



Exploring the Transformative Power of Affectional Bonds and Symbolism in *Jojo Rabbit*

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Abstract

Set during World War II, the film *Jojo Rabbit* follows the story of Jojo Betzler, a young German boy and avid member of the Hitler Youth, whose imaginary friend is none other than Adolf Hitler himself. However, Jojo's beliefs and worldview are challenged when he discovers a Jewish girl named Elsa living hidden in his attic. Drawing upon the field of semiotics, the study aims to examine how the affectional bonds formed between Jojo and Elsa, along with the symbolic representations employed throughout the film, convey its central themes and illuminate the psychological transformation of the protagonist. By conducting a comprehensive semiotic analysis, this research seeks to unravel the meanings embedded within the signs, symbols, objects, and images presented in *Jojo Rabbit*. Through the utilisation of semiotics as the primary research methodology, this investigation aims to provide a deeper understanding of *Jojo Rabbit*'s narrative, artistic choices, and the emotional impact it has on its audience.

Keywords: Affectional bonds, ideology, semiotic, symbols.

1. Introduction

In the realm of cinema, a few films manage to strike a delicate balance between entertainment and profound exploration of the human condition. *Jojo Rabbit*, directed by Taika Waititi, stands as a poignant testament to the power of storytelling. Set during the tumultuous backdrop of Nazi Germany, the film masterfully intertwines humour and tragedy, inviting audiences to reflect on the profound impact of the semiotic elements that shape the understanding of historical events and personal transformation.

Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit* is a satirical comedy-drama that explores the life of a young German boy named Johannes "Jojo" Betzler during World War II. The film delves into the complexities of human relationships, particularly in the context of a war-torn society. The current venture examines the relationships between Jojo and his mother, Rosie, his imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler, and the Jewish girl, Elsa, who is hidden in their home.

Life of human beings is intricately woven through a web of relationships that shape our identities and influence our perspectives. This understanding forms the crux of our hypothesis: the "affectional bonds" we form have the potential to transform individuals, especially children, in profound ways. By examining the semiotic relationships in *Jojo Rabbit*, the study aims to shed light on the transformative power of such bonds.

Moreover, the film's narrative takes place during one of history's darkest periods – the Nazi regime. The study also focuses on the semiotic elements in the film's dialogues and proves that it plays a vital role in countering the disillusionment and possibilities of depression that permeated society at the time. By delving into the depths of these relationships within the context of such an oppressive regime, the authors hope to uncover how human connection and empathy can serve as pillars of resilience.

2. Semiotics in Relationships

The study is conducted on the basis of the interdisciplinary lenses of 'Attachment Theory' and Semiotics. Attachment Theory, pioneered by John Bowlby (1907-1990), explores the significance of emotional bonds formed between individuals, particularly during childhood, and their lasting impact on psychological development. By applying this theory to the analysis of *Jojo Rabbit*, we seek to uncover how the protagonist's relationships act as semiotic elements that shape their journey of self-discovery.

The study of Semiotics offers valuable insights into the power of signs, symbols, and images as carriers of meaning. As viewers, we navigate the film's narrative through a visual language that employs various semiotic elements. These symbols not only represent historical events but also shed light on the protagonist's psychic transformation, allowing us to glean deeper layers of understanding.

The semiotic triad, proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, forms the foundation of semiotics. It comprises three interrelated elements: the sign, the object, and the interpretant. In the context of 'Jojo Rabbit', this theory can be used to analyze the relationship between the signs present in the film (such as dialogue, visual imagery, and gestures), the objects they represent (such as historical events or emotional states), and the interpretant (the audience's understanding and interpretation). By dissecting these elements, we can uncover how signs in the character conversations contribute to the film's overall meaning and thematic resonance (Burch).

Symbolism through Characters focuses on analysing characters as semiotic constructs and understanding how their traits, actions, and dialogue contribute to the narrative (Thibault, 3). In *Jojo Rabbit*, character conversations play a crucial role in shaping the audience's perception of the characters and their development. By employing the semiotics of characters, researchers can analyse the language, symbolism, and subtext present in their dialogues, exploring how these elements communicate their personalities, motivations, and transformations throughout the film.

Symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory developed by George Herbert Mead, explores the role of symbols and interactions in shaping human behaviour and social structures (McLeod). This theory can be applied to *Jojo Rabbit* to analyse the symbolic exchanges within character conversations. By examining how characters communicate, negotiate power, and construct meaning through their interactions, researchers can gain insights into the social and psychological dimensions of the film. Symbolic interactionism allows for a deeper understanding of the transformative power of language and the role of affectional bonds in shaping the characters' identities and relationships.

3. Jojo and Rosie

Jojo's relationship with his mother, Rosie, is central to his emotional development and understanding of the world. Rosie is a loving and supportive mother who encourages Jojo to

question the Nazi ideology he has been indoctrinated with. Despite the societal pressures and dangers they face, Rosie maintains a strong bond with her son, providing him with a secure base from which to explore the world. This secure attachment allows Jojo to develop a sense of trust and emotional security, which is crucial for his emotional growth and resilience in the face of adversity. Rosie tries to instil the values of love in Jojo, despite their strained relationship:

ROSIE: You're stupid. Love is the strongest thing in the world.

JOJO: I think you'll find that metal is the strongest thing in the world, followed closely by dynamite and then muscles. (Beat) Besides, I wouldn't even know it if I saw it.

ROSIE: Surprise, surprise, your shoelaces are undone. Again. (she ties his laces) You'll know it when it happens. You'll feel it. A pain...

ROSIE: Nope, in your tummy. And your heart. Like butterflies. It's like you're full of butterflies. (*Jojo Rabbit* 50:28 - 51:00)

The conversation revolves around the theme of love and strength, presenting a clash between Rosie's perspective on love and Jojo's belief in physical strength. Applying the semiotic triad, we can identify the signs, objects, and interpretants in the dialogue. The signs include Rosie's statement about love being the strongest thing in the world, Jojo's counterargument regarding physical strength, and Rosie's mention of shoelaces being undone. The object being represented here is the concept of strength and love. The interpretant is the audience's understanding and interpretation of the dialogue.

Rosie's statement about love represents the sign, conveying the object of love as the strongest force in the world. Jojo's response represents another sign, presenting physical strength and objects like metal and dynamite as the strongest forces. The interpretant can vary, with the audience potentially perceiving Rosie's view as a metaphorical representation of the power of love, and Jojo's response highlighting his youthful naivety and adherence to societal notions of strength.

Analyzing the dialogue from the perspective of the semiotics of characters, we can interpret the exchange as a representation of the generational gap between Rosie and Jojo. Rosie, as a parental figure, embodies a perspective shaped by wisdom and emotional understanding. On the other hand, Jojo, as a young boy influenced by Nazi ideology, showcases a limited understanding of love. His focus on physical strength and objects highlights his indoctrinated worldview. Through their conversation, the characters' semiotic representations exemplify the contrast between maturity and innocence, highlighting the potential for growth and transformation in Jojo's character.

Rosie's gesture of tying Jojo's shoelaces represents a nurturing act, symbolizing her care and affection for him. The mention of undone shoelaces symbolizes Jojo's immaturity and need for guidance. The conversation becomes a moment of interaction and learning, as Rosie introduces Jojo to a broader understanding of love beyond physical strength. By describing the sensations of butterflies in the tummy and heart, Rosie provides a vivid symbol of the emotional aspects of love. Symbolic interactionism highlights the transformative potential of interpersonal exchanges, indicating that Jojo's understanding of love may evolve as he grows and experiences different relationships.

4. Jojo and Adolf

Jojo's imaginary friend, Adolf Hitler, represents an insecure attachment figure, as he embodies the Nazi ideology that Jojo has been taught to believe in. This relationship is characterised by a lack of emotional security and trust, as Adolf encourages Jojo to engage in harmful behaviour and perpetuates the dehumanization of others. As Jojo begins to question the Nazi ideology and form new relationships, his attachment to Adolf weakens, ultimately leading to the dissolution of their bond. This shift in attachment highlights the importance of emotional growth and resilience.

Hitler becomes pivotal in setting the very titular identity of Jojo. Hitler comments on the rabbit situation Jojo was put under:

ADOLF: Want to tell me about the rabbit incident? What was that all about?

