

Performance and Style in *The Best Years of Our Lives*



Despite its importance in the creation of character and tone, the significance of performance in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) has not been widely considered. The most sustained focus has been David A. Gerber's (1994) analysis of the representation of post-World War II disability on-screen, which addresses Harold Russell's appearance in the film. Prolonged discussion of how acting helps generate meaning is absent from Sarah Kozloff's study of the film, although moments of engagement with performative labour are clearly important to her analysis even if not recognised as such.¹ This relative absence of analysis supports Lesley Stern's critique that the 'how' of how people act is not seen but rather absorbed into the transparent flow of image, narrative and the everyday (2012: 25). Stern and others emphasise analyses that acknowledge that the work of the actor is not simply created or mediated by formal elements of editing, mise-en-scène or music. This article follows such an approach, aiming to consider the place and function of screen acting within the formal and thematic elements that are otherwise emphasised in discussions of *The Best Years of Our Lives*. In considering the contrasting modes of performance used by the three lead male actors – Harold Russell, Fredric March and Dana Andrews – I will examine how these contribute to the overall hybridity of the film, suggesting where the relationship between style and performance is both aligned with, and a site of tensions within, the film's meaning and effects.

Discussions of the film often explore how Wyler's visual style achieves a social critique, position it as a departure from Hollywood conventions, and suggest how these projects are both supported and undermined by the narrative

trajectory. André Bazin's description of Wyler's use of depth of field as 'liberal' and 'democratic' is, of course, well known ([1948] 1997: 9). The visual style of *The Best Years of Our Lives* has also been seen as typical of Wyler's close collaborative relationship with cinematographer Gregg Toland, and of Toland's own work. Evan Lieberman and Kerry Hegarty, for instance, argue that Toland's deep saturation of the frame creates a sense of dislocation within the image that reflects the social circumstances of the subject (2010: 39-40). My aim here is to consider how comparable contributions to the film's meaning and tone are made by the performances of Russell, March and Andrews, focusing especially on casting choices (the types of actors and performance styles); acting labour (how the actors choose to perform in a particular take); and how each actor's performative style interacts with visual and aural style (the effects of framing, depth of field, mise-en-scène, and use of music on the performance).

Harold Russell was a non-professional who was cast in *The Best Years of Our Lives* after he sustained a major injury in the war that resulted in a life-changing disability, lending an important suggestion of authenticity to his character. In 1944 an explosive device detonated in Russell's hands and they were so badly damaged that they were replaced with mechanical hooks, and Wyler cast him after seeing his appearance in a documentary about rehabilitated war veterans, *Diary of a Sergeant* (Joseph M. Newman, 1945) (Kozloff 2011: 41). By contrast, at the time of the film's release, Fredric March was already an established star and acclaimed actor of stage and screen, including an Academy award-winning performance in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1932). March's

star status rested on versatility and critical reputation, as demonstrated by the titles of two of his biographies – *Craftsman First: Star Second* (Peterson 1996) and *Fredric March: A Consummate Actor* (Tranberg 2013). Dana Andrews' early acting career was spent in repertory theatre at the Pasadena Playhouse, a venue whose alumni included a number of later Hollywood successes. He secured a contract with Samuel Goldwyn in 1938 and became a popular star in films like *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), *A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone, 1945), *Daisy Kenyon* (Otto Preminger, 1947), *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Otto Preminger, 1950) and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Fritz Lang, 1956). Critical discourse characterises Andrews' performances as minimalistic and difficult to read, characterisations present in the titles of works like *Dana Andrews: Hollywood Enigma* (Rollyson 2012) and 'Dana Andrews, or the Frozen Mask' (O'Brien 1999). Andrews is often positioned as an emblematic star of *film noir*, where his understated acting suitably projected the genre's frustrated, bitter existentialist protagonists. Biographies also discuss the alcoholism that he suffered from throughout his life, a detail relevant to my later analysis of his performance in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, these three actors embody three experiential approaches to performance, which we might call: the authentic amateur (Russell), the mannered theatrical realist (March), and the underplaying naturalist (Andrews). Two of these performances were celebrated on the film's release, when March and Russell both won Academy Awards. However, Dana Andrews' performance was rarely foregrounded. This may be partly due to the recognised problematic nature of Fred Derry as a character, particularly in the film's denouement (c.f. Polonsky 1947: 260 and Warshaw 1947: 159). But it is also due to the naturalistic style that marked Andrews' career on-screen, a mode of performance identified as particularly elusive to analyse (Lovell and Krämer 1999: 5). Indeed, in 1946 film critic Archer Winsten described Andrews' performance in *The Best Years of Our Lives* as 'unspectacular', and suggested that 'that [which] makes it real and good also limits its chances to win awards' (quoted in Rollyson 2012: 197). This performance style illustrates some of the barriers to contend with when analysing screen acting. The perceived obstacles posed by a naturalistic style such as Andrews' supports Brenda Austin-Smith's observation that, if acting is 'invisible' because it appears natural, it becomes unidentifiable, much less interpretable (2012: 20). This article will engage with naturalistic underplaying as a deliberate performative strategy, and explore how Andrews' acting creates and reflects some of the tensions in the film, including those that arise from contrasting modes of performance. I will consider in particular how these three performances are contained by the film's style of deep focus photography, long takes constructed around medium and long shots, and tightly-packed scenes framing multiple characters in a manner allowing for an examination of social relationships.

