

From *Modern Times* to *Joker*: The Marginal people Alienated by the Times

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Abstract: A film is often marked with the brand of the times, about people and things of a certain era, reflecting the social problems of that era. This paper analyzes the characteristics of the protagonists in the two films and excavates the deep connotation of the film. From the four aspects of marginal people, protagonist's experience, character alienation, belief and choice, this paper analyzes the different behavior orientations and respective fates of the bottom people in the two films, who are also the marginal people who are struggling to survive in a certain era.

Keywords: *Modern Times*, *Joker*, Marginal people, Alienated by the Times

1. Introduction

The film *Joker* often remind me of the famous comedian Charlie Chaplin from time to time. The film just exactly interspersed with the ice skating and dancing clips of *Modern Times* to metaphor the theme of *Joker*, playing a finishing touch role and making it more worthwhile to compare and analyze the two films.

There are similarities and differences between the film *Joker* and *Modern Times*. For the similarities, they describe the marginal people who are at the bottom of the society as well as reflecting the times at that time, while the differences lie in character depictions and fate arrangements. Although one is a crime film and the other is a comedy, the cores of both are the same, that is alienation. In *Modern Times*, the industrialization of machinery and chemical industry alienates people into parts. Master Chaplin shows the tragic situation in a humorous way. In *Joker*, pan entertainment and the class gap between the rich and the poor also alienate people into someone like Arthur who lack self-identity and self-worth. Phoenix's acting unveils the ostentatious and festive city and tears out the ugly core.

2. Marginal people: The Phenomenon of a Specific Era

2.1 Marginal people

Kurt Lewin, a German psychologist, first proposed the concept of marginal people in his book *Principles of Topological Psychology*. From a generalized perspective, marginal person refers to a person who has his own uniqueness in a certain aspect, which makes it difficult for others to understand in a short time; there are also extreme factors with both goodness and badness. From a narrow perspective, marginal people refer to people who are separated from the mainstream social groups in all aspects. They are more difficult to be tolerated and less understood. Due to economic or political reasons, they are on the edge of society and belong to marginal groups. In this paper, the marginal people refer to the civilian at the bottom of the society from the narrow perspective. [1]

Joker and *Modern Times*, two films with different styles, are quite consistent in the positioning of the protagonists. They both have similar backgrounds, that is, the plight of the bottom. Arthur and little tramp were the representatives of the people at the bottom of each according era. Arthur lives in the fictional city of Gotham. He is pushed out and isolated. From his being kind-hearted at the beginning to become evil step by step, it shows the reconstruction of human beings in the 1980s. *Joker* reflects the separation of Gotham City, the contradiction between individuals and collective, and the antagonism between various classes through the visions of the bottom marginal figures. In *Modern Times*, Chaplin plays a character who is occasionally selfish, often making faults, but kind-hearted. It tells the miserable

experience of the little people, their inner confusion and aimless, and their yearning for a better life and love in the modern era with the great gap between the rich and the poor of United States in the 1930s.

2.2 The theme of the times

Any classic film has a theme of praising the truth or beauty. If *Modern Times* is the manifestation of the contradiction between the working class and the bourgeoisie, then *Joker* reveals the cause, process and result of the blackening of a social and political problem, the prejudice and discrimination of the world, the feeling that politics is hopeless, and the law is invalid.

The story of *Modern Times* takes place in the 1930s when the American economy was depressed. During this period, there were huge class contradictions in American society, and the unemployment rate of the whole country remained high. In the film, capitalists' merciless oppression and monitoring of labor together with the unfriendliness of the capital society to the vulnerable groups.

Similarly, in *Joker*, there is a tragic character in the background of the times. The story is set in Gotham in the 1980s. Under the outside world's extravagant life, the city of Gotham is turbulent and materialistic, but it is full of countless invisible violence and darkness, physical and mental torture.

3. Protagonist experience: same and different

3.1 Identity

Art comes from life but is higher than life. In fact, no matter in which era, the film should be the collective embodiment of the mass subconscious as the film itself is a mass entertainment. Whether it is economic depression or social unrest, in that special era background, there will be many tragic characters with comedy attribute, and also comedy characters with tragedy attribute. The protagonists in *Modern Times* and *Joker* both have comic color and tragic life. They use comedy to interpret tragedy.

Although the protagonist in *Modern Times* is the representative of the tragedy of that era, the little tramp is a tragic character full of joy. He makes the audience laugh and cry to see a series of funny and frightening scenes: he is insane in the accelerating conveyor line, rolled in and out in the huge machine gear, and fed by the malfunctioning food machine which also keeps fanning his sad and frightened face. The reason why Charlie can make people laugh is not only his careless and flawed behaviors, but also his hindsight in the face of "danger": skating on the second floor of the Department Store blindfolded, swimming in the shallow water, and being pushed and run by the people dancing in the restaurant with a big plate on his hand.

Arthur lives in a lie and other people's dream from the beginning. He has no talent for acting, and suffers from mania, but his goal in life is to become an excellent comedian. Seemingly comic performances are the roots of tragedy.