JOJO: They wanted me to kill it. I'm sorry.

ADOLF: Meh, don't worry about it. I couldn't care less. Just like a cloud.

JOJO: But now they call me a scared rabbit.

ADOLF: Well you want to know something? (offJojo's nod) Just because they're small and delightfully cute doesn't mean rabbits are cowards. The rabbit faces a dangerous world every day, hunting carrots for his family... for his country. Forget those boys. They have their place and so do you. My empire will be made up of all animals, eagles, lions, elephants and even the mighty rabbit. (*Jojo Rabbit*, 12:24 - 13:15)

Adolf's statement about not caring and comparing himself to a cloud represents a sign, conveying his dismissive and detached attitude. Jojo's concern about being called a scared rabbit represents another sign, reflecting his insecurity and the impact of the incident on his perception by others. The interpretant can vary, with the audience perceiving Adolf's words as a metaphorical representation of his manipulative nature and Jojo's vulnerability and desire for validation. The signs include Adolf's question about the rabbit incident and Jojo's remorseful response. The object being represented is the rabbit incident and its implications for Jojo's reputation. The interpretant is the audience's understanding and interpretation of the conversation.

Adolf, as Jojo's imaginary friend and a personification of Hitler, symbolizes the influence of Nazi ideology on Jojo's young mind. Through his dialogue, Adolf attempts to downplay the significance of the rabbit incident and reshape Jojo's perspective. Jojo, on the other hand, embodies the struggle between his innate empathy and the pressures of conforming to Nazi ideals. His remorse and concern over being labelled a scared rabbit reflect his internal conflict and desire for acceptance. The semiotic analysis of characters highlights the manipulation and indoctrination present in the conversation, as well as the potential for Jojo's psychological transformation.

Adolf's dismissal of the rabbit incident and his comparison of the rabbit to courageous animals like eagles and lions serve as symbols of Nazi propaganda and the distortion of reality. Through this interaction, Adolf seeks to reshape Jojo's self-perception by emphasizing the potential for strength and resilience in the face of danger, thereby reinforcing the Nazi ideology of power and dominance. The symbolic interaction highlights the potential for individuals to be shaped and manipulated through language and distorted symbolism.

Jojo's fictitious bond with Hitler is a reflection of his own strife and confusion. Hitler serves as Jojo's guide, cheerleader, and confidant, but as Jojo begins to doubt his allegiance to Nazism, Hitler also becomes increasingly violent, deceptive, and abusive. With his ridiculous acts and counsel, Hitler also offers comic relief:

ADOLF (CONT'D): Now you listen to me. I'm going to give you one last chance to make things right. You're going to put this on and forget about that disgusting Jewy cow up there, and you're going to come back to me where you belong. Got it? Jojo screws up the armband and throws it on the ground. Adolf buckles in pain.

ADOLF (CONT'D): Heyyy... hey, how about you Heil me, yeah? Come on, for old time's sake? (beat) Heil me, little man.

JOJO: No...

ADOLF: Come on, you know you want to. Just a little Heil. Just a little bit le Heil for your old friend?

JOJO: No...

(And with that, Jojo kicks Adolf as hard as he can... Adolf screams as he goes FLYING THROUGH THE WINDOW and out into OBLIVION.) (*Jojo Rabbit*, 01:39:30 - 54)

Throughout the film, Jojo has an imaginary friendship with Hitler, who represents his misguided beliefs and adherence to Nazi ideology. However, in this particular scene, Jojo takes a decisive stand against Hitler and breaks free from the toxic influence he represents. Jojo's rejection of Hitler's demands and his defiance in throwing the armband on the ground demonstrate a shift in their relationship dynamics. It signifies Jojo's growing awareness and rejection of the hateful ideology that Hitler symbolizes. By refusing to comply with Hitler's commands, Jojo rejects the indoctrination that has influenced him thus far, illustrating a significant turning point in their relationship. The scene further emphasizes Jojo's agency and his journey towards personal growth and liberation. The act of kicking Hitler in the groin and ultimately sending him out of the window can be seen as a symbolic representation of Jojo's emancipation from the shackles of Nazi ideology. It showcases his rejection of the distorted values and beliefs that Hitler personifies, marking a definitive break from their previous rapport.

