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**IS JOKER A FIGURE OF JESUS UPSIDE DOWN?**

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## Is Joker a figure of Jesus upside down?

### The Joker film

*Joker* is 2019 American thriller produced by Warner Brothers, directed by Todd Phillips with the leading actor Joaquin Phoenix. *The Joker's* story is the attempt to build continuity to the *Batman* saga originally created by DC Comics with the Joker character as a main villain. Film mise en scene is a specific reality of the Batman story with Gotham City, Arkham Asylum (in the *Joker* film Arkham hospital), Wayne family in their mansion etc.

The Joker character itself has a long story of impersonalisations in previous Batman's filmic manifestations. However, only few versions set up certain satisfactory standards. In Tim Burton's *Batman* from 1989, the Joker is played by Jack Nicholson. The Nicholson's portrayal of the Joker is vital mostly due to the twisted sense of humor of the actor himself with his philosophy of „smile after all“. This particular performance bears the shadows of Jack Torrance in *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) combined with David Locke in *The Passenger* (Antonioni 1975) and McMurphy in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman 1975).

The next important Joker is the Heath Ledger's version from *The Dark Knight* by Christopher Nolan (2008). The Ledger's performance is successful on many levels. The most important is that the actor found a convincing way to expose logic of chaos which is a part of every psyche. Nonetheless, the combination of childhood abuse events and certain type of intelligence are still operating via the rules of the shadow

symmetry. The result in a form of a complex subject goes beyond normal and creates a grim and dangerous picture. And that was the Ledger's right observation.

What makes *Joker* film new in comparison with the previous realisations, is the fact that from the scheme of each typical superhero production, with the fight between good and evil, Todd Phillips decided to choose only one side and fill with it the whole narrative.

As many observed, the power of the film lays in the power of its villain. If there is a perfect verisimilitude of the villain creation, the whole production reaches an entirely different status in terms of artistic or commercial success.

It was not difficult to observe that the previous serious versions with Batman vs Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan 2012) was dismissed from the same very reason. At some point of the narrative, plot become so ridiculous that certain audiences wish Bane to defeat Batman. The mistake layed in the studio production system, in which the script is rather a result of gathering information from polls than the original work of the artist. There is another factor of *Dark Knight Rises* failure; many Hollywood productions serves american propaganda in order to support social engineering processes (Jenkins 2012). For the Warners Brothers executives of 2008, it was obvious that Batman must support Gotham police, even if he looks much uglier than the revolt of the main villain - Bane.

In the *Joker* production all those flaws were subject of a careful consideration.

Firstly: what Todd Phillips proposed was a natural consequence of the research based on „vaillain law“. If the quality of the vaillain constitutes the level of production, then the vaillain should be put in the center.

Secondly: to make the vaillain real, hire someone who is a Joker figure in the real life.

Thirdly: skip all the political correctness and build the script upon actual political situation.

Fourthly: to make it even more believable, create a film that has appearance and characteristics of the independent cinema, or at least, american new wave of the 70's.

Each of those four points needs further elaboration. However, the first one was already introduced by presenting famous Joker performances, the analysis then will continue with the second point.

## **Joaquin Phoenix**

As many observed Joaquin Phoenix was born to play the Joker's role. Not only because of his acting skills - the highest level of performances covering a long line of master creations such as: Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line* (Mangold 2005), Freddie Quell in *The Master* (Anderson 2012), Joe in *You were never really here* (Ramsey 2017) or John Callahan in *Don't worry he won't get to far on foot* (Van Sant 2018), but of his readiness to take extreme risks.

From 2008 to 2010 Joaquin Phoenix decided to take part in a cinematic experiment by Casey Affleck, which finally appeared to be paradocumentary - *I am still here* (2010).

