How to Study a Film

To study a film, you have to study both its content (its scenario or story-board, its story theme and the stereotypes on which it relies, its strategy of story-telling, its strategy for characterization) and its technical form, its cinematography.

To study the content of a film:

The content of war films is a representation of war events, participants, and motivations. That representation is built up as a story to be told. That story has its conventional elements, so that it can be comprehensible to its audience, and its innovative ones, which the audience has to be "taught" to understand. The story, or scenario, is often worked up by the writer and director into a treatment and/or a storyboard, which then gets worked into a script and a shooting script (with shot instructions). Each story has conventional elements that make it "well-told" for its audience -- certain "obligatory scenes." If a scenario has the hero die, then it is almost obligatory for the film to show that death. Similarly, there are expectations about what heroes and villains, lovers and warriors, look like, act, speak, and react that are obligatory -- these are expectations that the audience will bring to the film. Many times, these expectations, these stereotypes, need to be "rewritten" by the film, and so they need to be quoted in order to be refuted in the course of the film.

So it is important to track:

* what's in and what's out: what adaptation in the source materials were made

*   what stereotypes are being used as "quick identification tags" for the viewers
*   what stereotyped scenes, locations, sets, etc. are being used to orient the viewers, and what elements violate this set of obligatory story elements.

Taken together, these choices will indicate who the audience is: a film has to operate from the familiar into its own space, its own story. In cases where the film is a landmark, it also often creates its own story grammar, a new way of telling stories that can be used by further filmmakers.

To make a case about the message of a film, it is useful to track sets of these elements from the opening sequences, a turning point or climax sequence, and the final sequences (denouement or resolution sequence).

To study the cinematography of a film:

The message of the film depends not only on what is represented, but also on how it is represented. There is a set of obligatory shots and sequences, traditions of shooting, lighting, sound effects, and framing, and genre conventions (what differentiates a "special effects" film from other adventure films, for example). That is, there is a set of *technical grammars* that convey meaning just as surely as the content does, and that draw in film history in their own ways.

Pay attention to:

*   camera movement: is the camera handheld, a steadicam, or on a dolly, boom, or vehicle? When does it pan, tilt, zoom in or out, track, or change its depth of field and focus?)

* framing and composition of camera shots (angle, lighting, depth of field -- how much is in focus --, color choices, how wide or narrow, close-up or far away the shot is, who or what plays in the center or the periphery)

* lens and film selection: is the film clear or grainy, black and white or color, hand tinted? Do the lenses distort, or zoom? Is the format academy or television mask, video, widescreen, cinemascope, or a format that pays a tribute to something in history?

* editing: who gets frame time? What rhythms are made, what is shown or not shown? What kinds of cuts, fades, or superimpositions are made, and do they speed up the action, slow it down, make the viewer nervous, . . . ?

* lighting: what color and light schemes are associated with which people, locales, or events? Do they reinforce or enhance the mood, "say" something that foreshadows something not evident? Does it work for or against the frame, any particular character?

* foley, other sound, music: do they work with or against what is being shown or told overtly? Does the sound comment on the action (e.g. a satirical song, or a dramatic swell of music when something important is happening)?

* point of view: does the perspective from which the story is told technically weight or tilt attention toward some particular part of the story?

* special effects: these can work for or against any of the other grammars, because they are completely flexible, completely able to manipulate.