Adolf's demands for Jojo to put on the armband and forget about the "disgusting Jewy cow" represent signs that reflect the oppressive and discriminatory nature of Nazi ideology. Jojo's refusal and his act of kicking Adolf symbolize his rejection of the hateful ideology and his assertion of individual agency. The interpretant varies, with the audience likely perceiving Jojo's actions as a symbol of defiance against oppressive beliefs and Adolf's defeat as a representation of the triumph of humanity over hatred. Jojo, however, embodies the internal conflict and the awakening of his conscience. His refusal to comply and his act of kicking Adolf represent a turning point in his character development, as he rejects the toxic ideology and asserts his individuality.

The semiotic analysis of characters highlights the transformative power of personal choices and the potential for individuals to break free from oppressive systems. Adolf's demands for Jojo to perform the Heil gesture and his appeals to their past friendship represent symbols of conformity and the manipulation of loyalty. Jojo's refusal to comply and his act of kicking Adolf symbolize his rejection of indoctrination and the reclamation of his autonomy. The

symbolic interaction reflects the transformative power of resistance and the breaking of the cycle of hate. Jojo's action becomes a symbol of liberation and the triumph of compassion over bigotry.

5. Jojo and Elsa

The relationship between Jojo and Elsa, the Jewish girl hidden in his home, is a pivotal aspect of the film, as it challenges Jojo's preconceived notions about Jews and Nazi ideology. Initially, Jojo is fearful and hostile towards Elsa, viewing her as a threat to his safety and beliefs. However, as they spend time together and form an emotional bond, Jojo's attachment to Elsa becomes more secure, allowing him to develop empathy and understanding for her plight. This relationship demonstrates the transformative power of secure interpersonal bonds in promoting emotional growth and challenging harmful beliefs: "ELSA: You're not a Nazi, Jojo. You're a 10-year-old kid who 'likes' Swastikas and 'likes' dressing up in a funny uniform and wants to be part of a club. But you're not one of them. Not you" (*Jojo Rabbit*, 01:04:41 - 4:53)

Elsa, as a Jewish girl hiding in Jojo's home, symbolizes resilience and resistance against the Nazi regime. Through her dialogue, she challenges Jojo's beliefs and offers an alternative perspective on his identity. Elsa's statement represents a sign conveying her perspective on Jojo's true nature, emphasizing that he is not a Nazi but rather a young boy seeking belonging and identity. Jojo's fascination with Swastikas and uniforms represents another sign, symbolizing his indoctrination and search for purpose. The interpretant may vary, with the audience likely perceiving Elsa's words as a symbol of hope and encouragement for Jojo's potential for growth and escape from the toxic ideology.

Jojo, as a young boy torn between his indoctrination and his inherent humanity, embodies the internal conflict present in the dialogue. His fascination with Nazi symbols and uniforms represents his immersion in the propaganda, while Elsa's words serve as a transformative influence, guiding him towards self-discovery and a rejection of the Nazi ideology. The semiotic analysis of characters highlights the potential for personal growth and the power of empathy in challenging oppressive beliefs. Elsa's statement challenges Jojo's self-perception and confronts him with the contradictions in his beliefs. By highlighting his inherent qualities and separating them from his misguided affiliations, she offers a path towards self-realization and liberation. Jojo's internal struggle becomes a symbol of the broader struggle faced by individuals under the influence of oppressive ideologies. The symbolic interaction showcases the potential for change and growth through human connection and the power of empathy. Jojo's journey towards self-discovery and the rejection of Nazi ideology symbolizes the triumph of humanity over hate.

Since Jojo was raised to despise Jews and Elsa was hidden in his attic, they initially had a hostile relationship. Yet as they spend more time together, they come to know one another better and form a friendship. Also, they correspond via letters while posing as Elsa's fiancée and Jojo's deceased sister:

(Jojo writes a letter at his desk, the Rilke poetry book lies next to him. Hitler lays on the bed reading a book.)

ADOLF: Yeah, this is a really good idea, what we're doing right now. If she had a heart, this would break it clean in two.

