ZOMBIES!

HOW TO WATCH A FILM

Watching a film's moving image, other than just for pure entertainment's sake, is usually enhanced by viewing it with an informed awareness of how a film works, and with some understanding, skill, and background training in the elements of the craft of film-making. Each film viewer should strive to be a 'critic' (in the best and most general sense of the word) and be receptive to the full experience. Viewing a film critically and attentively means to realize cinema with greater thought and awareness, and to elevate one's celluloid experience. It also means possessing an informed knowledge of the film's complex and dense 'language,' its conventions, codes, symbols, cinematic attributes, and other factors. [1]

Instructor's Note: Watching a film this way can also inform your work as a writer. For instance, a good director's commentary reveals how many choices directors make and the differences those deliberate actions affect the overall impact of a film. I highly recommend the commentary track for *28 Days Later*. Danny Boyle, the film's director, and Alex Garland, the film's writer, provide many excellent insights into their processes as director and writer.

PART ONE—THE FUNDAMENTALS

Have a Second Viewing:
Watch a deserving film more than once, and preferably with others so that the experience may be discussed afterwards.

During the *first* viewing:
- become familiar with the basic plot, main characters, and important action
- acquire a brief synopsis of its story including time and place, the characters and their interactions, and the film's main themes without taking notes

The *second* time around:
- pay more detailed attention to what is being projected
- take notes and make observations
- begin to think in a more concentrated way about the film's structure, acting, directing, and the camera shots and angles.

Turn on Dialogue Subtitles:
Use the closed-caption feature with DVDs, in order to better understand the dialogue. [**Note:** Oftentimes, the subtitles are abbreviated and do not match the actual spoken words.]

Watch Film Extras:
Play the added special features of most DVDs, including audio commentary, the original theatrical trailer or teaser, deleted scenes, and other related material.

Examine Title and Credits:
Consider a film's main title and its opening credits:
- Why was the specific title chosen (were there any other alternatives considered?), and how do the credits establish a tone or mood?
- What are the first sounds and images in the film?
- Can you find any motifs in the credits?
- Do the end credits have any unusual features (e.g., out-takes, gags, additional footage, etc.)?

Use Freeze-Frames:
Be prepared to pause (the freeze technique allows one to 'see' how everything is positioned in a frame) and to replay various scenes, shots, or sequences.

Listen Carefully to the Soundtrack:
Prepare to listen carefully to the film's soundtrack and how the music, songs, and score enhance the actions of the characters and the film's mood.

Evaluate Production Values:
Does the film have one or the other:
- high-production values (with a glossy and expensive look)
- low-production values (it's a low-budget, amateurish, B-film)

Study Running Time and Timeline:
Know the entire run time of the film and the locations of various segments (or sequences) or turning points within that time frame. Keep track of the timeline of the film's parts—with the digital counter of a VCR or DVD player.

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[1] Directly adapted from "Tips on Film Viewing: How to Watch Movies Intelligently and Critically," by Tim Dirks.

Maintain Critical Distance:
Maintain objectivity to what is being presented, without pre-judging the film based on what you've heard about it (from critics or friends), your preconceptions about the actors in it, the reputation of the director, etc.

PART TWO—IN MORE DEPTH
This additional list of 'how-to's' is provided for the advanced movie-goer to stimulate thought about film. It gives helpful hints on the art of reading, analyzing, watching, critically viewing, and deconstructing a film (to take apart the film's components and interpret how it was all intentionally assembled together). Anyone can learn the language, techniques, and structure of cinema of both the past and present. The *Internet Movie DataBase* (www.imdb.com) is always a useful resource for factual information about films. Here are additional, more detailed components to discover when critically viewing a film, to improve one's cinematic sensibility and literacy, and to unpack further layers of meaning:

Know The Basics:
Note the following basic facts (see some of these factors further below):
- film's title (and alternate titles or production titles, if any)
- year of release
- main stars/performers
- director
- rating
- running time
- genre classification
- brief summary
- tagline(s)

Identify Studio:
Know the studio responsible for the film. Was it made by a major studio, a minor studio, or an independent? Why was the film made?

Learn About Production:
Know the film's dates of production; study the production credits to learn more about the film's production; research any interesting facts about the 'making of' the film.

