

Critique

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## Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit*: The Satirical Power of Cinema and the Reimagining of War Films



*Taika Waititi disguised as Adolf Hitler in Jojo Rabbit*

Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) takes the audience back in time to witness the infamous period of Nazi Germany through the eyes of a ten-year-old Nazi fanatic named Jojo Betzler and his imaginary friend Adolf Hitler. He soon discovers a Jewish girl, Elsa, hiding in his home's attic. This revelation compels him to confront the realities of his blind devotion to the Nazi cause, recognising the sinister truths behind the regime he once revered. By blending elements of satire and drama, Taika Waititi has created a compelling narrative that delves into the power of propaganda, the cruelty of the Nazi era, and the enduring resilience of the human spirit even in the darkest times of history.

In *Jojo Rabbit*, satire is wielded as a potent anti-hate instrument, effectively dismantling and critiquing the ideologies of Hitler and his regime. Through clever humour, the film exposes the absurdity of these oppressive beliefs and diminishes

their influence, turning what was once feared into something laughable and powerless. The film pays homage to classic anti-Nazi satires like Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), and Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (2005). What distinguishes Taika Waititi's rendition is his bold choice to cast himself as Adolf Hitler. As a Poly Asian Jew, Waititi's portrayal ironically empowers the oppressed to mock their oppressor, a decision that significantly heightens the film's satirical impact. This approach is particularly resonant when considering historical films' role in shaping our collective memory of the past. Historians acknowledge that cinematic portrayals often leave lasting impressions of history on the public consciousness (Guynn, 2006: 165). *Jojo Rabbit* capitalises on this by depicting Hitler and the Nazis as exaggerated caricatures, stripping them of

their menacing aura and reducing them to objects of ridicule rather than intimidation.

Waititi's meticulous examination of Nazi structures and the functioning of the Third Reich enables him to extract the most surreal behaviours of the Nazis, creating a farcical absurdity that challenges anti-Semitic values rather than promoting them (Franz, 2019). This approach is evidenced in scenes where ludicrous claims are made about Jewish people, such as the instructor's ridiculous assertions about Jews mating. An instructor is shown explaining to children how Jews supposedly mate with fish and have serpent tongues (7:33-7:43), accompanied by the comment, 'It has been scientifically proven that we Aryans are a thousand times more advanced and civilised than any other race.' This statement is deeply ironic as despite being advanced as a race, there seems to be no scientific basis to her claims. Hence, this scene is an example of how the film effectively undermines the credibility of anti-Semitic propaganda, highlighting its baseless nature by exaggerating preconceived notions about Jews. The film's approach aligns with Mel Brooks' assertion that making fun of oppressive figures can be a powerful way to undermine their influence: 'Get on a soap box with Hitler, you're going to lose. He's a great orator. But if you can make fun of him. If you can, have people laugh at him. You win.' By infusing humour into the portrayal of Hitler, Waititi facilitates a critical reflection on the irrationality of extremist ideologies.

Waititi's adept exploration of the impact of war extends beyond the traditional confines of its genre by delving into the psychological realm of how individuals perceive and process the world around them. Drawing inspiration from Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Community' theory, which posits that the unity within a nation is a product of collective imagination rooted in shared values and traditions, Waititi stylistically weaves this sociological approach into the film by assigning Hitler as Jojo's imaginary friend. (Anderson, 1983) He serves as a manifestation of Jojo's morality, contrasting sharply with the real-life dictator. For instance, in a scene where Hitler consoles Jojo after he is bullied by other children at the youth camp for being too sensitive, Hitler displays

an unexpected tenderness ('Let them say whatever they want. People used to say a lot of nasty things about me, 'Oh this guy's a lunatic', 'Oh look at that psycho, he's gonna get us all killed.'') This portrayal, influenced by Jojo's positive mother complex, starkly contrasts with Hitler in real life, which is also amplified by the sarcastic undertones in his dialogues. (Scully 2021: 152) The film strikes a tonal balance by putting Hitler's harmful tendencies to light through his buffoonish traits. He frequently offers Jojo cigarettes throughout the film, despite Jojo being just ten years old, which serves as a clear sign that Hitler's advice that appears as 'fatherly' is far from reliable. Hitler's Youth Army is shown in the film, consisting of children casually handling explosives and knives, which is just as disturbing as giving cigarettes to children. By portraying Hitler as indifferent to such dangers, the film emphasises his ignorance, reminding the audience of his harmful tendencies while also highlighting that the supposed positive traits we witness at times are merely projections of Jojo's imagination and not the whole truth. This dynamic delves into Transactional Analysis, particularly the concept of the 'magical parent,' where individuals internalise idealised images of authority figures to cope with emotional needs. (Berne, 1996) In Jojo's case, the absence of his father leads him to project his needs onto an imagined version of Hitler, seeking comfort in a distorted parental figure. It allows the audience to engage with the idea that despite imagined national rhetoric and ideological pressures, everyone is merely subject to the values around them; only a fragment of themselves can change for the nation. (Dryden, 2020) The protagonist remains fundamentally kind-hearted, a trait that persists despite the propaganda and societal expectations he encounters. Waititi masterfully unveils this aspect of Jojo's character, reminding the audience of the enduring humanity that transcends the tumultuous times of war, using the cynicism of this topic to showcase the hopeful realities of people.

