

**Satire, Propaganda, and Indoctrination:  
Interpretation of Holocaust Representation in *Jojo Rabbit***

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Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) is a film that portrays an unconventional depiction of Nazi Germany by combining satire, coming-of-age storytelling, and historical commentary to demonstrate how nationalism and hatred were taught to children to promote internalized antisemitic ideology. Set during the final years of the Third Reich, the film follows Johannes "Jojo" Betzler, a ten-year-old boy who is a member of the Hitler Youth.<sup>1</sup> Having spent most of his formative years under the height of Nazi rule, Jojo's understanding of the world has been shaped almost entirely by Nazi propaganda. Jojo idolizes Hitler to such an extent that Hitler appears as his imaginary friend, a physical embodiment of the ideology he has internalized. When Jojo discovers that his mother, Rosie, is secretly hiding a Jewish girl named Elsa in their home, the beliefs he has been taught about Jewish people and his understanding of the Reich begin to unravel. As Jojo spends more time interacting with Elsa, he realizes that she is no different from himself, forcing him to confront the antisemitic myths he has been taught to accept without question and understand the humanity of the Jewish population as well as the cruelty of Hitler and his Nazi regime. Through this relationship, the film exposes the psychological mechanisms that develop and strengthen hatred and loyalty among German youth under the Hitler. By examining the film and its critical reception, particularly the U.S. and German response, we see how satire functions not only as a narrative device, but also as a powerful tool for confronting the history of Nazi indoctrination and creating wider engagement with the historical realities of the Holocaust for modern audiences. The film raises important questions about the limits of humor in representing genocide and demonstrates how satire can expose the process of Nazi indoctrination and extremist ideology, provoking debate about how this type of history should be portrayed in media.

The themes explored in *Jojo Rabbit* become clearer when given the historical context of Nazi youth indoctrination. After the Nazi Party rose to power in 1933, the Hitler Youth rapidly expanded into the regime's largest institution created to shape the views of German children. By the late 1930s membership had become mandatory as the Nazi government dissolved competing youth organizations, effectively consolidating control and transforming the organization into a central tool of ideological socialization.<sup>2</sup> The Hitler Youth combined political instruction with physical training, outdoor activities, and military-style discipline with the primary goal of encouraging unwavering loyalty to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi state in newer generations, which is seen in the opening scenes of *Jojo Rabbit*. By embedding ideology within activities that resemble ordinary childhood experiences and are similar to other non-political institutions for youth, such as the Boy Scouts of America, the Nazi regime normalized nationalist beliefs and integrated them into the daily lives of young Germans. Historian Michael Kater argues that Nazi leadership intentionally used youth organizations to create a generation of young people whose identities were inseparable from the ideological goals of the state.<sup>3</sup> Children in Hitler Youth and Germany as a whole were encouraged to see themselves not as independent individuals, but as future defenders of the Reich. Understanding this historical context helps explain the film's portrayal of how children like Jojo could become so deeply immersed in nationalist ideology without fully understanding its consequences.

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<sup>1</sup>Taika Waititi, *Jojo Rabbit* (Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2019), film.

<sup>2</sup> Erin Blakemore, "How the Hitler Youth Turned a Generation of Kids Into Nazis," *History*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.history.com/articles/how-the-hitler-youth-turned-a-generation-of-kids-into-nazis>

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Bergerson, review of *Hitler Youth*, by Michael H. Kater, *The Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 1 (2007): 212–14, <https://doi.org/10.1086/517575>

The reception of *Jojo Rabbit* has been widely debated among critics, particularly in regards to whether satire is a useful tool for representing the history of Nazi ideology and genocide. Although heavily debated, several reviewers praised the film for using humor to dismantle the symbolic authority that Nazi propaganda promoted. A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* argues that the film's satire works well by stripping Nazi imagery of the power and emotional control that propaganda creates. By portraying Hitler as a childish and absurd imaginary friend rather than the intimidating, genocidal historical figure, the film undermines the ideological authority that made Nazi control possible in the first place.<sup>4</sup> In Scott's interpretation, the film's satire functions as entertainment as well as a form of critique that exposes both the emotional and psychological foundations of extremist belief systems. This argument recognizes that propaganda often relies on the creation of myths and exaggerated illusions of strength to maintain its influence, making it extremely persuasive. By opposing the validity of these myths, *Jojo Rabbit* reframes Nazi ideology as a constructed system of beliefs that depends on emotional manipulation and social reinforcement to stay alive, rather than on an unchallengeable system.

