

Jojo Rabbit

(Waititi. NZ, 2019)

COMPONENT: 2

CORE STUDY AREAS: Key elements of film form

ADDITIONAL STUDY AREAS: Narrative

Rationale for study: Taika Waititi's adaptation of Christine Leunens's 2008 book *Caging Skies*, is a cleverly constructed satire that skilfully combines humour and the absurd, with a powerful message and themes. The film was nominated for several Academy Awards and won best adapted screenplay and was a box office success. The film enables you to indulge in the beautiful art direction, enjoy the absurd comedy, but also reel from the horrors of the Third Reich and its impact on the lives of everyday people.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

1. Be The Rabbit 00:00:38 – 00:04:20
2. Gestapo scene 01:06:05 – 01:14:17

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The vivid colour palate creates a distinct visual style in the presentation of 'ordinary' Germans and Germany during the Second World. The saturation of almost every scene seems heightened and intense, this emphasises how colourful and normal the world appears to be. Contemporary photos of Nazi Germany and colourised documentaries were used as inspiration and guidance for balancing the tone

of the film. Some of the reference photos by the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson depicted scenes of intense juxtaposition, such as children playing games whilst wearing gas masks and surrounded by soldiers, playing around the detritus of war. These photos provided inspiration for the often absurd-like situations and the overall style of the film. Like Cartier-Bresson's photos, the film was shot on 35mm film and used predominantly 'classical' techniques, such as not using handheld cameras, using a dolly, avoiding artificial lighting outside and even using matte paintings to visually extend some scenes. Melancholic scenes and settings look more desaturated to emphasise Jojo's emotions and the passing of time. This is best demonstrated in the portrayal of Adolf Hitler, who despite the initially presentational style of acting, is presented with no visual exaggerations to ensure that he is presented in a matter-of-fact manner, allowing the audience to interpret the character in their own way and deny him any special treatment or care.

Mise-en-scène

- The costume design by Mayes C. Rubeo is bold, individual and stylish. The tailoring is almost anachronistic, and the overall impression is one of happiness and of individuality. The Gestapo and the other Nazi officials are bland, lacking in vibrancy, are in uniform and representative of control, death and a bland existence of coercion and authority. The exception is Sam Rockwell's Captain Klensendorf, whose uniform is messy and unkept. He later wears an embellished and extravagant costume including red cape and heavy eye make-up to show that he is not like other Nazi soldiers and has turned against the regime.
- Much of the film was shot on location in the Czech Republic. The film was shot using



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relay settings, buildings and lighting, although it features around 200 special effects shots, many of which were ‘set extensions’. These are blue screen additions to actual settings and scenes to add more detail and a sense of Nazi Germany rather than Czechia in 2018. Betzler’s house was entirely hand-made and created in a studio lot, allowing the film crew to create typical architecture of the time and to create a large, open and friendly house that suited the successful Betzler family and opportunity for secrets, or people, to be hidden away in it.

Editing

- Editing is used to help balance the tricky tone of the film. Careful manipulation of individual frames makes a difference, with a few frames creating either humour or disgust. The number of humorous scenes were carefully balanced to ensure that they can compare with more intense and emotionally dramatic scenes. Director Waititi gave the editor basic notes and allowed the editors to work on their own, finding their own perspectives and ideas in the film. Editor Tom Eagles stated that they wanted the film to focus on the burgeoning relationship between Elsa and Jojo to underline the themes of family, punishment responsibility.

Sound

- Composer Michael Giacchino scored the film. Famous for his work with Pixar and most notably his Academy Award winning score for *UP* (2010), he employs an almost fairy tale like quality to the score. Giacchino developed a suite of music that encapsulates the overall feelings of the characters, especially Jojo, but rarely emphasising the comedy, allowing the

performances to do this instead. In many tracks, traditional instrumentation is used to mimic the music of the period in the film, and this is further enhanced using an orchestra in some songs to evoke the feeling of a classical European film and setting. However, the orchestra is quite small, designed to mimic the intimate nature of the film and Jojo’s limited worldview. There are also some notable uses of pop music with German lyrics, including songs by David Bowie and The Beatles. These are used to help portray young people, the tracks add a slightly anachronistic touch that is still appropriate for the film given the complex juxtaposition of themes and genres including comedy, absurdity and fascism.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social and historical