For almost two years Phoenix played the role of himself – the actor who finished his

career in order to pursue success in rap. The acting experiment reached unexpected measures when almost all audiences and spectators believed that Joaquin Phoenix was the rap singer for real. The pivotal point in the Affleck's narrative was Phoenix's participation in the *Late Night Show with David Letterman* (CBS Paramount Network Television 2009). Former movie star in the lights of New York CBS studio appeared to be unorthodox, nonconventional edgelord who exchanged his whole Hollywood career for bad singing of primitively constructed tunes. A year later, in the *Late Night Show with David Letterman* (CBS Television Studios 2010) with Phoenix's appearance, it turned out that the whole music adventure was just an experiment. In the front of all the cameras, Joaquin Phoenix apologised to David Letterman for inconvenience and promised never do that again.

Considering the fact that every creature in Hollywood movie business in order to prove that is prepared for the next role would do almost everything, Phoenix's „two years of rap singing” was an act of extreme bravery and devotion. Joaquin Phoenix convinced the audience that to get a proper artistic results he was able to put his whole career at stake.

These are the qualities that makes the subject perfect for the Joker role and the good director such as Todd Phillips knew that.

## **„Hollywood’s New Wave” – New Hollywood/The Hollywood Renaissance/ American New Wave**

Following the order of the list presented in the beginning of this essay, it was supposed to be elaborated on the issue of political correctness, however because it is the part of solving Joker’s puzzle – next chapter, the fourth point will be now discussed.

It was a smart strategy undertaken by *Joker*’s creators to turn a typical Warner Brothers superproduction into a narrative that tastes, looks and sounds like almost an independent cinema or the cinema of 70’s Hollywood breakthrough, the new domain leaded by names like: Coppola, Ashby, Altman and others (Dixon, Foster 2013)

There were many qualities that distinguished independent and New Hollywood cinema from typical Hollywood commercial productions, still the most important category was the element of risk that had been created by low budget environment with less advanced equipment and tighter schedules. This is why films from this era had a specific look. The invention of cheaper Panaflex Panavision camera made it possible to move out from studio and work on „readymade” sets with almost no budget. Nonorthodox style of acting based on improvisation due to the time limits and complex plots based on real life characters, with their beauty but without easy consumable look of typical Hollywood stars. It also meant employment of contemporary music composers who proposed rough sonics and forms.

All those qualities were taken into consideration in the process of making *Joker*. The film has a specific look – the orange palette of the 70’s, its soundtrack is supported by

the music of avant-garde islandic composer, Hildur Guðnadóttir. To continue, *Joker* has a protagonist that feels like a real life person (Joaquin Phoenix improvises!) far from the perfection of all the superman/green lantern/captain america/aquaman gym trained, paraalpha males.

One of the mysteries of *Joker* production is then asking a question why such a “profit oriented only” studio decided to invest 70 mln dollars in the para-independent production. How it was possible for executives of Warner Brothers to invest their assets in the project of a superhero film that is limited to R rated audiences? What was the logic behind hiring for the leading role the man who pretended for two years that he gave up acting career for rap singing?

To answer those questions, essentially one has to solve the puzzle of *Joker* film meaning.

### **Roland Barthes and Carl Jung as key thinkers on the way to solve *Joker*'s puzzle.**

The best way to dissect all the layers of the *Joker* picture is to employ original to Roland Barthes „cognitive vehicle”, which operates by detecting the historical element in the, so called, „natural” material. As the French thinker confesses in the introduction to his famous work *Mythologies* (1973), the category of natural element that defines in it's core all the mundane contemporary media content makes him angry. The strategy of deploying only the surface message via transmitting a bulk of banal images and pretending in the proces of publishing that none of it has any historical

connotations, however convenient for a dominant consumer, makes more trained in reading different narratives minds, tired. Since „Mythologies” entered the world of scientific researches – semiotics, it is not a secret to the public that every, even the most dry advert, could be readable in terms of long historical background of myths.

In the process of decoding *Joker*'s message, one has to conclude that structure of it is in fact very simple. 95% of Todd Phillips film time line is the Joker character himself. The figure represented by Arthur Fleck is central and dominates the whole narrative almost as first two notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (1808). The function of all the surrounding motifs, personalised in other characters such as: mother, therapist, neighbour, imaginary girlfriend, or even the opponent, played by Robert de Niro, is more or less, to fix the ornament that emphasises the *Joker*'s dynamics. De facto, what this production delivered to guarantee the perfect show based on combination of quality and unpredictability, is Joaquin Phoenix's understanding of dynamics.

