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**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CHARACTER JOKER PORTRAYED
IN *THE DARK KNIGHT* BY CRISTOPHER NOLAN AND *JOKER* BY
TODD PHILLIPS**

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Abstract:

The Joker is a supervillain character emanating from American comic books that are published by DC Comics. Bill Finger, Bob Kane and Jerry Robinson created the character which first appeared in the 1940 comic book 'Batman'. The character has endured as the archenemy of the superhero Batman. The character of Joker has been adapted for live-action films multiple times, but each time it is written and portrayed in unique differing ways. Joker appeared in Christopher Nolan's 'The Dark Knight' in 2008 played by late actor Heath Ledger and later in Todd Phillips' 'Joker' in 2019 played by actor Joaquin Phoenix. The present paper examines the ways in which the same character diverges in its depiction by two different filmmakers.

Keywords: *Joker, Christopher Nolan, Todd Phillips, Film Narrative, DC Comics, etc.*

The same character can be portrayed in a different light by various filmmakers. Although the character is inspired by the same comic book origin, film directors have been taking liberty in its depiction of live-action adaptations. This is known as artistic license. The character's appearance, physicality, origin story and psyche are all altered to fit the director's vision of the world within the narrative. Different actors playing the character of Joker have also brought their own interpretations and have made their performances discrete. With the director's vision and the actor's performance, the character has formed new and diverse identities to fit very specific aesthetics.

Appearance:

The appearance of Joker has certain aspects that make it iconic like the white face paint with bright red lips, the green hair, the purple suit and the perpetual grin on his face. Both films take a different approach to the visual representation of this iconic villain. The Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* has a desaturated colour palette to amalgamate a grounded and gritty vision of the city of Gotham. The white face paint is not uniform, looks cracked and dwindled, the red lipstick is applied in a slapdash manner over Glasgow smile scars, the purple long overcoat instead of a traditional suit is barely registered and the green hair is waned.

In contrast, the Joker in Todd Phillips' *Joker* uses a rich and saturated colour palette. His costume feels much more deliberate and motivated with green hair, white face paint, red lips, a red clown nose, blue triangles around the eyes, and instead of a purple, a dark red suit. This is a subtle departure from the original character's roots yet it is very noticeable and also practical because he also plays a struggling clown. Phillips' *Joker* pops out and demands attention while Nolan's *Joker* is a product of Gotham's milieu.



Props:

Apart from the visual appearance of the Joker, he is also known for his iconic props which are often self-modified to surprise and shock enemies. In the comic books, he uses playing cards with blades on their edges, a flower that squirts acid, a comically large gun or even a sharp quill. While Nolan's Joker however doesn't indulge in these novelty gags and uses much more direct weaponry like knives, guns, hand grenades, explosives and even rocket launchers. He doesn't let go of his sense of humour for example in a scene where he shows a "magic" trick by making a pencil disappear by stabbing it in the eye of an opponent.

Phillips' Joker on the other hand isn't this blend of frisky violence for he doesn't even begin as a violent character in the narrative. He becomes violent only by necessity when there remains no option at all. Then he uses knives and guns in ways more vicious and bellow.

Physicality:

Nolan's Joker and Phillips' Joker are both contrasting in their physicality. Nolan's Joker played by Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight* is restrained in his movements. His shoulders are arched, his arms hang down to the sides, and he moves slowly and drifts like a shadow. He moves only out of necessity and always has a calm demeanour to his movement like he doesn't need to rush because he is always a few steps ahead of his enemies.

Phillips' Joker played by Joaquin Phoenix on the other hand brings physicality into focus and makes it a cardinal part of the narration. His malnourished body is repeatedly exposed and put on display to show the disintegrated state of his psyche and also as a result of living an impoverished life struggling to make ends meet. His hunched back is symbolic of the character's subjugation by the ruthless society and thus his failure to live a dignified life. Although towards the end of the film, his hunched back becomes straight and he walks with confidence when he wears the iconic costume of Joker. He is shown dancing intimately with a hint of melancholy in his eyes but when he embraces his menacing self, his dancing on the staircase becomes an act of triumph.

Writing:

Although it draws inspiration from the comic books, the Joker in both films is a major departure from its role in the narrative. The comic book depicts the character as someone with carnivalesque actions, plotting and scheming in a way not shown in the films. Even if Nolan's Joker is stripped of colourful theatrics, he still prefers to plot some sanguinary games like the bank heist, his double kidnapping of Rachel and Harvey Dent and the ferry social experiment. All his schemes would require a lot of planning and yet Joker says in the film, "Do I look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I am a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it, you know, I just do things" - Joker (*The Dark Knight*, 2008). Because Nolan's Joker is an anarchist and he doesn't really have a plan in the larger sense. He is completely disinterested in material goods or wealth. It is evident from his next lines that he is averse to authority, law, order and social constructs of morality. "The mob has plans, the cops have plans, Gordon has got plans. You know, they're schemers. Schemers trying to control their little worlds. I am not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are" - Joker (*The Dark Knight*, 2008).

