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RESEARCH

Peace Cinema: Religious Pacifism and Anti-War Sensibility in *Friendly Persuasion* (1956)

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Through close examination of William Wyler's 1956 film *Friendly Persuasion*, this article describes the complex ways in which this western melodrama seeks to foster an anti-war sensibility via engagement with the experience and commitments of religious pacifism. The example of *Friendly Persuasion* is used to illustrate how US society acknowledges religious pacifist beliefs and argues that the Quaker (Society of Friends) 'peace testimony' is shown in the film in an intelligent and respectful way and as a proxy for a broader democratic anti-war perspective. *Friendly Persuasion* was produced during the Cold War at a time of military escalation and patriotic nationalism, and when Hollywood was accused of communist subversion and subject to the scrutiny of the HUAC; this fact makes it all the more remarkable that the film is largely successful in its advocacy for peace. This article concludes that *Friendly Persuasion* constitutes a rare mainstream example of what might provisionally be called 'peace cinema', that is, a film that is sympathetic to pacifist ideals and seeks to challenge in fundamental ways the widely held belief that war is inevitable and necessary.

Keywords: War film; anti-war film; peace cinema; pacifism; religion; HUAC

Introduction

Reflecting on his role as Chief of Film Services at the United Nations Department of Public Information from 1956 to 1960, Thorold Dickinson argued that 'warfare is cinegenic and goes with the grain of cinema' and that:

Every film that uses a stand-up fight as a solution accepts the idea of violence and wraps the audience yet more cosily in all its preconceptions. Preconceptions build almost impregnable prisons. The filmmaker with

the ability to take a sympathetic, long hard look at the world and try, as entertainingly as he can, to isolate a moment of clear vision, has one of the most potent weapons in the war for peace, the war against the most entrenched preconception of all. (Dickinson 1962: 149)

Subsequent scholarship has followed Dickinson, confirming his view that there is an entrenched preconception that war is necessary and positive and that this view is held in place by popular culture, including the cinema (Bacevich, 2005, Bourke 2016, Der Derian 2009, Stahl 2009, Turse 2008, Westwell 2006). But set against this, what would constitute, from a filmmaking perspective, Dickinson's alternative 'clear vision'?¹ What would a notional peace cinema look like?

Scholars working within the disciplines of peace studies and film studies are surprisingly quiet on this topic. Discussion of the role of popular culture in advocating for peace is an adjunct of peace studies (Barash 1991) but art and literature (Gittings 2012) and the news media (McLaughlin and Baker 2010 and Mitchell 2012) are the main focus of attention, with very little developed discussion of film (Young and Twigg 2010). Film studies has a healthy critical literature on war and anti-war films (Slocum 2006). However, the question of what would constitute a peace film has not, to my knowledge, been tackled head on.²

There is no clear canon of peace films already defined and under discussion. However, peace activists working at different times and in different places have set to this task. For example, the book *Films For Peace* (1961) comprises a filmography 'formed by a group of individuals who came together largely as a result of the Film Viewing Sessions at [The London Quaker] Friends House and all of whom [were] concerned that a wider use of films should be made as a means of arousing interest in and support for work [towards peace]' (Jude and Walker 1961: preface). A similar filmography titled *Films on War and Peace Issue* was compiled for the World Without

¹ Dickinson made his own peace films – *Power Among Men* (1958), *Overture* (1958) and *Pablo Casals Breaks his Journey* (1958) – which, of course, merit further discussion.

² Alisa Lebow's concept of the 'unwar film' is a significant attempt to get beyond the war film/anti-war film debate but her approach does not actively examine the question of peace (Lebow 2015).

War Council held at Berkeley, California in 1968. And, activists in the War Resisters League spent two years preparing a list of films that addressed questions of 'peace and justice' (Colt, Donnelly and Melnick 1987). There is much to say about these peace filmographies but it is worth noting to begin with that a number of films appear on all the lists, including well-known anti-war films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930) and films that consciously travel away from the battlefield, including *La Grande Illusion/The Grand Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937) and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour/Hiroshima, My Love* (Alain Resnais, 1959). These films already have a significant literature that is sympathetic to their pacifistic design (Hanet 1973, Jackson 2009, O'Shaughnessy 2009, Varsava 2011), but another film also appears on the lists that is relatively unknown: *Friendly Persuasion* (William Wyler, 1956).³ Unlike *La Grande Illusion* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, Wyler's film is not canonical and is little written about within film studies. Indeed, the only writing that directly relates to the film consists of a description of a legal battle regarding the screenplay (Dmohowski 2002) and some passing reference in accounts of Wyler's better-known and critically celebrated films (Sinyard 2013).

This article seeks to present *Friendly Persuasion* as an indicative example of the peace film. The first part glosses the pacifist beliefs of the Quakers and offers some background to contextualise *Friendly Persuasion's* historically situated story. The second part considers the film's production, especially, the different political commitments of its creative producers and the ways in which these come together to create a compelling drama of anti-war conviction. The remainder of the article examines these elements as they give structure to the film's narrative and shape the film's form in a particular scene in which an Army recruitment officer visits a Quaker Meeting House in search of volunteers. The article argues that *Friendly Persuasion's* sympathetic portrayal of religious pacifism is placed in the service of a broad, inclusive and democratic anti-war sensibility which still has relevance today. And that the film's peace advocacy provides a useful, and perhaps unlikely, point of

³ *Friendly Persuasion* also appears in an early 1960s German film education text, as an example of a peace film (Grieger 1961).

orientation in popular culture from which films studies might start to consider what a cinema of peace might look like.

