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Something Worse: Frank Capra's Populist Noir and Springsteen's "The River"

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Bruce Springsteen and Frank Capra are usually thought of in connection with their hopeful views and faith in the human spirit to overcome and triumph against adversity. However, in Capra's classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, the sentimental message of the film - that every person's life has value – obscures the darker implication that in order to fulfill the destinies of others the individual must suppress his or her own dreams. In Springsteen's song "The River," the narrator speaks of his own dashed hopes as he, like Stewart's George Bailey, is brought up "to do, like your daddy done." When marriage and children are introduced into both stories, the protagonists of both "It's a Wonderful Life" and "The River" have sealed their fates. When Springsteen asks "Is a dream a lie that don't come true, or is it something worse?" he asks the question for all who are forced to abandon their own visions of success and have gotten lost in others’ conflicting dreams. In *Born to Run* and even *Darkness at the Edge of Town* characters manage to keep fighting despite the bleakness of their circumstances. More insidiously, in “The River” the bleakness derives from the very elements that previously provided hope—marriage and family.
Dave Marsh refers to Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* in discussing “The River,” but speaks of its life-changing switch in perspective rather than noting the subtle death of George’s dreams (Marsh 235). In fact, Capra ennobles George in the end by making it possible for him to accept the status quo, to happily embrace the life with his wife, the children and the work which has forced him to do “like his Daddy done.”

At the open of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey seem unlikely to be saddled with any of those small town responsibilities, seeming to believe, as Springsteen’s characters do in his early albums, that the answer is somewhere “out there.” Leaving sleepy Bedford Falls and the dreary, ordinary life he sees his beloved parents living is the only answer. Travel, education, adventure…all provide the core of his dream, the vision of his destiny. While he loves and respects those around him, sticking around to battle the town’s villainous Mr. Potter does nothing to inspire him. A large suitcase, ready to be covered in stickers which boast of his worldly exploits, provides much the same tangible evidence of escape that Springsteen was to find in the automobile.

The pivotal scene in Life, the one which foretells the futility of George’s plans for his future, comes after a seemingly innocent high school dance, where he gathers with those much younger and is thrown together with the beautiful girl named Mary (a name which appears again and again in Springsteen’s own narratives). After a fall in the pool, George and Mary walk home in robes, carrying their damp clothes and flirtatiously talking about the future. Looking at a dilapidated, abandoned home across the street from Mary’s family home, George and Mary decide to throw stones through the home’s windows, making wishes about the future. After successfully breaking the window, George reasserts his desire to get out of Bedford Falls, to travel the world, to
get an education, to get far away from this “crummy little town.” Mary follows by also breaking a window and making her own wish. George asks her what she has wished for, but rather than answer she coyly smiles and resumes the singing of “Buffalo Girls” as the pair had been doing before. George is left to wonder what Mary wished for but the audience knows: she has wished that his wishes don’t come true, that he in fact is stuck in that crummy little town forever, providing her with the needed husband and road map to her success as a woman, wife and mother.

Unlike many of Capra’s previous films, the conflict at the center of Life isn’t an institution or the larger structure of capitalism, per se. Instead, the conflict for George is internal (Carney 381). He is unable to accept the happy hand he’s been dealt—at least in the eyes of his family and peers in Bedford Falls. Everything the small town residents have been taught to long for – family, marriage, children, a steady job, home ownership – are available to him, yet he longs for something more, someplace else. However, where Springsteen sympathizes with those needs, with the longing for a better life than the one his parents had, Capra makes it clear that George’s dreams are not suitable for fulfilling. Rather than tackling the matter of George’s dashed hopes directly, Capra instead resorts to a supernatural means of proving to George that he needs to settle, an angel by the name of Clarence. (Springsteen, of course, was to have his own savior named Clarence many years later, too.) Clarence, by showing George what the lives of those around him might have been if he had never been born, never addresses the merits or folly of George’s dreams. Instead, he shows how George’s life has allowed others to achieve their dreams. The result of this vision may provide a tidy way for George to tow the line, but the underlying problems have not been vanquished. George
may be left to realize how lucky he truly should feel (“No man is a failure who has friends”) but it is the tragic alternative lives of his loved ones which provides George’s shift in perspective.

