D.O.I. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2176-457349985

ARTICLES

Killing Joke: A Study of the Carnivalesque Discourse in Todd Phillips' *Joker* / *Piada pra morrer de rir: um estudo sobre o discurso carnavalesco* no *filme* Coringa, *de Todd Phillips*

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ABSTRACT
Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) is the latest cinematic portrayal of the notorious clown prince of Gotham City. Although the previous film adaptations would usually picture him as a villain to Batman's hero, this version depicts him as a lonely man who has to cope with depression and struggles to be accepted by and fit in the society. Therefore, this version of the character carries a marked aura of socio-political consciousness. The present paper aims to analyze Todd Phillips' *Joker* through the lens of the carnival ritual as put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin. The paper will discuss different carnivalesque elements present in *Joker*, and illustrate how the movie takes full advantage of them to mount an attack against the prevalent, official culture of Gotham. Moreover, it will argue how *Joker* forms a utopian condition where the constant anarchy results in freedom.
KEYWORDS: Joker; Mikhail Bakhtin; Carnivalesque; Official culture; Anarchy

RESUMO
O filme Coringa (*2019), de Todd Phillips, é a representação cinematográfica mais recente do notório príncipe palhaço de Gotham City. Embora as adaptações anteriores do filme usualmente o representassem como um vilão do herói do Batman, esta versão o descreve como um homem solitário que tem de lidar com a depressão e luta para ser aceito e se encaixar na sociedade. Portanto, esta versão do personagem carrega uma aura marcada de consciência sociopolítica. O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar o filme* Coringa *de Todd Phillips através das lentes do ritual de carnaval apresentado por Mikhail Bakhtin. O trabalho discutirá os diferentes elementos carnavalescos presentes no filme* Coringa, *e ilustrará como o filme aproveita ao máximo para montar um ataque contra a cultura predominante e oficial de Gotham. Além disso, ele argumentará como o filme* Coringa *forma uma condição utópica em que a anarquia constante resulta em liberdade.*
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Coringa; Mikhail Bakhtin; Carnavalesco; Cultura oficial; Anarquia

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Introduction

Celebration of the carnival has long been a prominent form of cultural rituals in various countries. Its origins date back to the Middle Ages and it consists of a feast where people, in an act of social unity, would spend a period of time in revelry and excessive debauchery. During the carnival, instances of anti-establishment mockery and resistance take place. Satirical plays, ridiculing of authorities, expression of all that is deemed inappropriate such as base bodily functions, vulgar language, depiction of death and bloodshed, and, perhaps most importantly, the reversal of social norms are among different ways of raising such anti-establishment stance. As such, this ritual has been a source of fascination and inspiration not only in the real world, but also in the world of art.

Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* is a seminal work that reflects the importance of the carnival culture as an anti-official force. For Bakhtin, carnival is a feast of the people, not just a mere theatricality. He states that "carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (BAKHTIN, 1984b, p.7). And it is precisely this quality that makes carnival a force through which the multitudes resist the tyranny of the official culture. The carnival becomes a space in which people mix the acceptable and the unacceptable. As Vicki Ann Cremona (2018, p.45) states, with reference to the Maltese Carnival, "the paidean space of Carnival allows for liberties that are not permitted in the restrained world of the everyday." Cremona (2018, p.45) adds that "Carnival across the globe often occupies the main streets where it is highly visible and creates general participation in the revelry, even simply through watching." The discourse of the carnival, then, is a celebration of all that is "low" and "vulgar," a sort of grotesque realism, which meets the bourgeois culture and rises to subvert it. The subversion-of-the-hierarchies feature of carnivalesque discourse was an important aspect of the ritual in colonized countries. For example, in the Brazilian Carnival, which originated from the Portuguese "entrudo," "the poor were decked out in glorious finery, men were clothed as women, impoverished black men and women were transformed into baroque courtiers of the French Court, family men shed their inhibitions, and housewives revelled in insinuating costumes" (JAGUARIBE, 2013, p.73). The socio-cultural function of Carnival

as a "culture of resistance" (JACKSON, 1988, p.213) has with differing degrees survived to the present day. A source of inspiration, this ritual has found its way into the world of art, as well. In Trinidad, still a major Carnival site, writers such as Michel Maxwell Philip used Carnival spirit as early as mid-nineteenth century "to promote an anticolonialist agenda" (LENNOX, 2019, p.258).

