

**Laughing All the Way to The Bank: The Strategic Ambiguity of Todd Phillips's *Joker***

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### **Abstract**

This undergraduate honors thesis explores the multiple interpretations of Todd Phillips's 2019 film *Joker*. It argues that conflicting interpretations are not only valid but that the film was deliberately constructed to be strategically ambiguous to increase its popularity. Despite the media's warnings of potential violence by disenfranchised men whom the film could inspire, the *Joker* quickly became the highest-grossing rated R film of all time. The *Joker* mirrors the political divide in America and capitalizes on it. In separate interviews, director Todd Phillips claimed the film was a reaction to "wokeness" and to the presidency of Donald Trump, thus playing both sides of the political aisle. This thesis will present a close-textual-intertextual analysis of four key narrative fragments to explain the polysemic interpretations found within the film. It concludes with a discussion of how the film used the media controversy and employed strategic ambiguity to generate profit.

## **Table of Contents**

|                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Acknowledgment</b>                        | 3  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                          | 4  |
| <b>Background</b>                            | 6  |
| <b>Literature Review</b>                     | 9  |
| Theoretical Framework                        | 9  |
| Strategic Ambiguity                          | 9  |
| Media Spectacle                              | 10 |
| Scholarly Reception                          | 12 |
| Clowns and their Role in Society             | 12 |
| Neoliberalism                                | 13 |
| Leftism and Occupy's Influence               | 14 |
| Incel Movement/ Conversations in Masculinity | 15 |
| <b>Justification of Research</b>             | 16 |
| <b>Joker Analysis</b>                        | 20 |
| Sophie's Scene                               | 20 |
| Origins                                      | 23 |
| Gary's Scenes                                | 28 |
| Mother on the Bus                            | 31 |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                            | 34 |
| <b>References</b>                            | 37 |

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## Introduction

Prior to its theatrical release, Todd Phillips's 2019 film *Joker* sent mainstream media into a frenzied moral panic. Media outlets, en masse, warned against the possible violence that could result from disaffected men who connected with the film's villainous protagonist (Phillips, 2021). Despite, or possibly in part due to this negative media attention, *Joker* quickly became the highest-grossing rated R movie of all time, earning 1.074 billion dollars in the box office. While America has yet to witness a violent terrorist act inspired by the film, *Joker* has taken a curious space in the public forum. Following its theatrical release, images of Joaquin Phoenix's Joker character have appeared at leftist protests around the globe (Kuryel, 2021), as well as in cringe-worthy memes shared by members of the alt-right community across the internet. The film has been praised by some as a poignant critique of neoliberalism and lauded by others as a critical response to political correctness. In this thesis, I will argue that the film is purposefully left open to multiple interpretations to appeal to the widest audience possible. This strategy has proven to be successful as *Joker* has become one of the highest-grossing films of all time, with a sequel currently in the works that will costar pop music icon Lady Gaga.

The focus of my study will be Todd Phillips's *Joker*, as well as materials capturing production and reception context, including interviews from the director, responses from audience members and critics, and related texts from other scholars. With these materials I will present a close textual-intertextual analysis to identify and explain the polysemic interpretations found within the film. The film has been subjected to a wide range of interpretations, which seem to be in conflict with one another. However, my analysis will show that these multiple meanings are not only reasonable but that this text was purposefully

constructed to facilitate those interpretations. I will argue that the director and producers of *Joker* used strategic ambiguity to appeal to audiences on all sides of the political spectrum. The film *Joker* mirrors the multitude of conflicting voices in our society in both its content and how it handles political themes. One suggestive piece of evidence that my reading is right is that in separate interviews, Todd Phillips has claimed that the film is both a response to “wokeness” and a reaction to the Trump presidency (Hagan, 2019; TheWrap, 2019). *Joker* straddles the political divide and rides it all the way to the box office.

This paper will begin with a brief background that introduces the character of the Joker and his cultural significance. The background will explain who the character of the Joker is in relation to the Batman comics; it will then provide the cultural significance of Heath Ledger’s cinematic take on the Joker, including the media spectacle surrounding his untimely death and the Aurora, Colorado shootings. Lastly, it will provide context to Todd Phillips’s *Joker*, including the socio-political atmosphere surrounding the film, the director’s previous work, and a description of the media response prior to the film’s release.

