Joker (2019) and Its Respective Position in Arthouse Cinema

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MOPA 409

22 October 2019

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Joker has been a popular topic in the late 2019 news due to its controversial nature. There is public concern that the story glamorizes a mentally ill man who turns to violence because he feels society does not understand him and that his criminal actions are justified. The fear is that it may provoke an audience member to also become violent. An article in *Vox* reports that "*Joker's* studio Warner Bros. and family members of those killed in the 2012 Aurora, Colorado, mass shooting have been in conversation over the possible danger the movie poses to moviegoers."[1] An opposing article from *Vanity Fair* praises the film's subject matter, interviewing a neurocriminologist who claims the script *"*authentically traces the way a man could be driven to deeply troubling acts of violence by a combination of genetics, childhood trauma, untreated mental illness, and societal provocation."[2] The film's ethics have been equally reviled and defended in the news and on social media for several months—this controversy plays into the philosophical ideas that are at work both on- and off-screen.

Directed by Todd Philips, *Joker* received the Golden Lion at the 2019 Venice Film Festival. In the book *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture*, author Mattias Frey notes, "Hardly a season—and certainly no major festival—passes without headlines about a controversial art film."[3] Frey's breakdown of a controversial art film asserts that they will "appear reliably in the media cycle, often accompanied by a critic, politician, or lobby group's consternation at how these productions might deform our brains or our impressionable children."[4] If this were the only requirement to become a controversial art film, then *Joker* would have exceeded the mandate. However, the most important point that separates *Joker* from the art films that Frey uses as examples is genre: *Joker* belongs to the superhero

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[1] Alex Abad-Santos, "The fight over Joker and the new movie's 'dangerous' message, explained," *Vox*, September 25, 2019, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/9/18/20860890/joker-movie-controversy-incel-sjw.

[2] Julie Miller, "Leading Neurocriminologist Considers *Joker* "a Great Educational Tool," *Vanity Fair*, October 14, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/joker-joaquin-phoenix-psychology.

[3] Mattias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 3.

[4] Ibid.

genre, and there has never been a superhero art film. The argument posed in this essay is that *Joker* is the first superhero-inspired film to be classified as arthouse cinema; it undermines the established superhero genre by provoking its audience to think and participate in its discussion versus allowing passivity.

By subverting the audience's expectations of the superhero genre, *Joker* is not another superhero film but instead a subgenre to the genre; the first arthouse-superhero film. Genre theorist Ralph Cohen writes, "The question for the genre critic is why and how such a subgenre is initiated."[5] Cohen uses *The Excellent Ballad of George Barnwel* (ca. 1600-1624) as an example for how a subgenre may be formed. In 18th century England, the ballad was considered a genre for the common people and of no interest to the social elite or the intellectuals, much like comic book-inspired films are for the entertainment-lovers and rarely of interest to the art scene. Recently, cinema legends Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese spoke out against the Marvel Cinematic Universe (which is different from DC Comics, the company behind *Joker*). Scorsese went as far as saying the MCU movies are "not cinema" and compared them to a "theme park."[6] In the 18th century, ballads like *The Excellent Ballad* were on the same level of appreciation, being printed on cheap paper and sung in the London streets. However, in 1731, playwright George Lillo adapted *The Excellent Ballad* into a tragedy to be performed in the theatre. His version was renamed to *The London Merchant*. Cohen explains the role of *The London Merchant* in evolving the tragedy:

> Here we have an elevation of a low genre into a high one; a tragedy about common
> people addressed to common people, altering the genre of tragedy that characteristically
> was about kings and aristocrats and dealt with affairs of state … What this implied was a

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[5] Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 215, doi: 10.2307/468885.

[6] Catherine Shoard, "Francis Ford Coppola: Scorsese was being kind—Marvel movies are despicable," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/21/francis-ford-coppola-scorsese-was-being-kind-marvel-movies-are-despicable.

conceptual change in tragedy. The genre was now a model for what critics called 'domestic' tragedy.[7]

On the question of how a subgenre such as domestic-tragedy is formed, Cohen theorizes, "The most obvious explanation is ideological: the plot of a known popular form becomes the subject of a traditionally elite one."[8] As is required of any comic book-inspired film, director Phillips and his co-screenwriter, Scott Silver, researched the source material before writing the screenplay for *Joker*. They borrowed from classic comic books like *The Killing Joke* (1988) and *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), as well as the 1928 silent film *The Man Who Laughs*, which was the original inspiration for the character when he was created for the debut issue of *Batman* (1940).[9] *Joker* is written as a character study of Arthur Fleck, the man who will become the Joker. Philips and Silver elevate the low genre, superhero film, into a high genre, arthouse, through the exploration of the Oedipus complex as a theme.

