

A Study on the Image of “Joker” under the Analysis of Tragedy Theory and the Characterization of the Movie “Joker”(2019)

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ABSTRACT. : *Based on the tragedy theory of Hegel and Nietzsche, this paper analyzes the reconstruction strategy of “joker” image in the movie “Joker”(2019) and explores the complex connotation and time metaphor of the image of “joker” through the interpretation of the movie.*

KEYWORDS: *Joker image, Tragedy theory, Characterization*

1. Introduction

The classic character “joker” was once again in the spotlight after the movie “Joker” which is adapted from the same name comics that produced by Detective Comics (or DC) won the Golden Lion for Best Film at The 76th Venice Film Festival on September 8, 2019. As a super villain of DC comics, “joker” is well known through Batman movie series. The villain who combines the characteristics of evil and madness, has also become a classic image on the screen under the excellent performance of Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger. Can the “Joker” directed by American director Todd Phillips come up with something new that is different from the past ones? And what kind of “joker” image will be brought by the leading actor of Joaquin Phoenix? Both kinds of questions above become the focus of the fans. Based on the tragedy theory of Hegel and Nietzsche, this paper analyzes the reconstruction strategy of “joker” in the movie “Joker” and tries to explore the complex connotation and time metaphor of the image of “joker” through the interpretation of the movie.

2. Introduction

The image of “joker” (or clown) has been written repeatedly in the history of drama and literature. “Homer’s epic” once described an “ugly and abusive Greek” named Thersites. Hegel came to a common social phenomenon from this man, and described it as “Thersitesism”; that is to say, “The people who are more sober about

things are abnormally combined with the way of criticizing and ridiculing things. They has a sting like a wasp, on the one hand, it can pierce all kinds of hazy illusions, let people see the truth hidden in the deep of things, but at the same time, it also recklessly stabs people's pain, causing people's antipathy. recklessly stabs people's pain, causing people's antipathy."Hegel sees this figure as a recurring figure throughout the ages.

For example, the images of "Joker" in Shakespeare's plays, such as fool and jester are the role that makes people laugh. In "The Solitaire Mystery" author Jostein Gaarder created a new image of "joker," a harlequin poker card, which is a perpetual midget who knows all about the truth. The researcher thinks that "the joker image written by Jostein Gaarder is the symbol of his philosophy, represents the curiosity and exploration spirit required by philosophy, and symbolizes the search for wisdom. From the perspective of joker, it is easier to see "the truth of life that is invisible to ordinary people." So the clown becomes "the embodiment of wisdom, the speaker of truth."

From the defective abnormal person to the amusing dramatic role, and to the intelligent incarnation of philosophy in the novel, the image of "jokes" in literary works is actually a metaphor of the development of the times. The "joke" image in the works of Jostein Gaarder is closer to the positioning and shaping of the joke image in "Batman" series and in the movie "Joker". The joker becomes a symbol of darkness, a villain who is tragic and difficult to be defined simply by the standards of right and wrong, good and evil.

3. The Tragedy Theory and the Screen Image of "Joke"

Aristotle once defined tragedy from the perspective of imitation in the "Poetics". Comedy, he thought, imitates the inferior man while "tragedy is a parody of a serious, complete, and measured action." In Aristotle's view, plot is the basis of tragedy, in which characters are fooled by the unknowability of fate, so he says that tragedy "releases these feelings by arousing pity and fear."

Unlike Aristotle, Hegel believed that "what tragedy represents is the conflict and mediation between two opposing ideals or 'universal forces'." Universal power contains the real contents of human nature and divinity, so "from their respective positions, they are reasonable and just, but from the overall situation at that time, they are one-sided and unjust, so they deny each other and both suffer from pain or destruction." In this regard, Zhu Guangqian explained that the psychological effect of tragedy is not only fear and pity, but pleasure and excitement.

Nietzsche put forward the spirit of "God of the Sun" and the spirit of "God of Wine" in the birth of tragedy. Tragedy is the combination of "God of the Sun" and "God of Wine". "Both 'God of the Sun' and 'God of Wine' are rooted in the deepest instinct of man, the former is the impulse of the individual man to affirm himself by the illusion of appearance, while the latter is the impulse of the individual man to deny himself and return to the world."Therefore, in Nietzsche's theory of tragedy, "the beauty of tragedy is a state of ecstasy in which pain and ecstasy mingle."

