

Joker (2019)

Carolín Lano

dir. Todd Phillips; prod. Todd Phillips, Bradley Cooper, Emma Tillinger Koskoff; screenplay Todd Phillips, Scott Silver; photography Lawrence Sher; music Hildur Guðnadóttir. 35mm, color, 117 mins. Warner Bros., distrib. Warner Bros.

»I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realize, it's a fucking comedy.« As Arthur Fleck (played by Joaquin Phoenix) speaks these words, his transformation into the supervillain Joker has already begun. Writer-director Todd Phillips takes viewers on a dark journey into a previously unknown past of the comic book character in this unusual origin story. Set in 1981, it follows Arthur Fleck, a low-rent clown, eager to bring laughter to others while dreaming of a big career as a stand-up comedian. Throughout the film, Arthur drifts in a state of mental illness and becomes increasingly delinquent. His performances provoke a violent uprising against the decadent elite of Gotham City. The film opens with Arthur, made up as a clown, sitting in front of a mirror and forcing the corners of his mouth up into a painful grin until the tears flow silently with the paint. With this exposition, the basic motif of the film is already introduced: Although Arthur makes every effort to uphold the professed values of society, he is constantly punished for his good nature and humiliated with brutal violence. His mother, who gave him the nickname »Happy,« taught him to smile regardless of his feelings. Arthur seems to have internalized this so much that he bursts into hysterical laughter even in the most inappropriate moments. Only later do viewers learn that Arthur is repressing childhood trauma that surpasses all visible cruelty in the film. At the climax of the action, Arthur proudly repeats his artificial grin, this time by drawing it on his lips in blood. Thus, he does not settle into the role of the innocent victim, as melodrama usually prescribes.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

At the same time, one of the origins of the Joker character itself lies in melodrama. Before the supervillain Joker entered the comic book world in 1940, coinciding with the birth of the DC superhero Batman, his creators drew inspiration from the film *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). Based on a novel by Victor Hugo, it tells the story of a man (mimed by Conrad Veidt) who was disfigured as a child. To take revenge on his father, both corners of his mouth were cut into a grin that never disappeared. However, Arthur's gesture with which he first violently, and then finally triumphantly, brings a grin to his face recalls another iconic moment in the history of melodrama. It is the agonizingly forced smile that Lillian Gish, in the role of the daughter in D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), forms with her fingers to appease her brutally irascible father. Significantly, this gesture was instantly adapted by actor and comedian Buster Keaton, as it ideally suited his stoic facial expression as a clown.

Joker, however, not only contains allusions to well-known movie melodramas but also crosses several lines of the genre tradition. The label »weepee« or »women's film,« which was common from 1930 onwards, was accompanied by a devaluation of the genre as a low form of cultural expression associated with women writers, stars, and audiences. With his emphatically androgynous acting style, Joaquin Phoenix is reminiscent of the heroines of melodrama. Arthur sacrificially cares for his decrepit mother, while passively enduring all injustices. The traces of abuse are clearly visible on his body, as his gaunt figure is a physical expression of his psychological condition. In the film we also encounter a deep moral polarization as part of the melodramatic formula of social conflicts played out in the family. Penny and Arthur Fleck are the epitome of the powerless poor who turn to the rich with hope but without success. Time and again, Penny's letters to her former employer, Thomas Wayne, go unanswered. When Arthur finally learns that he may be the illegitimate son of Thomas Wayne (and thus related to his later antagonist Batman), the class conflict leads to open confrontation. In this version—the film confronts us with different possible alternatives to the family history—Penny Fleck embodies the maid who is discreetly chased away, due to an »inappropriate« relationship, familiar from so many melodramas. In another melodramatic twist, however, we learn that Penny was apparently lying about her illicit relationship with her employer, only to again be left in doubt about it shortly before the end of the film (much is unreliably narrated in the manner of a mind game film, which makes Arthur's delusions appear as reality). It is part of the cruelty of the film that it is later revealed that Arthur only dreams himself into a better world and fantasizes a love affair with the neighbor, while the disproportionately violent reaction of the presumed wealthy father Thomas Wayne when Arthur confronts him is brutally real. Significantly, the movie theater shows the Chaplin classic → *Modern Times* (1936)—but Arthur does not transform into the harmless Tramp, even though he initially resembles him in his ridiculous get-up as a ticket-taker. Instead, he becomes a revenge clown, fighting from the underclass against the new feudal class of modern capitalism.

In his seminal study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks introduced the notion of melodrama as a mode of excess. According to him, the task of the melodrama in the 19th century novel was to make »the world morally legible« (42). At the turn of the 20th century, however, when melodrama conquered the big screen, another line of tradition emerged, more associated with the *Grand Guignol* in France: a theater of horror and spectacle, a Punch and Judy show for adults that refuses to make moral sense (Gunning). In early sensational film, the melodramatic mode of excess is inseparably

connected to an excitement of »thrills for thrill's sake« (Singer 148). We also encounter this line of tradition unmistakably in *Joker*. The victim triumphs in the end: not by restoring the moral order, but in an orgy of violence.

As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has pointed out in another example, the melodramatic mode of excess bears striking similarities to conversion hysteria as described by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, in this form of hysteria, repressed ideas are converted into physical symptoms or somatic reactions. In the melodrama, however, »a conversion can take place into the body of the text« (Nowell-Smith 73-74). In *Joker*, hysteria is not only present in Joaquin Phoenix's performance but also in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*. The »signs of melodrama« (Gledhill) can be read in the actor's body, as well as in the décor and in certain objects (Elsaesser 61-62). For example, after the confrontation with Wayne, Arthur locks himself in a refrigerator, which symbolizes his emotional world. Moreover, the dirty colors and gloomy lighting of the slum dwellings express an oppressive mood, as do the reminiscences of the shadow plays of film noir and a cleverly used Vertigo effect. Finally, the steep staircase, which Arthur has to climb again and again in resignation and fatigue over the course of the film, is also emblematic. It represents Arthur's desire for advancement through recognition as a stand-up comedian in bourgeois society. After this utopian hope is finally dashed, the staircase then leads, in a paradoxical reversal, to the ascent of the character Joker, who dances down the stairs in elation.

The excess culminates at the end in a hysterical outburst. The hero is finally recognized by the community and rescued from the crashed police vehicle in a kind of symbolic rebirth. In a depraved world determined by the cruel forces of the ruling class, morality becomes recognizable as an instrument of oppression and consequently can no longer triumph in the end.

References

- Brooks, Peter. 1976. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 1987. »Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama (1972).« In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 43-69. London: BFI.
- Gledhill, Christine. 1991. »Signs of Melodrama.« In *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 207-31. London: Routledge.
- Gunning, Tom. 1994. »The Horror of Opacity: The Melodrama of Sensation and the Plays of André de Lorde.« In *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, edited by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, 50-61. London: BFI.
- Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. 1987. »Minnelli and Melodrama.« In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 70-74. London: BFI.
- Singer, Ben. 2001. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press.