This carnival culture is not excluded to the world of literature, however. The cinematic representations of the carnivalesque are just as frequent and important as the literary ones. The movies of Luis Bunuel, namely, *L'Age d'Or* (1930) and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) are eminent examples of the carnivalesque on the big screen with their carnivalization of the "etiquette in all its forms" and "cinematic decorum" (STAM, 1992, p.105). As such, Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) is the latest cinematic attempt at using the carnival tradition as a means of decentralizing the norms of the official culture and putting up an alternative anti-official culture of the masses.

Joker narrates the story of the failed stand-up comedian Arthur Fleck and his ultimate transformation into the Joker persona. As hard as Arthur struggles, he's unable to be accepted by the official culture, which tries to crush him and people like him. By the end of the movie, Arthur has managed to inspire a revolution of the masses against the dominant culture. Throughout the movie, Phillips takes advantage of various carnivalesque features in order to convey that sense of resistance against authority. What's striking in the discourse of the carnival is the accented role of the jester figure. Thereby, *Joker* is presented with the perfect opportunity to explore this discourse through its protagonist.

The character of Joker originated in 1951 when it debuted in Detective Comics #168 as an archnemesis of the popular super-hero Batman. Along the years, there have been many iterations of the character in the world of comic books by different writers. However, one aspect of his character has remained constant: Joker is portrayed as the chaos to Batman's order. Such a trend is followed up in the world of cinema, as well. From Jack Nicholson's disfigured gangster to Heath Ledger's memorable anarchic agent of chaos, Joker has always been utilized to bring about chaos and misrule.

The present article seeks to investigate how Bakhtinian carnivalesque can shed new light on yet unstudied aspects of the chaotic environment of the movie. More importantly,

the article is set to use the carnivalesque context to analyze the significant differences between Joker in Phillips' movie and previous cinematic representations of this character. The next section will propose how the character of Joker performed by Joaquin Phoenix is an embodiment of the carnival culture. Then, the article will discuss how the movie reflects Bakhtin's seemingly paradoxical concept of utopian carnival. The discussion, then, will focus on chronotopic carnivalization to show how the director's spatial and temporal choices contribute to the overall carnivalesque overtone of the movie. Next, the movie's reversals will be studied in terms of their revolutionary function. The final section draws together the key strands of the study.

1 Joker as an Incarnation of the Carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin viewed the carnival tradition as a force of counter-culture aimed at the official, dominant culture of the day. His reading of Rabelais suggests such disposition and, as Clark and Holquist (1986, p.297) argue, "Bakhtin throughout his book is exploring the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial." In carnival, Bakhtin sees the opportunity of an upheaval where dogmatic views are challenged and dominant positions are shattered. The parodic nature of the carnival plays a key role here. It reverses the social hierarchies and by doing so gives rise to a host of probabilities that can ultimately form a counter-culture against the dominant bourgeois culture. What Bakhtin sees in this parody is the opportunity to anticipate "another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway" (LACHMANN, 1989, p.118).

For Bakhtin (1984b, p.92), laughter is the central feature of the carnival. He noted that

> festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts.

It is laughter that, according to Bakhtin (1984a, p.127), is "directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders." Laughter presents a direct contrast to what he considers to be the official culture. The revolutionary aspect of laughter becomes clear here, for Bakhtin (1984b, p.90) sees the dominant, official culture as ripe with limitations and tyranny tinged with a hint of fear, while "laughter on the other hand, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions."

This principle of laughter – since it is "associated with the folklore" (HOY, 1992, p.773) – inevitably gives rise to a sort of counter-culture that is predominantly folkloric. Thus carnival as a whole could "easily be linked with the 'common people,' the collective body" (EMERSON, 2010, p.36). As such, the carnival provides a culture of the people against the dominant culture of the bourgeoisie, a space where rules can be broken and change could take place. In such a laughter-intensive atmosphere, the figure of jester plays a prominent role. In the carnival ritual, "the slave and jester become substitutes for the ruler and god" (HOY, 1992, p.771) and thus, jester, through the destructive power of his laughter as well as his "ironic repetition of common language" (HOY, 1992, p.771) could act as an agent of anarchy; a harbinger of "a common creatureliness" (EAGLETON, 2001, p.230).