The Quaker Peace Testimony

Friendly Persuasion tells the story of a Quaker family in Southern Indiana in 1862. At the centre of the film are middle-aged nurseryman Jess Birdwell (Gary Cooper) and his wife Eliza (Dorothy McGuire), a Quaker minister. The film consists of vignettes of everyday life replete with a dramatic tension caused by the encroachment of the Civil War, and especially the question of whether the men of the Quaker community will fight with the Union Army. As a hybrid western/melodrama, the film does not present itself as a history film with strong claims to verisimilitude and facticity. However, in pursuit of a properly thoughtful engagement with pacifism the film does seek to elicit from its audience some genuine understanding of the experience of Quakerism in the US in the late nineteenth century.

The Quaker movement began in the early 1650s in England, amidst the turmoil of the English Civil War. Described by Peter Brook as a (leftist) sect of Puritanism (Brook 1990: 9), the Quakers 'stressed the Inner Light and inward experience, in addition to scriptural revelation, as the guide for a spiritual life' (Brock and Young 1999: 7). Their beliefs ran counter not only to Catholicism but also to clerical ritual and tradition within Protestantism, thus marking them out for persecution. While not initially pacifist, Brook argues that following the Restoration in 1660, two key statements – the Declaration of 1661 and Robert Barclay's *Apology* (1678) – 'laid a foundation on which Quakers erected a firm structure of war resistance' and served as a foundation for a long commitment to pacifism, that is, the belief that war and violence are morally wrong and unjustifiable (Brook 1990: 31).⁴ Writing in his journal after converting to Quakerism in 1959, and seeking to articulate this core belief, peace activist Adam Curle observed that:

⁴ The etymology of the word pacifism is distinctly modern. According to Howlett, the term was coined in the 1890s (Howlett 1991: xvii) and its meaning was stabilised during World War I when it narrowed to mean an individual's total renunciation of war and social violence. I've taken the liberty here of using the word in an anachronistic way to describe the Quaker's principled anti-war and anti-violence belief system, which of course, significantly predates the twentieth century.

There is only one central idea [to Quaker belief]: that there is an element of the divine in everyone. But from that follow a lot of things: that everyone is worthy of equal care and respect, that the violence of war, or any sort, is an affront to the essential goodness of the other; and that the idea of racism and racial superiority must be opposed (qtd. in Lederach and Woodhouse 2016: 26).

This strong and unequivocal commitment, originating in seventeenth century England and remaining central to Quaker belief until the present day, constitutes the dramatic and ethical centre of *Friendly Persuasion*, with, as we shall see below, the film seeking ways to articulate how this belief plays out in the specific historical context of nineteenth century America.

Quakers travelled to the British colonies in North America in the late seventeenth century, where they sought (with some success) ways of living in peaceful co-existence with Native Americans and where they were active and instrumental in establishing the governance of states, most significantly Pennsylvania. In the colonies, Quakers maintained their pacifist convictions by refusing to fight with the British military and navy, as well as local militias, and by withholding taxes used to fund war. As a consequence, they were often imprisoned and fined, though their resolve forced some accommodation of their beliefs and raised awareness of religious pacifism and conscientious objection. Following the American Revolution, the Friends retained a strong commitment to fighting against slavery and advocating for the rights of Native Americans (Brook 1990: 155).

The Quaker's religious pacifism and their specific, and sometimes uncomfortable, experience in the US directly inform *Friendly Persuasion*. Of particular relevance to the film is the 'considerable Quaker migration in the antebellum period from North Carolina and Virginia north-westwards to the fertile prairie lands [including Indiana] then opening up to cultivation' (Brook 1990: 173). The Indiana Quakers featured in *Friendly Persuasion* are these homesteaders, moving from slave-owning states further south due to their objections to slavery (Nelson 1991: 3). For these migrants, the contingencies of the war created significant tension within their community, with

many deeming the conflict a necessity to bring about the end of slavery, thereby challenging their pacifist beliefs. Nelson notes that the 'exceedingly emotional concepts of Union, emancipation and patriotism [at times] overrode the calm demeanour required for an idealistic, impartial, and uncompromising stand in regard to war' (Nelson 1991: 95). A question that shaped the experience of Quakerism at the time was: 'Is it possible for Quakers to stand by their historic peace testimony and at the same time remain loyal to the idea of national unity and to their belief in human freedom?' (Brook 1990: 166). This question split the community and can be seen in the experience of young men of fighting age: out of a population of 15,000 Quakers in Indiana in 1850, 1,212 Quaker men fought in the Civil War (around 25 per cent of eligible males), while 2,170 registered their conscientious objection (Nelson 1991: 20). As well as supporting the abolitionist cause and helping accommodate freed slaves, Quaker communities also contributed significant money and material aid to the military. As will be shown, *Friendly Persuasion* acknowledges this tension, indeed, it is central to the film's dramatic arc; not least in the difficult decision faced by the male members of the family of whether to fight or not, and in the inclusion of a freed slave, Enoch (Joel Fluellen), who has been given sanctuary on the Birdwell's farm. Indeed, the film's dramatic power and searching democratic quality stem precisely from the staging of this genuinely difficult ethical dilemma.