Audiences' perception of the joker's on-screen image comes largely from the "Batman" movies, it is best known for Tim Burton's "Batman" (1989) and Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight" (2007). In "Batman" (1989), Jack Nicholson played the joker whose real name is Jack Napier, a typical villain in Hollywood movies and the leader of Gotham city's underworld. In a fight with Batman, he fell into a chemical pool and disfigured. After his rebirth, Jack Napier failed to sew up the corners of his mouth, then keeping his face "laughing" as a circus clown. From then on, the "joker" officially appeared. In order to render the joker's appearance, the director made preparations in the aspects of atmosphere, light and shadow modeling and so on, in order to achieve the shocking effect.

For example, the director uses the plastic surgeon's reaction footage to suggest that Jack Napier's appearance has changed beyond recognition. In a scene in which the joker seeks revenge against the boss, the director uses backlight to let the joker step by step go out of the dark background until his real face can be seen. The joker succeeded in scaring the other person and made his iconic laughter. Like a naughty child, he indulged himself in shooting at the boss continuously. The joker's special effect makeup and creepy laughter make the image of "joker" impressive. In fact, before he became a joker, Jack used to like to play a card of "the Joker", which was considered his "lucky card". Jack doesn't want to be in charge of the chemical factory, and doesn't like the chemical taste, but he was accidentally disfigured by chemicals and became an evil "clown". That card of "the Joker" became a symbol of his destiny. After the destruction of the rebirth, Jack fell into a crazy state which was a mixture of pain and ecstasy. He was addicted to the killing game and got emotional catharsis from it.

Another classic image is the joker played by Heath Ledger in "The Dark Knight". In the film, the director tries to give "joker" a more complex connotation. He is the usual villain in movies who confronts the protagonist of justice, but he also has a value system of his own. Batman guards Gotham city, which is plunged into darkness, while the joker believes that Gotham city is morally bankrupt and incurable. At the beginning of the film, the director arranged a scene in which a thief dressed as a joker went to rob a bank. The disguise of the "joker" becomes a symbol of evil and an umbrella. The real "joker", who prides himself on being the god of Gotham city, immediately shows up and makes the robbers to kill each other. "The criminals in this city have had faith, honor and respect." He told the bank's executives, "My belief is that things that don't kill you will only make you more weird." "The joker became the Satan who tempts people to commit crimes. He instigated disfigured Dante to avenge the death of his beloved woman. It's the clown's motive to make the city chaotic and morally demoralized, and to challenge the image of the patron saint of Batman. The joker is mad and evil, he kills at his will and treats human life like dirt.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the portrayal of "joker" in "The Batman" and "The Dark Knight" is closer to the tragic theories of Hegel and Nietzsche. The joker's belief in the value of human nature and Batman's absolute justice constitute the conflict between Hegel's two universal forces.

4. Reconstruction of the Image of “Joker” in the Movie “Joker”

If the movie series of “Batman” takes the joker as the classic supporting role of Batman, then the movie “Joker” directed by Todd Phillips focuses on how the clown transforms himself.

The main character, Arthur, is a joker who loves talk show. His whole life seemed to be a joke. Arthur himself suffers from an uncontrollable giggle and has to support a mother who has caused serious damage to his childhood. He was framed by the colleague at work; he got fired ruthlessly by the boss again; he mistakenly thought that his female neighbor had a crush on him which was just his imagination; the host of the program who he adored was full of ridicule and contempt for him; he listened to his mother and went to the mayor to confirm their father son relationship but was humiliated by his father; when took the subway he was kicked and punched by the gangsters again. The director carefully set up this series of plots, which eventually led Arthur to the evil road and never turned back. He smothered his mother, shot and killed the gangsters who beat him, framed his colleagues and ridiculed his host.

