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EXISTENTIALISM IN TODD PHILLIPS' JOKER (2019): AN ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER'S SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

In today's media-saturated world, popular films often serve as mirrors reflecting complex philosophical and psychological issues embedded in society. This study explores existentialist themes in Joker (2019), specifically Arthur Fleck's quest for authenticity in an indifferent, chaotic world. Using a critical qualitative literary approach and applying philosophical thematic analysis grounded in Sartrean and Camusian existentialism, the paper examines how Fleck's experiences of isolation, alienation, and social rejection reflect fundamental existentialist struggle. Through textual and narrative analysis of key scenes for this journal, the study reveals that the social structure of Gotham City is marked by injustice and an imbalance of political views, and that it serves as a trigger for Arthur Fleck's internal conflict, which drives him to a transformation of his identity. This paper contributes to existing literature by emphasizing a philosophical analysis that situates Joker within broader existential discourse.

Keywords: *Joker (2019), existentialism, Camus, Sartre,* philosophical thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

As societies underwent drastic changes due to industrialization and urbanization, individuals became disconnected from their traditional ways of life and the communities that once provided them with a sense of belonging and purpose. This widespread sense of displacement and estrangement from familiar social ties and cultural norms gave rise to literature that reflected the feelings of alienation and existential anxiety experienced by people in an era of rapid transformation (Houassi, 2023). Similar existential concerns continue into the modern era. Contemporary cinema has become a powerful medium for expressing existential concerns, and *Joker (2019)* can be an example of a modern film that expresses existential ideas (isolation, identity crisis, and gaps in social ties).

Literature plays a crucial role in shaping cinema as a referential system, often guiding the intellectual framework of films. When viewing a movie, the audience's mind is drawn to literature, as films are not just visual representations but also narrative constructs. In this sense, the narrative of a film functions as a form of literature, encompassing intellectual ideas drawn

from philosophy, sociology, political manifestos, and more. Like literature, films offer multiple layers of intellectual depth, and the interpretation of a film can vary based on the viewer's personal background and experiences. However, a key distinction exists between literary works and feature films. Literature offers readers the opportunity to imagine, build, and add to the narrative, allowing them to develop characters or events with their personal nuances. On the other hand, in film, the plot and characters are predetermined by the creators, leaving viewers with less room for imaginative interpretation. While films offer different ways of perceiving stories, they are more fixed in their portrayal than written works, which engage the audience's imagination in unique ways (Zashikhina, 2021). For instance, films focusing on characters experiencing existential crises often highlight themes of social isolation and identity fragmentation, resonating with individuals who experience similar struggles in real life. Such depictions provide audiences with a mirror to their own existential concerns, influencing their understanding of mental health and personal identity.

Distinguished film critic A. Bazen emphasized that films convey meaning not merely through visual replication, but through symbolic montage that invites intellectual interpretation (Zashikhina, 2021). This interpretive depth makes cinema an ideal medium for exploring existential themes. One prominent example is *Joker (2019)*, a narrative film that reflects the layered structures of existential literature. This study centers on Arthur Fleck, the film's protagonist, whose psychological and social descent embodies core existential concerns such as alienation, absurdity, freedom, and authenticity. Male protagonists are frequently shown grappling with societal expectations and personal crises, reinforcing societal perceptions of masculinity and resilience. The portrayal of male identity as something performed and emulated is evident in films like *Joker (2019)*, where characters such as Arthur Fleck undergo a process of *impersonation* in order to define themselves. Through his interactions with different societal roles, masks, and expectations, Arthur attempts to conform to the idea of *being a person like other people*. This reflects a deeper engagement with the tension between personal identity and societal roles, where the self is constantly shaped by external pressures. This concept of male identity as performance underscores how film characters engage in a struggle to reconcile their personal selves with external expectations, ultimately highlighting the complexities of becoming a *real person* in a world full of contradictory norms (Howell, 2021). These depictions contribute to the formation of mental health awareness and shape societal perceptions of psychological resilience and personal transformation. One prominent medium for existential narratives is feature films, where characters' existential journeys highlight themes such as alienation, freedom, and moral ambiguity. Male protagonists are frequently shown grappling with societal expectations and personal crises, reinforcing societal perceptions of masculinity and resilience. The portrayal of male identity as something performed and emulated is evident in films like *Joker (2019)*, where characters such as Arthur Fleck undergo a process of *impersonation* in order to define themselves. Through his interactions with different societal roles, masks, and expectations, Arthur attempts to conform to the idea of *being a person like other people*. This reflects a deeper engagement with the tension between personal identity and societal roles, where the self is constantly shaped by external pressures. This concept of male identity as performance underscores how film characters engage in a struggle to reconcile their personal selves with external expectations, ultimately highlighting the complexities of becoming a *real person* in a world full of contradictory norms (Howell, 2021). These depictions contribute to the formation of mental health awareness and shape societal perceptions of psychological resilience and personal transformation.

Studies have examined how existential themes in film resonate with audiences and influence their views on identity and mental health. A film like *Taxi Driver (1976)* explores the struggle of individuals to establish a personal identity, transcending ethnic boundaries. The narrative suggests that identity is not merely a surface-level characteristic but is shaped by deeper factors such as worldview, interpersonal structures, communication styles, and behavioral patterns. The film illustrates how characters navigate their sense of self in relation to the societal frameworks that influence their experiences and interactions (Petković & Jurleta, 2022). The better reference to the depiction of the madness came from Joker and his mental health would be one the franchise of Batman films, *Batman (1989)*. Across various adaptations, the Joker's origin story evolves, yet most films emphasize how past experiences push an ordinary man into madness. The film presents this transformation in real-time, depicting Jack Napier's descent after falling into a barrel of chemicals. The physical and mental changes were shown to occur visibly: his initial narcissism about his appearance gave way to hysteria gradually as he began to glorify his new, hideous appearance. The Joker from *Batman (1989)* had one specific traumatic event as the source of his madness. Meanwhile, the Joker from *Joker (2019)* had past trauma as the root of all his problems, which was fueled more by other bad experiences that gradually led him to madness. The latest adaptation further supports the idea that traumatic wounds and a person's dark side are formed gradually—something depicted in Arthur Fleck's personality—before transforming into his current self, depicting a deeper internal struggle of the character (Preston & Rath-Paillé, 2023).