In this case one has to move beyond mythology and dig deeper. It is not just a story which in Barthes's terminology is expressed by rule: sense locked into the form. It is the complex, almost unmoving, gigantic figure that is transparent and recognisable for worldwide audiences minds.

Carl Jung (1972) observed:

„the term of „archetype” occurs as early as Philo Judaeus, with reference to Imago Dei (God-image) in man. It can also be found in Irenaeus, who says: „the creator of the world did not fashion these

things directly from himself but copied them from archetypes outside himself". In the Corpus Hermeticum, God is called archetypal light. The term occurs several Times in Dionysius the Areopagite, as for instance in De celesti hierarhia, II, 4: „immaterial Archetypes," and in De divinis nominibus, I 6: „Archetypa stone." The term „representations collective," used by Levy-Bruhl to denote the symbolic figures in the primitive view of the world, could easily be applied to unconscious contents as well, since it means practically the same thing. Primitive tribal lore is concerned with archetypes that have been modified in a special way. They are no longer contents of the unconscious, but have already been changed into conscious formulae taught according to tradition, generally in the form of esoteric teaching. This last is a typical means of expression for the transmission of collective contents originally derived from unconscious" (pp.4).

As Jung discovered, what makes all the myths, fairytales, historic narratives, in Joker's case: Prometheus, Gorgonae, Bronzen Ksatssus, vital and available for the modern audiences is the archetype itself. The archetype sums up on a global level and is the part of unconsciuous. However, by definition of the shadow, it is collective and transpersonal. Every human being on Earth is able to read archetype figure regardless of the language or symbolics in particular presentation. Considering the fact that the *Joker* production exceeded in the box office one bilion dollars (2.12.2019), besides being R rated and not being screened in China, the only conclusion that rises is that such a massive success must be an expression of some powerfull archetype which operates on the level of very ancient myth.

In the Joker film the audience has to deal with very unusual combination: the myth that represents the Saviour, although the archetype embodies the Trickster.

This is how Jung (1972) defines certain characteristics and draws connections between both:

”A curious combination of typical trickster motifs can be found in the alchemical figure of Mercurius; for instance, his fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine, his exposure to all kinds of tortures, and – last but not least – his approximation of the figure of a saviour (...) It is just this transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful that reveals the trickster’s compensatory relations to the „Saint” (pp. 135)

What can be read from Jung’s endeavour, is that the saviour and the trickster are the opposites intrinsically connected by the law of perfect contradictions. There are the two sides of the same coin.

The Saviour is obviously the figure of Jesus. Hence is Arthur Fleck’s story an actual opposite of what one can find in four gospels delivered by apostles of the divine church?

A careful reader of the Saviour story, constructed on the series of rebel events, and further torments with final mystery act which Romans reported as a trick – laughter

from beyond the grave, leads to the conclusion that there are striking similarities between Artur Fleck's path to glory and Jesus's Golgota. One can not go too far by admitting that the Saviour was possibly the Trickster as well.

### **The qualities of the Trickster.**

#### I. Action

The first instrument that the Trickster possesses and utilises with virtuoso skills is the ability to create spontaneous laughter. This is why he is called the Joker and this is why he wears his specific costume. There are four main theories of laughter:

1. The Theory of Superiority in which one is laughing at something that is by the position or the quality inferior: Smarter laughs at the Fool (Aristotle 1932).
2. The Relief theory in which laughter is a form of a body reaction to mental or physical body tension (Freud 1905).
3. Incongruity Theory in which one is laughing at something that is intrinsically contradictory (Kant 1790).
4. Play Theory in which laughter is an expression of playfulness that is an inherent quality of human being (Morreall 2009).

The most interesting and more or less present in all those theories is the hypothesis that laughter is a form of body and mind relief. This theory was created by Sigmund Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud analyses three laughter situations: *Der Witz* (often translated as "jokes" or "joking"), "the comic," and "humor." In all three, laughter releases nervous energy that was summoned for a

psychological task, but then became superfluous as that task was abandoned. In *Der Witz*, that superfluous energy is the energy used to repress feelings; in the comic it is energy used to think, and in humor it is the energy of feeling emotions. This essay does not use *humor* in Freud's narrow sense, yet in the general sense that includes joking, wit, the comic, etc.