There is a second context to Quaker pacifism to consider, namely that of the time of the film's production. Set against the backdrop of a stridently anti-communist political culture, a devastating war in Korea and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, pacifism during the Cold War was seen by many as a subversive and unpatriotic act. Howlett notes that during the 1950s the American peace movement was at the 'lowest point of its twentieth century influence' (Howlett 1991: xliii). As will be shown, this context impinged on the making of *Friendly Persuasion*, with the future of the production uncertain at various points as a result of anti-communist agitation. However, that is not to say that pacifism was not a feature of American life. For example, the 'Peacemaker' movement which was formed in 1948, consisted of small groups of pacifists (from a range of different faiths) adopting militant nonviolent action against a number of nuclear-arms facilities, with coverage in the

press (Howlett 1991: xlili). Brook notes that 'Within the religious pacifist community, it was the Society of Friends that made the most striking – and at times perhaps the most controversial – contribution to the peace movement of the Cold War era: repetition of a role they had played for at least a century' (Brock and Young 1999: 334). Through such actions, the Quakers remained in the public consciousness, and provided a touchstone for those sympathetic to peace activism, including the makers of *Friendly Persuasion*.

Anti-war Sensibilities

Friendly Persuasion's journey to the screen took over ten years and the contingencies of the film's production help explain how Hollywood became the unlikely location for a coming together of different anti-war sensibilities resulting in a finely calibrated and sympathetic account of religious pacifism. The film's screenplay is based on Quaker-writer Jessamyn West's 1945 debut best-selling novel *The Friendly Persuasion*, which consists of vignettes of Quaker society in the mid-nineteenth century. The novel pieces together thirteen previously published magazine short stories into a considered and positive description of an agrarian way of life. Focusing on a period of forty years, the novel stresses the importance of religious faith, marriage and family, and in its relatively equal weighting between the points of view of the two central characters, Eliza and Jess, it is properly egalitarian. The book's celebration of Quaker life also includes poignant recognition of physical hardship, illness, aging, depression and loneliness, and shows how family and community relationships are founded on the recognition of difference and compromise. The success of the novel ensured any future film adaptation would be pre-sold as long as producers were savvy enough to recognise that what was valued by its readers was the book's peaceful pastoral vision of American life. Indeed, West's novel is a gestalt of what peace studies, adopting the term coined by Johan Galtung, calls 'positive peace', that is, the depiction of a society in which there is not just an absence of war (so-called 'negative peace') but also an absence of 'structural violence': discrimination, exploitation, inequality, and so on (Galtung 2012: 75). The design of the novel seeks this vision of 'positive peace' through its description of a society that is stable, fair, egalitarian, and democratic. Preferring this broad peace advocacy rather than a statement about a specific war,

West did not make pacifism a central preoccupation. For example, in the Civil War episode, which occurs around one third of the way through the book, the Birdwell's son, Josh, volunteers to fight. However, Josh is knocked unconscious during battle and therefore his principles are not fully tested. As we shall see, much of this 'positive peace' approach originating with West survives into the script and the film as released. However, the draw of the intrinsic drama of the 'stand-up fight' noted by Dickinson would exert a pull on the film's creative producers as it journeyed towards the screen (Dickinson 1962: 149).

Frank Capra optioned the novel shortly after publication, commissioning Michael Wilson (who had worked on Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)) to write the screenplay. Wilson had begun his screenwriting career in 1941, writing several westerns, but after US entry into World War II he served in the Marines in the Pacific theatre. After the war, he worked as contract writer for Liberty Films, Inc., the independent company set up by Capra, George Stevens, and William Wyler and it was there he wrote the script for (what was at this point called) *The Friendly Persuasion*.⁵

Wilson was a self-proclaimed radical and member of the American Communist Party, with a background in political activism at the University of California at Berkeley (Dmohowski 2002: 495–6). However, as his military service shows, Wilson was not a pacifist but found significant correspondences between his own left-wing politics and Quaker beliefs, including the characters' strong anti-war position, the commitment to treat others, regardless of race, gender or social class, equally, and a commitment to abolitionism and the support of freed slaves. Wilson was likely especially drawn to the way in which abolitionism creates a tension, indeed, a dialectic, with pacifist conviction, something that would become a key driver of the film's drama, as well as a bone of contention amongst its creative producers. As a writer of westerns, Wilson was aware that Quakers (like any number of religious groups) are part of the foundational narrative of colonial settlement, and its attendant myth of Manifest Destiny. As such, Quakers are a recognised part of a celebrated American experience of settlement, something that authenticates their pacifism and broader anti-war

⁵ Wilson wrote a treatment or synopsis (11 June 1946), a first draft continuity (20 September 1946) and a second draft screenplay (13 February 1947) (Dmohowski 2002: 498).

sensibility and protects it from knee-jerk dismissal.⁶ Validated thus, Wilson sought to use Quaker pacifism as a cipher for a broad, inclusive and democratic anti-war sensibility and at script level *The Friendly Persuasion* had the makings of a radical film, albeit within the strictures of what Wilson felt Hollywood and its audience could bear.

However, his design would not come to fruition. As Wilson worked on the script for Capra, Hollywood became a central concern of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which convened a congressional hearing in 1947 to investigate 'communism in motion pictures.' This led to the drawing up of a blacklist of ten suspected communists, all of whom refused to testify and were immediately sacked from their jobs and imprisoned. For HUAC, anti-war sentiment was synonymous with anti-Americanism and those who challenged this view were treated as suspicious or treacherous. In this context, and as Liberty Films was acquired by Paramount in 1949, work on *The Friendly Persuasion* stalled (Dmohowski 2002: 493).

