

# Movies Don't All Need to Make a Profound Political Statement

Our obsession with labels — like calling '1917' anti-war or 'Jojo Rabbit' anti-Nazi — is giving us all tunnel vision

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"Jojo Rabbit." Photo: Searchlight

**T**he [Nazis in \*Jojo Rabbit\*](#) have two salient characteristics. They are evil (by association, even if not portrayed as egregiously wicked individuals). And they are ridiculous — not just

T Waititi's own Shaggy-ish Adolf, but also characters like Stephen Merchant's protocol-obsessed gestapo officer or Rebel Wilson's over-enthusiastic fräulein.

Yet [Jojo Rabbit](#), directed by Taika Waititi, is not an "anti-Nazi" movie in any meaningful sense, as critics have [widely hailed](#) it to be.

Nazism is intrinsic to the plot of *Jojo Rabbit* in a literal sense, but it's almost incidental in terms of the fundamental lessons that the movie can teach us about people and relationships. Surely it takes more than a mere recognition of Nazism's evils for a movie to be truly anti-Nazi. It is not enough to show, in passing, that the regime was cruel or the innocent suffered; we all know that, and indeed not showing those details might be interpreted as revisionism. Acknowledging the baseline facts doesn't turn a film into a strong anti-Nazi statement, any more than a serial-killer flick like David Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007) is an "anti-murder" movie.

Compare the treatment of Nazism in another movie often mentioned alongside *Jojo Rabbit*: Mel Brooks' *The Producers* (1967). Here, the comedic key is the way that *Springtime for Hitler* — the imaginary Broadway musical within the film — doesn't condemn Nazism; the humor of *The Producers* lies in its inversion of 1960s American values, and has very little to do with what actually happened decades earlier in Europe. *Jojo Rabbit* doesn't

attain this level of meta sophistication; its Nazis are silly, sure, but the ways in which they are silly says nothing much about either Nazism or us.

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And that's perfectly acceptable. Indeed, *Jojo Rabbit's* a fine piece of entertainment. But audiences and critics now have a tendency to apply greater symbolism to films than what actually appears on screen. There's an anxiety to feel as though we're connecting with something deep, as opposed to idly frittering away 108 minutes. After all, themes around intolerant extremism are important to us, and to society, these days, so it must be front and center in the movie, too. But not all films make sweeping moral or political statements — nor should they have to.

In much the same way, while [Sam Mendes' 1917](#) has been [hailed as an "anti-war" film](#), there's little sign of this in the movie itself — a straightforward and engaging, if excessively flashy, adventure that pays only routine lip service to the ugliness of conflict.

Surely, in order to earn a label of "anti-war," a film would need to do more than simply show battles in a negative

light. It would need to focus on the senseless destructiveness of war, or leaders' callous disregard for consequences. By this definition, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), or Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), or Mick Jackson's devastating British TV film *Threads* (1984) are truly anti-war. They portray particular wars but their import is wider.

*1917*, though, doesn't do this. In fact, an uncharitable critic might say that it is too busy dwelling on its own makers' undoubted technical skill to say much about anything else. Audiences encounter some grim Great War tropes: the nightmarish desolation of No Man's Land, the bloodthirsty officer determined to send his men over the top at all costs. But the No Man's Land of *1917* is both oddly sterile and patently unthreatening to the protagonists, and the officer soon repents.

As with *Jojo Rabbit*, none of this is to say *1917* is a bad movie. So why do we [seem to insist](#), almost as a [knee-jerk response](#), that both films be described as anti-something?

In part, it's a problem of perception, a difficulty we experience in seeing a movie for what it is, rather than infusing it with our own concerns. We're aware that war and totalitarianism are important, almost existential threats, so we find it hard to imagine how — in the context of a movie — they could be relatively insignificant compared to other issues that might seem more

mundane.

We fall into this trap with other films handling hot-button topics, too; for example, Barry Jenkins' *If Beale Street Could Talk* is arguably much more about the persistence of human love than the black experience. *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s handling of its subject's sexuality may be a little clumsy, but it's hard to see anything remotely homophobic in Bryan Singer's film — unless you arrive at the theater with that expectation. Callous attitudes toward the mentally ill may be among many, many themes on display in Todd Phillips' *Joker*, but that concern is hardly the core of the movie (and the allusions to political radicalization are much more intriguing, if slightly less obvious).

This tendency reached an extreme over the last few years in the U.K., where I live. Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, some film commentators have regarded almost any reference to leaving, splitting, or separation in any British-made movie as a metaphor for departing the European Union — as if those ideas couldn't possibly be part of a story for their own sake, without symbolizing something beyond it.

We look for our own priorities — both as individuals, and as a society — reflected in a film. And since we look for them, we find them.

Many of us are also serious people; we don't like to

believe we're wasting the day on mindlessness; we don't like to think (or want others to think) that we lost sight of the big priorities. We want to be able to tell ourselves that we're not just watching an adventure movie set in wartime; we're watching a profound anti-war statement. We are, perhaps, almost afraid of enjoying a movie set in Nazi Germany or during a conflict without characterizing it as anti-fascist or anti-war, just in case we're accused of trivializing the matter ourselves.

It's a pity because I bet what audiences will remember from *Jojo Rabbit* a few years down the line is not the bodies hanging in the market square, or the futile way that kids and old men are chucked into battle against the encroaching Russians. Instead, it will be the gentle teasing between Roman Griffin Davis' German-Aryan boy and Thomasin McKenzie's Jewish girl, the way that friendship blossoms between them in the least congenial circumstances. There is not a Nazi, or a big issue, in sight: just the kind of sweet simple humanity that movies can depict so well, reflecting back at us our inner selves rather than our social and political convictions.

If only we let them.