3.2 Difference

The protagonists in *Modern Times*, the worker Charlie and the wandering girl, are both tragic characters in the background of the times. However, the way of expression and the end of the film are full of hope make people feel the depression of the bottom of the society and get a little salvation. There are two main lines in this film: one is worker Charlie, which symbolizes the oppressed and ignorant working class; the other is the homeless girl, which symbolizes the lonely vagrant with broken family, lost relatives and no one to depend on. They are all out of tune with society. Charlie is oppressed by the capitalists in the factory. The monotonous and insistent mechanical labor and the capitalists' behavior of not treating the workers as human beings made Charlie insane and unable to control himself. When he sees the screw-liked objects, he wants to screw them. Therefore, he commits all kinds of absurd mistakes and must be sent to the hospital. After leaving hospital, Charlie loses his only job and was on the way to catch up with the strike movement, but he is arrested as the commander of the strike movement. But what is rare and valuable is that such a stupid Charlie has always had his own way of survival. He was lucky to save the officer and get out of prison, and got a job recommendation from the officer. But the prison life has made him paralyzed and used to it. After he comes out, he does not adapt to it. He wants to go back to the prison and is willing to live a life chained by others. However, several intentional crimes fail.

Different from *Modern Times*, Arthur, the protagonist in *Joker*, is a real tragic character of a comedic role player. He lives with his mother who is in poor spirits and cannot take care of herself. He plays the

role of a joker to solicit customers for the store in exchange for payment. He struggles to get rid of the control of mental illness, works and lives hard, and wants to become a talk show actor, but he fails. In return, people ridicule his efforts with worldly prejudice. He tries to adjust himself, but again and again finds that all these are false and illusions. His mother, whom he always respected, also has mental illness and is not his biological mother. He is only adopted. His fantasy of love with Sophie and his lucidity under all fictions makes him realize his sorrow and could not be redeemed through efforts. His spiritual world begins to collapse. Meanwhile he begins to disguise as a joker to commit crimes, in the indifferent city of Gotham, the joker Arthur finally chooses to be assimilated by indifference, so that the ending eventually went crazy and riots, the last scene of being caught and bloody footprints on the ground all reveal a message: no matter what the final character's ending is, Arthur shows the pattern of the bottom of the society full of tragic color [2].

The different endings and symbolic meanings of the two little characters, one with hope after sorrow and the other with madness after struggle, imply the difference between the two endings. The protagonists of the two films are small people at the bottom of the society, reflecting the good and evil in the background of the times. The supporting roles of the two films, including the existence of the heroine, are also strengthening the depiction of the psychological changes of the protagonists.

4. Character Alienation: external and internal

4.1 External image and inner world

As we all know, Chaplin's image in the film is very funny: poor dress, exaggerated shoes, huge top hat, as well as his pale face, dark eyes and exaggerated eyebrows, tag styled moustache, as well as a funny way to walk.

In *Joker*, Arthur always has a thick face painted with oil paint, a typical joker make-up, and a colorful and infectious joker costume when he plays the role of a joker. But in life, Arthur is indeed a social underclass with vicissitudes, bony and messy hair.

In the social environment of *Modern Times*, it is full of endless exploitation and oppression. Capitalists only care about the improvement of work efficiency and obtaining more surplus value brought by industrialization, but not from the perspective of human beings, let alone the happiness of the public. Charlie is a typical representative of this group at that time. Charlie in the film is not happy at first. He doesn't have any happiness except his day-to-day work. He is released after he stays in prison, but he wants to go back to prison instead, which shows the meaninglessness and unhappiness of his life. The film uses the reverse plot in O Henry's dramatic novels to enhance the dramatic tension. Whenever he wants to go back to prison, he is always out of his way, but when he wants to be a new man, he always goes back to prison. This kind of display technique is actually to better express his state of mind about "happiness". When his life is full of meaning, he never misses the prison. But when he is empty and lonely, on the contrary, prison has become the pronoun of "good life". When Charlie realizes his wrong behavior, he not only does not destroy his happiness, but also enhances his vision for a better life. Even after he and the wandering girl live in a rather shabby house, he feels happier.

From a psychological point of view, Arthur is suffering from schizophrenia, he has antisocial personality disorder. In the era of *Joker*, social polarization is obvious, people are extremely disgusted and dissatisfied with the economic depression, life distress, and the gap between the rich and the poor. The image of *Joker* is not only the professional reflection of *Joker* on the surface, but also the deep interpretation of the horror of human nature and the dark side of social development.

Generally speaking, Charlie's heart always keeps the vision and desire for the truth, goodness and beauty of the world, and his inner world is pure and flawless. *Jokers* use their own way to convey to the world their share of the purity of the world, against the worlds' dark.

4.2 Character mapping and kernel alienation

Although the huge contrast between Charlie's behavior and the environment makes him ridiculous, there are many tragic elements in the film. He can also be said to be a mirror of that era, reflecting that people are still optimistic and true to "laugh to life" in the face of merciless capitalist exploitation, social injustice and the tease of fate. However, the precious thing is that the oppression of the environment does not destroy Charlie's good quality, and it is precisely because of this kind of good quality that he meets the heroine. Compared with most people, especially capitalists, Charlie's performance is very

"gentleman".