Previous research on Joker has interpreted Arthur Fleck's psychological decline as a symbolic reflection of how society alienates and marginalizes individuals struggling with mental health. The film depicts Arthur Fleck's decline into the Joker as a result of the ongoing societal neglect and systemic dehumanization often experienced by individuals with mental illness (Preston & Rath-Paillé, 2023; Sreepada & Domínguez Partida, 2022). This depiction fits within the larger theme of existential loneliness, which illustrates how social exclusion can exacerbate mental suffering, deepening the isolation of those who already feel disconnected. Martin Heidegger's (1996) concept of existential isolation highlights the unbridgeable separation between the individual and the world. He describes humans as beings thrown into the world, meaning they find themselves in an existence without prior choice, leading to a sense of alienation. This separation signifies what he calls disclosure, a process of profound inquiry that ultimately reveals human limitations and the reality of existence in the face of death (Sein-zum-Tode). Because individuals cannot directly experience reality through the senses of others, each person interprets the world uniquely, creating a gap between themselves and the external world. This existential isolation shapes personal identity and social relationships, influencing how people interact with themselves and society (Gultom et al., 2022; Tambunan, 2016). These studies collectively underscore the significance of existential depictions in fostering empathy and promoting a more comprehensive public understanding of mental well-being.

In particular, the 2019 film Joker exemplifies the exploration of philosophical and psychological themes. Set against the backdrop of societal neglect and marginalization, the film explores the psychological struggles of Arthur Fleck, a man grappling with isolation, a search for identity, and the impact of mental health stigma.

Several studies have analyzed Joker from various perspectives, including its depiction of mental illness (Preston & Rath-Paillé, 2023), its critique of social inequality (Saidi, 2023), and its representation of marginalized identities (Henderson, 2018). Other scholars have examined how the film exposes the failures of social institutions through Arthur's interactions with mental health services, highlighting the systemic neglect experienced by individuals facing psychological distress (Brady & Erk, 2022; Zhang, 2022). The depiction of Arthur

Fleck's limited access to mental health care and the consequences of institutional neglect reflect broader societal patterns in which those with mental health conditions are marginalized, exacerbating their isolation and vulnerability (Angjaya & Marsena, 2022; Gultom et al., 2022). Tan (2021) offers an additional perspective, highlighting the influence of cultural devaluation and subconscious struggles on Arthur's life path. While not directly contributing to the primary emphasis of this study (his research focuses more on another philosophical value, nihilism), his perspective places Arthur's transformation within the broader context of philosophical and psychological influences that resonate with the film's existential themes.

While extensive research has been conducted on Joker, there is a gap in studies specifically focusing on the existential philosophical themes explored within Arthur Fleck's character. This paper aims to address this gap by analyzing Joker through the lens of existentialism, specifically focusing on Arthur Fleck as the main subject of analysis to examine how Arthur's journey reflects the themes of identity crisis, social alienation, and the search for meaning amidst societal indifference and personal trauma, and how this journey illustrates the dark intersection between existential anxiety and mental health.

Analyzing existentialism in *Joker* can provide valuable insights for education, especially regarding mental health topics in mainstream media. Through the examination of the film's existential themes, both educators and students can achieve a greater insight into how media portrayals influence societal views on mental health, independence, and individual identity. This examination can equip educators with resources to explore intricate psychological and philosophical ideas, motivating students to analyze media critically and comprehend its influence on contemporary existential and mental health discussions. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How does *Joker (2019)* portray existentialist themes through the character development of Arthur Fleck, and what philosophical significance does this portrayal hold in relation to mental health, identity, and societal alienation?

This study relies on a theoretical basis grounded in existentialist philosophy, mainly referencing the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Existentialism, as a philosophical trend, explores the human condition in a frequently indifferent, tumultuous environment, concentrating on concepts like absurdity, liberty, isolation, and genuineness. According to Aho (2023), existentialism focuses on an individual's fundamental conditions for questioning existence: constraints, opportunities, and obligations; to create significance without a clear essence of life. These themes, when explored in relation to Arthur Fleck's evolution into the Joker, shed light on the internal and external influences shaping his persona. Through the exploration of these existentialist concepts, this research seeks to reveal how Arthur's journey symbolizes a wider identity and meaning crisis.

1. Existentialism and absurdity

Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) highlighted the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's indifference, a concept he terms absurdity. Camus asserts that individuals must confront this absurdity without succumbing to despair, finding purpose through rebellion and personal meaning (Francev & Kałuża, 2022). Recent scholarship had elaborated on Camus' ideas, analyzing how modern films, including *Joker*, reflect the absurd through characters who defy societal conventions in their search for authenticity. Arthur Fleck's life mirrors this struggle, as his repeated rejections and failures culminate in his rebellion against societal norms, embracing chaos as his form of meaning (Preston & Rath-Paillé, 2023; Ravlić, 2021). This

existential conflict aligns with Camus' philosophy of the absurd, where individuals face an indifferent universe and seek to impose meaning through their actions despite the futility of this endeavor (Graham, 2020; Howell, 2021). Fleck's descent into madness and his eventual acceptance of chaos can be seen as a reflection of the human condition as described by Camus, where individuals confront the absurdity of their existence and choose to live authentically, even if it means embracing anarchy (Zhang, 2022; Sreepada & Domínguez Partida, 2022).

2. **Freedom and responsibility**

Existentialism has been known since Jean-Paul Sartre discussed it in his works. One of his most famous works, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), particularly emphasized external freedom: the idea that one is bound by the desire for freedom and the necessity of determining one's identity through one's own will. Fleck's transformation into the Joker exemplifies this concept, as he moves from passivity to active self-definition, embracing the consequences of his actions. Contemporary works exploring Sartrean freedom highlight the transformative identity shifts that can emerge when individuals embrace their radical freedom. In *Joker*, Arthur Fleck's defiance of societal norms and moral standards demonstrated his claim to independence, as he transcended the limitations imposed on him by society. This reflects Sartre's concept that freedom—despite being a burden—can result in a self-redefinition, compelling individuals to forge their own meaning in a world lacking inherent values (Graham, 2020; Preston & Rath-Paillé, 2023). Arthur's dismissal of conventional morality and his acceptance of chaos as a means of expression exemplifies Sartre's idea that existence comes before essence, suggesting that individual actions determine identity rather than predetermined roles or societal norms (Brady & Erk, 2022; Howell, 2021). By asserting his independence, Arthur emerges as a symbol of extreme self-definition, reflecting Sartre's idea of the transformative power of freedom, though intertwined with tragic outcomes (Zhang, 2022).

3. **Alienation and authenticity**

Scholars have examined existentialist debates on authenticity, focusing on the conflict between societal expectations and the quest for a genuine self. They emphasize that artistic authenticity frequently emerges when a person stays faithful to their creative vision despite external influences (Guignon, 2004, in Bertinetto, 2020). Arthur Fleck's increasing detachment from society, driven by his mental health issues and social isolation, exemplifies this existential struggle. His embrace of the Joker persona represents a bid for authenticity, albeit through destructive means. This transformation raises critical questions about the role of societal marginalization in shaping identity and the ethical implications of living *authentically* in rebellion against oppressive norms.

