

In What Ways Can We Have Positive Responses to Evil Characters in Film?

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Abstract—This article is based on the fact that more and more evil characters are liked by the audience in the process of shaping movie characters. Through examples, I have read many reference articles and got the following points after thinking: the point of audiences, the point of society, and aesthetic form of film. It would explore and discuss with the development of our films, why audiences are gradually obsessed with some evil characters and some evil characters even are more attractive and captivating than some ideal heroes. Furthermore, these evil characters in these movies even be madly pursued by a lot of fans, which also pose some negative or positive effects to the society. This is completely different from the appreciation habits of the audience before. Through research, the evil characters are loved by the audience, which is inseparable from our audience's sympathy, life experience, social reality, and aesthetic changes. This kind of research provides a certain reference value for the future analysis of these evil roles, shaping the evil roles and reflecting on our society.

Index Terms—Evil characters, appreciation habits, ideal heroes, films

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the sculpturing heroic characters in the cinematic universe, regardless the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) like the Spider-Man Trilogy by Sam Raimi (2002, 2004 and 2007) and later Jon Watts (2017, 2019 and 2021) and The Amazing Spider-Man by Marc Webb (2012, 2014) or DC Universe (DCU) like Justice League by Zack Snyder (2021), or even real-life characters like Braveheart by Mel Gibson (1995), audiences have been obsessed and fell in love with the characters within, especially the heroes and heroines, generally being portrayed as the main characters in the films. In both characters from the comics or real-life historical figures, they have made an extraordinary accomplishment and have demonstrated their bravery. Some of them fight alongside their country's honor and would rather sacrifice themselves for the expansion of land, being a symbol of a cultural hero, others protect the weak civilians and bravely battle to defend their justice, identity, country and even the world, holding the utmost personality of being responsible, being justice and being selfless. Some even possess an extraordinary power, laser eyes, web shooters and so on, alongside with their unbelievable mental and physical strength to assist in saving the universe. Foster through the historic point of view analyzes the changes in the roles of male heroes in different ages. He thinks each period of these

films as a representation and reflection of its current culture [1].

However, as time passes and society develops, film genre begins to expand and so does their technical development, Computer Generated Image (CGI), green or blue screen begin to take place to provide a more realistic scene for audience to enjoy. Dromm summarizes that CGI has made it possible for many conceptual scenes [2]. This changes the artistic and aesthetic view of the audience, since they want to be entertained, engaged, and impressed by the film and their beloved heroes and not just merely the perfect, top-of-the-pyramid, unachievable persona that the characters possessed in the film.

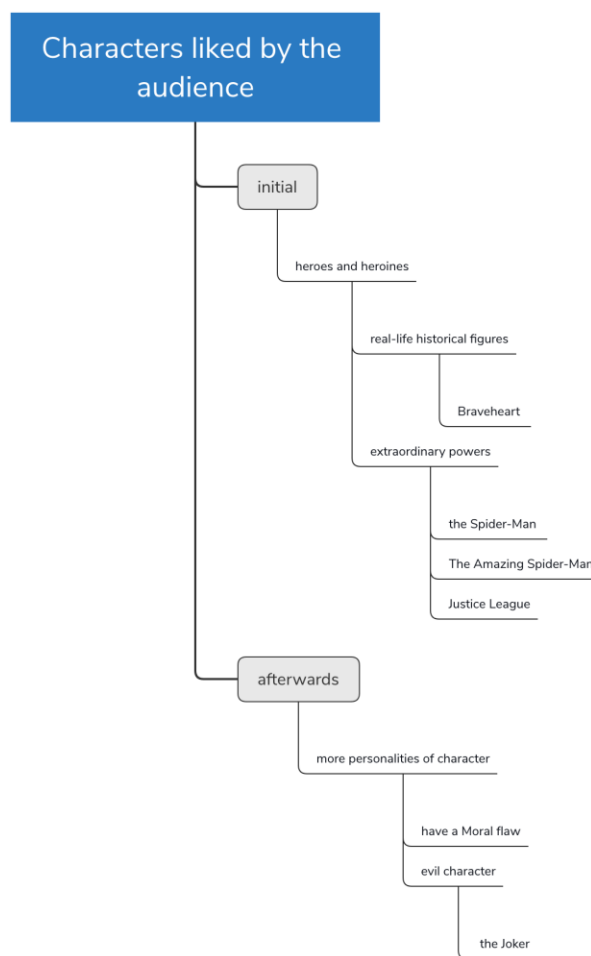


Fig. 1. Changes in character setting.

