

What to Look For When Watching Movies

After reading Chapter 2 of *Hollywood Worldviews* you should have a basic understanding of the nature and structure of storytelling. With that education in mind, here is a summary of the things to look for when watching a movie in order to understand what redemption is being offered the viewer:

1) Look for the protagonist and the antagonist.

Consider whose side you are on. With the tendency in modern cinema toward relativism, the graying of right and wrong, and the villification of virtue, heroes are becoming more like villains and villains more like heroes. Is the protagonist a hero with a fault to overcome as in *Jerry McGuire* (1996) or *The Truman Show*? Or is the hero a villain made sympathetic through endearing traits as in *Bugsy* (1991), *Get Shorty* (1995), *Heat* (1995), *The Score* (2001), or *Ocean's Eleven* (2001)? Are you rooting for bad guys to get away with crime simply because they're played by some "cool" actor like Jack Nicholson or Robert DeNiro? Has the villain been linked to the "evils" of traditional morality and religion as in *Pleasantville* (1998) or *Chocolat* (2000)? Remember: the protagonist/hero and antagonist/villain represent worldviews in competition for the way we ought to live.

2) Look for the hero's weakness/fault/need.

Right from the start you should be able to recognize what the hero wants and what keeps him from attaining it. What is the way he looks at the world or lives in it that is not quite right? Look first at his behavior, but then for his rationale for his beliefs or behavior. This is the setting of his need for redemption. But also look for the same thing from a different angle in surrounding characters. Their faults will usually be reflections of the main character. And their outcomes reflect contrasting aspects of the same theme.

3) Look for the hero's self-revelation.

The point near the end of the movie where the hero has his speech about what he learned or how he changed his mind is the redemption of the story. This is how the storytellers think we ought or ought not to live in this world.

4) Look for the opponent's rationale.

Why does the opponent do what he does? This is also usually a speech of some sort early on or revealed near the end in confrontation with the hero. This view is what the movie wants us to decide against in our lives. Remember, even exaggeration in a character can be a subtle reflection of a less extreme viewpoint. Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* (1992) was not simply a despotic military general, he represented the logical end of military philosophy *in toto* to the storytellers. The infamous "greed speech" in *Wall Street* (1987) by Michael Douglas' Gordon Gecko, represented not

merely the real life Ivan Boesky, but an actual segment of people in the real world of money.

5) Look for the factors that make the characters change their minds and why.

This is the means of redemption offered by the movie. In *The Doctor* (1991), William Hurt, an insensitive doctor, learns how to be a compassionate person because he is forced to endure the process of his own system of which he was coldly unaware. The means for his redemption was simply to place himself in other's shoes. In *Regarding Henry* (1991), Harrison Ford's lawyer character is so blindly ambitious and self-obsessed that only amnesia from a shot in the head can give him the objectivity to see what he really is and redeem himself from it. While we may not need to be shot in the head to achieve this same objectivity, we can certainly learn the lesson that we must do some drastic things in our lives in order to break our own blindness to our selfishness.

6) Look for the four "W"s: Who wins? Who Loses? Who dies? And why?

Whoever wins is usually the storyteller's model of how we ought to be and whoever loses is usually the storyteller's admonition of how we ought not to be. And if the writing is clever enough, it will make the winners and losers closely represent actual ways that people think in the world. Whoever dies is often the "weaker" viewpoint that cannot survive in this world. In *The Firm* (1993), Gene Hackman leads himself to his own death because cheating and skimming weakens a character's resolve to be above the villain's evil. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the student who kills himself because of his inability to disobey his oppressive father represents the viewpoint that ultimate allegiance to parental authority will end in self-destruction. And it is inevitable because the need to express individuality is absolute in the film.

But be careful. Death can be tricky. The context of death can have the opposite effect. For instance, in *Braveheart* (1995), the hero, Wallace, dies for a noble cause: freedom. Out of his martyrdom victory was ultimately wrought for his people. Conversely, Tristan, the free-spirited rebel in *Legends of the Fall* (1994), may die in the end, but since he represents the "heroic noble savage" unrestrained by man's or God's rules, his self-determined death by being mauled by a bear is really his ultimate power and victory. He chooses his own end at the hands of nature, unspoiled by "civilized man." In this movie, the wild, untamed and selfishly destructive man is made the hero, while his brother, the politician who tried to do what was right, ended in living despair and misery, being regretful for not having his brother's passionate disregard for others!

7) Look for consequences to behavior.

If a behavior doesn't end in negative consequences then it is often being considered legitimate. In *Get Shorty* (1995), Chili's success proves that using gangster machismo with a touch of sensitivity gets one far in the entertainment business. If behaviors or beliefs result in bad consequences then they are undesirable character traits for

society. In *Dead Poets Society*, Tradition, discipline and honor, the slogan of the prep school administration, along with parental authority, leads to stifling or destruction of individual freedom, the extreme of which is suicide.

8) Look for repeating phrases.

Often, a phrase will be repeated throughout the film that focuses attention on what the storyteller is trying to communicate. In *Dead Poets Society* it's "Carpe Deum," seize the day. In *Forrest Gump*, it's "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get," and "Stupid is as stupid does." In *Shadowlands* (1993) we hear several times that "pain is God's megaphone to a deaf world" and that "the pain now is part of the pleasure later."

9) Look at how it ends.

This is simple enough, but often missed. Do the bad guys get away as they do in *Hannibal* (2001), *The Score*, or *Heist* (2001)? If so, then the movie's message is that crime does pay. If the bad guys are caught, as in most movies, then part of the message is that crime does not pay. But don't forget the nature of morality tales that waken us up to our own ignorance by showing how evil can win if we fail to do the right thing. In *The Usual Suspects* (1995), the bad guy gets away in order to show us how easily we can be deceived by lies. And remember the reversal nature of tragedy as well. A good tragedy like *Remains of the Day* (1993) that ends with Anthony Hopkins never getting his love interest is a negative reinforcement of the positive value that we must reach out and communicate or we can lose all.