4. **Relevance of existential themes in film**

Existentialism has long been a subject of interest in film studies, with directors frequently exploring themes of alienation, freedom, and identity crises. *Taxi Driver (1976)* featured a protagonist who, like Arthur Fleck, confronts societal alienation and

rebels against conventional moral structures. In *Joker*, Todd Phillips employed philosophical motifs to depict Arthur's transformation, using narrative and cinematic techniques to blur the lines between reality and delusion. This stylistic choice amplified the portrayal of Arthur's crisis, as he navigated his fractured sense of reality and identity. By aligning Arthur's descent into madness with existentialist themes, *Joker* explored a complex critique of society's role in shaping identity and highlights the personal struggles of individuals facing overwhelming existential crises (Brady & Erk, 2022).

METHODS

This study is a literary analysis employing a critical qualitative approach. Critical qualitative research is an interpretive approach that explores themes of power, marginalization, and the societal effects of personal challenges, emphasizing the need to highlight social injustices and enhance awareness of mental health and identity concerns. Qualitative inquiry is also recognized for its flexibility in interpreting complex cultural texts, with previous work noting that different research approaches can support one another depending on the aims of the investigation (Stainback, 1988, in Kuantitatif, 2016). Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experiences, meanings, and perspectives. Research using qualitative research techniques typically involves data that cannot be counted or measured and utilizes methods such as small group discussions, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, and text and document analysis. Text and document analysis, the technique used for this research, is used to study distributed or private knowledge. Qualitative methods are employed to uncover issues where individuals can explain their own resistance, leading to different approaches (Porter and Bhattacharya, 2005, in Hammarberg et al., 2016). Hence, this method is particularly effective for exploring how complex narratives and cultural texts expose fundamental philosophical and social concerns, allowing researchers to connect characters' experiences to broader societal contexts. The main focus of this study is the film *Joker (2019)*, utilizing existentialism as the conceptual framework.

The data in this study include selected scenes and dialogues that illustrate existential themes and Arthur Fleck's experiences with societal rejection, isolation, and mental distress. From this dataset, scenes were chosen based on their relevance to existential and psychological themes, specifically focusing on moments that emphasize Arthur's transformation and the impact of his environment on his sense of self.

To analyze these themes, this study employs the existential framework of Jean-Paul Sartre, focusing on concepts of freedom, alienation, and the search for meaning. Sartre's framework allows for a nuanced interpretation of Arthur's psychological state as it relates to broader existential crises, facilitating an analysis of denotative and connotative elements within each scene.

This study offers a closer look into Arthur's existential struggles in *Joker*, highlighting the film's commentary on social inequality and its psychological impact on identity and meaning in contemporary society.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

In this chapter, the research findings were detailed, followed by a discussion addressing the research questions. The analysis of *Joker* yielded several key insights into the film's portrayal of existential themes.

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1. Existential themes in Joker

Arthur's character journey serves as a prime exploration of existentialism, embodying several key existential themes such as absurdity, alienation, freedom, and authenticity.

1) Absurdity

Arthur's absurd existence was most clearly seen in his failed attempts to integrate into society, which could be seen most clearly during his comedy show debut. Before Arthur's turn, we were shown another comedian's performance. This part was intended to depict a comedy that was loved by Gotham City's people at that time, as it was seen from every punchline of the comedian who was always caught by his audience. It can be seen in the Scene 1 (Figure 1), timestamp 00:25:24:



Figure 1 :*Everyone is laughing except Arthur*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:25:24

Meanwhile, in the Scene 2 (Figure 2) at 00:25:18, Arthur only caught the punchline after hearing them laughing and gave the reaction to joke later than the others, making him appear isolated.



Figure 2: *Arthur laughs alone*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:25:18

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In addition, there was a scene when he finally had a stage and we would hear the contestant right before Arthur's turn delivering the similar punchline with the comedian the other days, making an imbalance to Arthur's stage appearance after that which the audience were hard to caught, even more when his laughing disorder occurred right on the stage. Those moments encapsulated the absurdity of Arthur's pursuit of validation in a world indifferent to him.

Arthur's jokes involve puns and are combined from dark humor that involves something like death topics. The dialogue 1 from Scene 3 can explain briefly of how Arthur's joke is like:

> Arthur Fleck: *It's funny, when I was a little boy and told people I was gonna be a comedian, everyone laughed at me. Well, no one's laughing now* (*Joker*, 2019, 01:00:27–01:00:39).

MC's sense of joke was summarized in a sentence as it is shown in the Scene 4 (Figure 3) at 00:05:51–00:06:34, he wrote on his diary: I hope my death makes more cents (a pun from 'sense') than my life.

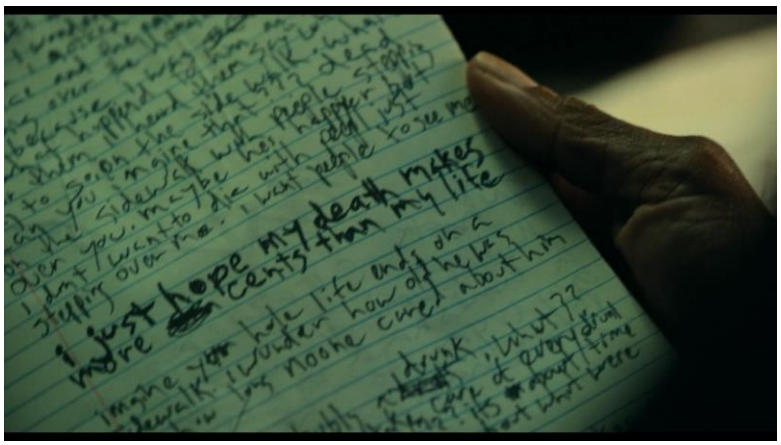


Figure 3: *One joke in Arthur's diary*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:05:51–00:06:34

In comparison, the jokes made by the comedians featured in the film involve things that lead to sexuality and racism. The Scene 5 proves this argument.

> Comedian 1: I have a wife. We love to role-play.
>
> Audience: Oh!
>
> Comedian 1: Yes, yes, very sexy. My favorite one right now is professor and senior who really needs to pass my class to graduate. Yes. So, I'll tell you how I operate. I'm a professor at a prestigious New England university... and my wife is a senior in my "Intro to Western Civ." I know. I know. Why is she a senior in the intro? I didn't buy it either. So, she comes to me during my office hours. It's Monday and Wednesday, 3 to 5. She says, "Excuse me, Professor

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> Lewis. I can't use my real last name at this college 'cause they don't hire Jews" (*Joker*, 2019, 00:24:58–00:25:41).