MCU has been engaging the audience using more real-life

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location like San Francisco in *Ant Man* and the *Wasp* by Peyton Reed and timeframe like the year 2019 in *Avengers: Infinity War* by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, allowing the audience to feel more participated. DCU on the other hand, uses more personalities of a character to engage with the audience, while their location remained fictional like Gotham in the *Batman Begins* by Christopher Nolan. It is very interesting that Eden made a distinction between heroes and anti-heroes in his article. He analyzes the differences between heroes and anti-heroes from the angle of moral violations and personality traits [3]. However, at present, many anti-hero characters are becoming increasingly popular among people. This change is shown in the Fig. 1. The film that discussed today would be the *Joker* by Todd Phillips. The audiences may find it engaging, identifying the emotion of the mental breakdown, psychotic personality of the main character, Joker, also known as Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix). Just as Scoma says: "Fleck's zero-to-hero character arc is an adept illustration of how society forces men to cross a metaphysical border from "weakling boy" to "real man" to gain respect from others and exert control over one's own body [4]." The idolization of such characters has allowed the film to win several awards including the Oscars and BAFTA film awards. In this study, the reasons for the devotion of the main character, Joker, is discussed, including:

- 1) The simulation of the audience empathy towards the evilness of the main character in the film, expressing their suppressed emotions towards him.
- 2) The painful experience shared between the audience and the main character himself.
- 3) The understanding of the societal background and its reality through.
- 4) A new film perception to excite the audience's aesthetic interest.

II. AS A PARTICIPANT: THE SIMULATION OF THE AUDIENCE EMPATHY TOWARDS EVIL CHARACTER, EXPRESSING THEIR SUPPRESSED EMOTIONS

These characters with disabilities, whether it is mentally or physically, or even some evil characters at a certain level, whether it is their similarities in looks, or their virtuous or villainous behavior, or a grey area in between, a contradictory aspect, or even a desire one have suppressed within their subconscious mind or a recall of an unforgettable memory, once an audience has placed their emotion and judgement onto the characters, empathy arises. As Gaut mentions in his article, "...maintains that film audiences can identify or empathize with characters and that this is an important aspect of their emotional engagement with characters... [5]" Thus, in such a case, the audience will have some good reactions to the growth of the villainous characters. For example, in the *Joker*, despite being evil, the characters are still loved by the majority because people's suppressed emotions within their feelings need to be articulated out, either through words or films, allowing us to relieve our stress and the pain surrounding us as we walk back into reality.

The *Joker* is one of the characters that enables audience to express their inner emotions to, since everyone is a combination of the *Joker* and Arthur. The *Joker* is represented as a carrier in our darkest feelings, and every

audience hopes and has been able to express that feeling through this character in the film. This relation of our empathy towards the *Joker*, a tragic character being set in a more tragic societal environment by the director is one of the reasons we felt sympathy towards him. It is true that the *Joker*, in his Gotham city, is unremarkable, minute, being frowned upon, yet he might be one of the people in the life of an audience, it may have represented an audience themselves. He has suffered mentally, physically, and financially as an amateur comedian and professional clown with mental disability, yet he remained struggling at the bottom of the society and remain the odd one out there, just like a fish out of water, both literally and idiomatically. He numerously fell into the void of hardship and difficulties, yet no one came to assist him; instead, they bully him and beat him up due to his pseudobulbar effect. Here we can see a strong contrast between the white collar, top dog, and fat cat in the society, where the spotlights are shone upon them, and the blue collar, inferior and underclass, where there is only darkness within their life, not even a dim glowing splinter would shine on them. Also, on the bright side, his rightful act of attempting to make a kid laugh, and his deterministic attitude towards life along with the jokes he made has made him the echo of the audience life experience.

III. UNITS AS AN OBSERVER: THE PAINFUL EXPERIENCE BY THE MAIN CHARACTER HIMSELF, WITNESSED BY THE AUDIENCES

It is indisputable to claim that there is still a distance between ourselves and a serial killer within the film. Aside from a few riots arose due to the film, majority of the audience will not opt to use such extreme violence to express their inner emotion, including but not limited to pain, suffering, and resent. However, the positive response we have for such characters goes to show that we are being an observer outside the character, accompanying him to experience his melancholic life, hence sympathizing him. As mentioned by Gaut, Carroll views such situation as "...We respond to fictional situations as outside observers, assimilating our conception of the character's mental state into our overall response as a sort of onlooker with respect to the situation in which the character finds himself..." [5].