Arthur's laughter is a key factor in setting the ground for a city-wide carnival which suspends all hierarchies, challenges oppressions and restrictions, and subjects officialdom to comic ridicule. It is responsible for commencing tensions in the subway scene in which Arthur commits his first murders. The three youngsters that Arthur kills in the subway happen to work for Thomas Wayne's corporation, Wayne Investments. The incident further infuriates Thomas who severely slams the working class as coward clowns "envious of those more fortunate than themselves." The upper class – represented by Thomas – thus comes into a bloody conflict with the riotous working class – with Arthur as its representative. Anna Lundberg (2007, p.172) states that "Bakhtin's carnival laughter displays the possibility of political agency." The character of Joker provides a suitable mechanism for the fulfillment of this political potential. In *Joker*, the carnival laughter leads to the rise of anti-rich sentiment. This clash is also a fight between Arthur's paradoxical laughter and Thomas Wayne's seriousness. Bakhtin (1984b, p.94) observes that

> As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade. It therefore inspired the people with distrust. Seriousness had an official tone and was treated like all that is official. It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied, and wore the mask of hypocrisy.

In Gotham City, the working class that has turned into a huge population of Jokers is fed up with the hypocrisy of the oppressors and hierarchies of the society. This is in line with Natalia Skradol's (2009, p.605) conviction that "hierarchies are inevitably related to ownership and production, whether material production or meaning production, in so far as these are the fundamentals of social divisions."

It is only half way through the movie that Arthur's laughter comes under his command. What prompts this, however, is no small matter: "I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize that it's a f***ing comedy." These words embody Arthur's realization of the hollowness of his life and his subsequent transformation into the jester role. His becoming Joker, in turn, brings about the destructive force of his laughter, an element that comes to inspire a whole movement as exemplified by the anarchic gang with artificial smiles on their masks.

Laughter is not the only destructive weaponry of the carnival, though. The dance is also of key importance for the jester figure. In the carnival tradition, dance and merriment are accompanied by "every despicable act, every murder, every form of excess that licentiousness and lunacy have dared to dream" (ROBINS, JONES, 2009, p.187 *apud* LACHMANN, 1989, p.127). As such, we see this destructive power on numerous occasions. Arthur's dance is always a companion of his violence, either as a precedent to it or as a subsequent step. All through the movie his dance is associated with violence and murder. The first instance of this phenomenon is evident when Arthur is performing a dance for the kids in the hospital. In the middle of the dance, his gun slips out of his pants and, as a result, he loses his job. This foreshadows the relationship between his dance and violence. This motif again and again presents itself throughout the movie. For instance, the very first time that he shoots off his gun (accidentally) is when he is dancing. More notably, after murdering the three businessmen on the train, Arthur runs away to a deserted restroom, where for the

first time he performs his "Joker" dance. From then on, the dance becomes an important element of Arthur's character. He performs it more and more as he steps closer to fulfilling his role as Joker. Accordingly, the dance comes to be closely associated with acts of violence in the movie. Arthur performs his dance after killing his mom, observing the cop thrashing on the train, killing Murray, and, most notably, in the climax of the movie, among the anarchist Joker gang.

2 Joker and Utopian Carnival

In the Introduction of his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984b, p.12) emphasizes on "the special philosophical and utopian character of festive laughter and its orientation toward the highest spheres." He then refers to the essential elements of communication between people in the carnival time: "the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning, and philosophical depth" (BAKHTIN, 1984b, p.16). Bakhtin (1984b, p.89) deliberates that "in sharp contrast with the stringencies of Lent," life during a carnival "came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism, born in the festive atmosphere of images."

Bakhtin's idea of the utopian character of the carnival has disapprovingly been received by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990, p.67) as a mistaken stress on an unrestricted and excessive form of folk culture which "ultimately proved a dead end." Morson and Emerson's interpretation, however, can be counter-argued by emphasizing two crucial aspects of Bakhtinian carnival as specified by Michael Gardiner and Renate Lachmann. We will briefly discuss these two views and see how they buttress our argument about the utopian trait of carnival in *Joker*.

