

Ideology, Internalization, and Psychological Control in Jojo Rabbit

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Abstract

This paper dissects the psychological machinery of fascism as depicted in Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit* (2019). While most academic discourse surrounding the film centers on its satirical bite or its "coming-of-age" tropes, this study argues that the film's true complexity lies in its visualization of how ideology is "housed" within the psyche. Utilizing a conceptual chain of theorists including: Interpellation (Louis Althusser, 1969), the Superego (Sigmund Freud), The Big Other (Jacques Lacan), mechanisms of Disciplinary Power (Michel Foucault), and Obscene Enjoyment (Slavoj Žižek), this research seeks to track the passage from the process of recruitment through to the eventual disjunction of internalized forms of authority. The analysis of Imaginary Hitler is intended to showcase how this film (not as a camp comedy) serves as an amalgamation of elements that mirror fascism's self-regulating nature as a psychological structure. The manner in which the film adapts its source material, Christine Leunens' *Caging Skies*, is indicative of how humor can be both a substitution for and a vehicle to express ideological engagement with others. In shifting from Leunens' strict sense of grim realism to Taika Waititi's absurd sense of surrealism through the lens of film, this paper illuminates instances where the seduction and subsequent sense of "pleasure" was achieved via one's willingness to lend themselves to—ideologically—those interested parties or groups around one.

Keywords: Jojo Rabbit, Ideological Interpellation, Disciplinary Power, Obscene Enjoyment, Fascist Indoctrination, Cinematic Adaptation.

Introduction

In 2019, Taika Waititi's film adaptation of Christine Leunens' novel "Caging Skies" chronicles an imaginative ten-year-old boy named Jojo Betzler, whose ideologically entrenched loyalty to the Nazi party is played out by way of an imaginary representation of Adolf Hitler. While many reviewers have described Jojo's arc as progressing from one based on hate to one inspired by empathy, the structural basis upon which ideology rests in Jojo's mind has been overlooked. This paper argues that Jojo's imaginary friend is the actualization of ideology, demonstrating the power with which ideology controls the inner space of children. By integrating multiple psychoanalytic and political theories, it is evident that Waititi's film provides a chilling example of how the child's entire interior psyche has been colonized by state-sponsored fantasy. There is an essential difference between Leunens' literary source and Waititi's screen adaptation. The internal monologue in "Caging Skies" is debilitatingly claustrophobic, whereas the imprisonment of Jojo's psyche as described above is presented on the screen through the use of a character representing Jojo's imaginary Hitler. In this manner, Jojo is shown to be the victim of state-sponsored fantasy and of

how the psyche of the child can be less realized when it is subject to outside influences in terms of ideology.



Figure 1

A Still from the Film Jojo Rabbit

Note. From "Springtime for Nazis: How the satire of 'Jojo Rabbit' backfires," by R. Brody, 2019, The New Yorker (newyorker.com). Copyright 2019 by Condé Nast.

Literature Review

Most of the academic literature regarding Jojo Rabbit is about how satire works as a way to critique Holocaust cinema. Authors like William Skiles have studied how the film presents Jojo's imagination as a tool to "re-educate" him. However, while there are many sources that discuss this theme, there is little literature discussing how the psychological "connective tissue" binds Jojo's world together. The source material (Caging Skies) is a very dark exploration of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Meanwhile, Waititi's film takes it further by presenting belongingness as something seductive. This study builds upon existing satire research by moving into the realm of subject-formation, exploring not just that Jojo is indoctrinated, but the specific theoretical stages from recruitment to enjoyment that keep him trapped in that indoctrination. Scholarly reception of Leunens' Caging Skies often focuses on the novel's portrayal of the "Stockholm Syndrome" and the moral decay inherent in prolonged deception. Literary critics argue that the book's strength lies in its refusal to offer easy redemption, a stark contrast to the film's "coming-of-age" emotional arc. By bridging the gap between Leunens' psychological horror and Waititi's satire, this study justifies the use of a multifaceted theoretical framework to address the complexities of ideological internalization.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in a **conceptual chain of five key theorists** that explain the lifecycle of an internalized ideology:

1. **Louis Althusser (Interpellation):** The process by which the state "hails" the individual into a specific identity.
2. **Sigmund Freud (The Superego):** The model of authority that is swallowed whole and becomes an

internal moral critic.

3. **Jacques Lacan (The Big Other):** The symbolic order that organizes a person's meaning of the world.
4. **Michel Foucault (Disciplinary Power):** The stage where the individual begins to surveil and regulate their own behavior.
5. **Slavoj Žižek (Obscene Enjoyment):** The theory that ideology is sustained through the "pleasure" or "fun" it provides the subject.

This framework is particularly useful when comparing the two mediums. While Foucault's disciplinary power is felt in the literal "caging" of the novel, it is manifested through Jojo's self-surveillance in the film. Similarly, the Žižekian "enjoyment" is a cinematic addition that helps explain why the film's version of Jojo is more initially "recruited" into the ideology than his literary counterpart.



Figure 2

A Still from the Film Jojo Rabbit

Note. From "'Jojo Rabbit' review: A hit-or-miss Hitler comedy with a heart," by P. Travers, 2019, Rolling Stone (rollingstone.com). Copyright 2019 by Penske Media Corporation.

