around it. The
 31 family, as well as the entire village, is as devastated as the church’s collapsed roof,
 32 and yet family, village, and church all remain resilient. It is among the rubble of
 33 the gutted church that the vicar makes his famous speech,¹⁶ and in the broken
 34 nave, the two families join in solidarity around Carol’s (Teresa Wright) spirit,
 35 as her widower goes to join her grandmother who is alone in her pew. The
 36 church embodies the centuries of English heritage, now standing against the
 37 Nazi onslaught.

38 The film that most feels the weight of time is *The Heiress*, as the story
 39 revolves around the relationship between Catherine Sloper (Olivia de Haviland)
 40 and her father (Ralph Richardson). He constantly belittles his daughter through
 41 unfavorable comparisons with her mother who died bringing Catherine into the
 42 world. One after the other, rooms close down in the film. Though never stated,

one can imagine that the late Mrs. Sloper's room has been closed off since her death. When Dr. Sloper finds that he will never return to his study, he takes the picture of his wife and closes off that room. When Catherine finally realizes to what extent her father despises her, she mentally shuts him out, to the point of refusing even to see him on his deathbed. That room is subsequently shut off. Catherine finally shuts out the world when she refuses to let in her erstwhile lover who is left pounding ineffectually at the door. Catherine's pyrrhic victory reduces her life to the parlor, the staircase, and her room.

Wyler's characters, such as those in *Detective Story* or *The Heiress*, have shared pasts that make the film one of many events in their lives. Rediscovery of past information becomes central to the plot. *Wuthering Heights* stresses the importance of such an intricate past relationship by setting up a preliminary scene that introduces the young Heathcliff into Cathy's life. *Ben-Hur* is predicated on the long-standing friendship between Messala (Stephen Boyd) and not only Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston), but his family as well. *Dodsworth* opens at the end of twenty years of the main character building and running a car company. The sense of finality is offset by the hopeful idea that Dodsworth and his wife will be able to have time together and start a new life. There is a meta-filmic irony in *Dodsworth* as it follows Capra's *American Madness* by a few years, and in both films, Walter Huston plays the leading character, a successful businessman. Capra's film ends with the hero taking a long-awaited vacation with his wife. Wyler's film begins with the vacation, and is structured around its tragic consequences. Despite the name changes, Wyler's film is, in many ways, the cinematic sequel to Capra's film. The careers of Capra and Wyler would intersect many times as would their personal lives when both directors would enlist in the military for World War II.

THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES

Upon returning from the war, both Wyler and Capra would embark on what would be their most personal works. The first two films that each man created after the War, echo one another, beginning with the bitter irony in their titles. Barbara Bowman notes that,

It's a Wonderful Life can be seen historically as the inverted version of *The Best Years of our Lives* made in the same year, 1946. Whereas *Best Years* dramatizes the anxieties of returning soldiers, *Wonderful Life* dramatizes the anxieties and irrational guilt felt by the men and women who stayed home: the guilt of survivors. If *Best Years* is a film about coming home, *Wonderful Life* is a film about staying home under duress and watching a younger brother get all the glory and return home a hero.¹⁷

1 The comparisons continue. What can be said of the one film can be said of
2 the other. "After several years of patriotic war films, in which the forces of
3 good (i.e., the United States) inevitably triumphed over evil, *Best Years* came
4 as sharp and not unwelcome corrective with its sombre tone and lack of overt
5 propaganda."⁸ The degree to which the "corrective," that Martin Jackson
6 alludes to, was desired can be questioned, as the opposite fates of the two
7 films⁹ also underline that audiences were not ready to deal with *every* aspect
8 of the war and its effects. Scholars and historians single out both films as the
9 best representations of that curious twilight between the war years and the
10 Red Scare. Wyler poured his soul into *Best Years*, as the film's subject matter
11 so closely reflected his own wartime experiences. Most importantly, these films
12 are rightly presented as the epitome of both filmmakers' work. Indeed, *The*
13 *Best Years of Our Lives* synthesizes many of the aspects of Wyler's work and
14 career we have already discussed. It is Wyler's last collaboration with Toland
15 before the cinematographer's untimely death, and stands as a monument to
16 both men's achievements.

17 The story of three veterans returning from World War II who must readjust
18 to civilian life is built upon layers of past experiences which in turn develop
19 several ironies. Not only do the returning troops have to readjust to civilian life,
20 they have to adjust to the fact that they cannot retrieve the civilian life they left
21 behind. The first of many ironies in the film is the social relationship between
22 the three service men. In military life, Fred Derry (Dana Andrews) is the officer
23 and superior to infantry sergeant Al Stephenson (Frederick Marsh). The situ-
24 ation is inverted in civilian life where the former is a working-class soda jerker
25 and the latter a well-respected banker. The inversion comes to a head when
26 Fred and Al's daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright) fall for one another. Al makes it
27 clear to Fred that he does not approve of Fred's attentions. While the ostensible
28 reason is that Fred is married, one cannot help but feel that the pre-war class
29 distinctions are also a factor in Al's reaction to Fred's interest in his daughter.