The origin story of Nolan's Joker is very ambiguous which is why his dialogues have universal relevance. He tells a different story every time of how he got the scars on his face and he does this deliberately maybe because he doesn't want to reveal anything about himself making him enigmatic and drawing more attention to his present actions rather than his past. He is a deviant who sees society and established order as the real evil rather than himself. He is a man who accepts the barbaric nature



of humans and tries to expose a hypocritical society by deconstructing all social constructs of morality. He uses the same notions of morality that render him a lunatic and pitches them against the “sane” society to prove that when pushed to its limits, the society so easily abandons its morals which it so pompously adhered to exposing its true primal nature. From a philosophical standpoint, he becomes somewhat like a post-structuralist dismantling the established norms of society.

Phillips’ narrative is personal and intimate. His Joker doesn’t really concern himself with philosophical questions but that may be because this story focuses on his earlier days before he transitions into an iconic villain unlike in *The Dark Knight* which focuses on the life of Joker after he has completely embraced a life of crime. Phillips’ narrative is more of an origin story of the character loosely adapted from the graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) written by Alan Moore. This is a story of a mentally troubled Arthur Fleck, an impoverished party clown struggling to be a stand-up comedian, ignored and abused by society who transitions into a nihilistic criminal. This Joker is much more a force of nature resulted from like cornering of an animal. Unlike Nolan’s Joker, this one is not a schemer and he is not invested in a larger philosophical sense of nature yet, because his struggle is with his personal life trying to stay sane in this brutish society.

“Is it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?”

-Arthur Fleck (Joker, 2019).

Phillip’s Joker lashes out when he could no longer take the disregard and abuse of society. He descends into chaos and insanity with no regard for societal norms.

“What do you get, when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? I’ll tell you what you get! You get what you fucking deserve!”

- Arthur Fleck (Joker, 2019).

Psychologically speaking, Arthur is someone who wants to be seen, to be heard and most importantly to be accepted. He is someone who has lived a life devoid of emotional comfort from anyone other than his mother. And when he tries to blend in and flow like a normal person, he is made aware by society that he is a freak and needs to be forsaken. All this trauma and violence is endured and suppressed until he no longer can. It is liberating for him to return this violence back to society and give them a taste of their own medicine. This is when he embraces the nature of what he has become without any guilt because he blames the society for it.

“I used to think that my life was a tragedy. But now I realise, it’s a fucking comedy.”

- Arthur Fleck (Joker, 2019).

Phillips’ and Nolan’s Joker, both are portrayed during their different time and age. Nolan’s Joker is an antagonist in the film whereas Phillips’ Joker is an anti-hero protagonist in the film.

Performance:

Nolan’s Joker is played by actor Heath Ledger and Phillips’ Joker is played by actor Joaquin Phoenix. Both actors have won Academy Awards for the same comic book character. Heath Ledger did not undergo anybody transformation like Joaquin Phoenix as physicality was central to Phillips’ narrative. Heath plays a Joker who is very clear in his vision and philosophy and yet at the same time has no plan in the larger sense. All he wants to do is upset the established order into chaos. Heath brings out this duality of character with his craftily controlled calm and turbulent speech. Heath constantly



manipulates his voice depicting the ever-changing aspect of his character like his story of how he got the scars. He departs from the iconic laughter of Joker and makes it more grounded and nuanced rather than plain evil. He wields his laugh like a weapon to petrify and shake his enemies but also uses it to mock and make fun of others. Heath expresses more through his voice and physicality rather than his eyes. In a larger sense, his performance departs from being animate and delivers a much more dynamic Joker.

Joaquin Phoenix had to undergo some physical changes because he is playing a malnourished man with a mental disorder. He expresses a lot through his body and demeanour rather than through his voice. Since Phillips' narrative is more like an origin story, Joaquin's performance is more intimate and personal where he uses his eyes to express Arthur's despair. His performance is more introverted and subtle but becomes explosive at times like his laughter. Joaquin's laugh for the Joker has a psychological foundation and it comes not only from his voice but also from his stomach making it creepier than Heath's. He speaks in a delicate, polite and soft manner as opposed to a typical villain snarl making him scarier. Joaquin successfully contrasts his calm voice with the turbulent psyche seen in his dreary eyes. Both the actors depart from the conventional portrayal of Joker and reinvent the character with their own interpretations to fit the very specific worlds of two different narratives.

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