Michael Gardiner has made a distinction between what he described as traditional and oppositional or critical utopias. Gardiner (1992, p.33) notes that Bakhtinian carnival criticizes the epic mentality of "bad utopianism" which seizes the utopian imagery "for the ideological reinforcement of a centralized and repressive social order." Also, Bakhtin's utopian carnival "distances itself from the totalizing rationalism of the traditional Utopia"; the folk traditions

present in the carnival "are reflexively self-deconstructing phenomena [sic] which refuse all 'one-sided monolithic seriousness' characteristic of monologism" (GARDINER, 1992, p.33). In other words, Bakhtin's utopistic carnival is an ongoing and dynamic phenomenon that hails diversity and heterogeneity in social and cultural practices and opposes the dominant social hierarchy. In *Joker*, Arthur is fed up with the world where "nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy." He says he doesn't want to be one of the "good little boys" anymore by sitting and taking anything Thomas Wayne and the likes of him dictate. He chastises Murray for never stepping out of his studio to see how real people live. He is clearly defiant of the current social order because it has no respect for the heterogeneity of Gotham City residents. Thus, the overbearing rationalism of the totalizing utopia which obliterates the multiplicity of voices is far from the ideals of carnival. More to the point, Arthur roundly rejects launching or leading any coherent movement. The lack of a single leader for the movement initiated by Arthur indicates the reluctance of rioters to acquiesce in the authoritative and one-voiced rationalism of the traditional utopia. Unlike the other side of the spectrum which has Thomas Wayne as its leader, the opposition movement is led by all Gotham rebels as the reconciliation between the carnivalesque environment and totalitarianism is impossible. Therefore, the utopian characteristics of the carnival in *Joker* are aligned with Bakhtin's deliberations on critical utopian discourse during a carnival.

Renate Lachmann has also studied the utopian ideas that constitute Bakhtin's argumentation of carnival. Lachmann has in particular focused on what she calls Bakhtin's utopian materialism. She observes that "Bakhtin openly defines folk culture and the culture of laughter as materialistic. His concept of materialism, which one at first might tend to associate with Marxism, turns out upon closer observation to be based on an opposition to spiritualism" (LACHMANN, 1989, p.125). According to Lachmann (1989, p.125), Bakhtin's "positive revaluation of the material and the corporeal" is central to his discussion on grotesque realism and an essential concomitant of his elaboration on the utopian element of carnival. Bakhtin (1984b, pp.19-20) contended that a major principle of grotesque realism is "degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity." Therefore, what Emerson and Morson condemned as Bakhtin's unjustified emphasis on an extravagant

form of popular culture is in fact his endeavor to delineate a non-spiritual utopian carnival where grotesque bodily images, as opposed to ideal and abstract ones, have a high profile.

3 Grotesque Realism in *Joker*

The utopian carnival created by Todd Phillips in *Joker* is significantly marked by multiple references to grotesque bodily images. In fact, the opening scene of the film features a group of delinquents stealing from Arthur and beating him. Replete with violence and, more notably, the reversal of hierarchies, this scene perfectly sets the film's ensuing tone. The violence permeates through the whole movie in a more graphic way afterwards. All instances of violence, from Arthur's stabbing of Randal to his shooting Murray from point blank range, are accompanied by much gore and bloodshed. This mixture of violence and grotesque imagery serves to highlight the carnivalesque nature of the film even more. The grotesque imagery does not end here, however. Character types such as the figures of the midget and the senile old hag as well are present in the movie in the forms of Gary and Arthur's mother. Additionally, in one striking scene, a desolate Arthur crawls inside an empty fridge.

Unlike almost all previous Jokers in the cinema, the Joker performed by Joaquin Phoenix is a scraggy and feeble character whom his mother urges to eat because he looks worryingly skinny. Not only is Arthur mentally unstable, but he is also physically unhealthy. His grotesque body – shown naked in several scenes – once again puts him in sharp contrast with the healthy-looking and striking Thomas Wayne and Murray Franklin. Also, Arthur's bony body is in stark contradiction with that of another antagonist of the movie, his colleague Randall. Arthur hates Randall because it is obvious that he is a better clown and has a more stable position at their workplace. In fact, Randall's role in Arthur's plight is crucial because it is he who gives Arthur a gun. That gun is used by Arthur in all his murders. After the death of Arthur's mother, Randall and Gary pay him a visit to express their condolences. In a bloody scene where Arthur's naked body is once again redolent of the movie's carnival-grotesque, he kills Randall but allows Gary to leave the apartment.