Other positive reviews illustrate the film's emphasis on the process through which extremist ideology becomes embedded in everyday life. Larry Decuers of the National WWII Museum argues that *Jojo Rabbit* creates a powerful depiction of how Nazi propaganda "poisoned" youth culture by shaping the worldview of children through institutions like Hitler Youth.<sup>5</sup> Decuers elaborates on this idea through his description of the film's portrayal of youth camps, competitions, and games, which show how ideological training was often disguised within activities that appeared normal, or even enjoyable, to children. From this perspective, the film's focus on a child protagonist strengthens its analytical value. This observation is extremely relevant to themes within genocide studies, specifically the concept that mass violence rarely comes solely from political leadership, but develops through the gradual socialization of everyday individuals into systems of hatred and exclusion. By illustrating how Jojo internalizes antisemitic beliefs long before he truly understands them, the film reveals propaganda's ability to shape moral frameworks, especially during the most formative stages of human development of identity and individuality. In doing so, *Jojo Rabbit* gives insight into the broader actions and control techniques under authoritarian leadership that help normalize extremist ideologies within society.

Despite these positive interpretations, critics have raised concerns about the film's satirical approach and how it risks diminishing the historical reality of Nazi persecution. Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*, argues that *Jojo Rabbit* centers the emotional development of Jojo, a fictional German child and devotes little attention to the lived experiences of those who were targeted by Nazi violence.<sup>6</sup> This critique raises important concerns within discussions of Holocaust representation and genocide and reflects a broader debate in genocide studies, but it also points to a more specific ethical tension of portraying mass violence in popular media: rather than putting victims' perspectives into a secondary role, narratives that attempt to make perpetrator behavior understandable risks normalizing that behavior. This tension reflects a broader dilemma in genocide studies. Understanding perpetrators is necessary for preventing future violence, even as such portrayals carry the danger of softening the realities of their

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<sup>4</sup> A. O. Scott, "Jojo Rabbit Review: The Third Reich Wasn't All Fun and Games," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/17/movies/jojo-rabbit-review.html>

<sup>5</sup> Larry Decuers, "Film Review: Jojo Rabbit," *The National WWII Museum*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/film-review-jojo-rabbit>

<sup>6</sup> Richard Brody, "Springtime for Nazis: How the Satire of Jojo Rabbit Backfires," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/springtime-for-nazis-how-the-satire-of-jojo-rabbit-backfires>

actions. From this perspective, the film's narrative structure makes Nazism into a backdrop for Jojo's personal moral awakening and growth and fails to confront the systemic brutality of the Holocaust itself. By focusing on the psychological transformation of a German child, the film invites audiences to empathize with Jojo, and other Nazi's who have been shaped by propaganda. This narrative choice may inadvertently shift attention away from the structural realities of persecution and genocide. Brody's argument raises a crucial question about the limits of satire in historical storytelling and whether using this method of exposing the absurdity of extremist ideology can coexist with an adequate representation of the suffering and historical agency of its victims.

While Brody's criticism highlights a concern about the ethical challenges of representing genocide through satire, it may underestimate the value of the film's narrative perspective. By focusing on Jojo's internalization of propaganda, the film exposes how extremist ideology becomes normalized within everyday social environments, especially among children who lack the ability to critically analyze what they are taught. The film demonstrates the fact that indoctrination does not always appear as direct coercion, and instead can operate through institutions, social structures, and cultural narratives that shape an individual's understanding of the world over time. The narrative does not excuse Nazism and instead reveals how ordinary individuals can be socialized into belief systems that they do not fully understand. By following the gradual destruction of the ideological façade Jojo once supported, the film highlights how propaganda functions as a psychological mechanism that creates loyalty and belonging, while initially minimizing direct portrayals of the regime's violence, which only becomes visible toward the end of the film. One may also consider the more broad question of whether representations of the Holocaust within the media must always focus solely on the experiences of the victim to be considered meaningful historically. Although the suffering and destruction of those targeted by Nazi persecution is central to truly understanding the Holocaust, being able to also examine and interpret the everyday realities of life under a dictatorship can also give further context into how genocidal systems can become embedded within society. Focusing on individuals who were not targeted by the regime and seen as socially legitimate can illuminate how propaganda and social pressure normalized loyalty, exclusion, and ideological conformity within the general population. By combining narratives that explore how ordinary people lived through and internalized Nazi control along with other sources about the horrors the victims experienced, we can develop a better understanding of the Holocaust and the social conditions that made mass persecution and genocide possible. These differing interpretations of *Jojo Rabbit* reveal the complexity of debates about how genocide should be represented in popular culture. By sparking the debate on representation, the film becomes an example of the process of how societies interpret, remember, and attempt to understand the origins of extremist ideology and the cruelty of the human race throughout history.