The Oedipus complex is a concept from Sigmund Freud that theorizes male children have an unconscious sexual desire to sleep with their mother and a hatred of their father. The concept is in reference to Sophocles' Athenian tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 BC), in which the titular character, Oedipus, unwittingly marries his mother and kills his father. The exploration of the Oedipus complex is often restricted to the independent cinema, including *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), *Savage Grace* (2007), and *Mommy* (2014). Major studios have allowed very few high-budget films to portray the subject, but *Psycho* (1960) and *The Reader* (2008) are examples, and now *Joker* is, too. The Oedipus complex is not a theme that allows for a passive viewing, but instead a thought-provoking one. Nearly all films that invoke it are considered arthouse due to the dark, confusing, and disturbing effect that the exploration has on the viewer.

In *Joker*, the Oedipus complex is studied through Arthur in an indirect manner. In the story, he is raised without a father and in his mother's old age he takes on the role of her caretaker. In an early fantasy scene, Arthur appears on a late night talk show and acts like a well-

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[7] Cohen, "History and Genre," 215.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Todd Philips, press conference at the Venice Film Festival, *celluloidVideo*, August 31, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyeFmjHadvk.

behaved child. He proudly tells the host that he is "the man of the house."[10] A scene depicts Arthur bathing his naked mother and it quickly turns into a fun splashing game. Other superhero films spoon-feed the audience information, but not *Joker*. Arthur and his mother never have a sexual interaction, which forces the audience to participate in the discussion of their relationship, questioning every creepy scene they have together and looking for moments when Arthur may be repressing an incestuous urge. As the plot progresses, Arthur finds out that his father may be mayoral candidate Thomas Wayne. He is at first excited by the idea and tries to pursue Wayne, but a series of events lead to Arthur causing Wayne's murder. So, Arthur fulfills the Oedipus complex through a strange and intimate relationship with his mother and by playing a part in killing the man who might be his father.

The Oedipus complex is interwoven throughout the entire narrative. A separate philosophical idea using music occurs over only a short dance sequence and it manipulates Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which deals with manipulation itself. The allegory describes a group of prisoners who have been trapped in a cave "from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them."[11] This cave is the ancient version of the movie theatre. The prisoners watch shadow puppets on the cave wall and perceive the performance to be reality because it is all they know; however, if a prisoner can break free and turn around then they will discover that it is an illusion manipulated by puppeteers. Freed prisoners take on the role of the philosopher, questioning the world the puppeteers are presenting and self-reflecting on how it effected them. The superhero genre has become so predictable with certain conventions that the audience members are willing prisoners who enter the cave and passively accept the shadows without any intellectual benefit. One specific convention that has dulled audience minds is the use of music.

It has become a standard convention for the superhero film to purchase the rights to a popular song and associate it with their characters. These songs are more often than not rock and

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[10] *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips, Warner Bros., 2019, Theatrical.

[11] Plato, *The Republic* (Basic Books, 1968), 514a-515a quoted in Patrick J. Deneen, "Escaping the Cave: On Film, Reality, and Civic Education," *Perspectives on Political Science* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 69, doi: 10.1080/10457090209604073.

roll hits from the 1970s or 80s and serve to invigorate the audience. Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" from 1970 is about Vikings charging into war, with reference to "the hammer of the gods" and "Valhalla."[12] It is used several times throughout *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), most notably when the God of Thunder bounds into battle with bolts of CGI lightning bursting from the sky and his body. The *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise (2014-) has even managed to construct (nearly) their entire soundtrack from retro hits, pointing to Star-Lord's "Awesome" mixtapes as the source, which were gifted from his deceased mother.

Patrick Deneen, a political theorist, argues that since moviegoers are willingly entering into Plato's cave, they can choose to be either prisoners or philosophers. Their choice often depends on what the film is trying to accomplish. Deneen's view is as follows:

> [Illusion] challenges us, when in the cave … to attend carefully to images that pass before us, to discern the ways those images might on the one hand merely reinforce our cave-induced assumptions, and alternatively—in the hands of a master puppeteer—challenge those assumptions from within (in precisely the way that Plato does).[13]

While past superhero films have pampered the prisoner, *Joker* challenges the philosopher. The film breaks the standard music convention when Arthur fully transforms into the titular villain: dyed green hair, creepy clown make-up, and a brand new red suit. By this point in the film, Arthur is beyond saving, having only moments before murdered an innocent, albeit cruel, ex-co-worker by stabbing him repeatedly in the eye with scissors. Arthur is scheduled to appear on the live talk show (the same one he fantasized about earlier). He knows that the host intends to humiliate him over his failed stand-up routine, which was videotaped and mocked on the talk show a week prior. But Arthur is not going to the interview—the Joker is.