When Arthur was rescued from the police car and was cheered by the crowd at the moment, Arthur's “joker” image seemed to become a symbol of the spirit of resistance of the people at the bottom of Gotham city. Therefore, the reason why joker becomes joker is the result of the combination of social system and self transformation. Next, we will use Hegel's conflict theory to analyze the reconstruction strategy of clown image.

Hegel argues that the real cause of action is conflict. Conflict mainly comes from three aspects: the conflict caused by physical or natural situations; the conflict of minds arises from natural conditions; the division that arises from the different sides of mind and spirit. [13]The first kind of conflict can be regarded as the theme of art only when it causes the split of mind. For example, disaster movies mostly build story structures around the human suffering caused by natural disasters. The second kind of mind conflict can be understood as “although the natural conditions are positive in themselves, they have the possibility of difference and opposition to the mind.” According to Hegel, this natural condition includes family background and “subjective passion caused by innate temperament.” Family background refers to “the unfairness that someone has been used to” while the latter refers to the level of envy, ambition, greed and other human nature. The third is the most profound conflict. Its root lies in “on the one hand, there must be a kind of difficulty, obstacle and destruction caused by a certain practical action of human beings; on the other hand, there must be harm to its own reasonable purpose and strength”. The conflict rule put forward by Robert McKee in the “Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting” divides the conflict into three levels: inner conflict; personal conflict; personal and external conflict. It is very similar to Hegel's classification of conflict. Combining the conflict theory of Hegel and Robert McKee to study the movie “Joker”, we can more clearly describe how Arthur walked towards his tragic fate step by step.

The voiceover at the beginning of the film introduces the background of the story. Gotham city, where the protagonist Arthur is in, is facing the sanitation workers strike, garbage accumulation, fuel oil price crisis and the city is into a state of emergency. Even Arthur's regular social assistance benefits have been cut by the government. In the face of such a terrible social environment, the government organizations represented by the mayor believe that the whole city is hostile to the rich, and Gotham city has fallen into depravity. Masked joker is an "idle trash, useless clown". There is an irreconcilable contradiction between the poor at the bottom and the social system. This is the first conflict of Arthur's tragedy -- the conflict between the individual and the society.

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The third conflict is the inner conflict between Arthur and himself. Under the impact of the outside world and others, Arthur can only seek comfort from himself, from his solo dance at home to his free stretch on the stairs when the city was in chaos. Arthur becomes a popular hero and begins his solo dance in public. This physical act is also the externalization of Arthur's heart. He initially believes in everything and believes that his mission is to bring laughter to the world and he fantasizes that he has an enviable mother. But when Arthur loses all he had, he is less afraid and more able to dance. He reconciles with his heart as if he has risen from the ashes.

Hegel said, "conflict can certainly be introduced in countless different ways, but the necessity of counter-action cannot be caused by something absurd and abnormal, it must be caused by something justifiable and consistent with reason itself." In this sense, the "joker" image in the movie "Joker" undoubtedly subverts the image of the villain "joker" created by the Batman movie series which have a very strong destructive power. Instead of the exaggerated, crazy and controlling joker in the past, Arthur in the movie "Joker" is just a marginal person at the bottom of the society. He loses everything he cherishes and is forced to go to the opposite side of good. The courage that supports him against the three-tier conflict comes from what Hegel calls "something that has a justification," and in the film, it can be understood as the violent means of using evil against evil to achieve the redemption of mankind.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, as a figure repeatedly written in literary works, "joker" is not only

the metaphor of the times, but also the embodiment of wisdom and the speaker of truth. Because of the complexity of ambiguity, the joker image on the screen has attracted great attention. Different from the clown in Batman movie series, the movie “Joker” shows us another possibility to reshape the “joker”. From being an extremely stereotyped eccentric joker, he becomes the image of the bottom people who are struggling to survive. Through the above interpretation of the reconstruction of “joker” image, we can perceive the reconstruction potential of “joker” as a screen image. In the era that is full of irresistible desire and materialistic desire, everyone seems to have the possibility of becoming a clown. The reconstruction strategy of the movie “Joker” with Arthur as the main point of view can also be regarded as a cry for the cruel reality, which also becomes the significance of analyzing the clown image in this paper.

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