When the HUAC hearings reconvened in 1951, 324 people, including Wilson, were placed on a second blacklist and fired by the studios. Capra is reported as saying that Wilson did 'a swell job' on the script but that 'it would be a bad time to produce a picture that might be construed as being anti-war' (qtd. in McBride 2002). And when Wilson was called before HUAC he stated, 'I feel that this committee might take the credit, or part of it at least, for the fact that *The Friendly Persuasion* was not produced, in view of the fact that it dealt warmly, in my opinion, with a peace-loving people' (qtd. in Dmohowski 2002: 497).

However, following a hiatus, in 1954 Wyler bought the rights for *The Friendly Persuasion* from Paramount and rehoused the film at Allied Artists Studio where he took on the roles of producer and director, with Gary Cooper joining the cast (Dmohowski 2002: 493). In contrast to West's religious beliefs and Wilson's radical tendency, Wyler brought a distinctly liberal democratic sensibility to the project. His most recent work had included finely balanced wartime propaganda films which, as Michael Anderegg argues, were preoccupied with an examination of 'the nature and

⁶ It is worth noting here that as a religious organisation Quakerism was also given the protection of the Production Code which advised that religion could not be made subject to criticism.

function of community in a period of crisis', a description that is also appropriate to *Friendly Persuasion* (Anderegg 1979: 115). Wyler also directed the post-war classic *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). As noted by Andre Bazin, Wyler collaborated on this film with Greg Toland to find a suitable way of combining deep focus cinematography and the staging of the action so as to offer the viewer greater freedom to choose where to look in any given scene (Bazin 1997: 9). In contrast to the predetermined economy of looks produced by conventional classical-era continuity editing, Wyler sought form for a democratic vision, extending from characters and their choices in the diegetic world, to viewers engaged in their own difficult everyday decisions and choices. This liberal commitment to filmic, existential, and political choice would be one of Wyler's distinctive contributions to *Friendly Persuasion*.

Wyler also had a complicated relation with HUAC that confirms his liberal political inclination. In 1949 Wyler co-founded, with John Huston and Phillip Dunne, the Anti-HUAC Committee for the First Amendment, to support those whose careers had been destroyed by the Blacklist and in his testimony to HUAC Wyler said that he felt it improbable he would be permitted to make *The Best Years of Our Lives* in 1947 (Humphries 2008: 57). To complicate matters, in the early 1950s Wyler was accused of 'guilt by association' because he had worked with figures such as Wilson, and, in an open letter to the studios, he pledged to distance himself from all left-wing activity (Humphries 2008: 151), a commitment that made his stewardship of Wilson's radically anti-war film script for *The Friendly Persuasion* more than a little difficult.

Under Wyler's supervision, *The Friendly Persuasion* became *Friendly Persuasion*, and West, now working in collaboration with Wyler's brother Robert, was hired to make changes to Wilson's script. Her work returned a sense of the everyday, and its gestalt of 'positive peace', to Wilson's screenplay, which she, and Wyler, found too didactic in its focus on the Civil War, its valorisation of the Quaker characters, and its condemnation of those involved in the military.⁷ In a conversation with West, Wyler stated:

⁷ The screenwriting credit for *Friendly Persuasion* was contested, with the studios removing Wilson's name; for a full account see Dmohowski (Dmohowski 2002).

I'm not a pacifist, as you know. So that's not why I'm interested in this picture. I'm interested in it in spite of that [...] But the Quakers honoured other people's ways of thinking and doing. Jess, who thinks fighting's wrong, lets his son go to war. Eliza, who thinks music is wrong, let's Jess have his organ. [...] When people go out of the cinema after seeing this ... if we succeed ... they aren't going to say 'so what.' They're going to say 'That guy had guts. He did what he thought was right'. (qtd. in Sinyard 2013: 161)

Wyler's interest here is in the characters' cooperation with one another in spite of their different points of view. He is drawn to the way in which the script shows how competing principles must be accommodated in order for a democracy to claim itself as such. For Wyler, the script's careful articulation of the Quaker's religious pacifism raised important issues regarding First Amendment and constitutional rights about freedom of speech and especially the rights of citizens to adopt ideas that go against the grain of the state or the status quo. As such, the film models the central dilemma at the heart of HUAC hearings, and McCarthyism/Hooverism more generally: is it possible to protect and maintain democracy by curtailing democratic freedoms? For Wyler, the answer was a clear no and the script for *Friendly Persuasion* offered an alternative model.

As the film's complicated pre-production indicates, *Friendly Persuasion* was formed in the contact and compromise between its creative producers, where each might be said to signal, or embody, discrete ideological positions. West's novel and her subsequent work as a script-doctor emphasises the historical experience of the Quakers in Indiana and articulates a vision of 'positive peace'; Wilson's radical left design can be seen in the dialectic tension between a principled anti-war position and abolitionism whereby progressive change might necessitate violence; and Wyler's contribution seeks a way to show a range of positions in an open way that invites the audience to understand the high ethical stakes of pacifism at a time of war, and in doing so, celebrates the need for a democratic society to protect the rights of those with opposing or radical views.

