

La Fleur du Mal Sprouting from Modernity

An Analysis on the Image of Joker

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ABSTRACT

The movie *Joker* has racked up positive reviews at international film festivals and sparked some controversy about its messaging. From the perspective of modernity, this paper explores the relationship between the society where the protagonist of the film, Arthur lives in, and his criminal path. Although two fatherly characters in the film exert direct and far-reaching impacts on him, their behaviors would not be deprecated by then mainstream standard of rationality. As can be seen from that, modernity is the root of distorting human nature. The purpose of this study is to awaken the public's empathy and reflect on the conflicts brought about by modernity through an analysis of Arthur's tragedy.

Keywords: *Joker, Image, American Society, Modernity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Joker directed by Phillips, T. and anchored by Joaquin Phoenix is an experimental film, endeavoring to present to audience the origin story of the famous super-villain in the Batman series. Arthur Fleck, the protagonist, began as a young man zealous in stand-up comedy despite his humble background and distressed family situation. Struggling to find his way in Gotham's fractured society, he lived with his sick mother and suffered from a neurological disorder that incurred much trouble. In his efforts, the young man earned a meagre income by dressing up as a clown by day for entertainment. The mask of smiling face he wore was not only a necessary part of his job but also a guise under which his aspiration dwelt [1].

However, jokes always seemed to be on him. Isolated, bullied and disregarded, Arthur gradually fathomed out that the society as a whole with its modernity had oppressed all walks of life, inflicting strains and tension upon people on the edge of breakdown and vulnerable relationship between people. Helplessly and desperately, he then was destined to embarked on a downward spiral of bloody crime and revolution, giving free rein to his alter-ego.

Since its debut on Venice International Film Festival, there have been reviews and criticism from various different perspectives, and most of papers zero in on

psychological changes of the protagonist. In fact, as set in the nineteen eighties, a paradoxical period of volatility and brightness, the movie endeavors to illustrate the process of how a notorious fiend is cultivated and hence arouse in our heart a great deal of sympathy. This paper attempts to expose the way modernity successfully crushes and bears down upon individuals to audience with a view to cautioning people against the seemingly reasonable modernity.

2. OPPRESSION FROM MODERN SOCIETY IN THE NINETEEN EIGHTIES

2.1. The Basic Ideas of Modernity

Since the Enlightenment under the guidance of rationalism, topics such as human rationality and modernity have been constantly brought to the forefront of discussion, and all disciplines of humanities and social sciences, be it philosophy, sociology, literature or political science, have found it unable to bypass the term "modernity". Baudelaire, hitherto regarded as the founder of modernism, defined modernity as follows: "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal land, the immovable." [2] Therefore, it is obvious to notice that modernity has been intimately associated with rationality in the first place.

The twentieth century was a time when modernity was intensively focused on and interpreted from a variety of perspectives by thinkers such as Weber, Lyotard, Marx and even Foucault. In terms of historical-sociological interpretation of modernity, Weber's paradigm is the most influential one, in which he proposes that the course of human history abounds in rationalization and disenchantment, and that modernity is close to, to some extent, rationalization [3].

On the one hand, the development of modernity has brought enormous benefits to Western societies, among which the United States is the one that has managed to sharpen its edge in all aspects. However, it has created many problems rarely seen in traditional societies. One can look no further than the American society in 1980s to gain a rough understanding.

2.2. Country Combating Crisis

Despite that no explicit and direct evidence is exhibited in terms of which year it's set in, the film *Joker* still indicates that, by means of contextual clues, this intense character study takes place in around 1981. In reality, of all the rise and decline of the American development, the late 1970s and early 1980s was one of the most awkward periods throughout its history.

Following ups and downs since mid-1970s, the country seemed to be choked up with troubles. Both its budget and trade deficit remained high, a languishing and stagnant economy, and the disappointed public had some doubts about the political system. In terms of international background, when the Reagan administration came to power, the "Cold War" between the United States and the Soviet Union for supremacy reached its prime, and the economy of Japan and Western Europe revitalized rapidly. Moreover, the Bretton Woods system centered on the US dollar staggered and even finally collapsed. In this section, we will discuss them in detail in order to have a glimpse of the formation of modernity in that period.

The *Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act*, signed into law by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, exerted significant impacts on the Federal Reserve. The title of the act itself indicated two major concerns that the government aspired to address--the deregulation of depository banks and the control of monetary policy. Apart from phasing out restrictions on interest, the also marked the inception of charging fees for certain services it provided, such as deposits, wire transfers, and safekeeping of securities.