In fact, it is all of Bedford Falls which suffers in the absence of George. The quaint small town doesn’t even exist now, replaced by Pottersville, a classic noir city filled with flashing lights, cynicism, mistrust, shady characters and trashy women, the very kind of place romanticized by Springsteen on “Born to Run” 30 years later (Krutnik 85). Disappointment abounds with Mary suffering the double failure of being a spinster and a librarian; his mother left to be a bitter widow who owns a boarding house; his uncle a deranged and institutionalized loser; his former employer, Mr. Gower, an abused and lonely alcoholic. By the film’s resolution, George understands the lesson Clarence has been trying to impart and is ready to abandon his own dreams when he realizes how his life has made it possible for the dreams of others to come true. Angst and dissatisfaction have been replaced by the euphoria of accepting the American Dream as others have defined it rather than as he had defined it for years. Capra doesn’t even feel the need to right the injustice of the film’s ultimate crisis, leaving Potter’s theft of the Bailey’s money unresolved, preferring instead to have family and friends bail out the Baileys by providing the money to cover the shortfall. The crime which nearly leads to George’s imprisonment, even suicide, is brushed aside, a mere plot device in Capra’s homage to small town values and the societal norms of the 1940s.

Capra himself saw It’s a Wonderful Life as not only his best film but “the greatest film anybody has ever made” (Capra 383). In his autobiography, Capra touts the film as a tribute to “the weary, the disheartened, the wino, the junkie, the prostitute,
those behind prison walls and those behind Iron Curtains” and proclaims that the film’s message is that “no man is a failure...each man’s life touches so many other lives.” While this inclusiveness and seeming acceptance of all forms of humanity would appear to parallel Springsteen’s efforts to promise salvation to all of God’s children in 2000’s “Land of Hope and Dreams,” Capra’s self-serving self-praise only heightens his belief that for all of those lonely and desperate folks, the life of Bedford Falls is the answer, not the problem as it is often is for Springsteen.

One can trace the progressively narrowed possibilities of Springsteen’s characters from Born to Run’s cautious and desperate optimism where despite the noir landscape escape to a better life and better world still seems possible to Darkness’s more purely noir atmosphere where cinematic fantasies of velvet rims and angel-fueled flights are obscured or nonexistent. By “The River” the dreams reveal themselves as the seeds of inevitable, inescapable defeat.

Relationships in earlier Springsteen songs are often avenues of escape from a narrow existence or places of solace (“Thunder Road,” “Born to Run”). In “The River” the opposite holds: the characters have established a relationship, a marriage, and we hear about their life. From this vantage, the relationship looks like a trap rather than the escape promised in previous accounts.

The singer “come[s] from down in the valley.” The valley is significant in its lower position to other things; similarly, the speaker is both geographically lower and, by implication, socially lower, than everything and everyone else. When they were in
high school, the singer and Mary had been able to escape the constraints of the the valley “to where the fields were green.” Likewise, the river with its depths and location, appears to offer a similar escape.

Mary's pregnancy forces the couple into the world of work and marriage with “a union card and a wedding coat.” The escape that relationships usually offer sounds more like a funeral as “the judge put it all to rest” without flowers or “wedding day smiles.” After their fate has been decided on the grim day, they return to the river in hopes of recovering their former scene of release, but the tone sounds more ominous, an empty ritual rather than a joyful enactment.

