Seger Note #4: JOJO RABBIT

Screenplay by Taika Waititi

Loosely based on the young adult novel Caging Skies *by Christine Leunen*

Directed by Taika Waititi

Academy Award, Best Adapted Screenplay

There are great films, memorable films, classic films, entertaining films, and sometimes there are brilliant films. I define a brilliant film as a film that has to pull off an extreme challenge, and not only pulls it off but does so extremely well. *Jojo Rabbit* is one of these films. Others that I would put in this category include *Amadeus* and *Crash* (the subject of Seger Note #8, to be published in December 2020).

Jojo Rabbit has to find humor and tenderness in one of the most serious issues of recent times: the Nazis, in all their danger and cruelty. The movie has to shape the emotional reactions within the film, as well as in the audience, and it has to do this without manipulating the audience's emotions for mere short-lived sentiment or thrill. Like a sculptor chiseling every detail for maximum effect, or an orchestra conductor shaping the dynamics and tempo of the music, or an actor knowing exactly when to let the tears flow and when to hold them back, the writer-director Taika Waititi has to continually balance humor, tenderness, reality, and imagination.

This is what I call Advanced Screenwriting, and Advanced Filmmaking. You can't fake it. You have to know exactly what you're doing.

Jojo Rabbit does not easily fit into the usual genres. The movie is advertised as a satire with humor and pathos. It also contains elements of black comedy (often called dark comedy or gallows humor), so we could call it a satiric black comedy. These are two of the most difficult genres to work with, because sometimes audiences don't get the joke.

All satire has at its core something that is being satirized, and the strongest satire takes on the most uncomfortable subjects. One of the most famous film satires is *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, which took on the life-and-death issue of nuclear warfare and the questionably sane people who have the power to blow up the world.

Black comedy, too, makes light of painful subject matter. There are very few black comedies—or at least, very few that have done well. The Coen brothers specialize in this genre, with movies such as *Fargo* and *Burn After Reading*. Other examples are *Pulp Fiction*, *Prizzi's Honor*, *Harold and Maude*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. These films take subjects such as kidnapping, murder, corruption, and suicide and address them in a way that makes us smile, even laugh out loud. They weave humor into material which is simply not funny.

Black humor makes some people uncomfortable. They feel guilty about laughing at the terrible things that human beings do. But sometimes black comedy enables a writer to explore a subject more deeply. Being able to do something very different with subject matter that has been explored thousands of times is a mark of a great imagination.

Even before the Second World War, we looked at the Nazis head on. We've looked at them from the right and the left and the right and the wrong. We've looked at the victims and those in power, and looked all the horror of their deeds. In *Jojo Rabbit*, we look at this subject through a new lens: the innocence of a ten-year-old who is captivated by their glamor them and wants to be a good little Nazi, then has a dawning realization that leads to maturity and the understanding that, at his core, he is not a Nazi.

Jojo wants to be Hitler's friend—and the satire turns on this, showing Hitler as a buffoonish, immature guy who needs his friend Jojo as much as Jojo needs him. The Gestapo, for all their threat (which is made absolutely real in the film, with the hanging of Jojo's mother), are also satirized. When they arrive to search the house, they actually look somewhat Jewish, or even Amish, in their black suits and hats. And Waititi gets a good laugh out of some slapstick "Heil Hitler"ing.

A genre suggests a certain style and mood and tone. Style is often what differentiates a competent or good writer from the great ones. Reality is not simply reality. Sometimes I call this a "slant," as if every character and scene is slightly off-kilter. We expect many people to "Heil Hitler" in a Nazi film—we just don't expect it to be repeated and repeated, everyone kowtowing so much that we see what a bad joke this all was.

Setting Up the Style and Genre

When I was directing a comedy in graduate school, my professor asked me: "Where are your first three laughs?" I answered, "I wouldn't know because we don't have an audience yet." And he responded: "If you don't know, the audience won't know."

That professor taught me how to set up the style of a play or film by creating three beats within the first three minutes that cue the audience into the genre and the mood of the story. If it's a comedy, what kind of comedy is it? Do you want the audience to laugh out loud, to smile knowingly, or to sit back in their seats ready for the pleasure of something amusing and lighthearted? If it's a thriller or a horror movie, what moments indicate the genre, so that the first gasps and screams don't come 45 minutes in?