The Best Years of Our Lives offers a complex interplay between visual style, narrative perspectives, and character types. It is a film of contrast, collaboration, hybridity and tension, mixing elements of a documentary-style aesthetic, melodramatic narrative, and contemporary social representations to explore different experiences of veterans on their return home. Although the three men superficially share stories and characteristics – the emotional and physical scars born from active service and the associated difficulties of reintegrating into a seemingly indifferent

post-war American society – the film also pointedly illustrates the differences between the men. Their social backgrounds encompass contrasting class positions and employment prospects, and run counter to their military standing: Al Stephenson (March), the Army sergeant and wealthy banker; Fred Derry (Andrews), the high-flying Air Force captain and lowly soda jerk; Homer Parish (Russell), the below-deck Naval Petty Officer and the son of a lower middle class family. The after-effects of their combat experience also manifest themselves differently: Homer's visible physical disability, for which he receives a state benefit; Fred's hidden mental anguish (what would now be termed post-traumatic stress disorder); and Al's heavy drinking and change in ideological attitudes, which are observed and ultimately tolerated by his family and employers. The clear differences between the men work to construct them as both individual, psychologically realistic characters and broader social types designed to reflect typical experiences of returning American servicemen and illustrate power hierarchies within American society. The different constructions of each character may also be seen in the contrasting performance styles that each actor brings to their role.

Before offering a more sustained analysis of each actor, I begin with a comparative analysis of a particular motif that is repeated in relation to each of their characters. Over the course of the film, all three men have access to a photograph of their pre-war selves, and are afforded the time and space to contemplate this image. The moments are positioned as significant articulations of character development, all concerning recognition of a now long-gone public identity and the characters' internal sense of self. The different ways these moments are performed permit an exploration of how divergent acting approaches can create a complex relationship between style and performance.

Pictures of the past

Performance style and film style seem most obviously wedded in March's encounter with an image from his past. In Al's contemplation of his former self the morning after his return – hung-over and slightly disorientated – the performativity and star status of March are emphasised. To begin with, three different images of March / Al are offered in one shot: the 'real' figure in the bedroom, the photograph, and his reflection as he compares his pre-war photograph to the unruly image in the mirror. The film then cuts to a tighter frame of the reflection and the photograph. Positioned centre frame, this photograph is a professionally-taken portrait in a silver frame. As well as suggesting the

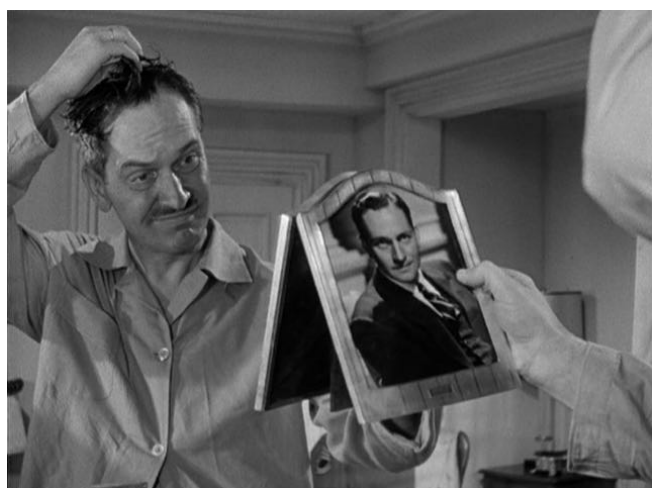


affluent middle-class, it resembles a conventional studio star head shot, lit from above to create a halo-effect on brilliantined hair, and glamorous in its aspirational image of respectable masculinity. This is a photographic representation of March that the public would likely have been very familiar with. On the one hand, the shot asks us to compare the now-dishevelled Al with the smart countenance of the pre-war man; on the other hand, by centring our attention on the professional image of March, it reminds us that he is a star performer who exists outside the diegetic world. It is a performance reliant on the presenting the 'familiar': the audience knows March well. The focus of the moment thus shifts to how the actor now performs his character's immediate post-war identity.

In deliberate contrast to the static photograph, March stresses Al's unkempt appearance through his broad performative gestures. The musical soundtrack is similarly broad, working in harmony with the acting. In the wider shot, he groggily picks up the photograph from the dressing table and moves it towards the mirror. There is a slight double gesture (his arm moves forward, then back, then forward) to signal comically that he does not quite recognise himself in the image he holds. In the mid-shot framed by the mirror, March / Al examines the soft photographic image, comparing it with his own harsh reflection. With a deep frown etched into his brow, he pulls down on his upper cheeks to peer more closely at his face and roughly evens out the bags under his eyes. This is accompanied by the sound of sharp trilling strings, which create a feeling of tension as he observes: surely this can't really be him? But the tone shifts to a lighter one as Al attempts to mimic the photograph, patting down his unruly

hair into a more respectable style. The music also softens into a whirring flourish as, with a resigned shrug of the shoulders, he decides that, at this time of the morning, a reconciliation of image and reality is futile, and heads to the shower. This unkempt representation is momentary; the familiar star-actor is smartly re-costumed and confidently mannered in the next scene. The expectation associated with star image returns, which also implies a return to normality for the character (at least superficially). March thus depicts Al's struggles to reconcile the present reality with the past image through a conventionally-coded and overt physicality, shifting between broad social signs that convey character and meaning quickly and clearly to an audience adept at reading such techniques. The roles of performance, visual style, mise-en-scène and music combine here to lend Al and March a sense of immediate legibility, almost transparency.