- *Jojo Rabbit* is a loose depiction of World War II, Nazi Germany and the Third Reich, but has many scenes or moments based on historically accurate details. The film depicts Hitler Youth Organisation, specifically the “jungvolk”, the section for young boys aged between 10 and 14. The activities depicted in the film and the boys’ reaction to them, are broadly historically accurate, showing the boys having fun, enjoying freedom and living a generally carefree life. Jojo’s collection of propaganda and memorabilia was also a common pastime for the youth in Germany who admired Hitler and other members of the Nazi Party almost as deities. The collection of scrap material for the war effort was often a task assigned to the Nazi Youth. Rosie’s depiction, as a member of the German resistance, is somewhat romanticised, given her especially visible presence in her local town. She reflects the covert, fragmented nature of the German resistance who couldn’t overtly oppose Hitler and instead relied on a form of secretive, hidden resistance.

Cultural

- There is a long history of war films and films that feature resistance fighters and of groups in direct opposition to the Nazi regime. However, films that feature Adolf Hitler are less common and it can be a shock to see him portrayed on screen, especially when interacting with

a child. Indeed, Waititi was told to play the role of Hitler by Fox Searchlight to secure funding for the project and was apparently “embarrassed” to be in character on set. Sam Rockwell’s portrayal of Captain Klenzendorf was informed by comedians like Bill Murray and Walter Matthau, perhaps idiosyncratic choices for a character who is typically a well-decorated and “hardened” soldier. However, he is perhaps unlike any other war character due to his homosexuality and dishevelled uniform which later becomes more flamboyant and dramatic. The superficial and friendly tone was an issue raised after release, with some historians concerned that the playful nature could undermine the significance of events and therefore be detrimental to young viewers. However, Searchlight pictures did collaborate with the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation to produce educational materials and resources to expand up on key themes and issues raised in the film.

Institutional

- Writer and Director Taika Waititi originally had the idea for the adaptation in 2010, close to the publication of the original source material in 2008. However, the first draft did not contain Hitler and was a drama. This was later changed to avoid creating yet another clichéd war film, and so a new version was written that played up the comical and absurd nature of Nazi Germany but also Hitler. This reflected the childish nature of the Third Reich and created a light, more accessible tone so that the younger generation could see and appreciate the problems. Despite the revisions and good word of mouth, the film wasn’t initially picked up and Waititi’s unwillingness to engage in the pitching process in Hollywood, meant that the screenplay was in limbo until 2012. It was at the end of 2012 when the screenplay appeared on the Blacklist, a list of excellent, but underdeveloped screenplays. Despite this, the film remained undeveloped and, in the meantime, Waititi made a trio of excellent films, *What We Do In The Shadows* (2014), *Hunt For The Wilderpeople* (2016) and *Thor: Ragnarok* in 2017. Fox Searchlight pictures eventually produced the film – they were interested in funding the screenplay and the studio as who were looking for ‘more auteur driven pieces’. They worked alongside

TSG Entertainment in raising \$14m to fund the making of the film. It later went on to gross over \$90 million at the Global Box Office.

