

A Research on American Social Issues Reflected by the Movie “Joker”

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ABSTRACT

Joker (2019 Film) is a psychological thriller directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix. The film is distinctively different from the rest of the Batman franchise which focuses on heroism and crime-fighting, this film is more focused on social justice issues and the downfall of a comedian that is also a mental patient. The film spends a large amount of time portraying the notorious Gotham city. From the streets, subways, to apartment buildings, Gotham city resembles every major American city that is raided with crime and poverty: Oakland, Chicago, Detroit, and so on. The social issues in the movie can be found in most major American cities. This paper focuses on the two major issues reflected in the film: the mistreatment of mental patients and the protest culture spurred by social injustice incidents. It can be concluded that the best way to respond to social injustice is through peaceful civil disobedience that is organized and dedicated to bringing effective change to the issue.

Keywords: *Joker, American social issues, the mistreatment of mental patients, the protest culture spurred by social injustice incidents*

1. INTRODUCTION

Joker(2019 Film) as a fictional film, alarmingly resembles several past events in America. This past year in America, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Stop Asian Hate movement, and so many more social justice issues and crises. America today is like Gotham, both riddled with social injustice and corruption. *Joker*(2019 Film) has brought it to our attention that a slight improper reaction to social injustice can lead to chaos. Arthur(*Joker*) as a mental patient, suffered unjust treatment from a society that ignored his condition and pushed him into an unstable state of mind. His reaction to the injustice of Gotham city is to go on a rampage and slaughter civilians. He was a victim of injustice, but his reactions were unjustifiable. This has brought us to an essential question: how do we react to social injustice? What is the proper and effective method we can use to fight social injustice? My research is focused on discovering the issues reflected in the *Joker*(2019 Film) and what specific issue does it resemble from the current American society, also unlike the *Joker*(2019 Film), how to fight for justice the right and effective way. This research paper is an analysis on social justice issues inspired by the *Joker*(2019 Film), and is dedicated to the purpose to help people gain a

perspective on the current issues in America, and make calm and educated choices regarding their response to the issues.

2. THE MISTREATMENT OF MENTAL PATIENTS



Figure 1. Stills from the movie "Joker"

Figure 1 presents the stills of *Joker*. The first social issue reflected by *Joker*(2019 film) is the mistreatment of mental patients in America. Arthur(the name of the *Joker*) is a man with a medical condition that will make him laugh when he feels anxious under uncomfortable situations. People misunderstand him and grow furious at him when it happens. Arthur has received a series of bullying and abuses because of his condition. Society tends to react to mental conditions more with aggression than sympathy and caring. The fact that Arthur laughs and cries at the same time is a thematic approach to give the viewers an idea or concept of what it feels like to be misunderstood because of one's mental condition. Like the mother that pulled her child away from Arthur and the anchor that laughed at his condition during his stand-up comedy performance on television, the world hasn't always been kind to mental patients. Christian Hall was a 19 years old Asian-American teenager with mental issues. On December 30th, 2020, Hall was suffering from a mental crisis and on the verge of committing suicide. He called the police for help and consultation, who later showed up and fatally shot him. This heartbreaking incident was not an isolated accident, according to Pocono Record News, "Christian Hall's fatal shooting by the Pennsylvania State Police was a "classic suicide by cop scenario"[4]. The American police have a rich history of murdering mental patients. According to NPR, "Since 2015, nearly a quarter of all people killed by police officers in America have had a known mental illness. Injuries, too, are common although they are less carefully tracked"[6]. Just three months earlier, the Salt Lake City police shot a 13 years old boy with an autism spectrum disorder. Luckily, the boy survived. Apparently, the police department does have professionals that specify in handling mental health crisis, called crisis intervention teams or CITs. Although their approaches have been proved largely effective, the CITs are often misread and poorly implemented by most departments. This disappointing fact proves that society and particularly the police departments are indifferent and impatient about people with mental conditions. They simply did not care enough to act rationally based on medical researches, instead, they decided to shoot first and ask second. The police are not the only part of the criminal justice system that mistreat people with mental conditions. Mental illness in prison has a three times higher rate than the general population[2]. As a matter of fact, "According to the 215-page report, *Ill-Equipped: U.S. Prisons and Offenders with Mental Illness*, prisons are dangerous and damaging places for mentally ill people"[2]. Mentally ill prisoners can suffer from a variety of victimization and exploitation. Prison staff often punish them for symptoms of their mental condition, such as being noisy and unable to follow orders. They are also more likely to end up in detrimental conditions like isolation, which can potentially push them into acute psychosis[2]. It is quite