30 The significance of the war is not the same for all Wyler's characters. These
31 divergences are given several disturbing scenes. Fred's wife (Virginia Mayo)
32 is appalled when she sees him in civilian clothes, as it signals the end of their
33 episodic (and essentially irresponsible) relationship. Al shows his war trophies
34 to his son who is less than enthusiastic. The son sees them as reminders of the
35 enemy's final destruction. Rather than explore the objects in his hands, Al's
36 son asks his father about the "Bomb" (implicitly equating his father's action
37 in the war with the dropping of the atomic bomb). A similar scene involves the
38 third veteran, Homer Parrish (Howard Russell), and points to a very unpleas-
39 ant American future. A Red-baiting, "America First" (deliciously portrayed
40 by Ray Teal) openly questions the value of Homer's sacrifice, maliciously sug-
41 gesting that they fought the wrong enemy. The scene is particularly cruel as
42 Homer has lost both hands in the war, as did real-life, double amputee Russell.

Wyler has Fred Derry do what Wyler himself did in a similar situation—punch out the “creep.” In the film, Fred quits his job before his boss can fire him. In real life Wyler nearly faced a court-martial and a dishonorable discharge.²⁰

Wyler’s sense of overarching filmic time gives audiences an acute sense of what life outside the movies was like at the time—and what was going to happen in the near future. In real life, returning servicemen certainly faced visible and invisible anxieties at home, and, within the framework of the plot, Wyler also leaves the audience with the uneasy sense that these men’s problems are far from solved. We are, for example, left with Al’s increasing reliance on alcohol, like a slowly ticking time-bomb that has yet to go off. The Red-baiting scene could have been just a personal touch, but it unexpectedly foreshadowed the stark political realities that were to plague the U.S. over the next decade. Merely a year later, Wyler stated “I wouldn’t be allowed to make *The Best Years of Our Lives* today.”²¹

This film is a monument to Wyler’s sophistication as a filmmaker and a catalogue of his various narrative strategies—the most important aspects of the film’s problems are *shown* to us rather than related through dialogue. Al’s alcoholism, which appears throughout the film as a minor piece of business, is brought to the fore when his wife (Myrna Loy) counts the number of drinks he has had by etching bars on the tablecloth with her fork. Fred’s difficulties and Peggy’s emotional concern are related through a shot in which Peggy comes into their bedroom where Fred is having a nightmare. Toland applies deep focus with Fred lying on the bed in the foreground and Peggy’s entrance in the background, both in focus. Their respective problems are both underscored by keeping multiple planes of action equally in focus. Similarly, in his uncle Butch’s bar, Homer, in the foreground, demonstrates his mastery of his infirmity by playing “Chopsticks” with his hooks. He is juxtaposed with Fred’s telephone call to Peggy, in the background, in which he is ending their budding relationship. Between Homer and Fred stands Al, who is both listening to the piano and watching the phone call in the background. This shot is the quintessential example of deep-focus photography and the technique’s ability to display multiple actions and emotions simultaneously.

There is a conflict between domestic life and public life that is illustrated spatially. Al’s kitchen is a safe-haven of domesticity, where he can make light of the chasm between the war (“kill Japs”) and the peace (“make money”). It is also where Fred can discuss his hopes with Peggy and (implicitly) about Peggy with her mother. Fred’s scenes with his wife are much more painful, as they are played out in his apartment; Fred cannot find peace in his own home. Domestic discomfort also causes Homer to yell at the kids on his street, punching his hooks through the window of his workshop. The workplace, on the other hand, is always fraught with tension. Even getting a promotion is harrowing for Al. Worse yet, Fred punches out the Red baiter at the department store where he works. A liminal space is found at uncle Butch’s bar, which is troublesome yet ambivalent. It

1 increasingly becomes the scene of testy relationships, but is also often juxtaposed
2 with scenes of hopeful renewal, as epitomized in Homer's piano playing for Al.

3 The film's very essence, the exploration of the pain as well as the hopes of
4 homecoming, is summarized when the three servicemen fly over their home-
5 town. This journey echoes Wyler's war films in an eerie way. Wyler began
6 his 1944 wartime documentary, *Memphis Belle*, with picturesque views of the
7 English countryside, which are designated a battleground. In *Best Years*, the
8 characters fly over their hometown in the nose gun of a plane that could very
9 well have been the Memphis Belle. The overpass can be read as a map of the
10 three men's past lives, as well as their future, with the view of a warplane grave-
11 yard and a football field. Homer's reference to his football exploits reminds the
12 audience and the characters alike that the past will in fact be irretrievable; a
13 new life will have to be created in its place.