'The Refreshing Picture of a Strong Man Refraining'

In the light of the film's sympathetic depiction of Quaker life and its complex production history, the remainder of this article focuses on certain formal aspects of *Friendly Persuasion*. I will primarily focus on the over-arching narrative structure of the film, and the ways in which it is governed by the central question of whether or not to fight. However, as part of this discussion, I will pause and spend some time analysing a pivotal scene which illuminates the specific ways the film *as film* makes a case for peace. This section of close analysis is important for my claim that *Friendly Persuasion* is a peace film that seeks ways of articulating a religious pacifist case for peace via specifically filmic techniques, and in doing so, makes itself distinct from a novel or play on the same subject.

The broad narrative structure of the film, which Dmohowski credits to Wilson (Dmohowski 2002: 499), strikes a balance between the loose, episodic structure of West's novel and a more recognisably classical Hollywood narrative structure, following the pattern of equilibrium (everyday life for the Birdwell family), disruption of equilibrium (the encroachment of war, and the decision of whether or not to fight) and return of equilibrium (the Birdwells reflect on their experience). The early parts of the film include a comic scene involving the Birdwells' youngest son, Little Jess (Richard Eyer) and a wayward goose, a race to church between Jess and his neighbour, Sam Jordan (Robert Middleton), and the signalling of the embryonic romance between Jordan's son Gard (Mark Richman) and the Birdwells' daughter, Mattie (Phyllis Love). Commensurate with the classical Hollywood style, these scenes are all carefully weighted to the task of setting up key themes and putting in place dramatic scenarios – the Birdwells exchange a worried glance at their daughter's infatuation with a soldier – that will mature and develop as the film progresses. Yet, even though these scenes foreshadow later events, they are primarily geared to the work of articulating a vision of a peaceful community that is true to the spirit of West's novel, and scenes such as these continue to punctuate the narrative. For example, the film brings together a number of elements related to respect for nature: Jess's occupation as a nurseryman cultivating fruit plants, the scene showing the birth of

the calf where Enoch talks of his missing children, the comedic, redemptive role of the goose, especially in the scene where Confederate soldiers raid the homestead. In sum, part of the film's vision of 'positive peace' is conveyed via distinct scenes showing a gentle nurturing relationship between human society and nature.

The initiation of disequilibrium comes to the fore as the Birdwell family attend a Quaker religious service at their Meeting House. There is no such scene in the novel and the scene is usually attributed to Wilson (McBride 2002). The scene begins with an establishing shot of the modest but well-maintained white clapper board Meeting House (**Figure 1**).

As a marker of Quaker restrictions on the use of music, the service is introduced with no dialogue and only the tolling of the bell of a nearby Methodist church. This is followed by a shot from a seated position within the Meeting House, with the congregation entering the space led by Eliza (**Figure 2**).

This is followed by a reverse shot from the doorway as the congregation, dressed in sombre, dark clothes take their seats, men on one side, women on the other. A pan right is used to orientate the viewer to the space and the camera then cuts in to a medium close up of Eliza (now seated) with head bowed and eyes closed. From there a pan right shows the men and tracks along a wooden divider in the centre of



Figure 1.

the room, with intimate portraits of thought, meditation and, for humorous effect, fidgeting. A cut takes us to a framed view of the men, with children making eye contact with one another. A mirror view of the women takes us over the line, and then to a broader view of the whole congregation, with Eliza again in a prominent, but non-hierarchical, position as minister (**Figure 3**).

In spite of the gender segregation of the Quaker congregation their specific version of egalitarianism is embodied in the figure of a female 'preacher' and



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

conveyed by Eliza's quiet authority, centrality and (via careful lighting) luminosity.⁸ It is important to note that she retains this position in the narrative as a whole. A child, bored with proceedings, looks from a window (**Figure 4**), leading to an establishing shot of the neighbouring Methodist church (**Figure 5**).



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

⁸ In foregrounding Eliza's character it is likely that West, Wilson and Wyler would have been aware that the Quaker peace movement during the Civil War had women in prominent positions including Eliza P. Gurney and Ann Branson (Brock 1968: 716–17).

This is followed by an interior filmed from the front of the church and showing a colourfully dressed non- gender segregated congregation bathed in the light of stained-glass windows and engaged in boisterous hymn singing (**Figure 6**).

The cross-cutting here between the two clearly demarcated church spaces – one quiet, monotone, thoughtful and peaceful, the other noisy, exuberant, colourful, and full of action (including Gard in full military uniform) – shows neighbours belonging to different religious communities, which for all their contrasts in values and style, are living and thriving alongside each other.

This equilibrium is disturbed by the arrival of Major James Harvey (Theodore Newton), a Union Army recruiting officer, at the Meeting House. As he climbs down from his carriage we see that he is disabled and finds it difficult to walk. In a measured signal of the way religious pacifism and war are to be contrasted in the film, the sound of his cane contrasts with peaceful birdsong and the quiet contemplation of the Quaker congregation. As Harvey enters the Meeting House we see him from Eliza's point of view, with the pew dividing the congregation providing a clarifying 'line of action' (**Figure 7**). He initially seeks out a male authority figure but eventually deduces that Eliza is in charge (**Figure 8**).

As the two figures face each other there is a shot in which Jess and Little Jess are framed by the bodies of the Harvey and Eliza (**Figure 9**); this shot indicates the way



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

the narrative as a whole places the male characters' decision whether to fight in a space somewhere between Eliza's trenchant pacifism and the wider cultural demand that in some cases it is right to enter a 'stand-up fight'.

There follows a shot-reverse shot (**Figures 10 and 11**) consisting of near 'frontal' close ups that seek to appeal (almost) directly to the viewer.