The straitened circumstances of their wedding day prove prophetic, as the promised work with a union card and a job for the Johnstown Company never materializes “on account of the economy” (one of my favorite Springsteen rhymes). In composing the song, Springsteen changed the company the singer works for from the “Jenkins Company” (in original version, “Angelyne”) to “Johnstown Company,” a reference to people living in another valley. The final version refers to a more famous reservoir that had destroyed hopes and dreams in a more obviously catastrophic way through inundation.1

The initial hope the singer and Mary's life together presented (escaping the valley “to where the fields were green”) has long since “vanished right into the air.” Eventually, only the singer's memories remain, moments of vitality when he and a tanned Mary had ridden out for a reviving swim “down at the reservoir,” and each close breath she took infused him with the sweetness of life. Those sweet memories

1 In the actual Johnstown flood, the captains of industry had built a private playground upriver from Johnstown on Lake Conemaugh above the South Fork dam, but ignored warnings about conditions of the dam. As everyone knows, their disregard of such led to the tragedy.
do not sustain him any longer; they haunt him now with their former promise, bitter reminders of what he dreamed his life might be. His only solution is to forget his former happiness, “act like I don’t remember” while watching Mary act “like she don’t care.” While BTR was inhabited by characters inspired by better futures, Darkness by those fearing the present, The River shows characters caught by their pasts—or rather caught by their past dreams.

The most terrible realization comes when the speaker wonders if “a dream’s a lie if it don’t come true/ Or is it something worse.” In Darkness we see characters who have lost or sold their dreams, giving “up little by little, piece by piece” (as in “Racing in the Streets”). Others’ needs and wishes often impinge or create the circumstances of these losses. In “The River” the dreams themselves are suspect: the “something worse” of false promises.

Significantly, though the characters dive into the river, those haunting memories happen “down at the reservoir,” a seemingly insignificant or perhaps merely puzzling detail—until one recalls that reservoirs are ex-rivers, Colorados (or Swimming) rivers that have been dammed to create ever-available Lake Meads of ready desire. Of course, dammed rivers eventually go dry—as the singer knows in his bones by this time.2

The singer’s reservoir dreams prove as narrow and constraining as his previous life, subsumed by others’ needs. We realize he has reached a point where his sense of duty can no longer sustain those dreams. He feels himself drowning in the dammed up dreams now released in an epic flood where he must sink or swim. The dream itself is somehow tainted and deadly, a dream which can drown you in its depths, depths which

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2 The Swimming River, which originally drained into the Atlantic, now is dammed into the sizeable Swimming River Reservoir, neatly located near Holmdale, NJ, where he was living while writing Darkness and I’m assuming is still the likely psychic (if not actual) location for the later songs.
ultimately turn out to be dry somehow—only a shimmering mirage (as described in “Promised Land”).

Similarly, in “The Promise,” a song originally written for Darkness, the singer laments that “Every day it just gets harder to live this dream I’m believing in” because “When the promise is broken you go on living,/ but it steals something from down in your soul.” Again, we find an illusory dream that steals rather than sustains.

Springsteen sounds a new note in The River about the danger of dreams if they promise more than they deliver. It is a note that often goes unheard by those seeking to hear again the more reassuring message trumpeted in Born to Run-- even by those who should know better. “Drive All Night”’s lush orchestration and alluring saxophone, for example, masks the bleakness of the singer's situation, so Dave Marsh hears “Drive All Night,” as “a reprise of the “Born to Run” experience,” “but this time, they're [the couple] not bursting free, but cuddling, looking for some warmth in the face of the chill outside” (234). He misses the implication of the opening lines which inform of the singer's current condition—lost in dreams of a better past with a love he abandoned: “When I lost you honey sometimes, I think I lost my guts too/ And I wish God would send me a word, send me something I’m afraid to lose.” He wants to hold to hold her tight, and taste her tender charms. He warns her about the “calling strangers,” “crying in defeat,” and tries to convince her to come to bed with him—but of course she's never there. He's trying to convince his former lover about the truth of a love that's already been lost. She's got his love, but its a devotion to a dream that he celebrates so convincingly we might miss his misguided attempt to recreate a
nonexistent past. He's really much closer to the situation of the singer in “Fade Away,” who begs to remain some part of his love's life—even if only in her memory.