14 Finally, the flyover tells the audience something else: while ostensibly
15 returning to the same hometown, these three men are returning to three very
16 different hometowns. Were it not for the mutual understanding of the shared
17 wartime experience, and the chance meeting on the airplane that brings them
18 home, these three men would never have met, nor would they have seen their
19 lives braid into a shared destiny. In a very real sense, the war has created a
20 united nation, symbolized by the bond that these three men share and that
21 will continue throughout the film and beyond. By the end of the film, Fred
22 is Homer's best man and will soon be Al's son-in-law. The war has united the
23 hometown through the bond of the three servicemen.

24 25 26 LIVING WITH THE PAST

27
28 Wyler could be described as the cinema's greatest novelist. His films create
29 worlds in ways that few filmmakers achieve. That world is fashioned by the
30 way time and space are so fully explored. Wyler illustrates how we are shaped
31 by what came before, not only our own personal choices but also by the choices
32 others have made—in short, by the very world we are born into, and how we
33 respond to that world, a response that is often tragically violent. In Wyler's
34 world, what makes the past so powerful is the effect it has on the present.

35 Even in one of Wyler's last films, and his first comedy since *The Gay Decep-*
36 *tion* (1935), we see the significance of the past. *How to Steal a Million* (1966)
37 wittily explores our fetishistic obsession with past artifacts. We frown upon an
38 artist who builds a career on reinventing art with the styles and techniques of
39 earlier artists, but what are we angry about? Ostensibly, for having been fooled
40 into thinking that a work recently created is of a great recognized (preferably
41 dead) artist. But one could say that we are more interested in owning the name
42 than the work. It is an idea that in itself Wyler mocks by showing the sincere

appreciation the collector has for the (fake) sculpture. Welles will also explore this idea with similar observations and conclusions nearly ten years later in *F for Fake*. Both Wyler and Welles point out that the artistic value of a work is in the work itself, not in who made it. Wyler demonstrates this attitude by mocking the anger associated with fraudulent art. The film ends well because the art collector (Eli Wallach) is kept in blissful ignorance. With the example of art, the film shows how we fetishize the past, imbuing it with a sense of perfection that clearly did not exist. But this is the case in almost all of Wyler's films, be it *Dodsworth* and its desire to retrieve past happiness, *Ben-Hur* and its desire to rekindle an old friendship, or *Best Years* with a soldier's hope to return to a home which has vanished during his absence.

Anger is an emotion that permeates Wyler's films. In *Jezebel*, Julie Marsden's resentment of the social norms and expectations leads not only to her own downfall, but to the destruction of those around her. Messala's anger sends Ben-Hur down a similar path of anger and resentment, and he risks becoming that which he hates. The importance of the past can be felt mostly in its absence. Critics have noted how the *Dead End* seems to fall flat after Baby Face Martin's (Humphrey Bogart) death. The truth of the matter is that his story overrides the rest of the film. He returns to his neighborhood in hopes of reconciling himself with his past. Unfortunately, his mother's rejection of him, as well as that of his ailing ex-girlfriend, now a prostitute and ill with syphilis, leads to his destruction. "I didn't get what I came for," Martin angrily concludes, so he plans to commit his final crime, which, to him, is a way to go out with style. Blind anger is his only solution for a past which cannot be reconciled with his present. Meanwhile, the other characters plod along with neither past nor future. The neighborhood, as the film's title points out, is a "dead end."

This then may well be the very essence of the Wyler style. "With a brilliant sense of space and duration," notes Serge Chauvin, "Wyler chronicles [characters'] prolonged reintegration into the world and transcends his recurring motif, by applying it to the immediacy of reality: bodies in search of bounds of the right scale."²² The relationship between the past and the present is not just the source of dramatic tension for a Wyler film, it is the very meaning of his entire *œuvre*. Wyler's films are resolved by whether or not characters can come to terms with an overwhelming legacy. The past looms large in the films of William Wyler.

NOTES

1. Wyler's talent for adaptation led Laurence Olivier to ask him to direct *Henry V*. Wyler declined. Wyler avoided Shakespeare, but one could imagine his cinematic interpretation of a play like *The Tempest*. Furthermore, and perhaps due to Wyler's influence, Olivier's version of *Henry V* remains one of the most imaginative visualizations of Shakespeare's work.