After President Reagan took office, a host of policies and regulations were carried out under the guidance of Reaganomics that based upon limited government and libertarianism. With a view to encouraging economic growth and curbing inflation, the government placed much emphasis on anti-inflation and pursued a supply

management policy, shifting from Keynesianism of government intervention in the economy to supply-side economics. This is evident in the case of the *Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981*, which later was enacted into law, involving measures that went a long way towards the economic growth. The act not only indexed individual tax brackets, with a 23% cut in individual tax rates, but also slashed the top income tax rate from 70% to 50%.

Besides tax cut, the government also tightened the money supply and delivered reduction in multiple fields such as government spending as well as the federal income tax and capital gains tax. However, the unemployment rate during the late 1970s to early 1980s was quite unstable. By way of illustration, the table below shows that unemployment rate presented a trend towards worse condition, registering 7.6% in 1981 in spite of an evident drop in 1979.

Table 1. Employment Situation over the Years

	Unit	1979	1980	1981
Unemployment Rate	Percentage	5.8	7.1	7.6
Total Employment	Million People	98.8	99.3	100.4

Meanwhile, the United States had been trapped between the millstone of contraction in international trade and disrupted by trade deficit since 1976 despite the implementation of *Preferential Trade Arrangement* in international trade in the 1980s. While the Soviet Union, the most formidable competitor at that time, had witnessed positive growth in cross-border trade, the trade deficit in the U.S. uncontrollably grew to over 36.1 and 39.6 billion respectively in 1980 and 1981.

What's worse, the American government itself also suffered from an added burden on Federal Government Finance, coupled with the pressure from outstanding gross debt in the early 1980s. This research has gleaned a host of information from the Congressional Budget Office and listed the sorted data in **Table 2**. It is obvious that with the economy tanking, the government had been faced with a soaring deficit from 1978 to 1982, and the 1982 government deficit nearly doubled over the previous year, mounting from \$79 billion to \$128 billion. In addition, debt held by the public in 1982 spiked compared with the previous two years when Mr. Reagan took office.

In effect, combined with advance in science and technology such as microcomputer, the economy jumpstarted a mild recovery. For example, gross domestic products (GDP) in 1981 exceeded \$3.1 trillion in comparison with the that in 1980, about \$ 2.8 trillion, which was a record-breaking economic performance.

Table 2. Budgets and Debt Held by the Public from 1979-1982

(Notes: Unit: Billions of Dollars; Total=Revenues-Outlays-Other Expenditure)

	Revenues	Outlays	Total	Debt Held by the Public
1979	463.3	504.0	-40.7	640.3
1980	517.1	590.9	-73.8	711.9
1981	599.3	678.2	-79.0	789.4
1982	617.8	745.7	-128.0	924.6

2.3. *Morphing Modernity*

Now that we have briefly reviewed basic national conditions of the United States in the early 1980s and introduced some policies, it's obvious that we should next place emphasis on the outcome incurred by those policies in this part.

The passage of Monetary Control Act of 1980 did produce several desirable outcomes, proving to be a driving force behind the economic stability, the fight against inflation. However, side-effects ensued. Given the restrictions put on interest rates, people found themselves unavoidably caught in the penalization of being denied a market rate of interest for their funds. More regretfully, it turned out that funds started to flow out of banks, and personal savings tended to suffer, then a process known as “disintermediation”, which meant a flagging interest to saving and a less noticeable role of traditional banks in financial markets commenced to step onto the stage.

Reagan, Carter's successor, whose principle of Reagan administration's domestic economic policy is summarized as “Reaganomics” which argues that the crux of the American economy crisis of his time lies in low productivity and insufficient supply, rather than insufficient social demand, enacted a set of laws to achieve trickle-down effect, believing in that the wealthy will make their way down to everyone. In his overall economic and social development framework, all aspects of fiscal expenditure to balance the budget should be pared down, especially social welfare spending, so as to reduce people's dependence on government public expenditure and transform the government into an efficiency-oriented institution.

Although after the bourgeois revolution, people were endowed with, as purported by bourgeois, extensive and equal political rights, in essence, such rights are still controlled by elites themselves who had realized that the government with administrative power can secure and enlarge their rights. In the new economic era of 80s,

information technology not only promotes the development of society, but also induce momentous issues for government to improve performance to cope with. Under the guidance of efficiency supremacy, “instrumental rationality” and “technical rationality” prevail in the government. Meanwhile, the economy spurred by policies in collaboration with the administration elicits “rationalization” in both political and economic aspects.