The movie's focus on the body is not limited to bodily images. When he gains access to his mother's psychiatric profile, Arthur finds out he was an adopted child. Arthur also

realizes Penny abandoned him and did nothing when one of her boyfriends repeatedly abused the little child. Arthur's childhood physical abuse is the origin of his adulthood mental disorders. While most cinematic Jokers are mentally unstable, it is a rare choice to place the roots of their present situation in their past physical troubles.

The carnivalesque nature of the film extends to the verbal domain, too, as we have instances of parodic paradoxes entailing destructive attitudes. For example, Arthur's mother insists on calling him Happy when he's obviously a depressed man who states "all I have are negative thoughts." Another instance of this could be found in the aftermath of his mother's murder when he tells Randall and Gary that he's quite alright about her death: "My mom died. I'm celebrating." But perhaps the most important example of such verbal instances is Arthur's stage name, Carnival, which is a clear nod to the film's recognition and employment of the carnival ritual. More to the point, in the official, monologic language, the lower body and its functions are considered crude and therefore omitted from the approved discourse. Carnival, however, is a ritual for telling the untold. Thus, "the lower stratum of the body" (BAKHTIN, 1984b, p.21) features prominently in this ritual. We may not encounter this element directly in *Joker*, but sure enough, it plays an important role in the movie, albeit in a different, chronotopic manner.

4 Joker's Chronotopic Carnivalization

An important aspect of the movie is its use of the carnivalesque chronotopes. That is, instead of using the conventional venues of action-occurrence, the movie defines its own unique venues. As Michael Gardiner (1992, p.31) says,

> In an attempt to generate an entirely new chronotope which was inimical to official conceptions of time and space, the traditions of folk-festive culture "opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal."

Thus, we see an extensive use of carnivalized time-space matrix in the film, one instance of which concerns the lower body stratum. The lower body is presented in terms of

the setting and Phillips carnivalizes the typical chronotopic venues of action by putting two key scenes in a restroom. Arthur escapes into a deserted restroom after he kills the three businessmen. It is there that he performs his signature dance for the very first time and arguably takes a big step towards becoming Joker. The next equally important instance is his confrontation with Thomas Wayne which takes place in the movie theatre restroom. This remains the only scene in the entire movie that features an encounter between Arthur and Thomas, and it is here that Wayne's rejection of Arthur deals him the final blow and drives him over the edge.

This sort of chronotopic carnivalization is not restricted to the lower body stratum, however. There are also numerous other juxtapositions in terms of setting and grotesque imagery. Throughout the movie, the streets of Gotham City are rather untidy. In fact, during some key moments of the movie we see the setting filled with garbage. This, coupled with the transient presence of "super rats" in some moments in the movie, is a far cry from what the official culture would deem appropriate. Curiously, stairs are used heavily in the movie, and it is remarkable how the movement associated with them is reversed. Typically, climbing the stairs signifies progress and success, while going down them marks decay and stagnation. In the movie, however, these movement stereotypes are reversed. Whenever we see Arthur going up the stairs, he's upset or has just returned from a failed task. By contrast, whenever he goes down, he's happy and one step closer to his true self as exemplified by his iconic dance scene later on. Also, there are numerous exit signs in the movie and Arthur enters a place on at least two occasions (the hospital and the cinema) through the exit door.

An important site of action in the movie is the public transportation, especially the subway. Transportation, by its very nature, opposes the "protective, timeless stability" (BAKHTIN, 1984b, p.81) that a harmonized culture propagates. The constant movement is effective in conveying a sense of restlessness in the movie. Moreover, the means of transportations shown in the movie are almost always public, which adds a new layer of mob mentality to them. There are various shots of Arthur travelling across the city by such means of transportation, but perhaps the most important one of all is the subway which acts as a site of anarchy. It is in the subway that Arthur commits murder for the first time and, later on, it

is in a train station that the Joker mob thrash the two cops and give Arthur the opportunity to escape.