There is another example of depiction of people of Gotham City's type of joke, which can be seen below in the Scene 6:

> Comedian 2: I think... I think most women look at sex like buying a car. You know, like, "Can I see myself in this long-term?" "Is it safe?" "Is it reliable?" "Could it kill me?" Most guys, we look at sex like parking a car. We're like, "There's a spot." "There's another spot. That would work." "Oh, I have to pay? Never mind." "Handicapped? I hope no one sees this" (*Joker*, 2019, 00:42:15–00:42:42).

Arthur Fleck's life in Gotham City is characterized by a stark confrontation with absurdity. The city's decaying infrastructure and its indifference to individual suffering create a chaotic environment where Arthur's search for meaning clashes with the randomness of life. Camus's idea of absurdity (1942) explored the quest for significance in a universe that shows no concern. Arthur's journey in the film highlights the intrinsic absurdity of existence, especially through his individual misfortunes of neglect, treachery, and psychological struggles (Arinze & Onwuatuegwu, 2020). The film emphasized this theme when Arthur ultimately accepted the Joker identity, representing his revolt against the pointless reality surrounding him. He dismissed society's enforced values and formed his own identity, embodying Camus's idea of accepting the absurd to discover personal significance in a tumultuous reality.

2) Alienation

Arthur's alienation was visible throughout his relationship with society which deteriorated as he realized the depth of Gotham's indifference. A pivotal moment is in Scene 7 (Figure 4) at 00:02:10–00:02:51 when street kids robbed him, yet people that were witnessing it only mind their own business, and in Scene 8 (Figure 5) at 00:02:51–00:03:11 when the gang ridiculed him after chasing Arthur chased them. This act signals his complete detachment from society and echoes Sartre's existentialist views on isolation and rejection of societal norms.



Figure 4*: Kids robbing a name board from Arthur yet no one cares*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:02:10–00:02:51



Figure 5. *Kids assaulting him in a public area*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:02:51–00:03:11

Arthur's experience in the film was closely connected to sentiments of isolation, echoing Oktaviano & Ramiro's (2024) observation that Gotham acted as a setting where individuals wander in emotional loneliness since society had ceased to appreciate empathy. They highlighted that Arthur's worsening mental health was worsened by a social setting that neglected or did not assist him. This reflects Kierkegaard and Sartre's claims regarding alienation in modern existence, where institutions meant to assist individuals frequently enhance their sense of isolation.

Gotham's declining environment intensified this feeling of isolation. Oktaviano and Ramiro emphasized that the city's disregard for mental illness—shown through Arthur's inability to receive treatment and therapy—acted as a type of systemic neglect. Inaccessibility to treatment, inability to achieve stability, and challenges in forming meaningful relationships intensified his internal struggle and external social isolation. Arthur's failure to connect with others illustrated his growing estrangement from society, reinforcing the existential conflict between the self and the world (Ravlić, 2021).

3) Freedom and responsibility

Sartre's concept of *condemned to be free* was apparent in Arthur's final transformation into the Joker in Scene 9 (Figure 6) at 01:51:12–01:51:29. Despite the chaos around him, Arthur realized that he had the freedom to act in any way he chose: either he tried to free himself from the desperation by having a suicide in public or he blamed all the frustration to Murray Franklin on live television. Later, flow led him to choose the later. After freeing himself from past burden, he expressed the feeling by dancing in front of the protesters. This act highlights both his newfound sense of freedom for making new choices in his life.

Sartre's notion was manifested too in Arthur's final performance as the Joker (Scene 9, Figure 6; 01:51:12–01:51:29). In process of choosing to kill Murray Franklin on live television and then dance amid the protests, Arthur exercises a dramatic redefinition of himself. These acts register not merely as impulsive violence but as a radical self-naming in front of a public stage.



Figure 6. *Joker dancing in the middle of protesters*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 01:51:12–01:51:29

The spectacle of Arthur's dance highlights a central existential tension: he expressed genuine freedom: choosing, acting, and redefining himself. His actions ignited violence and instability, demonstrating Sartre's claim in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that genuine freedom necessarily carries responsibility, as individuals are accountable for the consequences that arise from their choices (Sartre et al., 2022).

Action always hovers between internal potentiality and external sanction, meaning one can occupy the paradoxical position of being "guilty and innocent at the same time" (Agamben, 2018, in Diken & Laustsen, 2022). This duality manifests itself in Arthur through his neurological condition—his uncontrollable laughter makes him appear guilty even when he intends no harm. Society interprets this unconscious expression as deviance, placing him under preemptive suspicion before he chose to act. Agamben also distinguishes between the tragic paradigm (in which action is bound to guilt) and the comic paradigm (in which guilt disappears because action escapes the logic of sanctioned responsibility) (Agamben, 2018, in Diken & Laustsen, 2022). Arthur's televised murder of Murray Franklin exemplifies this "comic" rupture: he steps outside society's moral apparatus and acts from a position unconcerned with guilt, punishment, or justification. His performance becomes an affirmation of existence separate from conventional moral evaluation.

A psychological perspective can provide extra depth without overshadowing the existential interpretation. Tan (2021) observed that the deteriorating social atmosphere of Gotham, characterized by skepticism, disillusionment, and ethical exhaustion, fosters an environment where extreme methods of self-assertion are conceivable. In this context, Arthur's claim of agency develops in a setting that subtly directs his self-identity toward darker alternatives, even though the decisions remain his. This cohesive viewpoint preserves the existential importance: Arthur bears moral responsibility for his actions. The related social-psychological decline only elucidates why his freedom is expressed in a particular manner, not the motivations behind his actions.

The turmoil that erupted in the city represented for the Joker that his presence could instigate transformations, revealing his genuine essence. This created a feeling of obligation for all that transpired due to him, including the turmoil that arose as a result of his actions, which was suggested in Scene 10.

> Police officer 1: Stop laughing, you freak! This isn't funny.
> Police officer 2: Yeah, the whole f*cking city is on fire cause of what you did.
>
> Arthur Fleck: I know. Isn't it beautiful? (*Joker*, 2019, 01:47:30–01:47:46).

Arthur's violent choices highlight the darker side of existential freedom, where the rejection of societal values leads to morally questionable outcomes. Sartre's ideas on freedom and responsibility from *Being and Nothingness* highlighted the existential burden of choice and consequence (Sartre et al., 2022). Arthur's transformation into the Joker illustrates the existential consequences of absolute freedom. Incorporating Tan's diagnosis into the existential discourse complicates moral evaluation: Arthur's behavior can be interpreted as both a declaration of autonomy and as a result of shadow dynamics intensified by a nihilistic social environment. Thus, evaluating Arthur's morality necessitates considering both his decisions and the cultural-psychic factors that rendered some choices possible (Tan, 2021).