INT. JOJO'S HOUSE - INGA'S BEDROOM - AFTERNOON

(Elsa sits in an armchair. Jojo walks in.)

JOJO: I have something to tell you. I came across an old letter from Nathan - your fiance - addressed to you. It's quite lucky I found it...

JOJO (CONT'D): Dear Elsa, this is hard for me to say but I don't want to marry you anymore. I found another woman and we laugh a lot...

(Tears well in her eyes and she retreats into her hiding space, upset. She closes the secret door, leaving Jojo alone.) (*Jojo Rabbit*, 47:10 - 48:02)

Jojo's letter represents a sign that symbolizes his attempt to provoke a reaction from Elsa and inflict emotional pain. Adolf's commentary serves as another sign, reflecting his manipulation of Jojo's actions and the intention to hurt Elsa. Elsa's reaction, retreating into her hiding space and closing the secret door, represents a sign of her emotional distress and withdrawal from the situation. The interpretant may vary, with the audience perceiving the manipulation and emotional repercussions of the exchange. Jojo, under the influence of Adolf's indoctrination, symbolizes the internal struggle between his desire for acceptance within the Nazi ideology and his innate empathy. His decision to write the letter reflects his misguided attempt to conform to the toxic beliefs promoted by Adolf.

Jojo's letter and Adolf's commentary represent symbols of manipulation and cruelty, aimed at hurting Elsa. Elsa's retreat and closing of the secret door symbolise her need for emotional protection and withdrawal from the hurtful situation. The interaction reveals the destructive nature of Nazi ideology and the emotional toll it takes on individuals. It also highlights the potential for resilience and the importance of empathy in overcoming hatred. Elsa's reaction becomes a symbol of self-preservation and the need to shield oneself from harm.

6. Symbols and Allegory in 'Jojo Rabbit'

In the film *Jojo Rabbit*, signs, symbols, and objects play a crucial role in enhancing the storytelling and conveying deeper meanings. They serve as visual cues that enrich the narrative, evoke emotional responses, and communicate complex ideas in a concise and impactful manner. These visual elements provide a universal language that transcends words, allowing the audience to engage with the story on multiple levels. The signs, symbols, and objects in the film become powerful tools that ignite our imagination, evoke introspection, and deepen our understanding of the overarching themes and messages being portrayed. Through their careful placement and contextual significance, these visual elements invite us to contemplate the human condition, the impact of ideology, and the profound potential for growth, compassion, and empathy.

i. The Rabbit as a Symbol of Innocence and Cowardice

One of the most prominent symbols in the film is the rabbit, which represents both innocence and cowardice. In the beginning, Jojo is asked to kill a rabbit to prove his loyalty to the Nazi cause, but he is unable to do so. This inability to kill the rabbit highlights Jojo's inherent innocence and his inability to fully embrace the violent ideology of the Nazis. The other boys in the Hitler Youth taunt him by calling him "Jojo Rabbit," emphasizing his perceived cowardice.

As the film progresses, the rabbit continues to symbolize Jojo's struggle with his indoctrination and his growing realization of the humanity of those he has been taught to

hate. The rabbit serves as a reminder of Jojo's true nature, which is at odds with the violent and hateful ideology he has been taught to embrace.

ii. The Imaginary Hitler as an Allegory for Indoctrination

The character of the imaginary Hitler, played by director Taika Waititi, serves as an allegory for the indoctrination of young minds during the Nazi regime. Imaginary Hitler is a constant presence in Jojo's life, offering advice and encouragement as Jojo navigates the challenges of his world. However, as Jojo begins to question the beliefs he has been taught, Hitler becomes increasingly hostile and aggressive, reflecting the internal conflict Jojo experiences as he grapples with his indoctrination.