Understand Marketing:
Discover how the film was marketed and/or distributed - what were its *taglines*, posters and trailers?

Research Budget and Box-Office:
What was the film's budget? Did it go over-budget or under-budget and why? How did the film do at the box-office? Did it go straight to video?

Discover Film's Context:
What was the social, political, and/or historical context for the film? Was there any controversy surrounding the film's release?

Note Film's Rating:
Consider the film's official MPAA rating (G, PG, PG-13, R, NC-17, or unrated). Was there any controversy surrounding the film's rating?

Learn About Initial Reception:
What was the film's original reception? How is the film perceived today?

Read About Reviews and Reviewers/Critics' Opinions:

Discern what major reviewers, press reviews, or critics have said about the film. Also consider its critics' ratings (i.e., stars, "thumbs-up", letter grades, number ratings, etc.).

Understand Film's Influence:
Learn if the film had an influential impact on future films. Did it pay homage to (or reference) a previous film in some way?

Classify Film's Genre:
Decide on the film's principal type, its *genre* and *sub-genre* categories (such as action, adventure, musical, comedy, etc.). If it's a *hybrid* (a combination of two or more genres), what are they? How does the film fit (or not fit) into its conventional, recognizable classifications?

Write One-Liner Summary:
If you were to write a short 'one-liner' summary to describe the film (often called a *synopsis* or *film treatment*), what would it be?

Classify Type of Film:
Read about whether the film is a *sequel*, *prequel*, *re-make*, a *spoof*, an *homage* film, etc.
Are there other versions of the film's story or tale?

Study Narrative Origins and Script:

Learn about the script-screenwriter (and other works) - if a screenplay is available, compare it to the actual film. Read about the narrative origins of the film (literary or otherwise):

- Is it adapted from some other work, or based on an original idea? If adapted, how well does it follow the original?
- If original, how fresh and innovative is it?

Does the film's screenplay effectively communicate the story through action and dialogue?

Learn Whether It's Fact or Fiction?:

- If the film is based upon an historical event or person, how true to life is the film?
- Is the film fact or fiction?
- Does it mythologize an historical event or period?

Examine Plot, Structure or Story:

How is the film structured? Determine the film's pivotal scene(s) and sequencing. How is the story's plot told?

- through normal exposition
- by flashback
- with a narrator (by voice-over)
- chronologically or linearly
- character-driven
- objectively or subjectively
- otherwise

Additional Questions to Decipher:

- What is the vantage point from which the film is presented?
- Does parallelism (the film cuts back and forth between two scenes that are happening simultaneously or at different times) exist between two or more scenes?
- Are the transitions between scenes effective?
- Is there a climax and resolution (and denouement)?
- Does the film's narrative provide continuity from scene to scene?
- Is there closure by film's end?

Ascertain Special (Visual) Effects:

Learn about the special (visual) effects within the film and determine how skillfully they are handled. Consider whether the advanced, computer-generated technical aspects of the film are essential to the film's plot, or whether their unrestrained use overwhelms the dramatic, story-telling elements and sacrifices substance—namely, the plot and/or characters.

Look Up Awards and Honors:

Find out about the film's major awards (i.e., the Academy Awards), nominations, or other honors bestowed upon it.

Recognize Theme(s):

Look for the film's central theme, motif, idea or dominant message, as well as the film's sub-text (the message 'beneath the surface'), and then answer these questions:

- Identify prominent symbols and metaphors within the film and determine their purpose and overall effect.
- What popular ideologies are reproduced and reinforced in the film?
- Does the film have an original theme or a traditional one?
- Is the film's theme adequately or successfully supported by the story, acting, and other film elements?

Observe Style and Tone:

Decide the overall style and tone of the film (noirish, sophisticated, suspenseful, slapstick, etc.).

Distinguish Characters and Acting Performances:

List the following:

- the film's main characters (are their names significant?)
- also consider a few of the minor characters and how they are used
- a brief description for each one
- their major motivations or ethical values/assumptions
- their character development

Then, ask yourself these additional things:

- Is there a hero or anti-hero?
- Are the characters believable and three-dimensional?
- Is the acting memorable, exceptional, or inferior?
- Ask yourself about 'star quality' - why were specific performers (or stars) chosen (or cast) to play each role - were they appropriately cast (i.e., the right age or size, or with the proper accent)? Were any of the performers cast

against type? Were there any debut performances?
- Were their performances appropriate for the roles?
- Was the acting professional or non-professional?
- Does one performer steal the spotlight from others?