ADDITIONAL STUDY AREA – STARTING POINTS: Narrative

- **Three- and five-act structure:** The film can be plotted neatly as three- and five-act structures. In both instances, the accident that Jojo suffers could be seen as the inciting incident or the end of the first acts. Later, Rosie’s death is an intense emotional point, leading towards the end where the Allied assault and the civilian population clash. The main difference between the three- and five-act structures is the new equilibrium of the five-act structure where Elsa and Jojo become close and Jojo rejects his previous childhood infatuation of Hitler for the new freedom represented by Elsa.
- **Withholding and enigmas:** Throughout the film, characters withhold information about themselves, their relationships, each other and to an extent, the historical significance of some aspects of the story. Some examples include Rosie’s role within the German Resistance, Elsa’s boyfriend, Hitler withholding what his overall plan for Germany is to Jojo, and Capt. Klenzendorf’s personal motivations.
- **Foreshadowing:** In an earlier scene, it’s established that Jojo can’t tie his shoelaces as Rosie does this for him. It is a visual metaphor to show how young and naïve Jojo is and foreshadows the later scene where Jojo discovers Rosie’s body hanged in the town square by almost literally bumping into her shoes, then tying up her laces and showing his quick growth as a character.
- **In media res:** The film begins in the middle of a much larger narrative that is never fully explored, and the presence of Adolf Hitler isn’t initially explained as being an imaginary ‘friend’ to JoJo.
- **Ticking clock:** The film employs several narrative strands that suggest or directly invoke the idea of a ticking clock scenario. It’s clear quite early in the film that the days of the Third Reich are coming to an end and it’s more of a matter when rather than if. Rosie’s role within the German Resistance and Elsa’s hidden nature both feel as though they will inevitably reach a

climax and – this creates a nervous tension and energy, made even more poignant when others are in the house.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

The Opening Scene: Jojo Betzler

00:00:36 – 00:04:23

Watch clip

Cinematography

- Initially the colour palette is quite muted, with dull and insipid yellows dominating. Lighting is relatively even, flat and high key and overall creates a happy scene, though not brimming with life or style.
- When Jojo runs outside the lighting is bright and colours are more bold, bright, warm and vivid- they contrast with what we expect from war-time Germany.
- The archival footage that is added to the scene marks a clear distinction between the Germany created in the film and the Germany we have collectively created through recollection and old footage. The footage is black and white, shot on film over 70 years ago and is basic in style.
- Hitler is not directly shown in the old footage, rather he is sometimes shown via an over-the-shoulder (OTS) shot. This could be to avoid glorifying him and to dehumanise him, ensuring there is no visual link to the Hitler in the film, or to emphasise the excited crowds and the impact that one person had on these people.

Mise-en-scène

- There are some expressive performances from Roman Griffin Davis as Jojo and Taika Waititi as Adolf Hitler. Both develop levels of intensity and overt charisma within the scene – both begin quite reserved and in the case of Hitler, his sheer presence as he paces around the room is menacing and uneasy. However, as Hitler encourages and hypes Jojo, both become much more expressive and have exaggerated facial expressions and body language.
- Once outside, Jojo is largely distinct from others. He is younger, more vibrant, more expressive, faster and louder than everyone else, reinforcing how childish and naïve he is.

- Costume and setting are interesting to explore here – the costume of Hitler and Betzler are neat, tidy and seemingly accurate- they give an air of authority and a serious tone. When Jojo then becomes erratic and excitable alongside Hitler, the costumes, the house and soon the street Jojo lives in all juxtapose. From the beginning, Jojo lives in a world in which he doesn't easily belong.

Editing

- Initially the scene is quite slow paced, and the audience are allowed to explore the images on screen and question what Jojo is saying. Hitler ominously pacing develops tension because the slow pace of the scene means that audiences are primed for something dramatic to release the tension.
- As Jojo gets more excitable, so does the editing, and the pace increases to demonstrate how excited, energetic and carefree he is.
- Archival or documentary footage is intercut with shots from the film. This black and white footage shows how Germany really reacted to Hitler and the Nazi party during the 30s and 40s. It also draws distinct parallels with Beatlemania (see below).

Sound

- Opening credits feature 'traditional' German music and in keeping with the tone we expect of a film set in 1940s Germany.
- Jojo then engages in a monologue which offers insight and some exposition, with no accompanying score or soundtrack.
- As Jojo begins to run on the spot, the energy levels increase and the familiar opening guitar refrain from The Beatles' *I Want to Hold Your Hand* begins. The song parallels the energy levels of Jojo. As the song starts, we realise that it is the German version, *Komm gib mir deine Hand*. This relates to the imagery on screen but is then used to draw parallels between how people of all ages embraced Hitler and the Nazi party so fondly. When Hitler visited and toured, he would be greeted by crowds of thousands of adoring and fawning fans, creating scenes reminiscent of Beatlemania in the 1960s.