4) Authenticity

Arthur finally fully becomes the Joker, which shows his desire to be real and true to himself. To him, getting rid of who he used to be, Arthur Fleck, and fully becoming the Joker is like freeing himself from the rules and expectations others had for him.

His admiration for the new figure who had come into his life was evident in Scene 11 during his meeting with the social worker at her soon-to-be-closed office.

> Arthur Fleck: I said, for my whole life, I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do. And people are starting to notice (*Joker*, 2019, 00:41:05–00:41:21).

His embracing the Joker persona was also depicted subconsciously in Scene 12 when his imaginary girlfriend glorified the murder committed by a masked clown that was being widely reported at that time.

> Imaginary Sophie: You believe that sh*t? F*ck them. I think the guy that did it is a hero (*Joker*, 2019, 00:45:39–00:45:49).

Arthur's eventual embrace of his Joker persona reflects his pursuit of authenticity. According to existentialists like Martin Heidegger (1996), authenticity involves living in accordance with one's true self, rather than conforming to societal expectations (Tambunan, 2016). Bertinetto (2020) similarly argued that authenticity—particularly in an artistic sense—emerges when expression remains true to the creator's inner vision despite societal or cultural constraints.

Oktaviano and Ramiro (2024) expanded on this idea by emphasizing how Joker's intrinsic narrative techniques—its subjective framing, imaginary sequences, and fragmented perspectives—function as a cinematic manifestation of Arthur's search for authenticity. His reality was filtered through personal imagination, suggesting that his identity as "Joker" is both a psychological construction and an existential affirmation of his identity. In this sense, his transformation is not only philosophical but also narratively embodied: the very structure of the film mirrors

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his act of self-creation.

Arthur's metamorphosis is an expression of his rejection of the roles that society has forced upon him—someone who was known as the mentally ill patient, the struggling comedian, and the submissive son—he rejected these identities and embraced his violent and chaotic personality as Joker, which he believed to be who he really was. The existential topic of self-discovery and the search for one's own truth, free from social influences, is reflected in this devastating journey towards authenticity.

2. Societal chaos and moral decay

The depiction of social chaos and ethical decline in Gotham City was closely tied to Arthur's journey of self-discovery. Oktaviano & Ramiro (2024) observed that Gotham's indifference to mental health services—symbolized by the withdrawal of Arthur's medication—was more than just a policy error, but a trigger for alienation. Arthur was denied fundamental institutional care, which reinforced Gotham's moral decline; a small representation of a larger breakdown. Gotham's decline mirrored his psychological decline, which can be outlined in the following points:

1) Social inequality

Arthur was abused in the subway by three workers of Wayne corporation when his laughing disorder accidentally occurred while they were harassing a lone woman. Based on Scene 13 (Figure 7) at 00:29:59–00:32:32, it was apparent that the three workers had bad personality and that was likely due to the difference of class which them as Wayne's workers was counted as higher class while the woman and Arthur were the lower class. The accident later helped push Arthur toward his transformation, symbolizing the resentment of the oppressed class toward the wealthy elite.



Figure 7. *Arthur is bullied by Wayne company's workers right after harassing a woman.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:29:59–00:32:32

Yet after what they did to the lower classes, such as the woman and Arthur, those who belonged to the higher class were still considered noble after their deaths. That can be seen from Thomas Wayne's statement and the news about their murder in Scene 14, which was deliberately made to sound sad. Meanwhile, people like Arthur Fleck, the low class, are considered pathetic and clown-like.

Thomas Wayne: *Yes, all 3 worked for Wayne Investments. Good, decent, educated. Although I didn't know any of them personally. Like all Wayne employees, past and present, they're family.*

Penny Fleck: Did you hear that? I told you, we're family.

News Reporter: *There now seems to be a groundswell of anti-rich sentiment in the city. It's almost as if our less fortunate residents are taking the side of the killer.*

Thomas Wayne: *Yes, and it's a shame. It's one of the reasons why I'm considering a run for mayor. Gotham's lost its way.*

News Reporter: *What about the eyewitness report of the suspect being a man in a clown mask?*

Thomas Wayne: *Well, it makes total sense to me. What kind of coward would do something that cold-blooded? Someone who hides behind a mask. Someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until those kind of people change for the better, those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clown* (*Joker*, 2019, 00:38:38–00:39:41).

The film's portrayal of Gotham City emphasized social inequality as a key factor in Arthur Fleck's existential crisis. Arthur's experience as a marginalized person—enduring poverty, facing barriers to mental health services, and being overlooked by a society fixated on wealth—reflects the wider existential theme of isolation. This inequality deepens his disconnection from society, as those in positions of power and privilege disregard his plight. The stark contrast between the elite and the impoverished reflects how existential alienation is exacerbated by economic disparity, as those at the bottom of the social hierarchy are stripped of their dignity and autonomy.

Gotham's ethical discourse—particularly Thomas Wayne's derogatory term *clowns* for the poor—served as more than a mere elitist insult; it was indicated a broader societal collapse where common values became devalued. Multiple theorists observed that as social meaning diminishes, collective frustrations and underlying aggression are more readily activated in disruptive manners. This dynamic clarifies why Gotham's public disdain for the poor not only stigmatized them but also fostered an environment where extreme reactions appeared plausible. Arthur's subsequent violence can thus be interpreted mainly as an existential rebellion stemming from this breakdown of moral clarity: a self-assertion influenced by the city's declining ethical environment, though not entirely controlled by it (Crowell, 2020; Tan, 2021). As Oktaviano & Ramiro (2024) emphasized, Gotham's neglect of mental health care is one of the most obvious indicators of this moral decline. Arthur's loss of access to medication and therapy reflects a systemic neglect that deepens his isolation. Rather than serving as a safety net, social services became another mechanism of alienation, accelerating his psychological decline.

2) Crime

The rise of crime in Gotham City is both a symptom and a response to the moral decay and societal collapse within the film. As social systems collapse and economic inequality grows, crime serves as a means for individuals to release their frustration and existential suffering. Arthur's evolution into the Joker is deeply connected to this deterioration of societal structure and authority.

> Arthur Fleck: Is it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?
> Social Worker: It is certainly tense.
> Arthur Fleck: Hmm.
>
> Social Worker: People are upset. They're struggling. Looking for work. These are tough times (*Joker*, 2019, 00:04:51–00:05:10).

The dialogue in Scene 15 was a response from Arthur right after he was robbed by the street kids (see Scene 7 and Scene 8). His aggressive behavior later was not just a response to the personal pain he experienced as a victim of crimes in the city, but also a representation of Gotham's declining moral values. In this context, crime can be viewed as a rejection of societal norms, with some individuals favoring it over remaining in their present situation. From the events of the story, it appears that Todd Phillips aimed to illustrate Arthur's resorting to violence as a means to reclaim his identity and independence in a world that has deprived him of both.