Russell's encounter with a portrait from his own past evolves in a markedly different way. Towards the end of the film, just before he is reconciled with Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell) when she tenderly helps him undress for bed, Homer considers his bedroom wall, filled with photographs taken before his accident. Within this wide shot, he moves to concentrate on one of himself playing basketball. There is a cut into a point-of-view shot that pans across the wall, shifting attention to a second photograph of him playing football. Trapped by visions of his past and overwhelmed by loss, Homer gazes upon his former identity of high school sports star. But these depictions of the young, physically able Homer are also pre-war photographs of Russell himself. I will discuss shortly how the casting of Russell in fact creates a more complicated relationship between



performance of character and real-life authenticity, but here, as Russell / Homer considers the photographs, and especially in the cut that removes him from the frame, the sense of 'performer' is greatly diminished in favour of presenting Russell as a symbolically authentic body. The effect is to poignantly remind the viewer of the reality of war and loss. Here the actuality of Russell, rather than the fictional construct of Homer, becomes the essential subject of the shot. This is the first time that the film has shown Russell / Homer with his hands, this moment of ontological shock acting as a confrontation of able-bodied past and disabled present. Within the narrative, Homer contemplates these images as a means of coming to terms with his future by addressing his present and releasing his past. However, the spectator is invited to consider the reality of Russell's disability through seeing the unknown actor 'as he once was'.

This moment is thus grounded in the suggestion of authenticity: seeing the 'real' younger Russell captured in a photographic image. The reality of the moment is emphasised above the performative: the genuine, spontaneous action snapshot of Russell's body is, like Al's portrait, presented centrally before the camera. And yet, unlike in the case of March, whilst the viewer is permitted to see the 'real' Russell, they are also denied the opportunity to see both character and actor engage with their former selves, since the framing positions Russell's head turned away towards the wall and partially cut off. Such framing appears similar to an example discussed by William Rothman (regarding Jean Arthur in *If You Could Only Cook* [1936]), wherein withholding the reaction becomes 'expressive, revelatory, in itself', showing that the character has turned inward, creating suspense for the viewer waiting for the revelation of the reaction (2012: 232). Here, however, the revelatory release is absent: the move into the point-of-view shot is followed by a return to the wide shot, which captures only his distant profile in shadow. We are here denied witnessing Homer or Russell react to this image of himself. The emphasis is not on Homer and his diegetic response as a *character*; it is not on Russell-the-actor, who would have to *perform* a response to his own image.



Instead, by prioritising the 'real' non-diegetic, pre-war Harold Russell, it transfers a symbolic status to that individual beyond character and performance that emphasises a wider reality of post-war loss.

Andrews' / Fred's contemplation of the past develops the complex relationship between performer, character and image even further. Hanging on the wall of Fred's apartment

is a cheaply framed photograph of him posing with his new wife Marie (Virginia Mayo) before he left for Europe. Although it is often glimpsed in the background of scenes – a constant reminder of a lost history – Fred never looks at it; it is only openly considered by Marie's lover, Cliff (Steve Cochran). Instead Fred looks at three other photographs of his past, none of which contain him, suggesting perhaps both his uneasy relationship to his past, and an absence of his own sense of self. The first is a pin-up-like image of Marie that was placed on his machine gun sight, and of which Fred recalls crew members commenting, 'Nobody's got a wife looks like that!', further suggesting a dismissal of that past as a feasible reality. Fred's 'reality' seems to start only in the war, seen in his possession of the other photos: his V17 plane and a map of bomb hits. The framing of this moment places Andrews and Mayo mid-shot gazing down at the images. At certain points the 'wedding' photo occupies the centre of the frame, behind and unseen by the two actors, but still in focus for the viewer. Contemplation of that past is given to the spectator rather than to the photograph's subjects.



If photographs tend to be used to suggest the losses felt on each man's return, Fred's loss is increasingly dramatised through the present. This is seen partly in his later study of another photograph: a group shot of himself, Marie, Al's daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright), with whom Fred is in love, and Peggy's date Woody (Victor Cutler), taken on a double-date in a nightclub. That this is a group image compromises the photograph's function as a representation of Fred's own identity, as does Fred's stance in the picture: he turns towards Peggy whilst the others look directly at the camera. Fred rips the photo in two, shifting the focus onto Peggy as a means for Fred to re-define his present identity. Throughout this sequence, the film visually denies us access to much of Andrews' performance. The photograph is presented from above, mimicking Fred's perspective and meaning we can only see a small portion of his cheek. The film does not cut back to Andrews / Fred; instead the camera almost stands in for the semi-absent actor, and Andrews' reactive performance of contemplation to the image is not recorded. In Homer's moment of reflection, the stylistic framing that deliberately creates Russell's absence from the shot advocates a thematic authenticity of the non-actor; in Al's, March's foregrounded presence, aided by the classically-styled mid-shot which hides nothing, emphasises transparency and performativity. In both there is an alignment between style and performance that is missing in Fred's scene of contemplation. In the framing that catches a

little of his profile, he is just about present, but in the restrictions around his reaction, Andrews / Fred is firmly absent. This creates an ellipsis which configures Fred as a metaphorical lost soul and acts as a necessary moment of character development. However, to achieve this, the removal of Andrews is required. In this absence, we are not left with a sense of the performer's reality, as we are with Russell; nor are we offered a sense of coherence between performer and style, as with March; instead, the style denies us access to the performer as creative agent. As such, a tension between style and performance is created: to represent Fred-the-character, Andrews-the-actor must be lost.