The following section will be a literature review of the communication theory that will be applied in my analysis. This section will define and discuss the academic work on theories of polysemy and media spectacle. The paper will follow this discussion of the general concepts that will guide my study with a review of scholarly materials related to the politics and reception of Todd Phillips’s *Joker*. It will discuss the role of clowns according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theoretical concept of the carnival as resistant to tyrannical oppression and suggest that elements of that resistance are portrayed through the clown uprising in the film. The following section of the literature review will address the critiques of neoliberal policy couched

within the film. The literature review will conclude with a section on the leftist politics couched within the film, as well as a section on the alt-right ideologies and toxic masculinity portrayed in the movie.

The following section will be a justification of research, which will provide a summary of the movie's plot and highlight the significance of four key narrative fragments in the movie. These narrative fragments are essential not only for the development of the plot but also for the strategic ambiguity that allows for multiple readings of each fragment. Then, the analysis of these narrative fragments will detail what the audience sees and hears in the movie, the differing interpretations that can be inferred from each scene, as well as reception evidence to back up these claims. I will conclude my paper with a discussion of how the film's use of strategic ambiguity and media spectacle benefits the film monetarily and the cultural significance it brings to the film.

### **Background**

Appearing in the first issue of the Batman comic book series released in 1940, The Joker has become one of the most recognizable and infamous villains ever to appear in popular culture. The murderous clown's flamboyant purple suit and bright green hair have appeared in over 250 books, movies, Television shows, and Video games (Peaslee & Weiner, 2016). The Joker is not just Batman's archnemesis; he is an inversion of the character of Batman, his evil doppelganger (Terrill, 1993). If Batman is a representation of law and order, who functions to protect the status quo, then the Joker is a representational agent of chaos and anarchy (Brown, 2021).

In Christopher Nolan's 2008 blockbuster *The Dark Knight*, Heath Ledger took on the role of the prince of clowns, offering a compelling and hyper-realistic take on the character. It was the first on-screen portrayal that presented the character as a maniacal terrorist instead of a goofy, joking crime boss out to thwart Batman (Placido, 2022). In the movie, Ledger's character performs a series of deadly and grandiose terrorist attacks that send Gotham City's media and citizens into a state of panic and hysteria. Since Heath Ledger's iconic portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, the character has become a controversial and polarizing topic in mainstream media. Prior to its release and just months after filming had wrapped, Heath Ledger passed away from an accidental drug overdose. His untimely death facilitated the mainstream media's sensational narrative that his commitment to method acting had pushed him to the brink of insanity, just like the character he played in the film. While his portrayal of the character garnered almost unanimous critical acclaim and praise from the public, it also attracted an audience of disenfranchised White men who were frustrated with the political atmosphere under the Obama administration (Wessels & Martinez, 2015). Slowly gaining community on Reddit and 4chan, emulating Ledger's ironic catchphrase of "Why so serious?," lonely White men began to use the character in memes with the catchphrase "We live in a society," an aggrieved statement to infer that society has failed them.

Furthering the media controversy surrounding the Joker was the tragedy of the Aurora shooting in 2012. Following the release of Nolan's *Dark Knight Rises*, the sequel to *The Dark Knight*, a lone gunman entered a midnight screening of the film. That night on January 20, 2012, James Holmes murdered twelve people and injured seventy after releasing tear gas grenades and opening fire on the audience. While Holmes has not explicitly stated that he was influenced

by the original film, the atrocity itself mirrored the terrorist acts committed by the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Kellner, 2013). This caused the mainstream media to connect Holmes's actions with those of Heath Ledger's Joker. Some news outlets even reported the now-debunked rumor that Holmes announced "I am the Joker" upon entering the auditorium (Meyer, 2015). This pushed a narrative in the media that the Joker character was a dangerous and harmful influence on our society.

In 2017, when Warner Brothers and DC Comics announced its next film would be a gritty, realistic retelling of Joker's origin story from comedy director Todd Phillips, it turned curious heads. Phillips's previous work, which includes *The Hangover* trilogy and *Old School*, centered around White male bonding through acts of debauchery and hazing (Kavka, 2021). 2017 was one year into Donald J. Trump's presidency, a man who was known for anti-feminist, discriminatory, and hateful rhetoric that connected with the ever-growing White nationalist-populist movement within the country. All the while, the nation was beginning a debate on policing and law enforcement. The Black Lives Matter movement was just beginning to gain traction and garner media attention. Similarly, leftist protest groups against Trump were dubbed Antifa, or anti-fascist, and labeled in the media as wild anarchists whose purpose was to destroy America and its infrastructure as we knew it.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