- 1 2. Ronald D. Davis, "Southern Methodist University Oral History Project" (a 1979 interview
2 with Wyler) in Gabriel Miller, ed. *William Wyler: Interviews* (Jackson: The University
3 Press of Mississippi, 2010), 88.
- 4 3. George E. Turner, "Gregg Toland—An Enduring Legacy," *American Cinematographer*
5 (June 2017), <<https://ascmag.com/articles/gregg-toland-asc-an-enduring-legacy>> (last
6 accessed August 9, 2022).
- 7 4. It even created problems in the case of the screenwriting credits for *Friendly Persuasions*.
8 The writer for the original version of the script, Michael Wilson, could not be hired due
9 to the blacklist. Wyler turned to the author of the stories the script was based on, Jessamyn
10 West, who with Wyler's brother, Robert, greatly reworked the original screenplay. Wilson
11 balked at the suggested credits that deleted his name. Wyler tried to suggest a variation
12 that covered all the participants, but it fell through. The credits for the final product
13 created such an entanglement that the film received no screenplay credit. Jan Herman,
14 *A Talent for Trouble* (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1995), 376–8.
- 15 5. Barry Salt, "Film Styles and Technology in the Forties" in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 31, N°1
16 (Autumn, 1977), 48.
- 17 6. As quoted by Turner, "Gregg Toland."
- 18 7. Curtis Hanson, "William Wyler: An Interview" (1967) in Miller, *Wyler: Interviews*, 33.
- 19 8. Éric Rohmer, *L'Organisation de l'espace dans le Faust de Murnau* (Paris: Union générale
20 d'éditions 10/18, 1977), 9.
- 21 9. Neil Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart: The Films of William Wyler* (Jefferson, NC and London:
22 MacFarlane & Co., 2013), 15.
- 23 10. Barbara Bowman, *Master Space: Film Images of Capra, Lubitch, Sternberg and Wyler*
24 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 10.
- 25 11. Bowman, *Master Space*, 135.
- 26 12. *Ibid.*, 133.
- 27 13. "La façon dont le champ est investi, arpenté, occupé, abandonné détermine une la
28 spatialité propre qui renforce ou contredit la spatialité visuelle, celle de l'objectif perspectif
29 (avec son jeu sur les focales, la largeur de son cadrage . . .) et celle du décor, du lieu 'réel'
30 où se déroule l'action," (my translation). Jean Housen, *Espace plastique et espace filmique*,
31 *Revue Belge du Cinéma*, N°5 (Automne 1983), 9.
- 32 14. An interesting problem the series does not address is concomitance, that is, when two
33 events happen at the same time.
- 34 15. Bowman, *Master Space*, 119.
- 35 16. Wyler made the film to urge America into war. Churchill thought it "propaganda worth
36 a hundred battleships." Roosevelt liked the vicar's final speech so much that he had it
37 transcribed and translated with the printed leaflets air dropped over occupied Europe.
38 See Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart*, 15.
- 39 17. Bowman, *Master Space*, 25.
- 40 18. Martin A. Jackson, "The Uncertain Peace: The Best Years of Our Lives (1946)" in John E.
41 O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds. *American History/American Film: Interpreting the
42 Hollywood Image* (New York: Ungar Publishing Co., 1979), 156. One can add the irony of
the fact *Mrs. Miniver* was at the beginning of the series of wartime propaganda films.
19. Wyler's film was a critical and commercial success, winning academy awards in virtually
every major category, except cinematography (where it did not even receive a nomination).
It would launch his successful postwar career. Capra's film failed at the box office. It
severely strained his financial resources and more importantly shook his self-confidence.
Wonderful Life was to launch the independent production company, Liberty Films, he
had formed with Wyler, George Stevens, and producer Sam Briskin. While the three
others wanted to continue with the project, Capra persuaded them to sell the company to

- Paramount Pictures. He later regretted the decision, but it made a certain amount of sense. Capra had lost the artistic balance he enjoyed before the war, and the subsequent political atmosphere would make it impossible to try. His “touch” was to make ostensibly political dramas that were in fact moral paradoxes. His own subsequent projects didn’t function artistically, and his other projects were more successfully made by others. Wyler’s *Roman Holiday* and *Friendly Persuasion* were originally Capra projects for Liberty Films. A third film, *Westward the Women*, would be made by William Wellman in 1951. 1
20. Herman, *A Talent for Trouble*, 266–8. 2
21. Herman, *A Talent for Trouble*, 303. 3
22. “Avec un sens génial de l’espace et de la durée, Wyler chronique leur longue réadaptation au monde, et transcende, en l’appliquant à la réalité immédiate, son motif de toujours : des corps en quête de cadre, à leur juste mesure,” (my translation). Serge Chauvin, “William Wyler,” introduction to the Retrospective on Wyler at the Cinémathèque Française (April 25 – May 28, 2018), <<https://www.cinematheque.fr/cycle/william-wyler-437.html>> (last accessed August 9, 2022). 4
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