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Jo Jo Rabbit

Abstract

This is a film review of *Jo Jo Rabbit* (2019), directed by Taika Waititi.

Author Notes

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Jo Jo Rabbit (2019), dir. Taika Waititi

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL4McUzXfFI>

Doing a review on the winner of the Toronto International Film Festival’s coveted People’s Choice Award (2019) makes this effort all the more pleasurable. This is an incredible film on many levels and for many reasons. That elements of it may offend people is perfectly understandable and that particular viewer’s experience must be respected. The crux of the issue is that the film uses the mind of a 10-year-old boy, Johannes (referred to as Jojo) separated from his father and living, at least he thinks, only with his mother, to construct an imaginary male-figure that will guide him as he tries to be the “man” of the house. Given the historical context of the film — 1945 Berlin, Germany — there is one obvious choice: Hitler. Our first encounter with the boy at the very beginning of the film is him looking at his own reflection in a mirror demanding to know who

he is. His imaginary advisor, Hitler, tells him in no uncertain terms that Jojo is the “man.” This “Hitler” in the film is imagined as “the saviour of our country.” This “Hitler” in the mind of this boy tells him that various parts of his anatomy are fierce animals but that his soul is German. Then the boy goes into the world and the audience hears a German version of the Beatles song, “I want to Hold Your Hand.” In this film German language is seen everywhere from the writings on the walls and on any paper shown to the camera or all packaged goods sold at the markets. This visual of everything in a foreign language, and yet all the characters speaking in English, sets up the dichotomy between the fact that what is outside may separate us, but what is inside should bring us altogether.

This a film about learning what matters most about human interaction and how to navigate through some of the worst experiences one could imagine. The characters serve to act upon the child so that the outcome is more than one could hope for given the atrocities that happen in the background, foreground, in his head and upon his body. The final message is a powerful one that can touch the very soul of the viewer if they take it in on that level.

Shoes are mentioned specifically several times and the camera deliberately focuses on them at times or we clearly hear characters intentionally making typical shoe-sounds. The use of shoes is a clear thread for the viewer to see how Jojo’s journey unfolds and the “steps” he takes. It is a journey from immaturity to maturity and from naïveté to a state of wisdom. When he ties his mother’s shoes at a stark and horrific moment in the film, it shows his necessitated move to full maturity. It also connects very well with the final on-screen quote just before the credits, where it states: “We have to dance to show God that we are grateful to be alive.” I believe the quote is credited to Rainer Maria Rilke.

The basic story is about a boy who wants to be the best Nazi he can be but he is shocked to discover that his mother is hiding a young Jewish girl who is a few years older than him. His mother (played by Scarlett Johansson) is on screen less time than I expected but in retrospect I think it helps the story. Another character unexpectedly makes a remarkable transformation from comedic moron to heroic knight. His final scene is visually presented as a knight in many ways. The young girl (played by Thomasin McKenzie) engages in unexpected ways with Jojo. Even though no one is really surprised by the ending, the journey is well worth viewing. There is even a closing scene of Jojo one last time talking to himself in a mirror.

The film is a great example of mythmaking and the journey-motif and what defines human purpose. If the one thing we can say about the concept of religion is that it is an attempt at making life meaningful, then this film proposes, perhaps, one of the most meaningful insights to a very long list of meaningful insights.