#### *Strategic Ambiguity*

Audience members are not passive subjects who receive a text at face value; instead, they can actively and critically engage with a text to constitute their own interpretations. In his essay *Encoding/Decoding* (1980), sociologist Stuart Hall theorized that audiences read texts in three differing ways. The first and most common one is a dominant or preferred reading of a text, in which the reader interprets and agrees with the hegemonic narrative intended by the author. The second would be a negotiated reading, in which the receiver of a text accepts most of the intended meaning but challenges elements or aspects of the text. The last would be an oppositional reading wherein the receiver of a text acknowledges the intended hegemonic meaning of a text but rejects this meaning for their own subversive meaning. According to rhetorical scholar Celeste Condit (1989), these three differing readings make a text polyvalent, in which audience members accept the intended interpretation of a text but evaluate the meaning differently.

However, when multiple audiences interpret or read the intended meaning of a text in conflicting ways, we encounter polysemy. In “Television: Polysemy and Popularity,” media scholar John Fiske (1986) highlights that polysemic interpretations of a text do not mean that an infinite number of interpretations are justifiable. Instead, justifiable interpretations are bound to the audience’s relationship to the dominant ideologies embedded in the text. He demonstrates how multiple interpretations of a television program are necessary for that program to gain popularity in our society. Because we do not live in a monoculture, television

programs must be open to differing readings so that multiple cultural and subcultural groups will engage with the text in either a preferred or resistive reading. Unlike an oppositional reading, a resistive reading occurs when an audience member interprets the intended meaning of a text counter to the dominant reading.

In “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism” (1998), rhetorical scholar Leah Ceccarelli identifies that a resistive reading from an audience is not the only type of polysemy. She uses the term strategic ambiguity to refer to texts that the author intentionally crafted to be open to multiple interpretations. Strategic ambiguity allows for differing groups, who may be in ideological opposition to each other, to unite in acclaim of the text. Ceccarelli gives the example of a Madonna music video. Readers of *Playboy* can view the pop star’s display of sexuality as a provocative performance intended for their pleasure, which reinforces their patriarchal ideologies. On the other hand, young women can read the text as a feminist statement of empowerment meant to challenge the patriarchy. By intentionally incorporating these two interpretations, Madonna benefits both economically and in her ascension to pop stardom.

Because of its polarizing nature and its popularity among differing audiences, Todd Phillips’s *Joker* is an excellent example of polysemy. Polysemy is a valuable tool for understanding the public media and scholarly response to such a captivating movie.

### ***Media Spectacle***

Media plays an active role in our lives and how we view society. The media had a field day with *Joker*, which helped to shape the way people responded to the film. In Guy Debord’s seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), he theorizes that in modern capitalist society,

the world we live in is mediated by the images that surround us. These images often come from mass media and function to shape and construct how people view society and their place in it. Debord writes that the images that constantly surround us often reduce complex societal issues into simple right or wrong narratives that give people a false sense of their place in the world. He theorizes that the spectacle can function to pacify and distract the masses from the injustices and inequalities of the world (Debord, 1967). Similarly, in their book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of the World* (1992), Daniel Dylan and Elihu Katz have identified what they call “media events” that can also function to pacify and distract the masses by celebrating society and the status quo. Media events are usually preplanned live ceremonial events meant to reinforce hegemonic norms. Scholar Douglass Kellner synthesizes the theory of media events and the spectacle to identify what he calls the media spectacle. For Kellner, media spectacles are unique media phenomena, such as the O.J. Simpson Trial, the Clinton sex scandal, or terrorist attacks such as 9/11, that can be used to push forward hegemonic narratives in the media (Kellner, 2003).

One could argue that the publicity surrounding *Joker* was a media spectacle. In “Ace in the Hole: Media Panics, Muted Voices, and Anxieties of Consumption in the Reception of *Joker*” (2021), Ernest Mathijs writes that *Joker* caused a media moral panic about the violence that could be inspired by men emulating the violence portrayed in the film. Mathijs notes that the narrative of the media taking the moral high ground to warn the public of the dangers of *Joker* functioned to stifle potential conversations surrounding political ideology, mental health, and alienation. Similarly, in “*Joker*: Toxic Masculinity, the Instigation of (Political) Violence and the Protection of Minors in Greece” (2021), scholars Liza Tsaliki and Despina Chronaki detail how

the media panic surrounding the film in Greece caused the film to become over-politicized in the country. They also note that this prevented conversations surrounding mental health and masculinity from entering the public discourse surrounding the film (Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2021). Because scholars like Mathijs and Tsaliki feel the media played a role in sensationalizing *Joker*, it is possible that the media, rather than the filmmakers, are responsible for the reception the film received. This makes it especially important to look at the statements the film is actually trying to make.

