

REVIEW OF HOW TO LOCATE MESSAGES IN FILMS AND NOVELS

GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS

1. Using our models, we are assuming that a film or novel can be analyzed like an argumentative essay. In an argumentative essay, the writer tries to prove a central or primary thesis by proving a series of arguments. These arguments are then supported by giving examples.
2. In a film or novel, the arguments and examples are not necessarily laid out in order as they would be in an essay. So it may be difficult to determine the organization of a film or a novel. However, this task is made easier by locating the primary theme, message or thesis. Very often, a filmmaker or author will tell you what this theme is.
3. Once you get the theme, the arguments and examples should fall into place. If the filmmaker or author has done his or her job, the theme or message should explain or give a reason for every element in a film or novel just as the thesis statement explains the reason for every element of an argumentative essay.
4. Hence, it is really important to get the right theme or primary message if you plan to make sense of the film or novel.
5. Like an argumentative essay, the filmmaker or author should present a theme, arguments and examples that are consistent with each other. In other words, novel or film should not present contradictions.
6. In addition, the filmmaker or author should present a theme, arguments and examples do not have to be literally true. But they should be believable enough so that the viewer or reader will accept the film or novel as reasonable. A reasonable film or novel is one that presents “good arguments” for accepting the theme and also answers objections to the theme or the arguments that the intended audience might raise.
7. The intended audience determines what is reasonable. For example, if the intended audience for a film is young children, then the film’s arguments and examples will be adjusted accordingly.
8. Kushman follows these guidelines. For example, he accepts the fact that for a children’s film like “Cinderella,” magic and fantasy elements are perfectly

acceptable. On the other hand, he does not allow for contradictions and mixed messages that hurt any argument, regardless of the audience.

THE BEST CASE SCENARIO

1. Filmmakers and novelists in the popular media usually make it easy for the reader to identify their main themes or messages. Most often, they will tell you either through the comments made by the narrator or by a character that you are supposed to recognize as being the hero or heroine, “good” or as speaking for the author.
2. Once you get the primary theme, the secondary themes or supporting arguments should fall into place. If you have trouble identifying them, you might have selected the wrong theme.
3. The intended messages are always those that are the easiest to see or most obvious conclusions you can draw given the film or the novel.
4. The filmmaker or author might tell you in a preface or interview what they intend, but the only thing that counts is what you can conclude from the film or novel. In other words, the intended messages don't have anything to do with what they say.
5. In some cases, the author or filmmaker will present actions or other examples that imply the arguments or messages. For example, you might be TOLD that a male character loves a female character because she is beautiful or you might be expected to INFER that from their actions or behavior.
6. In the best case scenario, the filmmaker or author will tell you what themes and messages they intended. And then, when you look at the film or novel, you will agree with them. You will say that what they said they wanted to do and what they did were consistent and reasonable. In other words, there are no hidden messages. All the messages you get from the text or film are those that they intended.
7. Usually, you are left to decide what the intended messages are on your own. In a good film or novel, you should feel that all the meanings you get from the film or novel are the meanings that were intended. In other words, there are no hidden or unintended messages.

[NOTE: In real life, this is not always true. These are the just the rules we are following in our papers.]

HIDDEN MESSAGES

In class, we discussed four ways in which a film or novel might present mixed, contradictory or hidden messages.

1. The filmmaker or author publicly state what they intended to do. But you believe their film or novel contradicts what they say. In other words, they say one thing and do another.
2. You don't know what the filmmaker or author really intended. However, you believe the characters and other events in the film or novel make contradictory statements. For example, two characters that are supposed to be "good" say two different things or the character that you believe speaks for the author makes contradictory statements.
3. The third problem is a little like (1). But instead of contradicting what the filmmaker or author says, you believe that the film or novel contradicts facts or other assumptions that the "intended reader" would bring to the film or novel. This is a little difficult to explain, because it is based upon the intended reader and so it may vary. For example, if a film is made for an audience that does not believe in aliens, then it may make fun of people who think the *X-Files* is based on fact. The intended audience would laugh at these jokes. On the other hand, those people who believe the *X-Files* is really based on fact will probably find the film offensive and full of lies. These people would not laugh at the jokes.
4. Rule 3 refers to those cases where the filmmaker or author contradicts the beliefs of its own audience. So given the example I just discussed, if the film were to imply that the *X-Files* is correct in an episode where Scully accuses the US Air Force of using alien technology in building the F22, then this would be a contradiction.
5. The final rule deals with the cases where you are not sure what the audience of the film or novel is so you feel you can't decide whether or not it is consistent. You may not know enough about the subject or you may not be sure what the intended audience is. For example, if you do not know anything about punk music, you may not know if the film "Sid and Nancy" presents contradictory messages about the characters. Or, if you are not sure whether or not the film "Fast and Furious" was produced for an audience that knows about import racing, then you might not be able to determine whether the stupid racing scenes were intended to be seen as stupid or cool and exciting.

6. If you are not sure about whether a message is intended or not, just use rule (4) and say so. There is nothing wrong with not knowing something that is beyond your knowledge, experience or expertise.