I now turn to the question of how style and performance interact across the film to achieve either a sense of coherence or dissonance in relation to individual actors, and to the consequences of this for the film's broader meanings and effects.

Performance style and film style

An alignment of style and acting can frequently be observed in how Russell / Homer is filmed. Russell embodies the contradictory status of the amateur: in his scenes he is both 'performing' and 'not performing'. His 'non-performance' lies in the authenticity of Russell's symbolic on-screen embodiment of the real disabled veteran, whereas his 'performance' lies twofold on- and off-screen. It is there firstly in his lack of screen acting experience, overtly signalled in his clumsy, sometimes stilted and mis-worded delivery of someone else's lines, such as the mistakes made in Russell's delivery of Homer's wedding vows where he stumbles over the them, speaking 'Til death do us – us do – part' instead of 'Til death us do part'. He also struggles more to deliver moments of exposition or character background fluidly (as opposed to the more spontaneous sounding conversation that he excels at). This can be heard when he orders his first drink at Butch's bar: his flat, hurried, delivery of, 'Do you know Fred, before I went into the Navy, Butch would never let me drink any liquor' contrasts with the more dynamic one that surrounds the line as he interacts with Fred, Butch and Steve the barman. These examples offer moments of separation which reveal to the viewer that Russell is obviously 'performing' a character rather than 'being' himself. Similarly, archives of Russell's post-war experience record a significant contrast with that of Homer's. Publically, Russell carefully delineated between the character he played and the man he was in 1945, and, unlike the infantilisation of Homer by the film, he Russell was self-confident, sexually active and

fiercely independent (Gerber 1994: 567).

The film's treatment of Russell is responsive to his status as actor and 'non-actor', both pushing him into the limelight and offering protective support. Regarding the former: the shots in which he features tend to emphasise Russell's body, establishing his performance as a physical, reactive and demonstrative one. This can be seen on his entry into Butch's bar on the first night. In the middle of the frame, Russell effectively 'puts on a show' as he sits at the bar, clearly relaxing as he tips his hat back and slams a hook on the counter defiantly to order a drink. The film then cuts to a tighter shot where he adjusts the direction of the hooks and effortlessly picks up the beer glass, an action again



centrally framed. Butch and Fred watch him closely (as do we), and Homer even asks them to review his performance: 'How'm I doing?' A repeated use of head-to-waist framing draws attention to Russell's hooks and showcases his dexterity with them: signing his name, eating ice-cream, lighting matches and playing the piano. Elsewhere, such framings are also used for the opposite effect – showing Homer's failure to control his hooks (and by inference, himself). This enables a fuller sense of his character's development, wherein Homer becomes able to move beyond his mistakes, culminating in the precise and closely framed action of placing the wedding ring on Wilma's finger in the film's final sequence. This stylistic attention to the body draws focus away from those elements that might more obviously reveal Russell's limitations as a professional actor – his face and voice. The decisive concentration on the actions he can perform with great skill helps to suggest the non-performance of the character and



encourages the belief that Russell is not acting, but that we are rather 'really seeing' him using his hooks in the expert way he would in his own life.² Yet it also positions Russell explicitly as a performer in another way. The dextrous actions Homer performs may appear to be naturalised tasks rooted in Russell's disabled life, but the attention given to them means they also function as demonstrative 'tricks' learnt, perfected and performed for both diegetic and non-diegetic audiences.

The possible limitations of Russell as an actor are mitigated against in scenes with others. To a large degree, Russell is kept away from extended dialogue sequences with Fredric March, the performer whose style is most at odds with his more unskilled acting.³ Russell interacts more with Andrews, who, through his more naturalistic style, effectively grounds Russell's acting as on a continuum within a recognisable mode of performance, taking on the role of mediator the scenes with all three actors. This separation from March / Al mirrors the inherent issues of inflexible class positions that the film also addresses, in contrast to the service ranks achieved by each man, and to the initial equality between the three found in the liminal space of the airplane ride to Boone City (with its connotations of both 'military' and 'home'). The separation between the three men is thus sensed as much in performance style as it is narratively, stylistically and thematically.

Significantly, Homer's major speech on the first night back, in which he articulates his fears and frustrations, is delivered to another 'amateur' actor: Hoagy Carmichael, as Butch. Although Carmichael was an experienced performer as a pianist, singer and composer, his screen appearances were few and made use of his musical career; he may therefore be positioned as an 'amateur' actor in terms of his relative inexperience and reliance on his more well-known persona. Just as many of Russell's scenes show off his dexterity, this scene also acts as a showcase for Carmichael's talent as a pianist. There is continuity in this sequence between Carmichael and Russell, both 'amateurs' supporting each other's performance and presenting a sense of 'authenticity' in the moment. The music here has a further purpose: as they speak, Carmichael plays a soft a-rhythmic and tentative tune that gives the impression of spontaneity and improvisation. This helps to cradle Russell's performance, which contains some of the same qualities. Yet, when Al interrupts with his request for 'Among My Souvenirs', even before the recital begins, Carmichael's playing becomes more recognisably rhythmic, deliberate and controlled, supporting March's conventionally-coded performance of drunkenness.