obvious that law officials in prison are not willing to make changes or compromise in order to give mental patients the medical attention they desperately need. In the movie, the medicine supplier cut off Arthur's supply ignoring the fact that his mental state will become unstable without the medicine, reflecting on the indifference medicine companies and suppliers hold against mental patients. The movie reflects on the fact that the world only deals with mental patients when it is convenient, but when the situation turns out to be adding more work to their schedule, they either shoot them or imprison them. *Joker*(2019 film) uses Arthur as a magnifying glass to expose the aspect of the American society that is reluctant to help mental patients and unwilling to respect their conditions. As a fictional film, *Joker*(2019 film) visualizes the indifferent attitude society gives to mental patients by focusing on the everyday life of Arthur. The excruciating scene of Arthur being kicked on the ground by three businessmen and laughing in pain shows how much the mental patients suffer in life because of the symptoms of their illness. *Joker*(2019 film) introduces the world to the oppressive life of a mental patient and exposes the mistreatments society has done to them that are often overlooked.

3. PROTESTS AND RIOTS-RESPONSE TO SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Another social issue this film exposes and reflects on is the protest culture that has been more active than ever recently. Debates have been held on the topic of the effectiveness of protests and how they can sometimes descend into riots. In *Joker*(2019 film), the riot was a response to the elitist society of Gotham, in which the richest ten percent owns more than the rest of the population, while the majority of the population suffers from poverty. Arthur, who killed three employees from a large corporation and spoke up against the rich in an extreme way was viewed as a hero by the poor public. Protests, as one of the most effective non-violent ways for the people to seek change from the government, is quite frequently used by the American public. As there are many admirable non-violent protests like most parts of the Black Lives Matter movement and the current Stop Asian Hate movement, riots have happened occasionally where stores were robbed and cars were burned. *Joker*(2019 film) presents its viewers with a great question when the rioters in clown masks take down the street and murder random bystanders: what is the appropriate response to social injustice? To what extent? Arthur and the rioters did have a good cause with the bottom half of the society being oppressed by large corporations and descended into poverty, but they took it to an extreme degree by murdering innocent bystanders and violently raiding the street. A similar incident happened in the Minneapolis protest for the murder of George Floyd. Protestors got carried away