Another important aspect of the film's reception is seen through examining how German responded to the viewing of *Jojo Rabbit*. While the English discussions of the film focus on the balance between satire and representation, the German response evaluates the film within the broader context of the country's genocidal past.<sup>7</sup> Germany's reconciliation and confrontation with its past as a Nazi state has shaped how works depicting the Third Reich are interpreted and debated within the country. Since the Holocaust is a central part of German historical and national identity, films discussing the period of Nazi reign are discussed less as entertainment,

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<sup>7</sup> Jojo Rabbit, "Kritiken und Einspielergebnis," *Wikipedia*, last modified March 19, 2026, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jojo\\_Rabbit#Kritiken\\_und\\_Einspielergebnis](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jojo_Rabbit#Kritiken_und_Einspielergebnis)

and more as contributions to historical education and reflection. Reviews summarized in the German Wikipedia page for the film have a wider range of critical engagement than the English version, which focuses more heavily on box office performance and critical scores. The German perspective frames the film within discussions of historical memory, responsibility, and the ethics of representing Nazism in contemporary media.<sup>8</sup> An example of this is Bert Rebhandl from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, who praises the film and argues that *Jojo Rabbit* excels in confronting historical trauma without treating it as a taboo subject.<sup>9</sup> Other German critics were noted to be more skeptical of the film's approach, warning that its “anti-hate” message risks portraying Nazis as misguided individuals instead of active participants in a violent ideological system.<sup>10</sup> These interpretations demonstrate that German viewers may interpret the same film in different ways, just like Americans do, but as a whole will analyze through a lens shaped by historical responsibility and collective memory. Germany’s long process of confronting the history of Nazism has created a cultural environment where representations of the Third Reich are frequently evaluated as contributions to historical memory and public education, not just entertainment. As a result, German critics often see films and their relation to the Holocaust with heightened sensitivity to how it is framed historically, whether perpetrators are humanized, and how ideological violence is contextualized. This contrast shows how discussions of Holocaust representation can vary significantly depending on cultural context and national memory. Adding the German critiques of the film to the English Wikipedia page for *Jojo Rabbit* is crucial for understanding and interpreting the international reception of the film and introduces perspectives shaped by Germany’s own personal historical memory, allowing outside audiences to better understand how a society grapples with its own negative past. Incorporating the German critical response therefore reveals that *Jojo Rabbit* is discussed not only in debates about satire, but also in the broader international conversations about how societies confront, interpret, and remember the history of the Holocaust.

Ultimately, *Jojo Rabbit* demonstrates how film and contemporary media can serve as a powerful tool for examining the social and psychological foundations of extremist ideology and dictatorial rule. By portraying the indoctrination of a child growing up surrounded by Nazi propaganda, the film shows how hatred and exclusion can become normalized through everyday institutions. Through debates about the film, *Jojo Rabbit* contributes to broader discussions about how societies remember the past and how future generations are taught to recognize and resist the forces that make genocide possible.

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<sup>8</sup> “Jojo Rabbit,” Wikipedia (German).

<sup>9</sup> Bert Rebhandl, “Filmfest in Toronto: Hitler in der Komödie Jojo Rabbit,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien-und-film/kino/filmfest-in-toronto-hitler-in-der-komoedie-jojo-rabbit-16387667.html>

<sup>10</sup> Frédéric Jaeger, “Filmfestival von Toronto: Jojo Rabbit gewinnt Publikumspreis,” *Der Spiegel*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/filmfestival-von-toronto-jojo-rabbit-gewinnt-publikumspreis-a-1286728.html>

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