Elsewhere, Russell is filmed a number of times on his own, in close-up. In each case these scenes dramatise profound contemplation: on the flight to Boone City Homer wakes and looks to the sunrise, the realisation of his homecoming and future seeming to hit him; similarly, in bed on the first night home he appears to reflect on the tension he has brought to his family, and vice versa. In both shots, the convention and expectation of the moment dictates that an important emotional state for his character must be conveyed, its meaning unspoken while nonetheless clear. There is no sense at these moments that Wyler is once more 'protecting' the actor from our scrutiny of his performance: Russell is photographed in centrally staged close-ups, with no one to support him or to suggest a preferred interpretation. In the aeroplane, as the shot is held, he looks forward through the nose cone's glass panel, then off to the right of the frame, holding this gaze before looking downwards. In bed, he repositions his head from staring at the ceiling to a three-quarter turn towards the camera, and slightly lowers his eyes. The rather mechanical pacing and progression of these movements suggests that they are well-rehearsed simple gestures. Russell appears to be playing to a series of cues and beats, but as he shifts between them he cannot disguise that he is doing this. This obvious enactment on the part of the performer sits uncomfortably with the authenticity and dexterity implied elsewhere in Russell's performance, creating tension around what the performance actually is and what it strives to achieve. Russell's lack of ease in rendering these gestures with fluidity, naturalism and spontaneity threaten to compromise the overall desired effect of a conventional but psychologically 'realistic' emotional revelation. However, this is offset by Wyler's direction and Toland's photography.



Here, codes of classical style, which puts both realist and expressive elements in service of creating psychologically believable characters, are mobilised through the mise-en-scène, lighting and music. In both sequences, the orchestral score underpins each moment, swelling as the final revelatory performance position is achieved. Equally, in bed, Russell is first encased in shadow, then moves into a shaft of soft light where a further catchlight highlights his eyes, inviting us to read the turn as expressing a sensation within. Through his suggestion of authenticity and in his performative dexterity, Russell's identity is frequently markedly 'present'. Yet here, to a large degree, he is also an 'absent' figure, brought into being by style, mise-en-scène, and – elsewhere – by other actors. In these moments, Russell is not merely asked to 'be', but is 'mimicking' recognisable performance cues and behaviours. His performance style and its handling by the film functions as a means of engaging us, but the sense of 'imitation' also works partly to dislocate us from the individual character on screen. Homer / Russell acts as a discursive site that embodies a broader social identity. He is less an individual and more a certain 'type' of character / man, one also designed to become emblematic of the traumatised and disabled veteran as a broader trope.

Fredric March employs a very different mode of performance to Russell, although ultimately it is similar in its effect. Whilst critically acclaimed during his career, it is nevertheless easy to infer March from Sarah Kozloff's characterisation of the acting in the film as 'of its time': once realistic, but now mannered (2011: 9). The theatrically-informed 'realism' of the early-mid 20th century typifies March's style, and in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, his interpretation of Al is grounded in a practice that transparently displays the character to the viewer, using an overstated mode of representation that feels more so when viewed from a distance of seventy years. However, the intended function of this stylised excess is to render the character as a psychologically realistic figure, the significance of whose motivations and actions could be easily deciphered. Whereas Harold Russell employs similarly coded conventions (in his close-ups), March is more adept at maintaining a consciously consistent and coherent realist modality, rather than one that moves tensely between naturalistic action and stilted expression and delivery.

March's particular style of demonstrative realism can be seen during Al's first night and morning back, where the actions involved in his performance of drunken behaviour and waking up resemble pantomime sketches that create a comic characterisation through a series of set-ups and punchlines. As he rises, his unsteadiness is punctuated by the sound of tensely rising strings, before a drumroll marks his reorientation as he picks up his Army boots. Walking over towards the window, he nearly puts them in the bin, but then decides on a grander flourish and pulls open the blind. Baulking at the sun, he raises the shade, drops the boots, and tilts his head to listen for the hard landing. On hearing this, he nods conclusively; a full-stop to the whole Army experience of the last few years. These humorous elements are heavily telegraphed in the performance, as well as in how March's physicality is supported by the music and editing, which cuts into each gesture guiding us to the joke. Further examples of this performance style are the jerky movements in Butch's bar and beyond that indicate clearly Al's inebriation; the over-the-top facial expressions marking his mis-recognition of Milly as just another wartime sexual encounter as they dance; and the

drunken punch that punctuates the bedtime battle with his pyjamas. There is a marked difference here in the tone and style of Fred's commensurate 'waking up' scene, which occurs immediately before Al's. Here, the shot remains wide and unedited, positioning Andrews' whole body equally and framing him within Peggy's bed. The softness of the bed's tulle canopy is echoed in Andrew's smooth and subtle movements through the space. Although comedy is stylistically suggested by light cyclical musical phrase on a woodwind instrument, even Fred's mistaken entry into Peggy's wardrobe rather than the bathroom is not telegraphed with the kind of overt double-take or pantomimic about-turn we could imagine March using.



Instead, his slow pace flows naturally, he meanders out of the space with a small look upwards to try and orientate himself before moving across the room.

