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Fanny's Journey: A New Iteration of the Heritage Genre

Fanny's Journey (2016) is a female directed heritage genre film that encompasses many different aspects of French cinema. The film was received very well in France and the United States, being showcased at Jewish film festivals all over the world. The film won eight awards in total, including Best Narrative Audience Award at the Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival CineMondays, and at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival in 2017. It was seen as a new installment of the heritage cinema trend that pivoted to focus on uniquely French childhood experiences. Not many World War II films are upbeat as *Fanny's Journey* is, nor are they focused on the experience of children. The director, Lola Doillon, explores the character of Fanny and her role as an oldest sister.

Fanny's Journey is a continuation of France's heritage genre. It encapsulates all the cornerstone elements of heritage cinema, being a costume historical drama based on a uniquely French experience that showcases France's natural beauty. This film creates a sense of national pride by showing the strength of French children escaping occupation during World War II, an experience unique to French children during that time. This film is based on a true story, making it a biography of a historical figure. Fanny Ben-Ami, a German-born Jewish woman whose family fled to Paris before the war, saved 28 children from persecution by leading them from southern occupied France to Switzerland. Her story was immortalized through *Fanny's Journey* and gives a detailed account of what the children went through while traveling across the

country. While the film is not completely accurate to the original story, it depicts the essence of her story very well.

Fanny's Journey is a true story, and the writers made sure to respect the real story in many ways. The film was a high budget reenactment intending to capture the time period faithfully, the costuming and sets were incredibly realistic to the 1940s, and the world itself felt very real. A review from the Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF) said "I enjoyed the production design's attention to detail. The costumes and set pieces felt genuine and used." This is a major aspect of heritage films being costume dramas. This is meant to reflect a specific moment in French history, and it does so very accurately. Jewish film festivals showed this film at its time of release because it is one of the few films of that year that focused on Jewish stories.

This film was released in 2016, so the heritage genre had been well established for decades. There was nothing particularly unique about this film in its use of genre conventions. What sets *Fanny's Journey* apart is its exploration of childhood, in a similar way to *Tomboy* (2011) and *War of the Buttons* (2011). All of these movies explore how very serious circumstances can appear through the eyes of a child, and how the innocence of a kid is preserved through harsh conditions. *War of the Buttons* is very similar to *Fanny's Journey* in that it also depicts Jewish children escaping occupied France. Depicting such harrowing times as the Holocaust from the eyes of a child being persecuted creates a very unique perspective that a couple films were exploring at that time in France. Childhood as the subject of a war film is a difficult stance to take, but Doillon shows their perspective very well. In a review from the St. Louis Jewish Film Festival, the author says, "The director inserts a dose of realism by showing moments when the children play, not just relentless tense drama, which gives the story a human, heart-tugging appeal." Using children as the subjects of a war film keeps us immersed and

invested in the story in a unique way. Not only does this utilize heritage cinema by showing a unique French experience, but it allows the French children to have a voice as well, breathing some new life into the genre.

To further this point, most heritage movies are not in the war genre to begin with. The most popular heritage films such as *Jean de Florette* (1986), *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1990), and *La Reine Margot* (1994) are all comedy / romance films. Only one of these films has a child character (*Jean de Florette*) and she is a minor character in the first film. Not only is *Fanny's Journey* pushing the bounds of heritage cinema by pairing it with another genre, but also by including a new childhood perspective.

These three childhood films are also all part of a recent trend which explores France's natural landscape in cohesion with the conflict, using naturalism to enhance the stories. *Fanny's Journey* being so deeply connected to France's countryside is not only what makes it a heritage film, but also reminds audiences that Jewish French people had a unique and shared experience of being fugitives of their own land during WWII. Naturalism in heritage cinema not only shows the vital connection between the story and the land it happened on, but also connects French audiences to how rich their land is with stories. Naturalism is integral to the heritage genre. It keeps the story grounded and real, rather than letting itself become swept up in the politics of the situation. *Fanny's Journey* shows the kids in natural environments to reconnect the audience with the knowledge that these are still kids who will play in creeks when they come across them. It connects them to the natural landscapes of France to show that they are French kids just like any other, and the war around them has complicated and warped their identities beyond anything kids would ever be able to comprehend. This sentiment is voiced by Fanny's younger sister, she is confused why they can't escape their capture and she asks, "Why can't we stop being Jews?"