Another notable observation about the film is that time stands still in it. In various shots (although they happen very quickly and are hard to catch) we can observe that all the clocks point to one specific time: 11:11. This remains constant in the entire movie and – coupled with the various uses of space – stresses out the timelessness trait of the carnival.

Such reversals of hierarchies and values help Phillips inject the movie with a sense of inverted reality that implies the instability of the dominant hierarchies. Within this framework, *Joker* could be considered as a perfect incarnation of the carnival tradition in cinema. The movie is heavily grounded upon the parodic and ritualistic elements of the carnival and such carnivalesque elements provide the film with a counter-culture atmosphere that opposes the dominant bourgeois hegemony.

5 Joker's Revolutionary Subversion

The character of Joker has always manifested enough will and audacity to challenge and mock those in power. Johan Nilsson argues that "joker – fool, prankster, jester, trickster, clown; the derivations of the fool archetype are many, but joining them together is a sense of mischief and a ridicule of authority" (2015, p.165). Thus, jesters and clowns in literature and cinema often create carnivalesque environments through their satiric discourses and actions. However, the carnivalization of the Joker usually takes the form [of] an opposition toward the character of Batman or other protagonists with similar super-heroic traits. This stereotype is precisely the point where Todd Phillips' central character deconstructs the viewers' conventional notions of Joker.

Unlike his predecessors, Arthur Fleck faces no arch-rival superhero. The challenges Arthur has to deal with are more innate and more profound. Arthur has no intention to plunge the city deeper into crisis. He has a job as a decent comedian, pursues a career promotion, performs for children, sees a therapist on a regular basis, and takes care of his mother. He is even reluctant to accept the gun offered to him by one of the other comedians. However,

incremental personal and social torments turn Arthur into a Joker whose violence and callousness are rarely paralleled by his predecessors.

The movie could be summarized in two movements: First, Arthur's attempt at joining the official culture and his ultimate failure in doing so, and second, his destruction of that culture. What's notable here is that in the movie the official culture is represented by two characters: the comedian, Murray, and the capitalist, Thomas Wayne. Accordingly, Arthur's revenge is aimed at these two individuals.

Arthur's endeavor to join the official culture should not come as a big shock. As David Gilmore (1998, p.207) suggests, "carnival mixes class hatred with personal ambition and with the vindictive envy of the small for the just slightly bigger." Thus, Arthur's admiration for the dominant culture and his enthusiasm for joining it is understandable. Murray and Thomas Wayne are at the receiving end of this admiration. Arthur daydreams about getting on Murray's show and being recognized as a decent comedian. Similarly, he strives to convince Thomas Wayne that he is his son. Here a curious trend presents itself, namely, Arthur's desire to find a father figure in the official culture. As Lacan (1993, p.96) says,

> In order for the human being to be able to establish the most natural of relations […], a third party has to intervene, one that is the image of something successful, the model of some harmony. This does not go far enough – there has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervention of the order of speech, that is, of the father.

Therefore, it becomes imperative for Arthur to find a father figure in order to form the 'most natural of relations' and be accepted by the official culture.

In Arthur's fantasy, Murray's encouraging words, "you see all this, the lights, the show, the audience, all that stuff? I'd give it all up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you," clearly illustrates Arthur's wishful thinking. Arthur's pursuit of Thomas Wayne is another side of the same coin. He actively seeks out Thomas Wayne and struggles to talk him into accepting him as his own son. On both occasions, his yearning ends in disappointment. Subsequently, it is the rejection by these two potential father figures that thoroughly detaches Arthur from the official culture.

But the father figure is not the only axle in the official culture. In line with the rule-breaking nature of the carnival, Arthur goes after that most natural convention or web of relations in the bourgeois family, namely, the "daddy-mommy-me triangle" (DELEUZE, GUATTARI, 2009, p.51). This tripartite, which had already been missing an important component in father, is now completely broken. Arthur is not only fatherless, but he also gets rid of his mother, becoming truly an alien with no roots in the dominant system.

Once disillusioned, Arthur goes on a manhunt and targets the official culture that failed him. His subversive attitude, however, comes in both figurative and literal senses. Verbal parody is at the center of the figurative plain. According to Hoy (1992, p.771),

> the language of the merry rogue parodically reprocesses other people's discourse, but always in such a way as to rob them of their power, to "distance them from the mouth," as it were, by means of a roguish deception, to mock their language and thus turn what was direct discourse into light self-parody.