At the beginning of the *Joker*, Arthur Fleck remained optimistic and being filled with hope towards his life. Being a clown is still his job and the way of making a living. He remained his belief from his mom, stating that he has a sense of duty in making everyone happy, bringing everyone joy in life. For example, he tried to make a kid smile on a public bus, even though he received a distaste reaction from the kid's mom and got driven away. He would also still punctually feed himself the medication to stabilize his mental condition even though the government was starting to minimize his social welfare fund. In addition, he would continue to one up himself in being a comedian to bring laughter for everyone even though everyone perceived him as a joke. Moreover, he would gladly listen to his mother narrating the kind-hearted elite politician and their achievement in their life, imagining being accepted by elitism. He would also always picture the girl she loved, whom she met at a lift on the way up a building. His delight in life and his faith in the only way to save

Gotham city from falling due to corruption is the elitism made him failed to recognize that the society is gradually abandoning him. His fantasy went on until the elitism representatives, the three brothers at Wall Street, attempted to humiliate him in front of the public's eyes. Arthur quickly defended himself by pulling a gun, mass shooting at the subway and does not leave anyone out. As an audience, an observer, we can begin to see that Arthur's evilness has begun to rise, one step closer in becoming the nefarious Joker. After the incident, Joker (the wicked mind inside Arthur) became more frequently provoked by Arthur's surrounding, including the mockery, and denouncing by the politician he once believed in and the fact that his mental health is due to him being abused by his mother he always loved and believe him, forcing it to show up more and more times. This shattered dreams and fantasy of Arthur had caused an unprecedented hysteria within him. As his mother last breath died down after being smothered by him with a pillow, Arthur, and the Joker within him fused into one.

In my opinion, this unfair act of repaying someone badly after being treated nicely has become a force. Not merely just a force of action, but a force due to cornered deprivation as a person's free life and will being forced closed and stripped off. Like a domino this force, acting as his last free will, last choice, has thrust the Joker/Arthur to pick up the gun. As Eaton claims that "an immoral feature of an artwork can make a significant positive aesthetic contribution precisely in virtue of its immorality" [6]. In other words, a sinister character like the Joker can also be perceived as an aesthetic entity. As we go along the life of Arthur Fleck, we might feel sympathy towards him, we might accept his way of doing it, and might agree that no man will be left unharmed by others forever and at a desperate situation we need to use violence against violence, non-stop. As one being ravaged by the injustice world, as their dreams crash into million pieces, one would ignore the self-involvement in being a villain, since the world already is, and always, evil.

IV. THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIETAL BACKGROUND AND ITS REALITY THROUGH THE FILM

Likewise, one can relate to and question the societal concerns arising around themselves with and through the lifelike fictional character in the film. In the article, Redmond describes the chaos and unfairness of society, the breakdown of family, the unfairness of society and the corruption of politics. This clown character is lonely and morbid [7]. Come back the film, Arthur Fleck was not a happy person, as such he could not bring happiness to other people, making him unable to accomplish his role of 'spreading joy to the world', or being a joy spreader. This made him oppressed and depressed. Such repetitive and constant positive feedback had led him to a strangled position, filling his void with sorrowness, fear, and anguish, leading him to an uncontrollable laugh. Hypothetically, if everyone had just tried to understand him, give him a little bit of sympathy, and put themselves in his shoe to aid and not humiliate him, or provoke him unmeaningfully, letting him to do the 'righteous' unachievable, the hidden little Joker inside Arthur's heart and mind may have never been born. As a result, the only thing that can save Arthur from the terrible

Joker is a small bit of compassion and empathy. Yet, people around him are not 'bound by allegation and responsibilities' to assist him even though this will lead to a better Arthur. Or in other words, no one has asked no one to provide him guidance, this is truly a tragic part of the story.