Putting children into wilderness environments shows how their stories could happen to anyone, and that kids are not able to fully understand why these things are happening to them.

The reception of this film was very positive among the French and Americans. It was shown at many film festivals around the world, including the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival and the Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival. Critical reviews from these festivals praised the film for its portrayal of children and preserving their innocence through their escape across the country. The reviews from these festivals praise Doillon for creating a film that captures a Jewish story in such a beautiful way, showing how the children had to find strength from each other. Not only is this a French heritage film, but it finds community in the French Jewish population. The film festival critics say in reviews that the writing of the kids shows how they were forced to grow up too fast, and yet still allows the film to be bright and cheerful at times. The story does not completely victimize the children and make them wallow in their fear, but allows them to take charge and fight for themselves, a storyline not often given to young kids. While this film was received well in the reviews, it performed very poorly in the box office, making back only 15% of its budget and getting a theatrical release in only France and Italy. This film struggled to find commercial success due to its very small distribution and lack of marketing.

The depiction of female characters in *Fanny's Journey* was received very well through film festival reviews around the country. Madame Forman, Fanny's orphanage leader, is the one who got all the children she was responsible for from southern Vichy France up to Switzerland. Her older kids were meant to lead the younger, but the boy leading Fanny's group fled before they could leave. Madame Forman told Fanny to step up and lead her group, and empowered Fanny to be brave enough to keep them all safe. The CIFF review said that neither of their genders were significant at this moment. There was no special attention paid to the fact that a girl

would be the one leading, or that a woman was giving another power, it was just the desperate need for the children to get to safety, and Fanny being the most able to do so. This is a stance that I disagree with some critics on. This transfer of power from one intelligent woman to a brave young girl is not something that is commonly written. Fanny had to take control of the situation and lead the others in her group, which included her two younger sisters. Fanny being an older sister is an integral part of her character. She writes home to her parents and waits on their letters weekly, and works the entire journey to ensure that she keeps her sisters feeling happy and hopeful. The men in this world are more suspicious, given the that Vichy government and Nazi soldiers are all represented by men, the original leader of Fanny's group was a man who fled the train, and the people who were consistently hunting them down were always men. Madame Forman and Fanny were the only two people that the group of children could consistently trust. Fanny's presence as a girl leading other children is important, and the depiction of sisterhood and leadership in this film is one of the greatest things about it.

The film being female directed affected large parts of this movie. Lola Doillon began directing films in the 1990s and is part of the movement for the CNC to fund more women's projects. Many of her films in the past have featured women's stories and other unique perspectives, such as Fanny's. Doillon being a female director made this film have a more gentle overall feel to it. Reviews speak to the stylistic elements of *Fanny's Journey* straying from what is the norm for WWII movies right now. The CIFF review said that the more prevalent aesthetic in WWII movies is a washed out blue and gray filter. While *Fanny's Journey* did use something similar to this in moments of fear or destruction, it more typically had a colorful and vibrant appearance, as if we were seeing through the eyes of a child. Doillon created this look to make the audience feel immersed in the world of childhood she created.

Fanny's Journey is a modern version of the heritage genre. It uses the genre conventions to create a beautiful costume drama from Fanny Ben-Ami's perspective. It continues the recent trend of films about childhood and portrays gender in a very subtle but important way. It was received very well by audiences both at home and internationally, and it keeps the childhood of these actors integral to the story while still keeping the tensions high. Overall, *Fanny's Journey* is a great example of how French cinema continues to build on its previous trends to make new ones.