When we start watching *Jojo Rabbit*, we probably know that we're going to see a film about Nazi Germany. Perhaps we even know that it focuses on the danger to the Jews, and specifically to a Jewish girl. We probably also know that the little boy who is the central character has an imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler. The film tells us immediately that we're to approach this film with a willingness to laugh.

Under the opening titles is a German drinking song. Then as the credits continue, the music is a well-known Beatles song with German lyrics. Remember, this is a film about a ten-year-old boy who doesn't drink—yet. And the Beatles sang more than 20 years later. Everything sounds so happy! And then we see a clean and snappy German uniform, and we hear that this little boy is going to a training weekend. What could be more exciting?

A happy and very "up" Adolf Hitler is introduced within two minutes. First we are given hints of him walking back and forth, so we're prepared for his appearance, which comes before the titles are even completed. Detail after detail is piled on. The little boy is described as "the bestest little Nazi"—and we in the audience might feel a similar pride if our child had received the best grade in the class or won the science fair. We feel that pride as we watch Jojo learning everything he is supposed to learn. He practices his "Heil Hitler" until he finally gets it right! There are fireworks and planes, and Jojo is clearly part of something big and wonderful. To keep the humor going, the captain is introduced crunching an apple, and we meet a Fräulein who has borne 18 children for the glory of Germany.

Everything that is serious is depicted as fun. There's a montage with gas masks and dagger throwing and marching. The children are taught all about Jews, who are pictured with scales and horns. Then comes the fun of burning books. For ten minutes, the director plays a sense of excitement. It's "Hurrah Time!" It is all simply grand! If you didn't get the fun on the first and second and third beat, you can't miss it by the tenth or fifteenth story beat. At this point, the audience should be firmly with the program.

The Suspension of Disbelief

When we watch a movie, we bring our belief systems, our experiences, our knowledge, and our attitudes with us to the film. Sometimes filmmakers depend on that, so they can shortcut the background information of a story. But sometimes the filmmaker wants us to leave all that behind and come into the story with fresh eyes.

If we approach *Jojo Rabbit* with all of that background, we will likely disbelieve many of the things that happen. We'll think that what we're seeing is not possible and say to ourselves, "I don't buy that." We'll have trouble engaging with the movie because it goes against who we are and how we have learned to see reality. So the filmmaker has to suspend that disbelief to enable us to enter into the story.

In a farce, we have to suspend the disbelief that slipping on a banana peel is not dangerous. In a western, we might have to suspend our disbelief that a gun

misfires at the crucial moment. Sometimes we have to suspend our disbelief that a wound which looks fatal really isn't, because the character survives. We might watch a movie with religious underpinnings outside our own spiritual system, and accept it for the duration of the film.

In *Jojo Rabbit*, for ten minutes, we are asked to believe that all of this Nazi stuff is really fun. We are asked to put ourselves in the place of the innocent young boy. The movie is based on attitudes that young boys, particularly, often have. (Stephen King explores boyish fascination with the Nazis in his novel *Apt Pupil*—which was made into an unsuccessful film.) It's all great fun—until it stops being fun.

Reality comes to the forefront 10 minutes into the film, when Johannes is asked to kill a rabbit to show that he can be a perfect little Nazi. Of course the rabbit is cute, and the audience is undoubtedly rooting for the rabbit. When Johannes can't do it, he is labeled a coward like his father. The Nazi officer who is leading the training camp wrings the rabbit's neck and throws it into the forest. Johannes is nicknamed Jojo Rabbit, mocking his inability to do what a good Nazi must do: kill a defenseless creature. He runs away, but his imaginary friend Adolf comes to his rescue, letting him know that he's got Jojo's back. He even offers Jojo a cigarette to prove they're still good friends.

Two contradictory attitudes have been set up, which the audience has to hold in their minds at the same time. One part of our brain is lighthearted and playful and excited and feels it's all terrific; the other part of our brain knows it's all deadly serious and threatening and dangerous. This is called cognitive dissonance: the filmmaker is asking us to hold two ideas that simply can't exist together. Just as things seem serious, we are back in the excitement and fun of throwing a grenade. And just as we're back in the fun, seriousness elbows its way back in because the grenade knocks Jojo out. He's taken to the hospital unconscious, his mother is distraught, and he is left with disfiguring scars. We wonder if the film will tip into seriousness, or if the filmmaker will bring back the humor.