From an observer point of view, we can see that most pain and suffering perceived by an individual does not come from them not knowing the rights and wrongs, but the lack of compassion, sympathy, and encouragement. They have felt the pain due to claustrophobically being in a constant confined state by the sarcastic comments and provocation of others, just like Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen) in the Joker. Even though he is the most famous, and respectable philanthropist in Gotham city, constantly bewitching himself with the fact that he respected order, he was full of aspiration (all of which are superficial and untrue). Unexpectedly he remained unfair and unjust towards the poor and civilians from the lower class. Nevertheless, standing at Wayne's point of view, I do not think he is just as wrong either, since a tragic life experience of a person should be sympathized, but that does not mean he or she should commit a crime, also never a reason to take part in antisocial activities. In other words, correlation does not mean causation, a tragic person's life does not cause him to commit a crime, but other factors like his lust and desire may do.

It is undeniable that most of the time the societal rule has skewed its benefit towards the rich and upper class, but there is still hope and path for the poor to become rich. It may not be easy like the highway, but this remains a fair opportunity for the poor. Wayne noticed this scheme and decided to become the mayor, the ambassador of order and justice. Despite that, from the perspective of the society of Gotham, this is could be a mission that is impossible, since the disparity of the rich and poor is too big. The actual solution from what I understand is not conduct a mass killing like the Joker, nor believing in order like Wayne, but being understandable, sympathy and provide a light of assistance for Arthur before him turning into the Joker. Alongside the stressful and cruel society in Gotham, it unimaginable that such person that provide all aspect mentioned earlier exists. Say Arkham Psychiatrist (April Grace) in the film, she did not provide enough love towards Arthur as well, due to the unfair treatment of her by Gotham, as she never really pay much attention in listening Arthur during the latter's consultation with her. The health of a society or a city or even a country does not depend entirely on its economy and the wealthy, but how the country would treat the poor and minorities.

The disparity should be minimized as close as possible create a healthy society. This film does not solely demonstrate an individual maniac, but the deranged and demented of the framework of the society through this individual, hence weakening the foundation of society, allowing the virus of insanity to infect the society, resulting in a subconscious, collective maniacs. Moreover, the film wants us to depict each disturbed mind of everyone could condense into a riot, a societal exercise, or perhaps a cult. Just as Joker differentiates itself from its predecessors not only by making Joker the central figure of the film but by setting its origin story in a realistic and recognizable world. This process can be seen as passively unintentional [8]. In addition, the film

has portrayed that regardless being oppressed or the oppressor, both cases will lead to the deep void of violence and darkness.

V. A NEW FILM PERCEPTION TO EXCITE THE AUDIENCE'S AESTHETIC INTEREST

As previously said, in the early days, audiences' perspectives shifted from merely loving the hero in the film to gradually recognizing the hero's defect, gradually feeling empathy and sympathy for the destiny of the evil characters, and increasingly idolizing the antagonist as well. Krutnik analyzes film noir's style in *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* from a historical perspective and theoretical method [9]. In the process of carving film characters with the aim of allowing the film to apt to the artistic taste of the audience, the external characteristic and aesthetic style are continually up to date. Each frame by frame shot and the compatibility of the décor in the set is attested by the director, in hope of allowing audiences to enjoy the film with full of emotion. As Marković says "Something is an artwork if it elicits an "aesthetic emotion" in the spectator." [10].

Before the Joker, many films had used a variety of objects as symbolism, as well as lighting, frame shots, and location set to act as an element of symbol. For example, director Martin Scorsese loves to use perilous streets, rainwater, and dim lighting as his elements. In the Joker film, Todd Phillips also plays with the lighting in search of different portrayal and uses the iconic stairs as a metaphor of the connection between reality and fantasy. This contemporary portrayal has brought the enjoyment of the audience, both sight and hearing. Furthermore, the theme of the film has become broader, from a personal fate and the inescapable sink of addiction to a richer reference of an era towards a profession and a society. The individual that is inevitable no longer exist alone but has been showcased on an even bigger stage that affects it, leading to destruction. It is known that all these themes and settings have brought an aesthetic shock to the audience.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study shows 2 ways to have positive responses to the antagonist or the villain in a film. The first one would be being a participant, placing our feelings and thoughts into the antagonist as well. This allows us to identify the villain and

feel a sense of empathy in them. Another way is to act as an observer, witnessing the feeling of the antagonist, namely their negative feelings such as fear, sorrow, hatred, anguish and so on. This allows us to have sympathy towards them. At the same time, we would start to ponder on the societal issue occurring around us through the development of the antagonist and their plans. Not only this would make us aware of the societal problem as a whole and we might attempt to solve it, but at the that instant moment when we watch the film it would give us an aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment as we went along the film. As a result, only simultaneously being the participant and observer could one be truly having some positive responses and connection with the evil characters.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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