### **Scholarly Reception**

#### ***Clowns and Their Role in Society***

At its core, *Joker* is a film about a clown. Since the inception of the royal court, jester clowns have been able to make critical social commentary through the medium of satire, using humor and laughter to mask the harsh realities of their critiques. Scholars Aylin Kuryel (2022), Abdelbaqi Ghorab and Ouissal Harize (2021), Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen (2022), and Mohammadreza Hassanzadeh Javanian and Farzan Rahmani (2021) all note that the film *Joker* has elements of the literary category that Mikhail Bakhtin dubbed as carnivalesque. Carnivals have long been an integral part of society; originating in the Middle Ages, these cultural rituals function as a night in which social norms are thrown out the window in favor of debauchery and indulgence. Bakhtin writes that these rituals serve a greater function in society beyond being a great party; they subvert the dominant ideology of a culture and are an act of resistance to the tyranny imposed on people in their day-to-day lives. By embracing and indulging in what would typically be considered taboo in society, carnival allows people to make statements on society that would normally be punished or at least shamed (Bakhtin, 1968).

Diken and Laustsen (2022), and Javanian and Rahmani (2021), note that the Joker's painful and uncontrollable laughing fits are a physical embodiment of Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism. If *Joker* is to be taken as a carnivalesque text, then what is the text saying about society that would normally go unsaid?

### ***Neoliberalism***

While the scholars discussed in later sections of this paper may focus on different elements and offer alternative readings on the details of the film, they ultimately agree that *Joker* is a critique of neoliberal policy and its effects on the public. French Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu explains neoliberalism as the erroneous theory that the privatized market will solve the world's problems through financial deregulation (Bourdieu, 1998). By limiting government interaction in the economic sector and cutting governmental social services, the theory of neoliberalism claims the private sector will solve society's problems through trickle-down economics. *Joker* presents the harsh realities of a society run by neoliberal policy, such as privatized and inaccessible healthcare and right-to-work anti-union laws.

In "'Put on a Happy Face': the Neoliberal Horrors of *Joker/s*" (2022), Sorcha Ní Fhlainn notes that setting the movie in 1981 has major significance because it was the birth year of Reagan's economic policies and his quest to dismantle the welfare state. Similarly, Caroline Bainbridge notes that by setting the film during the year Reagan was elected, the filmmakers also pointed to the Trump administration; noting that 2016 was the year that authoritarian populist politics were exposed in the neoliberal agenda, Bainbridge saw allusions in the film to both Trump's presidency and Brexit (Bainbridge, 2021). It is not the fact that the film critiques neoliberalism that is in dispute, but how the scholars feel the movie handled its critique of

neoliberalism where they differ; some see the movie as coming from the left in mirroring the occupy movement (Phillips, 2021) while other can see the movie as mirroring the conservative ideology of incel-inspired vigilantism (Doidge & Rosenfeldt, 2022).

### ***Leftism and Occupy's Influence***

Some scholars have argued that in addition to critiquing neoliberalism, the film worked to defend capitalism by portraying alternatives as even worse, while others see the film as championing leftist politics.

In “‘You Get What You Fucking Deserve’: Joker and the Fantasies of Refusal” (2021), scholar Kendall Phillips sees the film as emblematic of leftist political protest after the failure of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Drawing from Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, Phillips asserts that the unattainable fantasy of upward mobility within a neoliberal economic system is what wears Arthur Fleck down as he slowly transforms into the Joker. Phillips draws parallels between the circumstances that inspire the Joker’s rage and leftist politics after the failure of the Occupy movement to come up with an alternative to the capitalist system that dominates us all (Phillips, 2021). In “The Concept of Social (In)justice and Its Portrayals in Todd Phillips’s *Joker*” (2020), Sami Çötel agrees that neoliberal policy propels Fleck’s transition into the Joker, especially the privatization of health care. Because the film is a product of the Hollywood machine, allowing revolution to be a viable alternative would be too destabilizing to US hegemony. So Çötel asserts that what Hollywood has to offer is a psychotic clown killer, whose reign would be worse than the socio-economic disparity we already live in (Çötel, 2020). Instead of giving lower- and working-class people representations of a true proletariat-style revolution and a true working-class hero, Hollywood presents the leftist uprising as a tyrannical

movement. In a similar vein, Kuryel (2022) sees the *Joker* as appropriating protest movements to fit its narrative, instead of being a true reflection of protest movements.