Diken and Laustsen (2022) framed this shift as a movement from *passive nihilism* (nihilism as in decline and recession of the power of the spirit), marked by forced happiness and resignation, toward *active nihilism* (nihilism as in a sign of increased power of the spirit), where destruction becomes a way to rupture an intolerable world. This aligns with Arthur's progression: his *put on a happy face* persona reflects passive nihilism, while his later violence marks a transition to active refusal of the moral structures that failed him. Agamben (2018), further referred by Diken and Laustsen (2022), sharpened this interpretation by analyzing how modern societies bind individuals through *sanctioned action*, where responsibility is assigned before actions are even taken. Arthur's involuntary laughter—perceived as mockery or threat—excluded him from moral recognition and placed him outside the sphere of legitimate action. Once he was positioned as guilty in advance, his violent choices erupted from a space where society's moral norms no longer hold authority over him.

The film explored how social disorder and ethical decline lead people to nihilism, yet Arthur's path is more existential than nihilistic, as he seeks personal significance through his transformation. Chávez and McCracken (2021) argued that Arthur's descent into violence mirrors the real-world pattern of a *lone wolf* (a perpetrator of violence who does not have a political motivation, and is better described as either a vigilante or mentally disturbed) terrorist whose actions emerge from prolonged exposure to poverty, social isolation, and institutional neglect; conditions Gotham had portrayed throughout the film. In their reading, Arthur's brutality became a distorted attempt to reclaim power from a society that had consistently disempowered

him, framing his killings not merely as retaliation but as part of what he believed to be a process of existential healing. His shift from seeing his life as a *tragedy* to calling it a *comedy* reflects a collapse of his previous worldview, where the inconsistencies and betrayals he uncovered—particularly regarding his mother and his identity—hit him with the force of an existential punchline. This interpretation reinforces how Arthur's violent acts emerge not from purposeless nihilism but from the painful recognition that the structures meant to give life meaning (family, morality, religion, social order) had deceived him. His transformation into the Joker becomes, therefore, not only a rejection of Gotham's collapsing moral order but a misguided attempt to assert selfhood within a world he perceived as fundamentally contradictory.

Oktaviano & Ramiro (2024) emphasized that the rise in crime in Gotham is inextricably linked to widespread social neglect, particularly toward vulnerable individuals. They highlight instances when the government cut social work funding, suggesting that the withdrawal of essential mental health services directly contributed to Gotham's collective instability, and that crime is not simply an aberration but a predictable outcome of a city that abandons its most vulnerable members. Arthur's violent actions stem in part from this lack, illustrating how social neglect can escalate into personal and collective destruction.

3. Influence of socioeconomic and political context

The film reflects how Arthur Fleck's character development is significantly shaped by the socioeconomic and political environment of Gotham which are delved further below:

1) Low-class struggle

Gotham was portrayed as a city suffering from rampant poverty, with the working class and poor struggling for survival while the wealthy elite remain oblivious or dismissive of their plight. Wayne's comments about the poor, calling them *clowns*, exemplify the disdain of the upper class toward the less fortunate, intensifying the resentment from those who feel abandoned by the system. As the story had progressed, the audience was repeatedly exposed to news broadcasts that provide indirect narration about the setting of Gotham City. One part of the news broadcast in Scene 16 mentioned that there was a garbage strike occurring, coupled with the increasing price of crucial goods such as oil, causing Gotham City people's quality of life to decline. This certainly had an impact on all levels of society there, but the ones who were most affected were the lower classes, causing misery that led to increased crime.

> News Reporter: *I'm Stan L. Brooks, and here's what's happening. It's day 18 of the garbage strike, with 10,000 tons of garbage piling up every day. Even the nicest sections of the city are looking like slums. Health Commissioner Edward O'Rourke is declaring a city-wide state of emergency for the first time in decades. There's no need to wait until somebody dies or comes down with typhoid fever. It's already a serious situation. It's something that affects almost everyone in the city, no matter who they are or where they live* (*Joker*, 2019, 00:00:20- 00:00:47).

From the news, it can be concluded that Gotham City was experiencing a sanitation crisis caused by the economic crisis that occurred there, this is implied in Scene 17 which is the next part of the news.

> News Reporter: *In other news, the building industry and landlords today expressed concern over the latest increase in heating oil prices. Renters in the metro area are certain to feel the pinch...* (*Joker*, 2019, 00:01:20–00:01:29).

The film strongly reflects themes of class struggle, where the lower classes are pitted against the wealthy elite. Arthur's struggle with poverty and disenfranchisement is a microcosm of the larger class tensions brewing in Gotham. The city's decaying infrastructure and neglect of the underprivileged create a growing resentment toward the upper class. This tension is captured in Arthur's gradual transformation, as he begins to embody the frustrations of the oppressed. The film presents Arthur's descent into violence as not just personal, but emblematic of the anger felt by those marginalized by a capitalist system that dehumanizes and alienates the poor. This aligns with the existential theme of alienation, as Arthur's sense of self is continually undermined by a society that values wealth and power over individual dignity. These existential themes of alienation and the search for personal meaning are prominent in the works of Sartre (1943) who argued that such alienation can lead to profound identity crises, rebellion, and violence (Sartre et al., 2022).

Gotham's declining socioeconomic conditions—garbage strikes, rising living costs, poor services, and a widening class gap—fostered an atmosphere in which shared meaning and civic trust were waning. From an existential perspective, this collapse exacerbated Arthur's already characteristic sense of alienation and futility. The collapse of institutional frameworks leaves individuals without a solid system for belonging or finding meaning, prompting marginalized individuals to pursue identity through unconventional, sometimes extreme, methods of self-definition. This kind of environment diminishes the cultural narratives that typically transform despair into a socially acceptable expression. In Arthur's situation, this void reinforced the psychological space in which the Joker persona emerged. Consequently, Arthur's underclass struggle can be interpreted primarily as an existential attempt to regain meaning amidst material scarcity, while also reflecting the nihilistic environment created by Gotham's moral and political decline (Preston & Rath-Paillé, 2023; Tan, 2021).

Oktaviano & Ramiro (2024) argued that this socioeconomic neglect pushes individuals toward identity fragmentation, as Arthur's struggle for medication and stability became intertwined with his struggle for dignity. Poverty does not merely limit Arthur's material conditions; it erodes his sense of self, reinforcing existential alienation.

2) Political disenfranchisement

The lower class in Gotham had little to no political voice, which became clear as Arthur Fleck and other residents grow increasingly disillusioned with the city's political system. One scene worth noting is in Scene 18 when Penny Fleck flattered Thomas Wayne and said that he is the best person to be the next Mayor. The benchmark for her words all came from the news she heard, indicating the

manipulation of information provided in Thomas Wayne's politics through journalism.

