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## **Analysis of the Film “ The Best Years of Our Lives” Using Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory**

The film, *The Best Years of Our Lives* highlights cultural artifacts for the establishment of the social identity in the transnational society. One may face serious challenges in establishing and maintaining a social identity in a transnational community. This is evident in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, as the film shows that most characters are experiencing difficulties in regaining their social identity after World War II. The film casts some extraordinary and complex situations that characterize civilians as they struggle to establish their identity (Jameson 36). The film wishes to offer closure and catharsis; however, the myth assumed by the generation present a different ideological agenda. The film signifies a melodrama that encodes and decodes for various messages; thus, presenting as a strategic artifact for learning the culture of the featured community.

The Stuart Hall’s reception model of encoding/decoding is useful in explaining the cultural artifact presented by *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Hall presented a model that provided a precise process for the production, circulation and consumption of the media messages. Hall believed that media messages do not carry a fixed meaning, and the audience does not receive message passively. This means that a piece of work carries different meaning and the interpretation of literary work is dependent on the encoding and decoding of the delivered message (Stuart 47). This concept is applicable in the interpretation of the film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, as one can deduce various implications of the film in relation with the World War II. For instance, the film may be viewed as a comparative account of the

good and bad war. From a different perspective, one can assume that the film highlights how war propaganda can make use of the “nation as family” metaphor (Lakoff 23). The Best Year of Our Lives identifies cultural artifact that has carried the values that prevailed in 1950’s across time, to be adopted and practiced by the generations that followed. The film guides into decoding concepts that help them recognize and understand events in their present life.

Hall is a famous cultural theorist who has produced various works of great social-cultural relevance. Hall has successfully described how Art is essential in aiding the understanding of the already existing meaning. However, Hall was keen to note that meaning or the message communicated by certain Artwork may change with time. The Best Years of Our Lives is a political film that features characters who makes meaningful decisions in developing important themes. The film highlights conflicts that resulted from various challenges that faced the society, which eventually led to the idea of Communism. In The Best Years of our Lives, Homer and Fred’s aggressive and violent defense towards their meaningful service in the World War II present this idea. This also includes their military service against Japan and Germany in general. Hall believes that such assertions at the political level present elements of the cultural artifacts. The most obvious cultural element in the film includes the values and ideas that are adopted in developing the concept of social identity in the transnational cultures.

The Hall’s theory of reception focuses on the audience. In particular, the model proposes that the meaning is mainly generated during the time of consumption. This means that individual audience regards the ideas

presented to them in the context of their own beliefs, experiences and opinions. This is apparent in the interpretation of the film *The Best Years of our Lives*. Diverse interpretations can be deduced from the film if one evaluates it from different viewpoints. However, in view of Hall's postulate, individuals with same socio-cultural experience are likely to make similar deductions after watching or reading same texts. The implication of this argument in reference to the interpretation of *The Best Years of our Lives* is clear in the sense that most people who have watched the film associate it with the status of the global community following the effects of World War II. The film features three military officers who are returning home, at Boone City. In particular, the film explores the difficulties that three officers face in readjusting and forming their social identity in the civilian life. One of three servicemen is Fred Derry, a soda jerk in the movie. He is a low-level employee at a drugstore. Before the war, he assumed the primary responsibility of making root beer floats (Rayan 18). However, this has changed as he has risen to be an adorable captain in the Air Force of Army. Fred marries women of a different social class who he is unable to understand. On his return to Boone City, he faces challenges in establishing a social identity due to his new status.

Another important character featured in the film is Al Stephenson. This character highlights the idea of the existence of disparity of the social classes. Before the war, Al Stephenson was a banker. However, on course of the war, he became a sergeant acting as a non-commissioned officer in the Pacific. There is a sharp contrast of between Al Stephenson's banker and sergeant lifestyles. As a banker, Al Stephenson led a simple life, which is in

contrast with the case when he assumed the sergeant role. Sergeant role is noble since he has high authority, and commands high respect. As a sergeant, he is no more a common person like any other and he is treated diligently even by the people of high class (Rayan 82). This scenario highlights the disparity in the society, which is essentially caused by power. Individuals of the lower status hardly have access to the privileges that people of high class have. Al Stephenson's struggle after his sergeant career highlights the challenge of establishing a social identity in the transnational cultures. The change in social class and multicultural experience that Al Stephenson is exposed to during the war challenge his ability of establishing a social identity. The third military veteran is Homer Parrish, who is a local boy engaged to his girlfriend, Wilma. He was engaged before he had left to join the Navy. Homer's life changes significantly after joining the Navy. He loses his hands in unfortunate aircraft attack. Upon returning home, Homer experiences challenges in accepting Wilma who still wishes to marry him (During 68).

The film also develops an interesting theme of romance through Peggy and Fred. These characters highlight the difficulties that they constantly face on course of adjusting to civilian life after World War II. In coherent with the Hall's account, the film is not encoded with definite values and perceptions of Americans, immediately after the war. The film highlights that in earlier years, gender based stereotypes led to discrimination. Prejudiced attitudes created a situation where women only secured low paying jobs such as retail sales and childcare. Furthermore, women have to please men who have dominated the corporate to secure good jobs.

The Best Years of Our Lives also explores various themes that decode multifaceted messages involving ideas such as veteran's disempowerment, the sexual frustration, alcoholism, hatred and depression that characterized the world in the in 1950s. This simple script encodes and decodes for controversial ideas that can be approached from diverse perspectives. This is in line with the Encoding/decoding model of communication of Stuart Hall that argues that media presents messages to the audience; however, the audience generate varied interpretations depending on various factors (Pillai 230). Aspects such as personal experience, social-economic standing and cultural background define the interpretation of the presented media message. For example, different individuals may associate the film The Best of Our Lives with any of the identified themes or any other upon watching it. It is apparent that the movie, The Best of Our Lives is a cultural artifact because it explores various themes that can help one develop knowledge of the people's way of life especially after the World War II. In line with the Mall's theory, one can decode an array of messages from this film by evaluating it from various perspectives. The film has explored the plight of various characters in their course of establishing a social identity in a transnational culture, a situation created by the intercultural interactions prompted by the World War II. Through reviewing this film while taking account of the Mall's postulate, one acknowledges movies as important artifact for learning people's culture.

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