Arthur's failed stand-up bits fit right into this category. As the "unofficial" jester, he, though inadvertently at first, twists the jokes into tasteless, shoddy profanities. The shocked reaction of his audience, especially at Murray's show, illustrates the counter-culture force of his jests: "Oh, no, no, no. No, you cannot joke about that." The ensuing argument buttresses this point: "All of you, the system that knows so much," Arthur responds, "you decide what's right or wrong. The same way that you decide what's funny or not!" Arthur's way of turning around the jokes demonstrates how the official, monologic language is, according to Bakhtin (1981, p.77), "degraded by the accents of vulgar folk languages." Notably, Arthur's transformation from figurative destruction into literal destruction takes place through yet another final profane joke. Right before he murders Murray, Arthur gives the punchline to his final joke: "You get what you f***ing deserve."

The actions related to the physical aspect of destruction and violence are similarly important. It is of note that it is Arthur that kills Murray, but it is the mob that claims the life of Thomas Wayne. It was fitting that Arthur, as the unofficial jester, take out Murray. But another aspect of Arthur's havoc throughout the movie is his inspiration for the 'common people'. His actions create an incentive for the common people to stand up for themselves.

The fact that the comedian is killed by one individual (Joker), while the capitalist is killed by the mob (Jokers, plural) is yet another evidence of carnival's mob mentality and its revolutionary aspect. An aspect which is nevertheless clearly inspired by the solitary jester figure as evidenced by the iconic punchline "you get what you f***ing deserve" being delivered to Thomas Wayne, as well, right before his death.

The ending of the movie, though, shows the demise of the carnival and the return of Arthur to the bitter reality of a world dominated by the official order. Yet, in that official order there are still signs of strife: Arthur's footsteps are covered in blood and security guards run after him as the screen fades away, hinting at the eternal struggle of the official and the carnival culture. Like any other carnival, transience characterizes the subversion of the hierarchies in *Joker*. However, the temporariness of the carnivalesque discourse does not indicate its defeat from the official ruling system. Instead, it signifies that the discourse of the carnival needs to be constantly challenged by the deadly seriousness of the normal official discourse because otherwise, in the words of Sandra Lee Kleppe (1993, p.445), "there would be nothing to mock."

Conclusion

The current study endeavored to interpret the movie *Joker* in the analytical context of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. First, the article discussed the elements that helped turn the character of Joker into the incarnation of the carnival. Laughter and dance, in particular, play a key role in the characterization of the movie's central character. Joker's uncontrollable laughter outbursts along with his dance performances that follow his murders reinforce the grotesque atmosphere of the movie. Moreover, they ridicule the official culture with its stubborn insistence on maintaining order, seriousness, and rules. The article proposed that such a mocking attitude toward official culture and the concomitant portrayal of diversity and heterogeneity comprise the ideals of the utopian carnival.

The study also found that Joker's transformation from a failed stand-up comedian to a killer with a clown mask takes place in unique chronotopic matrices, including the lower-body stratum, filthy streets, stairs, and public transportation. More to the point, the

universality of the carnival culture has been reflected in the movie's overarching chronotope as the temporal element stands still while the spatial element undergoes multiple changes.

The story concluded that Joker's subversion of the official culture is in fact his revolt against two father figures, Thomas Wayne and Murray, who represent capitalism and official comedy respectively. However, what is even more significant about Joaquin Phoenix's revolutionary subversion is that, for the first time, Joker does not square off against Batman. This time, the struggle is not about the symbolic good-vs-evil. Instead, the fight goes much deeper as we see the Joker not as a villain but as an anti-hero who challenges a culture that has marginalized the condition and pain of him and those of others like him. Thus, Todd Phillips' *Joker* is not merely just another superhero movie, but a serious critique of a real-life culture that antagonizes those whom it deems worthless, narrated this time through the lens of the "villain."

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Statement of Authorship and Responsibility for Published Content

We, Mohammad Reza Hassanzadeh Javanian and Farzan Rahmani, as coauthors of this paper, declare that we both had access to the research corpus, participated actively in the discussion of the results, reviewed the paper multiple times, and approve of the final version.

Received February 08,2021

Accepted May 31,2021