This allegory is particularly powerful because it demonstrates the insidious nature of indoctrination and the way it can infiltrate even the most innocent of minds. By personifying indoctrination as a character, the film effectively conveys the struggle that many individuals faced during this time as they attempted to reconcile their beliefs with the reality of the world around them.

iii. The Power of the Swastika:

One of the most potent symbols in *Jojo Rabbit* is the swastika, the infamous emblem associated with Nazi Germany. The film utilises this symbol to both underscore the indoctrination of Jojo and explore the larger theme of the seductive power of propaganda. The swastika is prominently featured throughout the film, adorning flags, uniforms, and even Jojo's bedroom wall, serving as a constant reminder of the prevailing ideology. However, as the narrative progresses, the swastika is also visually subverted and challenged. For instance, Jojo's shoes, which bear the symbol, are transformed into a source of ridicule and parody, reflecting the film's satirical tone. Additionally, the swastika is cleverly juxtaposed with the heart symbol in scenes involving Jojo's growing connection with Elsa, the Jewish girl hiding in his house. This visual contrast illustrates the clash between the oppressive ideology Jojo initially embraces and the universal power of love and empathy.

iv. The Butterfly as a Symbol of Transformation and Hope

Another important symbol in the film is the butterfly, which represents transformation and hope. Throughout the film, butterflies appear at pivotal moments, often signalling a change in Jojo's perspective or a moment of personal growth. For example, when Jojo discovers Elsa, a Jewish girl hiding in his home, he is initially terrified and repulsed by her. However, as he spends more time with her and learns about her life, he begins to see her as a human being rather than an enemy. In the scene where Jojo discovers his mother's body, the appearance of the blue butterfly amidst the tragedy can be interpreted as a symbol of hope and resilience. It suggests that even in the face of despair and loss, there is the potential for beauty, growth, and the possibility of a brighter future. They are often associated with fragility and the transient nature of life. In the context of the movie, the blue butterfly can symbolize the fragility and impermanence of human existence. It reminds Jojo of the preciousness of life and the need to embrace the present moment. The butterfly's fleeting presence serves as a poignant reminder of the ephemeral nature of joy, love, and the opportunity for personal growth.

7. Conclusion

The exploration of the protagonist's relationships with other characters has highlighted the capacity of the bonds to shape and mould individuals, particularly children, leading to profound changes in their personalities and perspectives. The relationship between Jojo and Elsa exemplifies how initially adversarial connections can evolve into deep friendships, challenging ideological beliefs and fostering personal growth. Similarly, the loving yet strained relationship between Jojo and his mother, Rosie, underscores the role of affectional bonds in instilling values of compassion and freedom, offering protection against the indoctrination of the Nazi regime.

Furthermore, the application of semiotics in analyzing the film *Jojo Rabbit* has provided valuable insights into the use of semiotics to convey the themes and subject matter of the movie. By securitising the semiotic elements present in the film, we have gained a deeper understanding of the historical events represented and the psychic transformation of the protagonist. Through the theories of semiotics, such as the semiotic triad, semiotics of characters, and symbolic interactionism, we have examined various conversations and dialogues in *Jojo Rabbit*. These analyses have revealed the power dynamics, internal conflicts, and transformative journeys of the characters. The study excellently portrayed the impact of affectional bonds in shaping the personality of individuals, especially children, as they navigate through complex situations and ideologies.

The conversations between characters, such as Rosie and Jojo, Adolf and Jojo, and Elsa and Jojo, have exemplified the interplay of signs, symbols, and interpretants. The semiotic analyses have illuminated the themes of resistance, identity, empathy, and the triumph of humanity over hate. It is through these semiotic elements that the film *Jojo Rabbit* effectively conveys its message and engages the audience in a thought-provoking exploration of historical events and the potential for personal growth and transformation.

The current endeavour has demonstrated the relevance and effectiveness of semiotics as a methodology for comprehending the significance of signs and symbols in conveying themes and subject matter in film. By critically analysing the conversations in *Jojo Rabbit*, we have gained a deeper appreciation for the rich layers of meaning embedded in the dialogue and the visual elements. Semiotics has provided a framework for understanding the psychological, social, and historical implications of the film, enabling us to delve into its complexities and extract valuable insights. The application of semiotics in analysing *Jojo Rabbit* has revealed its depth and complexity as a cinematic work. The film's adept use of semiotic elements has enhanced its storytelling and enriched the audience's experience. This research serves as a testament to the power of semiotics in unravelling the layers of meaning in films and sheds light on the transformative potential of affectional bonds, the representation of historical events, and the exploration of personal identity as reflected in films, specifically in *Jojo Rabbit*.

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