Although March's acting style conforms to an overstated yet (for the period) realist practice – one ably supported by a formal style that clearly showcases each behaviour or set-piece – certain sequences suggest that something other than a dated performance of 'the real' is being signalled. Across the film, March momentarily uses a more naturalistic mode of underplaying. The resulting pattern of contrasts creates a tension around the performance of Al that can be seen to take on thematic resonance, which can in turn be related to readings of *The Best Years of Our Lives*' liberal concerns with post-war American, social identities and power hierarchies.⁴

Performance, style, and meaning

In our first encounters with Al, in the bomber and in the taxi ride across Boone City, March is noticeably understated in his representation. He does not draw on mannered intonation or conventionally coded social gesture; instead he uses small facial movements that the wide shots of the three men do nothing to emphasise. His delivery of the potential aphoristic commentary (after watching Homer's reunion with Wilma), 'the Navy couldn't train him to put his arms around his girl, to stroke her hair', is delivered in a soft, low-key voice accompanied only with a slight sucking-in of his cheeks. The moment is open to multiple interpretations: it does not just constitute an objective characterisation of Homer; it also partly suggests Al's thoughts about his own marital relationship and desire to caress Milly in the same way (which we see later on), and partly offers a comment on an institution's rehabilitation programme. But none of these meanings take particular precedence, due to March's understated, and consequently pluralistic, delivery and gestures.

March's more recognisably demonstrative performance style makes its first appearance when he leaves the taxi, and the company of his fellow veterans, to enter a different social space. When Fred (on seeing Al's 'swanky' apartment building) asks him 'What are you, a retired bootlegger?', Al replies 'Nothing as dignified as that: I'm a *banker*.' On these words, March's enunciation becomes suddenly punchier and more deliberate as his mouth widens more than is naturalistically necessary to form the sentence. In doing so, Al also shifts into a more overtly performative mode. March / Al draw on typical gestural conventions in the lift that takes him to up to his floor, signalling nervousness



through a sideways glance to the bellhop, biting his lip and raising his shoulders up to clearly 'pull himself together'. Even his entry into the apartment is initially characterised as something of a pantomime, clasp his hand over his children's mouths and creeping down-frame. This style is firmly in place by the time he, Milly and Peggy leave the apartment, and it remains the central feature of Al's reintegration into his life as a successful banking executive – from his stutteringly unsuccessful interruptions in the telephone conversation from his superior Mr Milton (Ray Collins) that brings him back to work, to the transparently obvious signs of Al's alcoholism that permeate later scenes with slurred words and overtly staged flourishing of downed drinks. However, in one pivotal scene, this style of expressiveness disappears and the subtle naturalism returns.

His conversation with ex-G.I. and hopeful farmer Novak (Dean White), about granting a loan without collateral, is notable for its nuance and invisibility of technique. The spectator is positioned apart from Al / March, who maintains a profile position towards Novak, speaking softly without obvious punctuation of lines. The social and political commentary is the central concern of this scene, moving the focus away from the lone individual. The boundaries of class and affluence momentarily collapse with the respectful attention the framing gives to Novak, recalling Al's instruction of 'Don't "Sir" me'. Novak describes his war experiences in a quiet, soft way emphasising their typicality. The framing, his dialogue and naturalistic delivery (his eyes flutter up and down nervously as he recalls) is reminiscent of contemporaneous



documentary interviews with ex-servicemen, notably John Huston's *Let There Be Light* (1946), concerning the rehabilitation of psychologically-damaged veterans. In his naturalism, Al here takes on the role of interviewer, listening and prompting memory. The sequence ends with a sense of equality as the two men shake hands, perfectly balanced face-to-face in a mid-shot. Beginning the scene through an association with the observational documentary positions the conversation as a political and representative one, and, as this is Novak's sole scene, he functions largely as a symbol, not a character. There is thus a juxtaposition between overstated realism and underplayed naturalism in March's depiction of Al, and the occasional naturalism contextualises his over-the-top and conventionally coded performance style in other moments. On his return to the consumerist society of Boone City, he must frequently 'play the part' of the successful banker and family man through pre-determined, virtually mechanised actions, suggesting the social 'role play' of a man denied individuality.

To emphasise the commentary in the above sequence, it is bracketed by two scenes of Fred working in the drugstore, where the former Air Force hero is most clearly defined and constrained by his social class: his former subordinate-turned-line manager, 'Sticky' Merkle (Norman Phillips Jr.), puts Fred firmly in his place by making him start work as a cashier. Here, we also find moments in Andrews' performance that recall the staged overplaying used by March to suggest role-play. In the sketch-like scene which follows Al's conversation with Novak, Fred works the drugstore counter, selling perfume at a premium to an easily impressed affluent housewife. The scene is hardly a subtle critique on consumerist culture, and Andrews' performance colludes with this: he carefully times his 'big' gestures, such as turning his head and neck at right angles to inspect the bottle, and mechanically parroting back the rhetoric of advertising in his responses to questions about the brand: 'What do they say it is? ... "Haunting, provocative, languorous." Oh, yes. I'm sure it's all of those.'

This style contrasts with his continued use of stillness and minimal inflections of delivery and expression elsewhere. The effectiveness of Andrews' immobile body is seen especially amidst the milling guests during Homer and Wilma's wedding sequence. Knowing that Peggy has arrived but unable to find her, Fred (centrally framed by a decorated arch) moves slowly and deliberately through the space of the living room (shot from a high angle and in deep focus), contrasting with small groups of guests facing inwards onto themselves, naturally twitching and shifting as they chatter. On seeing Peggy (placed in the foreground of



the frame), Fred stops completely and faces forward. This sudden stillness in a busy scene draws the eye, as does the shape of Fred's figure – his broad-suited shoulders noticeably make him the biggest mass in the room. A visual line is drawn from Peggy to him as she steps back slightly in conversation, opening up a gap from her group towards Fred. Around him, the everyday chatter and movement continues, but his unnatural stillness marks him as at odds with the celebratory atmosphere in the room. When the camera captures the full detail of Andrews' face in close-mid shots, such as his reaction to Al's telling him to keep away from Peggy, this immobility is even more devastating in its effect. In that scene, after cutting to a close-up of