In *Songs* Springsteen asserts that “By the end of Darkness I’d found my adult voice.” In the final song he had left his characters “unsure of their fate, but dug in and committed” (Springsteen 69). *The River* songs insistently note adult realities and the loss of youthful indulgence.

In “Two Hearts” an early song on the album the singer declares he is leaving behind “playing tough guy scenes” and “living in a world of childish dreams.” Now he knows “Someday these childish dreams must end/ To become a man and grow up to dream again.” The singer in “The River” believes he has left the world depicted in *Born to Run* and Darkness for the adult world and adult dreams explored in *The River*. His song is addressed to “a little girl [he saw] crying along the way/ She'd been hurt so bad said she'd never love again.” He consoles her that “Someday your crying girl will end/And you'll find once again/ Two hearts are better than one.” He does so even though “sometimes it might seem like it was planned/For you to roam empty-hearted through this land.” His song suddenly turns inward, toward his own solitary condition as he asserts his belief that even a heart of stone has to eventually admit “two hearts are better than one.” Perhaps her broken-hearted sobbing suggests his own. His promises about relationships are based on a belief that his own experience has not borne out. Still, he is certain that one cannot endure alone. Such an assertion could sound more

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3The illusory nature of the singer's bedtime dreams in “Drive” become even clearer when we recall the origins of the song in the “Sad Eyes”/“Backstreets” medley. In its initial version the singer imagines a possible romantic future with a woman who isn't currently interested, but—he promises—will be one day. Later versions have the singer excoriating the woman's unfaithfulness and her abandonment. The details and circumstances clearly evolved over the course of the complicated compositional history of the song; however, the constant is the fact of the lover's absence.
like the fear of being alone than a desire to join hearts with someone.

Similarly, in “I Want to Marry You,” a seeming paean to connubial possibilities, the speaker admits the challenges he and his “little girl” will face, but feels it is time to confront them:

Now honey, I don't wanna clip your wings
But a time comes when two people should think of these things
Having a home and a family
Facing up to their responsibilities
They say in the end true love prevails
But in the end true love can't be no fairytale
To say I'll make your dreams come true would be wrong
But maybe, darlin', I could help them along. (“I Want to Marry You”)

The speaker makes no foolish promises, but does suggest their love might conquer all—even if “true love can't be no fairytale.” He even admits that “say[ing] I'll make your dream come true would be wrong” (confessing to the possibility that there is a chance they won’t—especially since at this point he has no idea what they are, or if they involve him), but he does promise he “could help them along.” Despite his realistically hopeful tone, questions remain. He seems to have decided that they should be married as much because “a time comes when two people should think of these things,” as that he is touched by the unsmiling “working girl” “raising two kids alone.” He seems to want to rescue her from her “lonely life,” and convinces himself she's put a “lonely ribbon in her hair” for him. He likes the image of them melding their lives together, but has not tested any of its likelihood or possibility, content to watch and dream about it rather than pursue her in more concrete fashion.

The fact that this brighter sounding imagining of marriage precedes “The River” makes even his cautious promises sound less convincing. The speaker may know life
does not offer fairy tale endings, but that does not mean he is prepared for the reality that awaits. (The fact that he is still “waiting” to even mention his dreams to her does not bode well.) In fact, the “little girl” (already with two children) that he fantasizes building a life with could even be a later version of “The River”’s Mary after the singer in that song has finally given up on his life with her.

That a writer like Springsteen might repudiate the media dreams of a classic American director such as Capra isn’t entirely surprising. However, the dreams in Springsteen’s earlier songs drive his characters to escape their deadly circumstances. In “The River” the speaker’s dreams only sink him deeper into the life that’s drowning him. His only escape lives in his memories of Mary and her “wet and tan body down at the reservoir,” memories of freedom and pleasure that belie his trapped reality. Unlike Capra, who sought to celebrate lives of quiet desperation such as George Bailey’s, Springsteen in The River wants to show the quiet desperation of such lives and the way media dreams--both his own and of others--are implicated in such desperate lives.

WORKS CITED