Harvey states: 'The Union has endured two years of bloody civil war. Thousands have given their lives in battle to free our country from slavery'. To which Eliza replies:



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

'We are opposed to slavery but we do not believe it right to kill one man to free another'. Harvey then responds: 'Ma'am, it's not going to be a question of fighting for freedom or principle but defending our own homes and families from attack'. The film pushes at the edges of the continuity system and the conventions for blocking a conversation here, adopting near direct address to convey a dialectic between two people and their incompatible belief systems and directly involving the viewer in the



Figure 11.

resolve and reasoning behind the two positions. The script clearly articulates their respective ethical stances and the sense of propriety and mutual respect presents these positions as dignified lived experiences. As a consequence, it is hard to identify a preferred reading and the choice, for the characters and the viewer, is a genuine one. At this point, Harvey turns to directly address the men. 'Are you afraid to fight?' he asks (**Figure 12**).

The scene then carefully conveys how the male members of the congregation will negotiate the challenge in different ways, with reaction shots from female members of the congregation extending the range and diversity of viewpoints. Josh Birdwell (Anthony Perkins) in close-up answers: 'I don't know' (**Figure 13**) and the camera reframes to include Eliza as Jess speaks of his own doubt and his faith in God, stating 'If the test comes all I pray is that I hope I can be an instrument of the Lord' (**Figure 14**).

Then, as the Captain leaves (**Figure 15**), Eliza's position, and authority, is re-established (**Figure 16**) and the final shot has Jess contemplating the decision his son will take, thereby prefiguring the narrative events of the film (**Figure 17**).

This pivotal scene, of which there are many in the film, is properly dialogic and seeks to articulate both the Quaker peace testimony and represent the abolitionist



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

cause, thereby engaging the audience with difficult ethical scenarios without fully directing them how to respond. In his discussion of Wyler's distinctive style, Bazin notes that:

All the dramatic joints are so conspicuous that a few degrees' shift in the angle of a glance would not only be clearly visible even to the most obtuse



Figure 14.



Figure 15.

viewer, but would also be capable of causing an entire scene to lose its symmetry, as if this shift in the angle of glance were an extra weight added to a perfectly balanced scale' (Bazin, 1997: 17).

Bazin's observation is true of the Meeting House scene, where even a small adjustment to the finely calibrated economy of looks would reveal a commitment to one course

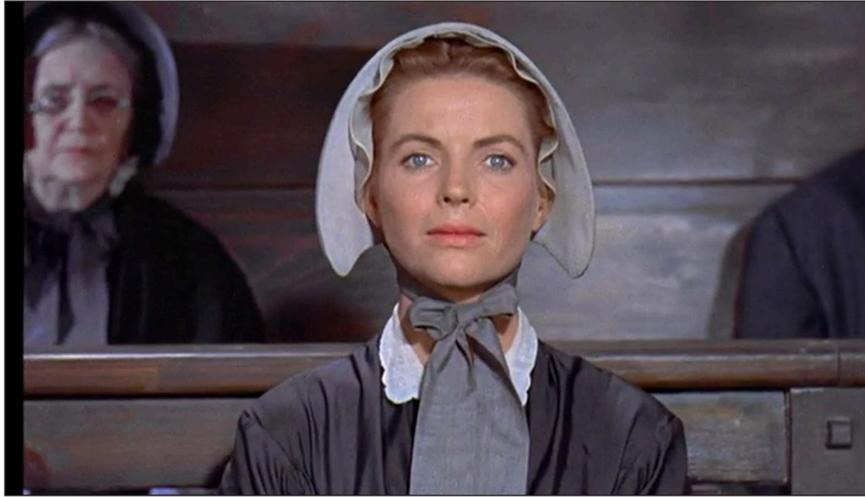


Figure 16.



Figure 17.

of action above another. The careful direction of the scene is graceful; indeed, one might say, peaceful, in its poise, balance and harmony, in its ability to accommodate and hold in check conflict.

The Meeting House sequence can be read into the overarching narrative of the film. Eliza's principled and privileged position is maintained and set against the conventions and common sense of the wider culture. As the film continues, Jess

and Josh are shown as having only a loose fit with the stricter senses of Quaker religious propriety and a number of scenarios are staged in which they delicately negotiate tensions between principle and the breaking of principle. For instance, Jess defends his son from bullying through the use of restrained violence and defies the Quaker proscription of music by purchasing an organ and installing it in the house, leading to a marital rift; he also engages in competition: racing his horse and carriage to church. Taken together, these constitute low key hymns to the power of free will set against a backdrop of a strong, centred moral code, with comedy used to dissipate tension. In this, the viewer is presented with Quaker beliefs, a celebration of a gentle resistance to these beliefs, and the need for a society to accommodate this constant negotiation. These seemingly sentimental scenes are, I would argue, a genuine attempt to represent the 'positive peace' of lives lived fairly, decently and lovingly, which are coded in the film in relation to pastoralism, love, comedy and joy.