> Penny Fleck: He'll make a great mayor. Everybody says so.
> Arthur Fleck: Oh, yeah. Everybody who? Who do you talk to?
> Penny Fleck: Well, everybody on the news. He's the only one who could save the city. He owes it to us (*Joker*, 2019, 00:11:32–00:11:44).

The political dimension of powerlessness is also evident in Arthur's limited institutional support, which Oktaviano & Ramiro (2024) interpreted as a form of political neglect. When funding cuts halted his therapy and treatment, Arthur became not only socially invisible but also irrelevant to the political and social systems of the time.

The people who seemed to have no right to be involved in the politics carried out by Thomas Wayne made the situation chaotic, especially after being provoked by Arthur's murder which was considered as resistance against the upper class by them. Finally, they held a demonstration with a clown theme that depicted the figure of change, while also alluding to the words made by Thomas Wayne who considered the resistance carried out by the lower class to resemble a 'clown'.

> News Reporter: *What's the point of all this?*
> Protester: **** *the rich.* **** *Thomas Wayne. That's what this* ******* *whole thing is about.* **** *the whole system.*
> News Presenter: *Wayne, who recently announced he is running for mayor, will be attending the benefit. You might remember it was Thomas Wayne who first referred to many of Gotham's residents as "clowns." Today, he offered little in the way of an apology.*
> Thomas Wayne: *Well, what I will say is, there's something wrong with those people. I am here to help them. I'm gonna lift them out of poverty, help make their lives better. That is why I'm running. And they may not realize it, but I'm their only hope* (*Joker*, 2019, 01:01:39–01:02:11).

Political disenfranchisement is another crucial factor influencing Arthur's existential journey. Throughout the film, specifically in Scene 19 which was depicting the start of people's confrontment in climax to the government, Gotham's political system was depicted as corrupt, with the wealthy elite controlling the city's fate while ignoring the needs of the poor. Arthur's sense of powerlessness is exacerbated by this political environment, where he felt completely disenfranchised and invisible to those in positions of power. The film illustrates how this lack of political agency leads to Arthur's existential crisis, as he felt disconnected from any sense of purpose or societal role. The rise of the Joker persona—despite its destructive nature—carried a depiction of resistance against the system in Gotham City; a rejection of government power that favors the upper class and tramples on the lower classes.

Chávez and McCracken (2021) emphasized that Arthur became a symbolic figure precisely because Gotham's marginalized residents projected their frustrations onto someone who embodied their sense of abandonment. According to their analysis, modern society often elevates the *lone wolf* perpetrator to mythic icon status when people feel systematically ignored, humiliated, or stripped of political agency; conditions that Gotham's underclass had faced. Arthur's rise to public symbolism, then, reflects a broader cultural pattern in which marginalized

groups rely on destructive figures not because of their ideology, but because they dramatize resistance in a world where legitimate avenues of recognition no longer exist. This symbolic adoption reflects the article's argument that public despair can reframe violent individuals as vessels of collective rage, particularly when institutional structures like government, healthcare, and the media fail to protect or acknowledge those they are supposed to serve. Thus, the *clowns'* movement in the film aligns with the authors' claim that societal resentment often fuels the transformation of isolated criminals into perceived champions of the oppressed.

4. Role of visual and narrative techniques

The visual and narrative techniques in Joker (2019) played a crucial role in conveying existential themes. The film's use of lighting, framing, and color palette reflects Arthur's internal turmoil and social isolation, while the disjointed narrative structure reflects his fragmented mental state. Bertinetto (2020) noted that artistic authenticity often hinges on formal choices that embody the creator's inner vision, making the medium itself a vehicle for genuine expression. In Joker, these visual and structural elements function not merely as aesthetic devices but as an authentic reflection of what Todd Phillips sought through his depiction of Arthur's psychological decline and his refusal to conform to social norms. Further explanation can be seen in the points below:

1) Visual techniques

Throughout the film, Arthur was often shown looking at himself in mirrors. These moments of reflection are symbolic of his internal struggle with his identity and existence. In one early moment in Scene 20 (Figure 8) at 00:00:56–00:01:26, Arthur forced a smile on his face in the mirror, a poignant moment of his conflict between who he is and who society expects him to be.



Figure 8. *Trying to smile wide as a portrayal of himself trapped in societal expectations.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:00:56–00:01:26

Visually, these scenes emphasized his fractured sense of self, foreshadowing his later break from societal norms to embrace his authentic identity as Joker that was depicted in Scene 21 (Figure 9) at 00:34:45–00:36:13.

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Figure 9. *His depiction of gaining freedom from societal expectations*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:34:45–00:36:13

One of the most iconic scenes in the film involves Arthur dancing in the bathroom after his first act of violence on the subway. In Scene 22 (Figure 10) at 00:34:45–00:36:13, it was shown his slow, deliberate movement signifies his transformation, as the physical act of dancing reflects his psychological shift. The film used this visual motif of dance several times, particularly when Arthur is donning his Joker persona, emphasizing his freedom and his break from societal constraints.



Figure 10*:The transformation dance right after the first murder*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:34:45–00:36:13

The movie's use of color was evolving along with Arthur's journey. In Scene 23 (Figure 11) at 00:03:43–00:04:36 which was shown in the beginning of the story, the muted and desaturated tones of his surroundings mirror his depression and sense of alienation.

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Figure 11. *He laughs in a gloomy room at the beginning in an expression like he is holding pain.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:03:43–00:04:36

As he transitions into the Joker, the film's color palette shifts toward vibrant reds and yellows, especially in the final scene in Scene 24 (Figure 12) at 01:52:41–01:53:17 where Arthur was fully immersed in his new identity. This contrast visually represents his movement from a dull, oppressed existence to a vibrant, chaotic freedom.



Figure 12. *He laughs in a bright room at the end with a more relieved expression.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 01:52:41–01:53:17

The film also used stairs as a metaphor of Arthur Fleck into Joker. The staircase is a recurring visual metaphor that represents Arthur's struggle and eventual liberation. Early in the film, more precisely in Scene 25 (Figure 13) at 00:09:42–00:10:02, Arthur was shown laboriously climbing the stairs, which symbolizes his uphill battle with society and his own mental health.

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Figure 13. *Arthur climbs the stairs tiredly*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:09:42–00:10:02

In contrast to Scene 26 (Figure 14) at 01:30:36–01:31:30, once he fully embraced his Joker persona, he was depicted dancing down the same stairs, symbolizing his release from societal expectations and the acceptance of his new identity.



