

Jojo Rabbit: A misguided comedy about Nazis

Edward Norton's neo-film noir, *Motherless Brooklyn*

By Joanne Laurier
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Jojo Rabbit

Having premiered at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival, where it won the Grolsch People's Choice Award, *Jojo Rabbit* is a would-be satirical comedy about Nazi Germany, written and directed by New Zealand-born Taika Waititi.

The film is based on Christine Leunens's novel *Caging Skies* (2008). It should be noted that the author's grandfather, Flemish artist Guillaume Leunens, was a prisoner in a German labor camp during World War II—and that the novel is not comedic.

The movie's central character is a 10-year-old boy, Jojo Betzler (Roman Griffin Davis). Loyal to the Nazis, Jojo has an invisible playmate: an imaginary-childish version of Adolf Hitler. The boy's ideological indoctrination is challenged, however, when he discovers that his mother is hiding a Jewish teenage girl in their home.

Waititi [*What We Do in the Shadows* (2014); *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016); *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)], from a part-Maori and part-Jewish background, apparently wanted to address the impact of racist propaganda on children and may well have been influenced by present-day events and dangers. But he has taken a seriously misguided path, creating a work that inadvertently or not trivializes Nazism and turns people away from a study of the concrete historical processes that produced such horrific carnage.

Jojo Rabbit opens in the final year of World War II. Living in a German town, Jojo wants nothing more than to be the very best little Nazi, even conjuring up a goofy version of the Führer (Waititi) to be his mentor. The boy earns the nickname "Jojo Rabbit" when he refuses to kill a rabbit at a Nazi youth training camp run by Captain Klenzendorf (Sam Rockwell), a one-eyed drunk. Klenzendorf is assisted by Fred Finkel (Alfie Allen) and Fräulein Rahm (Rebel Wilson) who teach the boys to hate Jews because, among other things, they are supposedly the product of humans breeding with fish.

Life changes when Jojo finds the Jewish girl, Elsa (Thomasin McKenzie), living in a closet in his home. He learns that his clandestinely anti-Nazi mother Rosie (Scarlett Johansson) has been hiding Elsa. Rosie will eventually be punished severely for her transgressions and Jojo will replace his fantastical Hitler

with Elsa, who helps him overcome his anti-Semitic brainwashing.

Waititi made an amusing vampire satire (*What We Do in the Shadows*), but with *Jojo Rabbit* the filmmaker is in over his head. He shows himself to be not just in the shadows, but completely in the dark. While there are similar satirical-structural elements in both movies, form is not inconsequential and the content here—the history of Nazism—demands a fundamentally different artistic embodiment.

In the current period of political and cultural regression, the influence of a socialist, class analysis of fascism has declined. Waititi argues in his film that hatred is the source of Nazism and can be vanquished with love. This is little more than futile liberal finger-wagging.

Nazi fascism was the counterrevolution in Germany, arising from the need of the ruling class to smash and atomize the working class. Its ferocious anti-Semitism was inextricably bound up with anti-communism and anti-Bolshevism. Revolutionary opportunities in Germany were squandered or betrayed between 1918 and 1933 and fascism was not inevitable—and was certainly not the product of mere racial hatred!

As philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer put it in 1939: "If you don't want to talk about capitalism then you had better keep quiet about fascism."

An interviewer at National Public Radio challenged Waititi: "There's this thing I hear you driving at and I'm trying to figure out—are you responding to some of the criticism of this film which is you shouldn't make a movie in which Nazis are buffoons because the Nazis weren't buffoons? They were efficient killers. They weren't funny. Like, at any point in the making or the marketing or the release of this movie, did your mind change about anything?"

The director simply replied, "No."

In Charlie Chaplin's autobiography, the comic genius wrote: "Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made *The Great Dictator* [his satire about Hitler and the Nazis]; I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis." This probably holds true as well for Ernst Lubitsch and his 1942

anti-Nazi comedy, *To Be or Not to Be*. The fascist ~~André Bakard~~ really discriminatory things—that almost sound like conspiracy theory, they’re so wild and intense—into the decisions he made.”