When the movie is played for nearly an hour, the rhythm begins to slow down. When poor Charlie is out of prison for absurd reasons again, the beautiful heroine brings Charlie their real "home", a shabby wooden house by the river. Under the pressure of the social environment at that time, everyone who lived a miserable life had his or her own ideal lifestyle in the heart, which is realistic: to live a rich life and live in a big house. There are also fairy tale unrealistic: the entire department store goods arbitrary. The reality is cruel, they still need to face the reality and struggle to survive in the society. Charlie has such a daydream, but fantasy is always fantasy. After waking up, life will continue. Charlie's accurate positioning of himself can make his life as happy as possible under limited conditions.

Arthur, a professional joker, is a figure portraying between hope and despair. As a result of brain injury, Arthur would burst out laughing when he is in high spirits, which makes him suffer from all kinds of strange glances and even bullying. As a result, he always takes the pistol given by his colleagues to perform and loses his job when it is found. Later, when he shoots in self-defense, he feels a great sense of relief. Then he has an experience of finding himself an adopted son and suffering from childhood trauma. After a series of attacks of domestic violence and public ridicule, he gradually twists into a murderer [3] [4].

At the end of the movie, the joker sits in the police car and looks at countless "jokers" outside the window. Like him, he uses violence to vent his dissatisfaction with the current situation of Gotham. The joker is very excited. When he stands on the roof of the car, he feels that he is no longer the bottom of the society who was abandoned by his father, bullied by others and cared about by no one. But countless people worship and follow the imitation of the clown, the flame burning around, in the violence and disorder, Arthur seems to find his true self. And this is destined to be a tragedy, the tragedy of the joker.

5. Faith and choice

5.1 Firm faith, silent cry

Both Charlie and Arthur have a firm belief. Although Charlie is an exploited bottom worker in the society and worries about his livelihood all day long, he is still eager to have a home. Arthur is a marginal person at the bottom who lives by dressing up as a joker to run a business for the shop. His antichrist is always ridiculed and despised by others. Even so, he still faces it with a smile, and still has his sympathy Dream of career and fantasy of love.

In *Modern Times*, Charlie still believes that hard work will lead to a better life after all kinds of hardships and hardships. In the film, after escaping from the pursuit of the government with the wandering girl, he comforts her not to give up easily, but to believe in the future. They are supporting each other on the barren road, but the image of Charlie is very dreamy in the eyes of the audience. After all, how many people can still maintain hope after multiple attacks? In *Joker*, the joker writes in his notebook "I only hope my death is more valuable than my life". He longed for the affirmation and care of the outside world. He even says that in his life, he is not even sure whether he exists in the world. He does not confirm his existence until he degenerates into a joker and affirmed by the public, but It also made him bind himself again, and finally he needed feedback from the outside world to prove his life. As an audience, he also laments the rest of his life in the hospital.

At the same time, they are full of hope, but also in the heart of the silent cry. *Modern Times* is a silent film. Even if there is no sound, we can still feel the helplessness and pain of the protagonist through his performance and the film language and feel his hope for life. He expresses his heart in a silent way. But *Joker* is also like this, Arthur does not have too much language, but lets the audience realize his resistance and struggle step by step in the performance.

5.2 Similar destiny, different choice

The joker and Charlie are both fictional characters in the film in an extreme way. However, the reason why the film can move the audience across the differences of time, space and culture means that their works reflect part of the truth to a certain extent, and also explain a certain universal value. They are also marginal people, living at the bottom of the society, have the same resistance and the same fate, but their final choices are different.

In order to feed the capitalists in the modern era, the workers in the upper class will not stop squeezing

the value. This is the exploitation of the people at the bottom by the upper class, who live at the bottom as lambs to be slaughtered. In *Joker*, Arthur is also the object of ridicule of the upper class. Morrie laughs at Arthur on his show. After Arthur admits that he killed the three people, Morrie blames all this on him. Instead of knowing the truth, he pushes public opinion on the joker and condemns them who live at the bottom.

"Don't give up" is just like the last sentence "don't give up" in the *Modern Times*. While in *Joker*, Arthur finally chooses the joker to revenge on the disappointed society and becomes a hero in his heart. But it also makes him bind himself again. Finally, he spends his life in a mental hospital. He has just completed the redemption of his soul. Just like Arthur's last words in the film: This is life. It may seem funny. Some people's stimulation comes from trampling on other people's dreams, but I will not be discouraged, because this beautiful old world will not stop.

6. Conclusion

Generally speaking, stories of the two films are not of the same era, but they have similar historical background. They are both excellent works. They reflect and satirize the social phenomenon of capitalism. To some extent, *Joker* seems to be the reconstruction and upgrading of *Modern Times*. In the industrial age, the topic of conflict between individuals, enterprises and human pursuit of happiness may be a long-term theme.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from *Teacher education open fund project of Hubei Normal University (Number: TEY04)* funds. Corresponding author is Xinghong Liu.

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