Figure 14. *He goes down the stairs dancing*
Source: *Joker (2019),* 01:30:36–01:31:30

The film used several visual techniques to enhance the portrayal of existential themes. For example, the use of lighting and color plays a critical role in conveying Arthur's emotional and psychological descent. Dark, muted colors dominate scenes where Arthur feels most isolated, reflecting his inner despair. In contrast, brighter, chaotic colors are used during his transformation into the Joker, symbolizing his rejection of societal norms and embrace of chaos. Additionally, the use of tight, claustrophobic camera angles reflects Arthur's growing sense of entrapment and alienation within a society that constantly pushes him to the margins. These visual cues immerse the audience in Arthur's perspective, allowing them to experience his existential crisis viscerally.

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2) Narrative Techniques

The non-linear narrative and unreliable perspective reflect Arthur's fractured psyche. The film blurs the lines between reality and illusion, particularly in scenes like his imagined relationship with Sophie. Each of the pictures below presented the contrast of the scene based on Arthur's point of view on Scene 27 (Figure 15) versus the reality in third-person point of view on Scene 28 (Figure 16):



Figure 15. *Imaginary scene.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:25:24



Figure 16. *Scene in reality.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:25:24

Oktaviano and Ramiro (2024) highlighted that the film's application of distorted angles and fantastical sequences is a purposeful, inherent method to immerse the audience in Arthur's fluctuating inner reality. They contended additionally that this narrative alteration acts as a structural signal that exposes Arthur's declining subjectivity, mixing the boundaries between external occurrences and his psychological projections. This reinforces the film's wider examination of existential doubt, where Arthur's identity arises from a disjointed and questionable view of reality.

There was also a part which is Scene 29 (Figure 17) at 00:12:07–00:15:20 that narrated his fantasy of being on Murray Franklin's show. These elements of storytelling mirror Arthur's existential crisis, as he grappled with understanding

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what was real and constructing his sense of identity in a world that seemed indifferent to his existence.



Figure 17. *The talk show in Arthur's imaginary.* Source: *Joker (2019),* 00:12:07–00:15:20

Oktaviano and Ramiro (2024) highlighted that the film's application of distorted angles and fantastical sequences is a purposeful, inherent method to immerse the audience in Arthur's fluctuating inner reality. They additionally contended that this narrative alteration acts as a structural signal that exposes Arthur's declining subjectivity, mixing the boundaries between external occurrences and his psychological projections. This reinforces the film's wider examination of existential doubt, where Arthur's identity arises from a disjointed and questionable view of reality.

The mixture of real-world narratives with the main character's imagination kept the audience carried away by the emotions poured out in his imagination. The audience could feel Arthur's confusion and surprise when faced with a reality that did not match his expectations. One of the confusions appears in the way the film portrayed an inconsistent perception of Arthur's idol character, Murray Franklin. In his imagination in Scene 30, he was depicted as a highly caring person who would defend someone like Arthur when people laughed at him who is considered a mama's boy and preferred to consider him as filial piety to his parents.

Murray Franklin: Oh, okay. Well, there's something special about you, Arthur, I could tell. Where are you from?

Arthur Fleck: I live right here in the city with my mother.

Audience: Hahaha-

Murray Franklin: Okay, hold on. Hold on. There's nothing funny about that. I lived with my mother before I made it. Just me and her. I'm that kid whose father went out for a pack of cigarettes, and he never came back.

Audience: Ow…

Arthur Fleck: I know what that's like, Murray. I've been the man of the house for as long as I can remember. I take good care of my mother.

> Murray Franklin: All that sacrifice, she must love you very much (*Joker*, 2019, 00:13:27–00:14:00).

In Scene 31 which is the real world depiction, Murray Franklin was nothing more than a presenter who was considered funny by bringing satirical jokes about others, even about his son.

> Murray Franklin: *So, the other night, I told my youngest son Billy, you know, the new one, the not-so-bright one. I told him, "The garbage strike is still going on, Billy." And he says, and I'm not kidding, Billy says, "So, where are we gonna get all our garbage from?"* (*Joker*, 2019, 00:59:15–00:59:29)

Because Murray's joke was kind of this, he then popularized Arthur by bringing his incompetence in comedy, making this as one of the big triggers in Arthur's transformation into 'Joker'. This was seen in Scene 32 below.

> Murray Franklin: *And finally, in a world where everyone thinks they could do my job, we got this video tape from Pogo's Comedy Club, right here in Gotham. Here's a guy who thinks if you just keep laughing, it'll somehow make you funny. Check out this joker.*
>
> (*Joker*, 2019, 00:59:36–00:59:50).

Oktaviano and Ramiro (2024) noted that this contrasting portrayal of Murray demonstrates how intrinsic narrative techniques manipulate audience perception. By juxtaposing Arthur's idealized fantasy with Murray's cynical real-life persona, the film underscores the instability of Arthur's worldview. They argued that this dissonance is central to the thematic construction of the Joker persona, revealing how Arthur's fragmented internal narrative reshapes the external character into a symbol of meaning or betrayal.

Oktaviano and Ramiro (2024) also noted that Joker's narrative structure—its sequencing, shifting focus, and blending of subjective imagination with objective events—forms the backbone of Arthur's character development. Their study highlights how these intrinsic elements work together to depict a protagonist whose grasp of reality weakens as he struggles to establish identity and purpose. Intrinsic narrative fragmentation is a vital aspect of the film that significantly contributes to its philosophical portrayal—in this instance, its portrayal of existentialism—showcasing a universe where meaning must be created in the face of uncertainty, deception, and emotional confusion.

The film's narrative structure was equally important in conveying existential themes, particularly through its blurring of reality and delusion. The unreliable narration, where the audience was left uncertain about what was real and what was a product of Arthur's mind, mirrored the absurdity of his life. This narrative ambiguity reinforced the existential theme of chaos, as Arthur's grasp on reality disintegrates, and he was left to construct his own truth in an indifferent world. The film's fragmented storytelling, with its flashbacks and distorted reality, emphasizes the uncertainty and meaninglessness Arthur faces, aligning with the existential notion that individuals must create their own meaning in an incoherent and

uncaring world.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the existential development of Arthur Fleck, the main character in Joker (2019) directed by Todd Phillips, within the framework of existentialist theory. Through a detailed analysis of Fleck's experiences of alienation, absurdity, freedom, and the struggle for authenticity, the study revealed how his transformation reflects core existentialist concerns. The character's psychological and social crises, heightened by the harsh socio-economic realities of Gotham City, illustrate the intersection between personal identity and external socio-political forces. This suggests that existential struggles are not only personal but also social, rooted in both individual freedom and systemic constraints. Fleck's journey underlines the existential themes of identity, authenticity, and personal responsibility within oppressive societal conditions, challenging viewers to consider the limits of individual freedom in a structured, inequitable world.

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