These scenes can also be read as a series of rehearsals of when to be disobedient; that is, as pragmatic case studies of how the coming together of individual desire, personal and social relations, and principles of law and faith, might sometimes merit disobedience. As such they lead the viewer to the central dilemma tackled in the film's denouement: will the characters fight? In its acknowledgement of the genuinely difficult nature of the dilemma, the film presents a range of responses: as a resolute and disciplined soldier, Gard commits to battle; freed slave Enoch tells Josh that he will be killed by the Confederate soldiers if they raid the homestead and that he would rather die fighting, with Jess replying that because Enoch is free, he is also free to choose; Josh decides he will fight even though Eliza tries hard to persuade him otherwise bringing her into conflict with Jess who states 'I'm just his father, Eliza, not his conscience'; And, finally, Jess, who despite his somewhat opportunistic accommodation of Quaker faith in the film as a whole, steadfastly refuses to join the soldiers as they march to war.

These decisions play out in complex ways in the film's resolution. When Josh's horse returns from the battle without a rider, Jess gets his gun and ventures out, even

though Eliza asks him not to.⁹ On the battlefield, Jess first finds Sam Jordan, shot and injured. The bond between the Sam and Jess has been based on mutual respect and in an earlier moving scene, the neighbour defends Jess's pacifist position, stating 'I like to see someone hold out for a better way of settling things'. The neighbour dies in Jess's arms and Jess is also shot and wounded. As we shall see below, conventions for the depiction of pacifist characters in other Hollywood films such as *High Noon* (1952) would now dictate that Jess take action to defend himself and avenge his friend's death but instead he disarms the Confederate soldier and lets him go. A deep focus shot has the bewildered soldier staggering away, with Jess still in the background, the score hinting that the soldier is in the midst of a redemptive, transformative experience, his animated, vital movement contrasting with the dead bodies in the next scene which shows the aftermath of the battle.

This sequence was important to West who felt strongly that it was in Jess's decision to belatedly ride to war, set against what we know of the Quaker way of life, that the audience would be placed in a properly ethical position in relation to his decision. West told Wyler:

He must be tempted to violence [...] and he must have the means of killing in his hand at the moment of his temptation. And we must see him decide, in spite of provocation and in spite of the means, to refrain. Even though the refraining may lose him his life' (qtd. in Sinyard 2013: 266).

It is reported that Cooper expressed reservations to West about his character's lack of action in the film as whole, feeling it played against his star image and audience expectation. West responded that his character was taking action, that he would, 'Refrain. You will furnish your public with the refreshing picture of a strong man refraining' (Miller 2013: 339). West pointedly emphasised, and in doing so reinforced a key point of principle for the peace film, that refraining from war is a significant

⁹ In Wilson's original script Jess did not travel to the battlefield; West and Robert Wyler were responsible for the change (Dmohowski 2002: 499).

action in its own right. Indeed, the word pacifist is based on the Latin words for 'make' and 'peace' and what we see in the film's denouement is what Neil Sinyard calls a 'sophisticated dramaturgy [that] is required to convey pacifism as an active, not passive, quality' (Sinyard 2013: 166).

The experience of all the characters is complex: Jess defends himself but doesn't kill; Josh kills but is traumatised by the experience; Eliza disarms the Confederate soldiers who raid the homestead by offering them everything she has (she does hit a soldier with a broom to save her pet goose but she suffers a guilty conscience about even this small transgression). In the final instance, the film shows that violence (and by extension war) *may* be necessary to protect one's family, but that the principled stance of withholding violence must also be taken seriously and might be just as, if not more, productive, with the audience dramatically involved in, and ethically drawn by, the difficult decisions faced by the central characters.

***Friendly Persuasion* as a Peace Film**

In spite of the film's relative neglect by film studies, this article has shown why *Friendly Persuasion* was attractive to peace campaigners in the late twentieth century and might rightly be labelled a peace film. The first qualifying element to note is the way in which the film resists the conventional ways in which Hollywood shows pacifism. Rick Clifton Moore notes that 'the relationship between the dominant American ideology and pacifism seems to be played out in two ways – through exclusion, that is, the scarcity of presentation of pacifism as a film subject, and through containment, the presentation of predictable formulas [sic] that frame arguments and lead to acceptable conclusions' (Moore 1996: 103). Michael Anderegg writes that '[i]n Hollywood's traditional depiction a pacifist is someone who refuses to fight or kill as long as he is not faced with any reason to do so, but who gives up his principles whenever a good, compelling, immediate and personal motive presents itself' (Anderegg 1979: 190). The western genre in the 1950s is an exemplar of the way pacifist ideas are, to use Clifton Moore's term, 'contained'. For instance, in *High Noon* (1952) Marshall Will Kane (Gary Cooper again) is married to Amy Fowler Kane (Grace Kelly), a devout Quaker, who inspires her husband to seek a peaceful life. However,

by the film's close, Amy has used violence to protect her husband and he has killed to protect the town.¹⁰ Clifton Moore includes others films, such as *Shane* (1953), *Fastest Gun Alive* (1956) and *The Peacemaker* (1956), that together form a distinct 1950s cycle that depict religious pacifism only in order to undo anti-war conviction.¹¹ The way these films show violence to be inevitable, ineluctable and, ultimately, righteous, are governed by the logic of what Jacques Ellul calls the 'necessity' of violence whereby violence is framed as the only given rational and moral option available to otherwise peaceful people (Ellul 1969: 122–4). This is, of course, a position regularly articulated by politicians and leaders rallying nations to war.