*Der Witz* includes telling prepared fictional jokes, making spontaneous witty comments, and repartee. In *Der Witz*, Freud says, the psychic energy released is the energy that would have repressed the emotions that are being expressed as the person laughs.

This essay author's own observation observation in that field can be specified as The Truth Theory, in which basic mechanism off sudden explosion of laughter, sudden – the key word, is the result of the exposition of the final truth in particular situation. The laughter/explosion is stronger if the amplitude between the lie that constituted previous assembly and the revealed truth is wider. Both categories in this equation are almost exponentially related. Apparently, this proposition is just a variation on four main theories mentioned above, however it could be helpful, because it puts the accent on the element of TRUTH.

The truth and the laughter are directly connected to the dominant Trickster's activity, which creates pranks in order to destroy faulty rules created by deceitful and hypocritical elites.

This type of event was utilized by many keen storytellers and has a long history. In the novel *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1980), the engine of the plot is guarded by the oldest monk in the monastery: the hidden knowledge according to which the most dangerous for the stability of papal emporium is the laughter. Therefore, any act of self

relief, considered as a part of humor domain, prank or satire, has been abolished. The laughter for the elite who controls reality of the Eco's novel equals a sin and by that is evil.

From my experience, I remember that the communist, Jaruzelski's regime (1982-1989) was more afraid of performing stand up comedians than underground revolt. This is why the regime media of this time created their own satire channels which were the installation of some sort of safety fuse on the body of public. The jokes were supposed to be secure and the satire within reason.

Johan Huizinga in his works *Autumn of medieval ages* (1919) and *Homo ludens* (1938) mentions similar strategies established by the Holy Church such as: the new year fool's pope (*fatuorum papam*) or donkey mass (*festum asinorum*). For some amount of time authority was transmitted to the clown figure (jester) who celebrated in the main cathedral special mass. The preaching members of congregation were disguised as a fool's crowd in the colorful, weird clothes. The crowd recited prayers backwards or with addition of silly noises imitating in the case of *festum asinorum*, donkey's "y-a" ("*hac modulatione hinham concludebantur*"). After certain period it turns out that even childish pranks for one-week fiesta were too dangerous for the Vatican. In vain did Pope Innocent III inveigh against the "jests and madness that make clergy a mockery", and the "shameless frenzy of their play-acting". The fight between carnival and lent – the theme used by many master paintings and the painting under the same title by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1559), was created in order to document those most exciting moments.

The motif of the Trickster who in the last stage of his procedures finally replaced the ruthless hegemon or the members of the corrupted establishment, has a long history

in the cultural artefacts of almost every world society. Whenever one mentions Loki, Enki, Coyote, Olifat, Renart the Fox, Kitsune, Ivan the Fool, Kalulu, Anansi, Veles, Maui, Mbeku, Yaw, Kumiho, Azeban, Hermes, Odysseus, Eris, Prometheus, or more contemporary such as: Pulcinella, Till Eulenspiegel, the narrative repeats with the same sequence of episodes: the protagonist, with the help of his adventurous spirit and unique sense of humor, in the end of the story overthrows the evil order.

## II. Mask and the costume

Another important element of the Trickster instrumentation is his outfit with the smiling mask on top of it. It was prudent on the jester's side to appear silly. Considering the fact that on many medieval courts the jester was the only one who could speak freely to the king, the look was the matter of life and death. On the other hand, one can read utilisation of the mask as a sign of depersonalisation and escape. There is one who wears the mask – someone hidden and polymorphic, and there is the one on the surface who theoretically reveals the TRUTH. This is the part of the Trickster mystery if they are separate or rather work together. For the same reason the Joker is a card in every card deck, that substitutes all other denominations. Therefore, the sly fondness of pretending to be everything and everyone, with the funny haircut and painted smile on his face, puts the shadow on the whole figure that the entire undertaking is nothing but trick. The trick which is the main category that differs Tricksters from the realm of heroes personalized by all Herculeses' and marvel super/iron/green-lantern man. The trickster in order to win cheats. He is smart but ruthless, witty but uncompassionate. His dominant activity is to destroy and bring the chaos - on the opposite to the Savior, who's actions aim at order and stability.