Andrews, ten seconds elapse before he says 'Well, I guess that's it then; I don't see her anymore'. In this time there are no major signifiers of a decision-making process: Andrews' face barely changes – and that indeed is the point, since this is a performance of implication rather than overt articulation. Looking straight at Al for just too long, his head movements very slight, emotions are implied only in his eyes seeming just about to change register; he drops his eyelids minutely (again, longer than convention and expectations suggest is necessary), and, with a virtually imperceptible curl of his mouth as he forms the line, he brings his eyes back up to hold Al's gaze. The overstretched length of these inflections counters our sense of them as performative beats; they become smooth and naturalised. The largest movement in the scene is Andrews' breathing as it becomes faster and heavier, although not obviously so – never coming close to spilling over into a release of tension. The delivery remains flat and emotionless apart from the repeated 'I won't see her anymore', at which point this steeliness breaks slightly with a tiny sideways shift of the head, softer inflection, and an elongated vowel sound on 'more'. The sense of turmoil, defeat and love are all communicated by Andrews in these twenty seconds of virtually nothing. Interpreting the minimalism enables the full significance of the performance to be revealed. Its 'flatness' is not necessarily transparent in its function, it *suggests* rather than *articulates*.

I have already discussed March's conventional performance of drunkenness, but Fred too has his moment of inebriation in Butch's bar on the first night home. Two physical elements of this performance strike me particularly. The first is the way Andrews drinks a glass of scotch as Fred and Peggy chat. Here, Andrews plays with a very upright body; his shoulders are firm and tall, his spine straight and rigid. This continues down the rest of his frame as he bends his arm to take the glass. As it bends at the elbow, he makes the unusual motion of holding his forearm across his body at an acute angle. This small leverage is visually and kinetically awkward; it is easier and more



common to form a larger obtuse angle to complete the action of drinking, as March does elsewhere in the scene. Whereas March's obtuse angle allows for a smooth glide from table to mouth, with a flourish at the wrist as the forearm moves quicker than the upper arm, Andrews' movement is stiff and mechanical, concentrating movement along the whole arm equally. Eschewing the performative convention that March makes use of, this slight movement dramatises the closely-controlled tension in Fred that is

constantly denied release. If one mimics the movement, it reveals that completion of the action raises the chin and neck, opening the throat wide, allowing the drink to fall straight down. Andrews' repetition of this action across his body of work starts to raise further questions around the naturalism of his acting.

The gesture is an indication of the 'invisible' style with which Andrews conveys the repressed identities of his characters. It is perhaps also an illustration of the actor's own off-screen relationship with alcohol. This reading, of course, necessitates a move beyond screen performance analysis towards one more reliant on conventional studies of stardom: the 'real' Andrews seeps into the filmic moment, since the gesture also suggests a man who knows how to hide his excessive drinking. Similarly, as Fred drunkenly leaves the car at the end of the night, performing his polite goodbyes to Milly and Peggy, he hits his head on the doorframe. It seems an obviously coded sign of drunkenness, and yet its origins reportedly lie in the everyday alcoholism of Andrews. Teresa Wright recalls that on that day Andrews had failed to appear on set, having



disappeared to drink heavily (Rollyson 2012: 194). He was found, sobered up, and filming began. In this state, Andrews accidentally hit his head and Wyler asked him to keep the action in. Wright remembers cringing as, take-after-take, Andrews, in perhaps a perversely self-destructive mood, hit his head harder and harder. Thinking back to my discussion of Harold Russell's mimicry of 'natural' behaviour via cues and beats, here the opposite occurs. Whereas Russell had to rehearse gestures to strive towards an on-screen sense of naturalism, Andrews takes an example of 'real-life' off screen behaviour and rehearses it until it becomes excessive and unnaturalistic. The repetition of an act originating from Andrews' own behaviour is turned into a piece of theatricality, at odds with his other scenes, which rely on particular strategies of minimalism in the creation of a naturalistic performance.

For the most part naturalistic in mode and psychological in effect, Andrews' style complements the characterisation and narrative arc of Fred. And yet, as discussed previously, there is a tension between aesthetics and actor whereby our access to Andrews' performance is restricted at significant moments of his character's development. Instead of focusing on Fred / Andrews, the meanings of many scenes are primarily created through the formal apparatus of deep focus, long takes and mise-en-scène, especially in moments that depict Fred in settings associated with work. These include Fred's entrance into his former workplace, now



expanded into the Midway Chain, where he moves through the store and is increasingly absorbed into the amorphous mass of retailers, customers and advertising. It is also there in his subsequent interview with the store manager: Fred is positioned away from the camera with half the frame filled with a window through which we see the chaos of the store below. It occurs again as he waits in the unemployment line, occupying one corner of the foreground with two long queues stretching on ahead. The visual style at such moments communicates much about the social environment that Fred now finds himself in: swallowed up in busy spaces full of people and objects. Unlike the close-ups and other formal techniques which allow us to read the coded expressivity of Homer and Al, the social commentary lying at the heart of Fred's representation – that he is merely one-of-many, increasingly defined by a lowly social identity not by the individual heroism of his wartime actions – is achieved through keeping Fred *and* Andrews at a distance, lost within visual disorder. Andrews' subtle underplaying that implies a mask-like surface under which boils immense emotion, and which is used so effectively elsewhere to create the individuality of his role, is missing in these sequences. Instead the blankness must be imposed by formal elements to accentuate the absence of that individuality.