A number of critics have argued that *Friendly Persuasion* follows this convention. Anderegg argues that although *Friendly Persuasion's* approach to pacifism is 'more sympathetic' to Quakerism than most Hollywood films, it ultimately shows that 'none of these pacific Quakers really holds fast against an immediate challenge to his or her faith' (Anderegg 1979: 191). Similarly, Pauline Kael observes that the Quakers in *Friendly Persuasion* 'are there only to violate their convictions' (qtd. in McBride 2002). As my reading of the film has indicated, these views are simply wrong. The film's early scenes attempt to represent a 'positive peace' of lives lived fairly, decently and lovingly, and which are coded in the film in relation to pastoralism, familial and romantic love, and joyful physical exuberance. Some might say there is a sentimental, and perhaps nostalgic, logic in play here, but I have argued that these scenes are a genuine attempt to convey what peace *feels* like. Alongside this, the way in which the economy of looks in the Meeting House sequence are finely balanced to demonstrate both the tensions and conflicts that lead to violence while also offering a model of how to hold these conflicts in check, is exemplary. This fine balance must surely be a prerequisite of any film claiming to be a peace film. And, on from there, the film's

¹⁰ *High Noon* is a sophisticated western and its success stems, in part, from the seriousness with which it explores the high stakes of withholding violence. Kane's (Cooper's) anxiety and suffering indicate a genuine ambivalence in the decision to return to violence; in ways not dissimilar to *Friendly Persuasion*, the unflinching depiction of Cooper's age (shown via the film's celebrated use of close ups) drives home the point that the stakes are high and he might not prevail (Smyth 2015: 49–50).

¹¹ A much-celebrated contemporary example, which pays homage to these 1950s westerns, is Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992).

dramatic power and searching democratic quality stem precisely from the staging of the genuinely difficult ethical dilemma of whether or not to fight in a way that is aware of the dominant logic, and yet actively resists the dubious rhetorical claim that violence is a necessity. In short, just as Jess refuses to kill, the film refrains, refusing to give the viewer the violent denouement they have been led to expect and possibly even crave.

Recalling Dickinson's claim that 'warfare is cinegenic and goes with the grain of cinema' (Dickinson 1962: 149), another way to consider *Friendly Persuasion* as a peace film is to examine it in relation to the war film. In my book, *War Cinema; Hollywood on the Front Line*, I argue that the war film genre's general tendency is to make an argument *for* war based on a number of recurrent elements, including the endorsement of jingoistic nationalism; the self-sacrifice of individual desires to higher ideals/goals, a prejudicial constructions of otherness, a celebration of individual heroism in ways that conform to a pro-war logic, e.g. a conscientious objector will not be shown to be heroic, someone who sacrifices his life for a comrade will, the use of a rites of passage narrative structure, in which boys become men and in doing so confirm and define conventional masculine identity, the need for strong leadership (with potentially fascistic overtones), regeneration through violence, severely restricted point of view leading to a reduction of political and cultural horizons; and, an acknowledgement of the 'price' of war, but the justification of the need to pay this 'price' (Westwell 2006: 109–115). Even in the most bloody and gruesome war movies (including those widely considered anti-war films), these central elements almost always show war as a 'progressive' activity, entered into reluctantly but ultimately necessary, useful and productive (Westwell 2006: 114–115).

Friendly Persuasion challenges and complicates this way of relating to war. The film is not governed by a nationalist logic, instead preferring to relate how the pursuit of higher ideals/goals (in this case, pacifism and abolitionism) is a dialectical process that plays out in myriad ways at a personal, community and national level. There is no prejudicial construction of cultural otherness in the film: a freed slave is given space within the story world, and even the Confederate soldiers are not dehumanized. There is no celebration of heroic military action: instead, heroism is posited as the ability

to stay true to principle while also accommodating the complexity of the world. The rites of passage narrative structure can be found in the experience of Josh, but the war is in no way ennobling or central to his masculinity (Perkins' soulful and awkward proto-Method style of acting is effective here); indeed, conventional and conservative notions of masculinity embodied in Cooper's star persona are challenged by the picture of Jess refraining. Authority figures are met with respect but these figures include Eliza, a female Quaker pacifist; the Captain who visits the Meeting House is treated respectfully but it is individual Quakers firmly situated within a community who decide whether to fight or not: their decisions are the result of an open and democratic process. Violence is not shown to be regenerative: Josh mourns the loss of the life of the man he kills, and very little is achieved as a consequence of the battle; Eliza's peaceful and compliant accommodation of the Confederate soldiers – she facilitates them taking her personal property – is a violent exchange but nobody is hurt. The film's multiple characters, and two religious communities, ensure an expansive range of points of view beyond that of the front-line soldier, including the articulation of a valid anti-war perspective.

So, if the tendency of the war film is to show that civilization requires war, *Friendly Persuasion* refutes this and in doing so offers a negotiated alternative. That is to say, within the context of Hollywood, *Friendly Persuasion* is a peace film inasmuch as it performs how a certain type of genre film, whether a western or a war film, replete with certain overdetermined messages regarding violence and war, might still be able to advocate for peace; the lesson here is that a claim for peace can be made even via codes, conventions and iconography that actively seek to legislate against such a claim. This is not the same as arguing that peace cinema must always define itself in relation to war cinema (this is the extant problem with the anti-war film) but instead to note that peace cinema must necessarily start out from this position, with a dramaturgy entangled in war and violence, while also striving to be something else entirely. As noted, the word pacifist is based on the Latin words for 'make' and 'peace' and with *Friendly Persuasion* as a leading example, perhaps it is possible to imagine a notional peace cinema comprised of a range of films that actively and intelligently engage the violence in the world but also present the viewer with a profound, lived sense of peace and how this peace might be achieved.

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