So, there's the touch of seriousness, and then the touch of humor, and then the touch of seriousness, and then the touch of humor—all carefully woven to keep us

in balance on a balance board that seems impossible to negotiate. Yet Waititi does it. And once he gets us balanced, he can begin to expand his palette into other emotions, such as tenderness and love and fear, without losing the overall style. How does he do that?

Using the Structure to Hold the Style

Jojo Rabbit is a beautifully structured film. It sets up the world of the Nazis and the individual world of a little boy who is brought into the excitement as well as into the constant threat of death. We get all of this within the first 15 minutes, when he is knocked out. In the next section of the script, which I call Act One Development, the film begins to touch on other serious considerations, such as people who are hanged for their "crime" of not supporting the Nazi program. We begin to get a sense of the war. And at the First Turning Point, Jojo finds the Jewish girl, Elsa, who is hiding in the attic.

This moves the story into Act Two, which explores what happens when the Jew—whom we saw drawn with horns and scales at the training camp—becomes personalized. Jojo gets to know Elsa while he is still under the spell of the Nazis, as he works with the captain putting up posters that glorify the regime. This gives the story the same push-pull that the audience is already feeling. Just as the audience experiences a cognitive dissonance between their knowledge of the Nazis and the lighthearted tone of the film, Jojo experiences a cognitive dissonance between what he himself sees of the Jewish girl (who doesn't seem to have horns), and the brainwashing of the Nazis.

The unfolding of the story in Act Two explores the theme, which could be stated as, "There is no 'other,' there is only us." At the Second Turning Point, the Nazis search the house and Elsa turns the tables by pretending to be Jojo's sister. Jojo finds himself helping her against them—but she also recognizes that he has betrayed her when she sees the book he has made that shows his hatred of Jews. This brings Jojo to a moral reckoning, which is reinforced when he finds his mother hanged moments later. It is now up to Jojo to help Elsa.

Meanwhile, the war is coming to a close, and it is very clear that the Nazis are not going to win. Act Three (which is 24 minutes long) focuses on the battle and the German defeat. At the Climax, Jojo throws away his swastika and kicks Hitler out the window. In the Resolution, we see that the two children are safe, and Elsa does what she said she would do when the war ended—she dances. And Jojo joins in the dance.

So each Act has a different focus: glory and excitement in Act One; the tension between hiding a Jew and trying to be a good Nazi in Act Two; the defeat of the Nazis and the liberation of Elsa in Act Three. Humor and seriousness seesaw all through each act, even when the focus changes.

Threading in the Subplots

There are a number of ways to analyze the relationship of the plot and the subplots in *Jojo Rabbit*. The main plot gives direction, so we might say that the "A" storyline is the story of Jojo and Elsa. It has forward momentum, because there is always a threat of her being discovered. Elsa was brought into the household off-screen, probably during Act One when Jojo was at the training camp. The danger is personal, and it's personal on two different levels. Clearly, Elsa is in mortal danger; and Jojo is in danger, too, because, as he is told several times, anybody who hides a Jew or even sees a Jew and doesn't report it is guilty as well. We understand that his mother is in danger because she is the one hiding Elsa, and then we discover that she is distributing anti-Nazi propaganda. This danger is presented with a very light touch: Jojo is asked where his mother is and he says she's in town, or she's busy. The shock of seeing her hanged is all the more powerful because it has not been telegraphed, even though we have been prepared for it by seeing hanged people in Act One.

We can also look at the story of Jojo and Elsa as a subplot developing their relationship. As a rule, subplots are relational and dimensional rather than directional. In Act Two, we see this emotional development. Jojo wants to know more about Elsa's Jewishness, because he thinks of Jews as bad and dangerous and intrusive. Yet he's curious about this alien entity whom his mother is hiding in their home. He has not known many Jews, but he has been taught all the stereotypes. And, as we know, he's a

good student. So, the first half of Act Two shows Jojo parroting all the ugly lies about Jews, and Elsa goading him by feeding them back to him. Their antagonism slowly develops into a loving friendship, which leads to a Second Turning Point when Elsa discovers Jojo's book about Jews, which includes pictures of a suffering and dead Nathan, whom she has described as her fiancé. Jojo's brainwashed hatred of Jews and his love for Elsa are tangled together in this illustration, which shows his jealousy of the fiancé she clearly loved.