and blew up cars and raided buildings. They had the right intention to protest against racist police and police brutality, but there is no excuse for violently raiding buildings and blowing up cars. When protests start to become violent and lethal, they are no longer protests but small-scale wars. According to professor Erica Chenoweth of the Harvard Kennedy School, non-violent civil resistance has twice the success rate in comparison to violent ones from 1900-2006 all around the world[5]. Non-violent civil resistance has been proven to have three superiority over violent ones: It allows a wide range of participants which increases the overall population of participants; It has a wide variety of approaches to protest which makes it hard to stop; It is sustainable for a long period of time, unlike violent battles which take a large number of supplies and physical stamina. Professor Chenoweth also proved that it only takes 3.5% of the total population to be active in a non-violent protest for it to be successful[5]. In the Catholic school teaching document Challenge of Peace written by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, it was mentioned that the war can only occur as the last resort when all the other peaceful alternatives failed[3]. More effectively and peacefully, non-violent civil disobedience should always be implemented first before using violence and firearms and escalate the situation into a riot. There is no perfect government in this world, and it is important for the people to determine what is the right way to bring up the social issues to the government officials and seek change. When the oppressed overcome and take over the oppressors with violence, they become the new oppressors, because they are only in the position they are in by using physical overpowering and abuse over the people that oppressed them, while no systematic change is being made. They simply replaced the oppressed people with the old oppressors, which is why “the best way to keep the oppressed from becoming oppressors is by ongoing protest from within the liberation movements”[1]. At the end of the film, Arthur became the new oppressor of Gotham, the criminal prince *Joker*. *Joker*(2019 film) proves that the cons of violent civil disobedience outweigh the pros. The film uses the progression of Arthur slowly transforming into the *Joker* to imply the effects social injustice has on the oppressed when they do not know the right way to respond and the fact they can be easily misguided by their justified anger. The film provides the viewer the darkest possible way civil disobedience can turn out to speak to both officials and protestors that they need to do better especially at a time of crisis like this.

As a psychological thriller based on a supervillain from DC Comics, *Joker*(2019 film) is comparatively realistic and closely related to the social issues in real life. Unlike the other *Joker* films, which focus on the heroism of Batman or the despicableness of the *Joker*, *Joker*(2019 film) focuses on the human side of the

Joker. The movie uses the personal story of Arthur, a failed comedian, a mental patient, and a bastard son. He is the reflection of every dirty deficiency of the Gotham society. The rich that does not care about the well-being of the poor, the corporate employees that bully him for his medical condition, the countless times he gets knocked down, beaten, and mugged turned him from a person that made a sad boy smile on the bus to a mass killer. Arthur was just a person that tried to put smiles on everybody’s face even though he was not very good at it. Arthur had every reason to descent into this crazy clown killer and act on his vendetta and punish this society. But the question this movie presents to its viewers is “are you still going to be good when the world is bad?”. Arthur was nothing but a person who is tired of this unfair society, and there are countless others like him. Every person who put on a clown mask and marched on the streets shares the same resentment as Arthur. Every one of them decided that they are going to be bad because this world is bad. What distinguishes heroes from villains and civilians is that heroes react to hardship and injustice by becoming the force for good, while civilians fold and villains seek revenge. At the end of the day, the *Joker* is still a villain and an antagonist, even though he has his own reasons. Social justice activist Bryan Stevenson mentioned that his grandmother told him to “always do the right thing, even when the right thing is the hard thing”. It is easy to be negative and vengeful when a person lives in an unfair society, and it takes tremendous strength and determination to do the right thing when every aspect of that person’s life is being oppressed and exploited. Arthur didn’t have that strength, neither did most of the civilians in the movie.

4. CONCLUSION

Joker(2019 film) reflects on a lot of social issues and moral dilemmas, and what was mentioned above are merely a few of the many. As one of the major sources of entertainment, films have the influential power to introduce their audiences to some of the issues often ignored by the mainstream media. The film shockingly resembles many of the current social events, either it is the BLM movement or the capitol hill riot. The fact that this 2019 film predicted so many future events shows that these social problems have been existing for a long time and have never been solved. The film didn’t directly present the audiences with a message, but merely used the tragic story that ended with Gotham City descending into chaos to give the viewers an opportunity to think and reflect on what went wrong in this film that ultimately led to this ending. Arthur’s story is like a twisted reflection of the marginalized and oppressed community. He represents the worst possible way a lop-sided society can turn out. *Joker*(2019 film) can serve as a warning to the current American society, for them to start prioritizing awareness of social

injustice and work together to solve the issues peacefully. *Joker* (2019 film) won the Golden Lion at the 76th International Film Festival, with its untraditional tweak on the classic character *Joker* and insightful reflection of society, it is truly a thematic masterpiece.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently accomplished by the author.

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