This is how Carl Jung approaches Trickster/Savior mandala:

”He is (the Trickster) a forerunner of the Savior, and like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristics is his unconscious” (pp. 143).

As was mentioned above, for the author of this essay there are more similarities than opposites between the Trickster and the Savior. Modern mathematics of chaos revealed that what was once perceived as random behavior is in fact most symmetrical realm of fractals (Lorenz 1963). Quantum mechanics discoveries, with the last performed quantum delayed choice experiment, performed successfully at the Canberra University (Khakimov, Truscott 2015), proved that in fact the material order established by the science of the centuries – from Newton to Einstein, is nothing but series of dice rolls with just the one defining condition: who watches and when. For the conservative part of the physics society nonmaterialistic approach with Wheelerian postulate of the reality build upon matrix of information is almost a deadly joke.

For the AI (Artificial Intelligence) makers, holy grail of conscious is badly ungraspable and is reduced to unfunny proposition of the brain as a vehicle for combinatorics and algorithms (Searle 1990).

By the law of contrast, what can be seen through obscure realm of materialistic pirouettes is the perspective where the spirit as the quality that defines human conscious is the unifying element for Trickster, Jesus, or series of Zen masters with their koan strategies and Drukpa Kunley’s (Dowman 2000) urinal practices above all.

Arthur Fleck is the character build upon all the features mentioned above. He calls himself a Joker, he wears proper costume and mask, and most importantly, he travels through the series of special experiences with the pre-stage of naivety, then torments,

then initiation, then action, to the final victory. At the end the ruler is overthrown – the ruler of the fake joke domain, personalized by Robert de Niro in *The King of Comedy* (Scorsese 1982), nomen omen, is shot dead by Joker. The order based on the power of Wall Street and their puppets, represented by Mr. Wayne and friends, is destroyed by the crowd of masked guerillas, which, like in the medieval donkey spectacle, are clones of their master – the Trickster/Joker. Arthur Fleck is in the final adored by clown warriors and elevated to the status of a new king and ultimate ruler.

### **Upside down**

There is a one thing that still is unsolved in Jungian explanation. Swiss thinker depicts the Trickster figure as the first archetype of the shadow. The shadow in this place means unconscious which occupies a form of the realm, or in parlor of our times – the cloud. If the Trickster and the Savior are the two sides of the same coin, or some sort of carbon copies, what one concludes is more of “symmetrical nature” than geographical displacement. During the process of rethinking Jungian hypothesis, what one can find more convenient in terms of cataloguing the Tricksters of the world is the position upside down.

Discovering the upside down symmetry in the world of psyche is something completely different than the proposition of conscious and unconscious with its impossible to locate topography. One could say that the Trickster is rather Jesus turned upside down, with all the consequences of that arrangement, than the Jesus from planet X.

The question is therefore: is the Trickster Jesus turned upside down for real?

The picture which is the direct contradiction of Christ on the Cross is the twelve cards of tarot (major arcana) – the hanged man. The hanged man hangs upside down. The hanged man, similar to Jesus, is attached to the cross but in the opposite direction.

The meaning of imago Christi – crucifixion, is the subject of the centuries of interpretations and commentaries, but what is the meaning of the crucified man upside down? Is it possible that this relaxed figure, counterpointing the main icon of Christianity, could be the Trickster?

A.E. Waite (1911) defines the qualities of the hanged man as a result of approaching the reality at a certain angle. The hanged man represents someone who can finally look at things from effectively new perspective. Therefore, he/she is able to reconsider particular issues in a new way. Apparently, the position determines unconventional behavior and is an ultimate design for the outsider badge. Waite mentions yet the willingness to be uncomfortable in a pursuit for higher truth, ability to break free from restricted habits, and capacity for staying true to yourself even in the most dramatic environment.