So the Elsa/Jojo storyline has both the direction that we expect from the "A" plot and the dimension that we expect from the "B" subplot. What should we call it? I would separate it into two: the directional part of their story, which has to do with the threat to Elsa, as the "A" plot, and the relational development as the "B" plot. Other analyses are valid, as long as there is a recognition that this storyline is both directional and dimensional.

There is another important plotline, which I sometimes call an Umbrella Plotline or a Contextual Plotline. This is the war. In my Seger Note on *The African Queen*, I discussed the importance of the war plotline, which is small but extremely important in adding a big-picture layer to a small-scale, personal story. In Act One of *Jojo Rabbit*, we know we're in World War Two, because Jojo is in uniform, Adolf Hitler is there, and they are going off to a training camp. There is a very subtle story beat that can be seen as the First Turning Point of the war story, when Jojo's mother tells Elsa that the Germans will never win. Gunfire in the background suggests that the war is in its final days. (This occurs at 32 minutes into the movie. The whole film is about 104 minutes.) The Midpoint of the war story comes at the 45-minute mark, when the mother, celebrating with a drink, announces with delight that Italy has fallen. The Second Turning Point occurs when the invasion is imminent and everybody is getting ready for it. The gunfire has increased, and Jojo and Elsa watch it in the distance (85 minutes in). The Allied victory is the Climax of the war storyline (90 minutes), but the movie isn't over yet because Elsa is not yet safe.

The relationship between Jojo and Hitler is tied in to both the Elsa story and the war story, but it can best be seen as a separate subplot. Hitler is introduced within the first two minutes of the film. At the First Turning Point, around 28 minutes in, Hitler

gives Jojo a mission—which shapes Act Two—to use his mind powers over Elsa in order to find out more about her. At the Second Turning Point, Hitler is very stressed out, because he knows he is losing the war; at the same time, Jojo's friendship with Elsa threatens his friendship with Hitler. Hitler confronts Jojo, telling him, "Get your shit together. Sort out your priorities. You're ten, start acting like it!" At the Climax, Jojo kicks Hitler out the window.

The relationship between Jojo and his mother works more like a throughline than a subplot. It has neither strong turning points nor development, because the relationship was established before the movie began. She is loving and supportive even though her son is fascinated by everything she loathes. The relationship does have a strong Climax, when she is hanged, but most of the on-screen scenes simply reinforce the love between them, while also reinforcing the dangers posed by the war and the Jew hiding in the attic.

Another throughline is the relationship between Jojo and the captain of the training camp. The captain is a clownish figure, and yet, as the story evolves, we see him being protective of Jojo and his family. It is clearly implied that he is not responsible for the mother being hanged, and he tells Jojo that he is very sorry that happened. He protects Elsa when she gives the wrong birth date while pretending to be Jojo's sister. And he protects Jojo at the end, knowing that he himself will be killed.

There is a third throughline: Jojo and his friend Yorki. Yorki does not buy into the Jewish stereotypes as much as Jojo does, but Yorki also works for the Nazis. We occasionally see him in his new uniform, although most of the scenes of this work are offscreen. Yorki is proud of his new uniform—though it's very uncomfortable—and by the end, he is exhausted with it all. Again, there's a recurring comic tension between "Ain't it wonderful?" and "Ain't it awful?"

The Characters

Waititi has a great many balancing acts to perform in this film. He has to keep the war story going without letting it overpower the emotional development of the relationship between Jojo and Elsa, and without adding a heavy weight to a story

that focuses on innocence and holds to its lighthearted tone throughout, even as the material of the story darkens. He does this partly by constantly adding humor to the characters.