Analysis and Discussion

The Ritual of Interpellation

The film begins with Althusser's concept of interpellation. In the Hitler Youth camp, Jojo is not just learning skills; he is being "called" into a role. The cinematic emphasis on uniforms, daggers, and group chants illustrates the moment a child recognizes himself as a "subject" of the state. When Jojo looks in the mirror and sees a Nazi, he is answering the state's call. Waititi uses bright, postcard-like colors here to show that this recruitment isn't felt as a threat, but as a prestigious invitation to belong. Interpellation is not a passive event but a sensory ritual that requires the subject's active participation. A particularly good example of this theme is in the "book burning" scene at the training camp. In this moment, when Jojo throws the book into the fire, the camera holds on his face for a moment, showing the mixed feelings of both weakness and excitement. The destruction of this book was his "answer" to the state's hail. By destroying the "other", in this case the intellectual (or Jewish) text, he is able to reinforce himself as part of the collective. The cinematic use of a vibrant, summer-camp aesthetic during such a violent act demo-

nstrates how the state masks the reality of fascism with the aesthetics of belonging.

The Superego and the Big Other

Once Jojo faces the trauma of his injury, the ideology shifts from external rituals to an internal voice. Imaginary Hitler emerges as a supportive "best friend," embodying Freud's concept of the superego. He provides Jojo with the moral rules needed to survive. Simultaneously, Hitler acts as Lacan's "Big Other"—the symbolic authority that interprets reality for Jojo. It is important to note that Jojo viewed Elsa not as a human but as a "ghost" or "monster", which is what his internalized Big Other has formed as his vocabulary of meaning. This subheading is therefore crucial to understanding how the progression from external ritual to internal psychological structure occurs in Jojo Rabbit. We see this transition clearly when Jojo returns home after his injury. No longer able to participate in the physical rituals of the camp, his mind creates a "supportive" Hitler to fill the void. A key scene demonstrating this is when Jojo looks in the mirror, and Hitler encourages him, saying, "You're a scary little rabbit." Here, Hitler functions as the Superego by transforming Jojo's physical limitation into a psychological strength. He also acts as the Big Other, providing the symbolic language Jojo needs to make sense of his "new" reality as a wounded hero rather than a failure.

Self-Regulation and the Panopticon

As the story progresses into the domestic space of Jojo's home, we see Foucault's disciplinary power at work. Jojo begins to monitor his own thoughts and actions to ensure they remain "Nazi-compliant." He doesn't need a Gestapo officer to watch him; he has become his own guard. His project of writing a "research book" on Jewish secrets is a perfect example of self-regulation; he is trying to "capture" the threat through his own internalized gaze, essentially building a psychological prison for himself and Elsa. Justifying this point requires showing that ideology remains powerful even when the authority figure is absent. This is demonstrated through Jojo's "study" of Elsa. Instead of reporting her immediately, he tries to classify her using the propaganda he has been taught. He sketches what he believes "Jews" look like in his notebook, showing how the Panoptic prison he has in his mind is looking at a threat through my eyes in an attempt to "capture" it. He tries to check his actions to see if they are "brave," "loyal," etc. He is trying to be brave even though he is frightened, showing that he has become a guard of himself. This is seen when we compare the "caging" of Leunens as it is depicted literally in the book versus psychologically (ie, in his mind, thinking about how to escape).

Žižek and the Rupture of Enjoyment

Finally, the paper addresses why Jojo's ideology is so "sticky." As Žižek argues, ideology is sustained by "obscene enjoyment." Jojo has fun with Hitler; they eat unicorn meat and leap through the woods. The ideology provides a sense of play that makes the hate palatable. The climax of the film—kicking Hitler out of the window—is the ultimate rupture. Hitler is no longer a fun friend; instead, he is a bloody, horrible screamer. When Jojo leaves him behind, he is not only rejecting an individual; he is also destroying the entire chain of pleasure that kept him loyal to the regime. The rationale for including this last sub-section is to provide an explanation for why the ideology eventually fails: because its supporting force of "pleasure" becomes impossible to maintain. The "dinner table" scene, where Hitler eats unicorn meat while Jojo sits in silence, demonstrates the absurdity of this affective investment. Hitler is "fun" as long as the ideology provides a sense of power; however, when Jojo witnesses the real-world violence of the regime (the hanging in the square), the "obscene enjoyment" turns to horror. The final confrontation where Jojo kicks Hitler out the window, is truly the visual rupture of this enjoyment. By rejecting the "pleasure" of the imaginary friend, Jojo finally breaks the symbolic chain that held his identity together.

Conclusion

The final moment of *Jojo Rabbit* is a dance, representing the end of a fixed, formalist, ideologically-driven life path. When the connection between Althusser's "recruitment" of the subject and Žižek's notion of enjoyment is traced as a chain, it becomes evident that the culminative victory of Jojo being free from the shackles of fascism is actually the defeat of his own psychoanalytic structure. The closing quote by Rilke reinforces this sentiment, inviting one to be open to "beauty and terror" that fixed ideologies cannot accommodate. Ultimately, then, in what Waititi illustrates, whilst a state can give a subject their perceived reality (the voice from the Outside), it remains the subject's own act of labour to reject that inner voice.



Figure 3

Jojo and Elsa in *Jojo Rabbit*

Note. From [Promotional still of Jojo and Elsa in *Jojo Rabbit*], 2019, Twitter ([twimg.com](https://twitter.com/twing.com)). Copyright 2019 by Searchlight Pictures.

The comparison made between *Caging Skies* and *Jojo Rabbit* reveals an extremely profound insight into the nature of ideology. Leunens' novel provides a warning of the continued existence of darkness within an individual who has been engulfed by a lie, while Waititi's adaptation suggests that through the "beauty and terror" of genuine relationships, an individual can finally liberate himself from the psychoanalytic chains of the "Big Other."

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