Coupled with the worsening gap between the rich and the poor, the poverty rate rocketed to 14 % in 1981. Financial liberalization, tax cuts and other related policies by Reagan and his predecessor were the culprits in such social inequality. In terms of income distribution, as effective tax rates fell in both absolute and relative levels, the richest households benefited most from tax reform. In the 1980s, the share of households in the top 5% of national income increased from 8% to 18%, while those in the bottom 1/4 fell to 7.8%, a remarkable indicator of the deteriorating economy. In the wake of widening wealth gap, there was also a disparity of adaptation to modernity, in which the rich for the most part were well educated and accessible to more resources, such as the Internet, almost monopolizing the knowledge-discourse system. As a result, the cognitive ability between people began to differ, and the fierce competition for survival diffused anxiety into the society. Individuals paid less attention to their peers, the natural environment, and superstructure, all those they deemed as trifling otherness. Interpersonal relationship alienated in the first place, and empathy disappeared eventually. But that was the tip of substantial modernity in the form of economic field. In modern politics, the logic of instrumental rationality was manifested in worship of technology and efficiency. Under the modern bureaucratic system, there was a lack of interdepartmental information communication, and excessive obsession with power and discourse, which later were transferred from to other areas of society through political activities. The market economy and the bureaucratic system, under the aegis of money and power, eroded the private and public spheres, driving the non-market-oriented, non-commercialized and non-administrative culture to the “colonization of the life world”.

3. KING OF COMEDY

3.1. *Fiend Awakening from Otherness*

With the development of modern industry, capitalism is in full swing. The essence of capitalist mode of production rests with capital proliferation, which not only exists in the economic field, but also permeates all aspects of life, and has become the principle against which all social activities and individual behavior are benchmarked. The public power and economic lifeline of

Gotham has been firmly connected to the establishment comprised of big bourgeoisie and other upper-class elites. Therefore, the ordinary are almost suffocated by the repression brought about by the class gap and elites' possession of discourse. The scene of opulent celebrities gathering in Wayne's home epitomizes is a case in point.

However, the scene of Arthur taking medicine from the drugstore and walking heavily up the ladder on the only way home every day is even more sarcastic. At night, Arthur climbed the seemingly endless ladder and boarded the platform, several passers-by passing by in front of him. In this scene, the meaning of the ladder is self-evident, and what is even more poignant is that even though Arthur drags his skinny body up the ladder, it is only ordinary civil society that awaits him. In effect, the most straightforward illustration of the class gap is the benefit at Wayne home mentioned above. For weeks, a seething of anger and resentment fueled by lackadaisical Gotham government has been building, bordering on a political upheaval. The clown-face protesters outside the Wayne Mansion wave placards and grumble, yelling "Fuck the rich" "Fuck all this system", while the upper-class seated in the resplendent theatre laugh silly at Chaplin's *Modern Times*, a film satirizing capitalists. Being interviewed, Wayne castigates "clowns" for "having something wrong" and promise them with conceit,

I'm gonna lift them out of poverty.

As can be seen from the above two details, the class differentiation between the rich and the poor is escalating, which is stemmed in part from the anemic administration. In Gotham where there is a chasm with regard to the possession of wealth, the upper class driven by modernity have long been prejudiced against the underclass. They establish a mighty "self" image by identifying the lowly as "super rats" and marginal people such as Arthur as "coward", unconsciously or intentionally inflicting much pressure on the unprivileged. In Thomas Wayne's remarks on the street protest, he pointed out his classification, as a dignitary, of people from all stratum.

...someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until those kind of people change for the better, those of us who've made something of our lives, will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns.

The government with Wayne at its core cut back on social welfare, proclaiming to be for the well-being of the majority, but in essence for wealth accumulation for the sake of bourgeois. Arthur, who had already been driven from pillar to post, due to exacerbating mental health as a result of the termination of government subsidy he originally relied on to curb Pseudobulba affect, became incapable of inhibiting alter ego from recurrent appearance. It was only after being ridiculed and even

beaten and warned by Wayne, representative of the mainstream discourse, that Arthur realized that the intersection with people at the top was just a figment of imagination. The moment he stepped into the refrigerator, he was about to merge with his alter ego, the joker, and lapse into a killer fond of sanguinary slaughter.

4. CONCLUSION

On the basis of above analyses, the factors behind Arthur and his counterparts' degeneration into villains can be largely attributed to modernity. Nonetheless, Gotham and its proponents who profit from the system, still blame marginal individuals for the great convulsion, ignoring that they also contribute in other forms. The impact of modernity on marginal figures like Arthur is immeasurable and can give rise to anti-modernity forces. It is under the oppression of modernity that Arthur's alter ego gradually acquires the power of anti-modernity, and that most of underclass willingly partake in his revolution. Therefore, a communicative rationality based on equal and mutually understood interaction is required in response to the utilitarianized instrumental rationality and the incomplete project of "modernity"[5].

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