Critics have debated whether *Jojo Rabbit* humanises what Hitler was in real life by presenting him in an 'oddly impartial' manner. However, this portrayal is instrumental in showcasing Jojo's

growing disillusionment with anti-Semitic beliefs. (Sharf, 2019). Through his interactions with Elsa, a Jewish girl hiding in his attic, Jojo is confronted with the stark difference between the anti-Semitic propaganda he has been taught and the reality of Jewish individuals. As his loneliness is replaced by genuine human connection, he begins to see the fallacy in the Nazi propaganda he has internalised. Consequently, Hitler's character evolves from being his 'friend' to becoming a more menacing, loud, and self-serving figure, reflecting Jojo's increasing detachment from Nazism. This is depicted in a significant parallel that occurs when Jojo kicks Hitler out of his room's window, mirroring an earlier scene where Hitler had jumped out of that same window after offering Jojo some advice. This transition—from a superhero-like leap to a villain's demise—is a motif that crystallises the protagonist's final disconnect from the oppressive system. This gradual switch invites viewers with an opportunity to understand the complex worldview of individuals living under a dictatorship rule, who, despite their personal beliefs, often find themselves drawn into the bureaucratic systems of evil and terror where they must feign commitment while following orders, just like Jojo. (Brody, 2019) Without experiencing the tension between opposites, there can be no proper understanding of the complexity of human behaviour, and *Jojo Rabbit* encourages viewers to grapple with this tension as they witness the protagonist's journey towards individuation. (Scully, 2019) Addressing such psychological complexities during a significant period in history is an important aspect of the post-literate age; it is a venture only films can achieve with this degree of emotional intensity, which can be understood worldwide. (Rosenstone, 2004: 59)



As discussed previously, this film's use of visual metaphors and symbolism further enriches its narrative. For example, the recurring motif of shoes in the movie is a powerful symbol, particularly when paired with the thematic portrayal of dance. Rosie, the protagonist's mother, frequently dances throughout the film as a gesture of gratitude towards God and a symbol of her enduring hope for the end of the war, captured by frequent close-up shots of her movements. Thus, when the audience sees Rosie's shoes hanging in the air a few scenes later, the impact is profound, as the shoes become symbolic of care and freedom during adversity. Rosie, who embodied these ideals, passes away, leaving a void of these emotions in the audience and her child, Jojo. Waititi enhances this effect by employing a repeated wide-shot, spatial alignment from the scenes where Jojo witnessed Rosie dancing to the moment he saw her shoes hanging, creating a poignant visual motif. The incorporation of this symbolism under emotive themes allows the film to acknowledge its identity as a historical film by representing real-life horrors of the Nazi regime and the death of innocent souls, like Rosie, who tried to resist it. Waititi's idea of displaying hanging shoes to imply death could have been inspired by the compositional monument 'Shoes on the Danube Bank', which consists of iron shoe sculptures as a remembrance of Hungarian Jews that were executed there. (Kennedy, 2014) As author Rosenstone stated, filmic literalism is rigid to achieve. Still, a film must situate itself in a historical context the audience may be aware of for a similar effect. It is also crucial to recognise that, despite Rosie and Jojo being on opposite ends of the political spectrum at the time, their love for each other transcended those differences. This is poignantly illustrated when Jojo ties the shoelaces on Rosie's loose shoe after her death, mirroring the simple act of care she had shown him earlier in the film. This small gesture emphasises that the innate human need to love and be loved remains untouched by any political regime. Rosie asserts in the film, 'Love is the strongest thing in the world.' By weaving in this rather sensitive, symbolic element in a war film, Waititi enhances the narrative's emotional depth,



lifting it beyond simple satire and offering a more nuanced reimagining of war cinema.



Building onto this argument, it is noticeable how Waititi makes multiple choices in this film depicting war, unlike the general conventions of a war film. For instance, films about World War 2 usually have a dulled-down palette, where the colours are often desaturated to amplify the nature of tragedies being showcased. In contrast, *Jojo Rabbit* opts for a vibrant colour scheme reminiscent of what critics call the ‘Wes Anderson’ palette, assisted by cinematographer Mihai Mălaimare Jr (Franz, 2019: 32). According to Waititi (2020), this deliberate choice reflects the reality of Germany's artistic zenith during that era, where citizens embraced bright

colours in fashion, textiles, and design, despite the looming spectre of war. This approach underscores the film's light-hearted nature while highlighting the societal context in which violence occurs – one where life continues to flourish amidst the chaos of conflict. Moreover, it suggests that violence cannot exist in isolation; society evolves and adapts, even in the face of brutality. The national identity narrative is deeply intertwined with individual self-perception. When individuals resist government ideals and strive for positive change through recreational activities, it signifies a fundamental failure of indoctrination. This theme, therefore, underscores the film's exploration of resistance and personal growth amidst the backdrop of war.

Rather than directly opening a window to the past, historical films open a window to a different way of thinking about the past that can change the present. (Rosenstone, 2004: 58) *Jojo Rabbit* is a prime example of how oppressive, intolerant and bigotry regimes can be mocked through the power of comedy as an effective anti-hate tool. Hateful ideologies from the past, like those of Hitler, can have their power taken away from them and can instead become topics that breed feelings of solidarity, strength, and brotherhood instead of contempt alone.

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### **Filmography**

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