Reveal Directing:
Learn about the director's entire repertoire of films, stylistic characteristics, and favorite techniques. Is the director a veteran or a novice? How has the director shaped, *auteur*ed, interpreted or controlled every aspect of the film's making, and the telling of its story?

Perceive Cinematography and Visual Cues:
Identify the film's cinematographer, stylistic and visual characteristics, use of lighting and color (or black and white) to create a mood, use of a static or moving camera, amount of closeups, and favorite techniques. Compare screen time to 'story time.' Be attentive to various visual clues, such as the following:
- *establishing shots* (the initial shot in a scene)
- camera lighting (diffuse, high-key, low-key, muted, highlighting, spot-lighting, use of light and dark areas)
- focusing (*zooms, rack-focus, blurry, deep-focus*)
- camera distance and *framing* (*full shots, medium shots, closeups*)
- compositions (positioning of elements, symmetrical vs. asymmetrical, use of shadows, doors, low ceilings, windows, mirrors, etc.)
- camera angles (*tilted, wide angle, telephoto, POV shots, low/high angled*, etc.)
- camera movements and shots (*dolly shots, crane shots, pans, tracking, hand-helds, freeze-frames, reaction shots*, the number and order of shots, the use of shot/reverse shots in conversations or interviews, etc.)
- colors used (or color filtering)
- film speed (reversed, or fast/slow-motion)

Overall, is the cinematography effective?
Listen to Score and/or Soundtrack:
Identify the film's composer, and any previous similar works. Note any memorable songs (and their lyrics) and/or dances. Listen carefully to how the music/score functions within the film to underscore the action, to move the story along, or to provide an emotional tone or mood. Is the film's soundtrack appropriate, subtle and effective, or inappropriate, overwhelming and domineering? Note if silence is used, at times, in place of sound

Find Out About Mis-en-Scene:
Understand the '*mis-en-scene*' of the film. (*Mis-en-scene* can include the setting, costumes, make-up, lighting, and camera positioning and movement.) How were the scenes 'orchestrated' or set up for the camera?
Identify Locations or Settings:
Identify the settings for each scene. Are they each appropriate and effective? Note the different kinds of settings:
- geographical (place)
- temporal (time period)
- locations (on-site)
- studio sets
- important props

Notice Film Conventions or Cliches:
Notice the typical conventions used in the film, for instance, (1) cars that crash will almost always burst into flames, or (2) all telephone numbers in America begin with the digits 555.

Disclose Stereotyping:
Were the popular stereotypes (attitudinal or imagined) about different kinds of people (fathers, gays, Native Americans, the elderly, women, the mentally-ill, blacks, rural folks, etc.) challenged or reinforced? Were there any caricatures?
Detect Editing:
Is the film seamlessly and smoothly edited? Note the film's transitional edits, such as the following:
- *jump cuts*
- *wipes*
- *fade-ins/fade-outs*
- *fade-to-black, dissolves*
- *lap dissolves*
- *mixes*
- use of *montage* or rapid cutting between shots
- *juxtapositions* (*cross-cutting, cutaways, match cuts*)
- aural editing (how music, noise, or transitional dialogue create the illusion of continuity between cuts)
- the pace and rhythm of editing (the typical length and speed of sequences or shots)

Listen to Audio Clues:
Listen for the film's audio clues, including one of more of the following:
- sound effects
- music
- dialogue or voice
- silence

Study and distinguish the use of the following:
- sound bridges
- on-screen vs. off-screen sounds (to provide an impression of 3-D space)
- post-synchronized sound vs. direct sound
- *diegetic* sound (i.e., dialogue and sound effects)
- *non-diegetic sound* (i.e., the musical score, narrative voice-overs)

Note when sound transitions do not match shot transitions.

Observe Costuming:
Identify the use of period costumes, body physiques, hair-stylings, etc.

Identify Dialogue:
Identify the most important line(s) of dialogue, and identify any lengthy monologues or speeches Note how the dialogue is delivered (fast, mumbled, overlapping, loud/soft, etc.). Are there any recurring lines of dialogue and how do they function?