Reflective Journal II: "Deviance and Media Analysis"

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The 2019 film Joker, directed by Todd Philips and starring Joaquin Phoenix, provides a powerful depiction of deviant behavior and the societal forces that shape it. The movie follows Arthur Fleck, a mentally ill and impoverished man living in Gotham City, as he transforms into the infamous criminal known as the Joker. This film not only tells the story of one man's descent into violence but also exposes the broader social and cultural factors that influence deviance. Through its portrayal of Arthur's isolation, marginalization, and rebellion, Joker offers a rich case study for analyzing deviant behavior through the lens of sociological theory.

The main deviant behavior depicted in the film is the Arthur progression from a struggling, harmless individual to a violent criminal. Initially, Arthur is a clown for hire and aspiring comedian who faces constant ridicule and rejection. He suffers from a neurological condition that causes uncontrollable laughter, which isolates him even further. After being assaulted by three men on the subway, Arthur shoots them in self defense but then continues to fire after they are incapacitated an act that crosses into intentional violence. As the story progresses, Arthur kills his former co-worker, who betrayed him, and later murders television host Murray Franklin live on air after being mocked on his show. These acts represent clear violations of both legal and social norms, making him deviant within the film's moral framework. However, the film complicates this by revealing how Arthur's mental illness, poverty, and social rejection contribute to his breakdown.

The film's framing of Arhtur's behavior is complex and intentionally ambiguous. On one hand, the audience is invited to empathize with Arthur. His life is marked by trauma, childhood abuse, and systemic neglect. The government cuts his access to mental health medication and therapy, symbolizing society's abandonment of its most vulnerable citizens. Through close up cinematography and emotional storytelling, the audience experiences Arthur's pain and confusion, which makes his eventual violence appear as a tragic consequence rather than pure evil. On the other hand, the film does not excuse his crimes. His murders and violent outbursts

horrify both characters in the story and the audience, showing the deviance, even when understandable, remains socially destructive.

Within the world of Gotham, Arthur is labeled in different ways depending on who is reacting to him. The elite and the media portray him as a dangerous psychopath, while parts of the public view him as a revolutionary symbol of class resistance. His killing of wealthy men sparks a protest movement among the poor, who wear clown masks and riot against the rich. This social reaction highlights how deviant acts can be reinterpreted by others depending on their position in society. For the privileged, Arthur's actions are senseless crimes; for the oppressed, they were acts of rebellion. This duality shows how labeling and interpretation are central to the social construction of deviance.

Merton's strain theory helps explain Arthur's transformation into the Joker. Strain theory argues that deviance occurs when individuals experience a disconnection between culturally approved goals and the legitimate means to achieve them. In Gotham, the societal goal is success, respect, and financial stability. Yet Arthur, living in poverty and suffering from mental illness, is systemically denied access to these means. He tries to conform to holding a job, aspiring to be a comedian but he is constantly humiliated and excluded. The economic inequality in Gotham and the government's withdrawal of social services intensify his feelings of powerlessness. When the legitimate routes to success are blocked, Arthur adapts through deviant innovation. He creates his own path to recognition through violence and chaos. His Joker persona represents rebellion against a system that he feels has abandoned him. The riots that follow show how collective strain among Gotham's lower class can produce widespread deviant reactions.

Another sociological perspective that helps explain Arthur's behavior is Labeling Theory, which focuses on how society's reaction to certain individuals can contribute to continued deviance. Throughout the film, Arthur is consistently labeled as "weird," "crazy," or "a joke" by others, which reinforces his sense of alienation. According to this theory, once someone is

publicly labeled as deviant, they may internalize that identity and act according to the label. In Arthur's case, the ridicule from his coworkers, the media, and even strangers pushes him further into the Joker persona. The label of "monster" becomes self-fulfilling as he accepts and performs the role that society assigns to him. This illustrates how stigma and social rejection can intensify deviance rather than prevent it.

The broader social and cultural context also shapes the film's portrayal and reception. Joker reflects real world concerns about class inequality, failing mental health systems, and the growing alienation in urban societies. The film's depiction of a man ignored by institutions until he erupts in violence mirrors modern debates on how society treats mental illness and poverty. It also critiques media sensationalism, as the talk show that mocks Arthur directly contributes to his public breakdown. By showing how humiliation and neglect can lead to extreme acts, the film comments on how structural inequality and lack of empathy can create the conditions for deviance.

Critically, Joker both challenges and reinforces stereotypes. It challenges the idea that deviant behavior emerges purely from individual immorality by exposing systemic causes like inequality and neglect. But it also risks reinforcing harmful associations between mental illness and violence. While the film invites viewers to empathize with Arthur, it can unintentionally strengthen public fears that people with psychological disorders are dangerous. The movie's artistic ambiguity leaves room for misinterpretation. Some viewers see Arthur as a victim, while others as a hero. This tension is part of what makes Joker such a significant cultural text. It forces audiences to confront the uncomfortable overlap between victimhood and deviance.

In conclusion, Joker (2019) illustrates how deviant behavior is not merely a product of individual choices but a reflection of broad social and structural conditions. Through Merton's strain theory, Arthur's violent transformations can be understood as a response to blocked opportunities, social isolation, and systemic neglect. The film portrays deviance as both a personal tragedy and a social failure. By blurring the line between sympathy and condemnation,

Joker compels viewers to question how society defines, labels, and responds to those who fall outside its norms and whether the true deviance lies in the individual or in the society that created him.

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