All the mentioned above characteristics are intrinsic and defining for the Arthur Fleck's story. The Joker is a broken figure who through tormented, impossible immobilization, invents the solution how to break out.

### **Picture of the society**

As was mentioned before the film mainly contains two layers, the figure of Joker, which is the 95% of the narrative and the society scenes with its final, "global" revolution,

which makes the 5% of the narrative. The society is presented as a crowd of angry, desperate people who were robbed and left alone by “wall street guys”. People who started to react by destroying everything around. Implicitly the action is taken to kill oppressors – the elite.

Looking at this process through the glasses of modern sociological theories, which try to nail the nature of the humanity of our time: postmodern – Zygmunt Bauman (1992) - consumerism, hypermodern – Gilles Lipovetski (2004) – the rise of the technology, then one can easily conclude that the mentioned thinkers are already outdated, because they avoid the issue of economy.

According to Bauman (1992):

”once we remember that incoherence is the most distinctive among the attributes of postmodernity (arguably its defining feature), we need to reconcile ourselves to the prospect that all narratives will be to a varying extent flawed” (pp.49).

and Lipovetski (2004):

”The society that is coming into being is one in which the forces opposing democratic, liberal and individualistic modernity are ineffectual, in which the 158 Supplanting the Postmodern great alternative visions have collapsed, in which modernization no longer meets with any strong organizational or ideological resistance. Not all pre-modern elements have evaporated, but they themselves function in accordance with a modern logic that is deregulated and de-institutionalized. Even social classes and class cultures are fading away before the principle of autonomous individuality. The State is on

the retreat, religion and the family are being privatized, a market society is imposing itself: the cult of economic and democratic competition, technocratic ambition, and the rights of the individual all go unchallenged. A second modernity, deregulated and globalized, has shot into orbit: it, has no opposite, and is absolutely modern, resting essentially on three axiomatic elements constitutive of modernity itself: the market, technocratic efficiency and the individual” (pp. 157-158).

Thinkers like Lipovetsky and Bauman by using their shamanic jargon trying to convince the public that the rapidly changing environment is almost affecting human DNA.

According to Keyes (2004), people are living now in post truth era where subjects are able to function without notion of any truth. Unfortunately, the bitter condition that everyone must face at the end of the day is the number on the personal banking account. In this particular moment of illumination there is no such thing as a post truth.

In Todd’s Phillips film all people suffer due to the lack of money. There is no money for the therapy, for medicine, no funds for public safety, there is no work and there is no future. The society is atomized to the ridiculous measures – as Werner Herzog (1974) once observed – Jeder fur sich und Gott gegen alle.

One could ask: is it not just a classic Marxist framing with war of classes, and inevitable project of revolution behind? Unfortunately, Marx is outdated as well. People are living in the times of enormous concentration of power. Four corporations own everything

on the globe. There is no nasty, but at least examined capitalism. With the total control of all the devices, the world is entering the state of skynet totalitarianism. The society does not live anymore in the postmodern, hypermodern, x-modern times. People are back to to dark ages of enslavement.

The Joker's writer conclusion is that such a world is impossible to maintain. 10 people own the value of the rest 7 billion. Main media channels trying to protect elite members in a way that to obvious sex offender is given prime time to explain that he is not sweating and visited pizza express instead of participating in intimate meeting with the underage girl. It could be a great joke in the Monty Python style: hey, this photo is photoshopped, but unfortunately for ordinary man, trapped in the reality of banking system, this is not a funny situation anymore.

This is why the Joker laughs compulsively unable to get a relief. Todd Phillips proposes a metaphor of the world where laughter is impossible and the perspective of the revolution by the next incarnation of the Savior ceased.

Transforming the Laura Mulvey's (1999) original thought, one could add, that in order to participate in the spectacle of upcoming times rather we need to grow wallet then penis.

## **Conclusion**

The tremendous success of the film directed by Todd Philips proves that all of his conclusions are valid. Joker is the sign of our times. He reflects all the current issues and expresses directly the collective unconscious. The question: if the Trickster figure

is the Jesus “upside down”, must then be left open hoping for the material gathered in this essay will inspire readers to their own investigations and possible answer.

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