Motherless Brooklyn

Actor Edward Norton wrote, produced, directed and starred in *Motherless Brooklyn*. Based on the 1999 novel of the same name by Jonathan Lethem, the neo-noir drama, set in New York City in 1957, follows a gumshoe protagonist with Tourette syndrome on the trail of crimes that lead directly to City Hall.

Dubbed “Brooklyn” or “Freakshow,” Lionel Essrog (Norton) displays Tourettic impulses (“like living with an anarchist”) that cause inadvertent verbal outbursts and physical gyrations. The film’s title refers to the fact that Lionel grew up an orphan.

But Lionel is also possessed with above-average memory and reasoning powers. When his boss, friend and mentor Frank Minna (Bruce Willis) is murdered, Lionel is hell-bent on discovering the identities of the killers. Besides Lionel, other members of Frank’s detective agency include Tony (Bobby Cannavale), Gilbert (Ethan Suplee) and Danny (Dallas Roberts), none of whom have Lionel’s dogged desire to avenge Frank’s slaying.

His investigation leads him to a Harlem jazz club, which is home to Laura Rose (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), a community activist and lawyer. (The club’s music is performed by Wynton Marsalis via actor Michael K. Williams.)

Laura Rose and Gabby Horowitz (Cherry Jones) are leading a campaign against the city’s planning power broker Moses Randolph (Alec Baldwin) and his drive to eradicate poor and black neighborhoods in favor of profitable development. Randolph and his murderous thugs ruthlessly crush anyone, including Randolph’s brother (Willem Dafoe), who stand in the way.

Motherless Brooklyn is in general, a well-constructed, atmospheric film. Norton has assembled an admirable cast of characters, each with his or her own foibles or agenda, who manage to navigate a danger-filled city.

Baldwin is outstanding as Randolph, based on Robert Moses (1888-1981), a New York City public official, known as the “Master Builder.” Moses was, according to Wikipedia, “one of the most polarizing figures in the history of urban development in the United States.”

Norton makes Randolph too much of a perfidious individual, a vicious lone wolf forcing his will on a defenseless population rather than a cog in the wheel of postwar urban planning. In an interview with Corporate Crime Reporter, the filmmaker argued: “New York was run by a Darth Vader-like figure [Robert Moses] who was never elected to public office. People thought he was the Parks Commissioner of New York. But from 1930 to 1968, he had uncontested authoritarian power over New York City and New York State and he made every significant decision about the way that the modern infrastructure of New York was built ... And he was very racist.

In his 1982 book, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman noted that when Moses “was asked ... if urban expressways ... didn’t pose special human problems, he replied impatiently that ‘there’s very little hardship in the thing. There’s a little discomfort and even that is exaggerated.’” Berman went on, “Compared with his earlier, rural and suburban highways, the only difference here was that ‘There are more houses in the way ... more people in the way, that’s all.’ He boasted that ‘When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.’”

But Moses merely, if ruthlessly, presided over the particular expression in New York of a wider development: the “modernization” of America’s cities, a process inevitably carried out by the ruling class for its benefit. As the WSWS explained a few years ago: “That Moses’s infrastructure projects connected the city by a network of highways ... and gave pride of place to the automobile instead of public transportation was bound up with the exigencies and peculiarities of American capitalism in the post-World War II period. Moses’s ego and overbearing personality had little to do with it.”

It also seems that Norton, like a good many others, chooses to see Donald Trump as the devil incarnate, rather than the foul product of a decaying social and political system. In an appearance as guest host on Turner Classic Movies, Norton likened Baldwin’s character to Trump, and elsewhere has called the current president an “insane clown charlatan.”

More valuably, in the same interview, the actor-director pointed to the danger of the power of giant corporations: “[W]e’re living in an era where arguably the base problem under everything is the argument between corporate interest and human interest. That’s the root of our environmental problem. It’s the root of our healthcare problems. It’s the root of our political problems ... we’ve got to elevate human interest over corporate interest.”

Norton’s *Motherless Brooklyn* attempts, with a good degree of success, to dramatize these concerns.

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