When a viewer hears a recognizable rock song in a superhero film they become passive because the convention has conditioned them how to react and feel—they are willing prisoners in the cave. *Joker* aggressively distorts the convention. As the Joker leaves his apartment en route to the talk show interview, the 1972 song "Rock and Roll (Part 2)" plays. The Joker is soon dancing on steep exterior steps to the song, as if he can hear it. "Rock and Roll (Part 2)" is a

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[12] Led Zeppelin, "Immigrant Song," *Led Zeppelin III*, Atlantic, 1970.

[13] Deneen, "Escaping the Cave," 70.

popular sports anthem used to energize an audience and it functions with the same intent in this scene. The superhero film's prisoner has been pre-programmed by the puppeteer to cheer when they hear these types of songs at pivotal moments in the story, except now they are instinctively cheering for a murderer to murder more people. The prisoner realizes their mistake and breaks the bonds so that they can think. The use of popular rock is no longer a passive experience for the viewer but a self-reflective one as they are assessing their immoral reaction to the scene.

The use of "Rock and Roll (Part 2)" sparked controversy outside of the cave. A firestorm of news outlets reported on backlash over the song's inclusion, all of them having a headline similar to that of *Global News*: "*Joker* faces new controversy for using song by convicted pedophile Gary Glitter."[14] The *Global News* article reports that "a number of upset fans have taken to social media expressing their anger and concern that Glitter would be receiving royalties" for the song's inclusion in the film and its respective soundtrack.[15] It would later be reported that no, Glitter did not receive royalties, but criticism still remains for *Joker* supporting the music of a pedophile.[16] This is an example of the prisoners turning on the puppeteers to question and criticize the reality that they are fabricating.

Joker is incorporating the history of music into the film to provide insight into the character, a method that has been used in past superhero films. For example, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) links the Queens-based web-slinger to the 1976 hit "Blitzkrieg Bop," which is a song by the Queens-based punk rock band the Ramones. Knowing the history of the song and the band provides information about Peter Parker. *Joker* is further distorting the convention by introducing the Joker, a murderer, with "Rock and Roll (Part 2)," a song by Gary Glitter, a convicted pedophile. Gary Glitter is an evil man who preyed on innocent children and was sent to prison for it on numerous occasions. If the viewer is familiar with Glitter's history, then they

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[14] Adam Wallis, "*Joker* faces new controversy for using song by convicted pedophile Gary Glitter," *Global News*, October 10, 2019, https://globalnews.ca/news/6005955/joker-backlash-gary-glitter-song/.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Gary Glitter will not receive *Joker* royalties, say rights holders," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/oct/15/gary-glitter-joker-royalties.

know that associating his music with Joker reveals that the Joker is an evil man, too. It is important the song plays at this point in the film because before Arthur transformed into the Joker he was a victim, but the transformation has changed his status from prey to predator.

The audience is seated in the cinema, a modern rendition of Plato's Cave. They are first disgusted they have let themselves passively cheer for the Joker, a fictional character, to kill more people because "Rock and Roll (Part 2)" energized them, and then they become horrified when they break the bonds, turn around and learn that it is Gary Glitter, a real life pedophile, who has been manipulating the shadows on the wall. The result is a guilt-ridden, self-reflective experience for the audience.

In conclusion, *Joker* is an arthouse film because it employs philosophical ideas that function both on- and off-screen. The film's controversy in the news and on social media proves that it forces people to participate in its discussion. To return to Frey and his book *Extreme Cinema*, he writes that all controversial art films have critics say that "they dumb-down and devalue artistic cinema."[17] It is no surprise, then, that the *Times* review from the Venice Film Festival complained, "Phillips may want you to think he's giving us a movie all about the emptiness of our culture, but really, he's just offering a prime example of it."[18] Seen through Frey's perspective, the negative response is actually supporting *Joker's* case as an art film. And the dissection of themes and scenes in this essay have shown much greater evidence for it. Through the exploration of the Oedipus complex as a theme, the traditional superhero story becomes the subject of a strictly arthouse theme, the result is the superhero genre's first arthouse subgenre. When Plato's Allegory of the Cave is applied to the controversial use of Gary Glitter's music, we see the prisoner breaking their bonds to question the intention of the puppeteers and also self-reflect on their own moral failings. The audience at a superhero movie is passive, the audience at *Joker* is provoked to think and participate in the discussion. There is no telling when

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[17] Frey, *Extreme Cinema*, 3.

[18] Stephanie Zacharek, "*Joker* Wants to Be a Movie About the Emptiness of Our Culture. Instead, It's a Prime Example of It," *Time*, August 31, 2019, https://time.com/5666055/venice-joker-review-joaquin-phoenix-not-funny/.

the next superhero film will risk as much as *Joker* has, but when one does, it is certain that *Joker* will be the film that all compare it to.

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