However, the complexity of this often oppositional relationship between Andrews' acting style and the film's aesthetic choices is perhaps most effectively illustrated in the climactic scene in which, sitting in a discarded bomber, Fred confronts and seemingly resolves his post-traumatic stress disorder.⁵ In the bomber, the relationship between style and performance may create tension, but the effect is one of coherence, in line with the sequence's narrative function of resolution. The viewer is both denied and given access to Andrews within the frame. At one point, an over-the-shoulder shot of Andrews looking out through the bomber's window abstracts the darkly-lit figure against the white window streaked with dirty watermarks. The marks on the window form a pattern that obscures the view outside beyond the airplane. This contrasts with the preceding shot within the aeroplane, which frames Andrews' face in a focused close-up. This shot is held for thirteen seconds. In the first nine seconds there is only one observable change in his performance as he moves forward in a small and slow mechanical movement, pivoting from a low point, akin almost to an inert body rising up into a physical consciousness. In this time, Andrews' eyes remain devoid of emotional register. For the remainder of the shot, more familiar elements of an 'Andrews performance' return: tiny movements of the head, a shift in eye shape combined with



a slight raise of the eyebrows to change the register, and a steeling of the jaw through gritted teeth. The scene then cuts away before his full response to this contemplation can be seen. Following these strategies of both denial of and detailed access to Andrews' body, the subsequent shot is a mixture of the two. Cutting to an exterior reverse shot, the viewer looks through the dirty window at Fred. The close-up reveals the 'presence' of Andrews / Fred, but both the focus on the streaks and Andrews' continued mask-like performance behind suggest an 'absence' to both actor and character. Off-screen, shouts are heard, initially suggesting (given that this appearance of 'absent presence' so closely mirrors a conventional move into flashback) another traumatic memory that may collapse the boundaries



between past and present. But on the shout of 'Hey, you!' the camera snaps into focus, and Fred, somewhat disorientated, looks up sharply. The absence that was so crucial to the preceding shots – both in terms of formal style and acting – disappears with this dual shift whereupon Andrews' performance becomes more animated. In doing so, the sudden coherence between form and performance has a thematic resonance for the film's narrative: Fred grounds himself in the present as the moment enables him to move forward.

The simplicity of this narrative device has been highlighted, particularly how it compromises the film's socio-political critique with an apparent turn away from the social to the personal / individual in order to conclude the story (Warshow 1947: 158-9). However, what occurs in this balance of aesthetics and performance in the sequence does suggest alternative interpretations. The 'blankness' of Andrews' expression in those nine seconds intrigues me, as does Wyler's choice to use that particular take. The absence conveyed here in his performance goes further than what may be observed elsewhere, and Andrews moves Fred beyond his typically underplayed frustrated, bitter characters, by suggesting an even more unconsciously empty shell. The denial of any emotional register in his blankness, and then in the formal treatment of that performance, hints not an internal emotional confrontation and resolution, but further repression, locking the past away never to be revealed. The mask-like countenance superficially allows progress to be signalled, but recognition of how and when Andrews employs such a performative tactic implies that Fred's victory is not as straightforward as it might appear. The film apparently dismisses the hardships ahead, suggesting easy repairs made to the burden of Fred's war and post-war experience (a sentiment also found in the words of his proposal to Peggy that concludes the film). However, a focus on performance allows us to nuance this interpretation. March overplays to show the role-play that Al has to undertake to reintegrate (and the tensions present thereafter), whereas Russell's 'acting / non-acting' conveys tensions between an individual and a social trope. Andrews, meanwhile, underplays to suggest that the role-play of the individual, which is needed to achieve the required melodramatic resolution, remains at odds with the social situations the film chooses to leave behind. To return to the arguments of Lesley Stern and Brenda Austin-Smith: Andrews' performance is not simply absorbed into the flow of image and narrative, nor is it uninterpretable merely because it is invisible and appears natural. Through sustained attention to Andrew's acting style, what occurs in the above sequence can be observed as a deliberate action



with its own meaning; one could even identify an 'unnatural' quality to its minimal style and excessive duration that takes on a more confrontational dimension between film and viewer. The performative labour that chooses only to suggest rather than articulate, coupled with the long take that showcases this, invites interpretation, yet denies the viewer a resolution that might seem unified in meaning.

This is commensurate with the ways that the stylistic hybridity of the film is reflected throughout in how performance is employed by both actor and filmmaker. Each of the three lead male actors utilise modes of performance that highlight the film's tensions in different ways, and the film's style recognises and engages with each individual differently by adopting different strategies of formal presentation. Performance contributes to the overall aesthetic and thematic complexity of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, even where it may first be interpreted as overt, natural, authentic, unspectacular, or even invisible.

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

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¹ Such as her discussion of Fred's proposal to Peggy (86).

² Sarah Kozloff notes, as recorded in the Script Clerk's notes, that many of Russell's actions that appear effortless took many takes to achieve (2011: 48).

³ The one exception is their conversation in the bank that convinces Al to loan capital to the hopeful farmer Novak (Dean White).

⁴ c.f Kozloff (2011): 80-82 and Miller (2013): 250-51.

⁵ The earlier scene that introduces his traumatic memories – the nightmare in Peggy's bed – is filmed and performed very traditionally, and I would argue that the sense of complexity conveyed elsewhere is absent in this rather conventionally emotive moment.