The shading of this humor varies. Some characters seem to come straight out of a broad comedy. The captain is introduced chewing an apple, complaining about his eye, and pretending to be a Western sharpshooter, showing all the fancy ways you can fire a gun. His sidekick and the Fräulein lean toward buffoonish. Even the head Gestapo guy is played with humor, when we realize how very tall he is. Hitler, too, is buffoonish: he jumps for joy and does a high step dance, and seems befuddled.

Yorki, the huggy friend, is adorable and often confused because the Jews he meets seem fairly normal. Still, he is influenced by other people's ideas. Yorki has my favorite line in the film: after going through the battle, including explosions and running for shelter and having to wear a uniform that gets really hot, he says, "I'm going to go home to see my mother. I need a cuddle." We probably can relate!

By creating characters that carry the humor, Waititi leaves the mother and Elsa able to carry the emotional weight of the story. They do, however, have some humor associated with them. There is humor in the mother's love and support for Jojo as she disciplines him, and in Elsa's character as it shades from goading Jojo with her descriptions of Jews into a more tender and serious mood when she shows him the angel. At the very end, we see pictures of Jojo and his mother on the bicycle, which seem to have been drawn by Elsa with the pencils Jojo gave her.

Elsa is able to carry both humor and seriousness because she is not a passive character and she doesn't play the victim. She reverses expectations.

The emotional weight in the story keeps shifting between characters. Waititi layers in these different tonal qualities within the first 10 to 12 minutes of the film, which allows him to play with them as he moves from scene to scene. He has given himself room for his characters to be funny and tender and afraid and confused and protective and hurt and offended and worried . . . the list goes on and on.

Cinematic Images

A number of images move throughout the film, such as the shoelaces. They are introduced when we learn that Jojo does not know how to tie his shoelaces even though he's ten. This is mentioned several times, and his mother even ties his shoelaces together so that he stumbles, to make her point that it is time for him to learn to do it himself. The image of the shoelaces comes up about five times, as does the image of the saddle shoes his mother wears. The payoff of the two images, shoelaces and saddle shoes, comes when Jojo finds his mother hanged. We know it is Rosie only by the shoes, and Jojo does a kindness by tying the untied shoelace.

Other images come up repeatedly:

- Butterflies appear three times.
- The dagger recurs five or six times.
- The apple that the captain is crunching at the training camp is echoed when the mother hits him and he falls to the floor, and the apple strudel he was eating also ends up on the floor.
- Books come up several times: the book-burning at the training camp, and Jojo's book about Jews.
- The bathtub is shown in Act One with the mother, and in Act Two with Elsa.
- Other repeated images are the drawings of the angel and the tiger, the photo of Inge, and the soldiers and jeeps.

These images create a sense of cohesiveness as they travel throughout the story. Images are also used to show time passing, particularly in the montage of Elsa and Jojo spending time together as he works on his anti-Jewish book while their relationship develops. The montage is played with the camera moving from left to right panning across Jojo and Elsa in different positions as they read and write and talk.

IN SUMMARY, Taika Waititi has a sure hand as he juggles all these elements and holds the delicate balance between comedy and deadly serious subject matter. The story is

told entirely from Jojo's subjective point of view, which keeps it grounded in innocence. We in the audience feel very close to this little boy, with his seriousness and idealism and good heart. It certainly helps that he is a phenomenal little actor.

Study Questions

1. Trace several of the plotlines, and differentiate between dialogue containing information that moves the story forward, and images containing information that moves the story forward. (Examples would be the dialogue about Elsa and Inge, and the images of the Americans' victorious arrival.)

2. Make a list of all the funny moments in the film and see if you can define them according to how broad or subtle they are. Which moments elicit a laugh from the audience? Which elicit a smile or mild amusement?

3. Now look at the most serious moments in the film—such as the mother's body hanging in the town square, the gunfire and explosions, the fear when the Gestapo comes to search the house—and see if you can describe the techniques Waititi uses to keep those moments from being too heavy.

4. At what points in the film did you feel emotionally connected in a positive way with particular characters, such as the captain, Elsa, or even Hitler? Did your sympathy shift at certain points? Can you define where those points were, and why your sympathy shifted?

5. What did you learn about the characters through dialogue and backstory, versus what you learned about the characters on-screen? (Examples would be information about the father and the mother's past, and about Elsa's life before she went into hiding in Jojo's house.)

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