

Analysis of Aesthetic Elements in the Film “The Best Years of Our Lives”

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“The Best Years of Our Lives” is a film that touches upon the difficulty veterans experience readjusting to civilian life. It was an outright commercial success and due to its clever cinematography, it contains several notable aesthetic elements. “The Best Years of Our Lives” makes use of the aesthetic elements of a wide-angle lens with deep-focus technique, hard lighting, and small, quotidian sets.

One of the aesthetic elements “The Best Years of Our Lives” makes use of is a wide-angle lens with deep-focus technique. Deep-focus techniques involve the use of a wide-angle lens, which has a shorter focal length producing a wider angle of vision captured by the lens (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 66). This is why deep focus is referred to as “a variation of the long or extreme long shot” (Giannetti, 1996, p. 10). Deep focus is intended to attain an “all-perceiving and meaningful camera eye” (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 66). In other words, it shows the background and foreground items in equal focus (Moore, n.d., p. 3). It facilitates the simultaneous showing of the background and foreground “without the need for cutting, camera movement, and focus pulling” (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 66). A specific example of deep focus in “The Best Years of Our Lives” is the ending scene where Homer and Wilma are getting married at one end of the frame and Fred and Peggy are reconciling on the other. In this scene, deep focus is employed so we can concentrate on more than one character at once, which increases the sense of togetherness between the soldiers. Another example of deep focus is when Al comes home and his children are welcoming him in the foreground and his wife Milly is realizing he is home

in the background. And finally, a third example of deep focus is when Al stands in the middle of the screen as an intermediary figure, with Homer playing the piano with his hooks on one end and Fred breaking things off with Peggy via telephone on the other. Al is the only character who is aware of everything going on in the scene, hence his placement in the middle of the frame. And so, in the above examples, it is observed that “The Best Years of Our Lives” makes use of the aesthetic element of a wide-angle lens with deep-focus technique.

Another aesthetic element that “The Best Years of Our Lives” employs is hard lighting. Hard lighting is lighting that casts “sharp” and “defined” shadows (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 53). Unlike soft lighting, which seeks to soften the actors’ appearance for “beauty” shots, hard lighting puts the actors’ bodily imperfections on full display (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 53). The close-up shots were hardly lit; they only had a single light lighting up each character’s face, casting well-defined shadows. The key light was placed slightly above the actor, about 45 degrees from the camera, and off to one side (Fulltime Filmmaker [Parker Walbeck], 2018). This technique produces shadows on the actor’s face to make him look more three-dimensional and add depth to the frame (Fulltime Filmmaker [Parker Walbeck], 2018). Depth gives the image a more cinematic feel and makes it “pop from the screen” (Fulltime Filmmaker [Parker Walbeck], 2018). With his pointed facial features and skinny face, Al’s character looks particularly climactic and ominous, especially in the scene where he is confronting Fred about being in love with Peggy. Well-defined shadows can also be observed on Homer’s face when he is showing Wilma his bedtime routine; this makes the scene more dramatic. Hence, in such a manner, it is observed that “The Best Years of Our Lives” utilizes the aesthetic element of hard lighting.

Additionally, another aesthetic element I observed in “The Best Years of Our Lives” was the use of small, quotidian sets. As mentioned in the textbook “Film Appreciation”, “setting can be its own character” (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 45). And set design can “elicit greater meaning” and “direct the thought of the audience” (Moss & Wilson, n.d., p. 46). In this particular movie, the sets consist of mundane quotidian American middle class settings such as kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms. However, for the World War II veterans in the film, quotidian American middle class life becomes an unconquerable challenge as they deal with PTSD, alcoholism, and disability. As opposed to using large sets, the sets were actual size, which I observe made them seem more intimate and real. So, in such wise, it is observed that “The Best Years of Our Lives” employs the aesthetic element of small, quotidian sets.

Thus, “The Best Years of Our Lives” employs the aesthetic elements of a wide-angle lens with deep-focus technique, hard lighting, and small, quotidian sets. To get the most out of viewing films, it is crucial to become aware of the non-narrative dimensions of the film. It is only through this that we can truly understand and appreciate the work. And a film like “The Best Years of Our Lives”, which harbors so many themes that are still relevant to our society today, deserves to be understood and appreciated.

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