However, scholars are not in agreement as to whether *Joker* affirms or critiques hegemony. In “A City Without a Hero: Joker and Rethinking Hegemony” (2021), Jeffery Brown reads the film as a counterhegemonic text whose true villain is the city itself. Brown asserts that without the character of Batman to protect the status quo, Joker becomes the (anti)hero for the oppressed and disenfranchised people of Gotham City.

### ***Incel Movement/ Conversations in Masculinity***

Director Todd Phillips has said *Joker* was inspired by the Trump administration *and* wokeness. He specifically cited wokeness because he said he feels he can no longer get away with making comedies for fear of offending people (Hagan, 2019). In “A Tale of Two Masculinities: Joaquin Phoenix, Todd Phillips, and Joker’s Double Can(n)on” (2021), Misha Kavka notes that Phillips’s previous films, including *The Hangover* trilogy and *Old School*, all center around predominantly White males bonding over debaucherous acts and casual misogyny. She asserts that the conformist masculinity of Todd Phillips’s earlier films is reflected in *Joker* as the character tries and fails to be accepted by society. She notes that the film is centered on masculinity and resists a feminist reading in more than just its outright violence towards women (Kavka, 2021).

Doidge and Rosenfeldt (2021) noted that the film’s portrayal of race and gender isn’t nuanced enough to be considered a critique of toxic masculinity and, therefore, itself is an example of toxic masculinity. In “‘What Do You Get When You Cross a Mentally Ill Loner With a Society That Abandons Him?’- Madness and Power in *Joker*,” (2022) scholar Nicola Young

further this analysis by asserting that the film's portrayal of women of color is deeply problematic. The author explains that none of the people of color in the movie are given personal agency or have interior lives. Even Sophie, the one person of color in the movie to appear in more than one scene, is presented as one-dimensional and denied the agency of frustrations and madness that is seen in the film's White characters (Young, 2021).

In "It's All About the Punch(line): The Crossing of Masculinity's Border as Portrayed in Todd Phillips's *Joker*" (2022), Sam Scoma asserts that Arthur Fleck's transition into the Joker is a glorification of the character as he embraces toxic masculinity, noting how this portrayal of Joker can be a negative influence in young men. Similarly, in "Cracking Up: Joker and the Mediatization of the Arse-End of the World" (2021), scholar Caroline Bainbridge remarks that the film has become a dog whistle to the incel community who identify with the character of Joker. As described by Grace Sharkey (2022), incels, short for involuntary celibates, are a group of predominantly White males who feel their incapability to mate is due to both the rise of feminism and alpha male culture. As I will discuss in my analysis, Joaquin Phoenix's Joker can be read as both a left-leaning victim of neoliberalism and a right-leaning member of the incel community.

### **Justification of Research**

A recent study found that of a sampling of 28 different articles written for *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, 51% of them referenced the character of Joker as a hero, and 49% of them referenced him as a villain (Grapă, 2020), confirming that he is a complicated and controversial figure. The *Joker* seems to have a polarizing effect on just about everyone who sees the movie. From news outlets to YouTube videos and subreddits dedicated to the film,

people from all different walks of life have their own interpretations of the movie. This paper will supply analyses of four key narrative fragments in the film that not only explain the differing interpretations but also provide reasoning for how these multiple interpretations are both valid and intentionally crafted by the filmmakers. First, however, I will provide a summary of the movie's plot and justification for the scenes I selected for my analysis.

The film follows Arthur Fleck, a hapless clown-for-hire, struggling to support himself and his aging mother, Penny Fleck. Arthur also struggles with mental health issues, including being sent into uncontrollable, painful laughing fits when he is in uncomfortable situations. The two Flecks live together in a run-down apartment and fantasize about escaping their lives in poverty. Arthur dreams of becoming a successful stand-up comedian and appearing on the Murray Show, a late-night talk show he watches every night with his mother. Penny fruitlessly writes letters to her former employer, business tycoon Thomas Wayne, in the hope that he will take pity on them and offer his charity.

After Arthur is mugged by a group of teenagers, his coworker lends him a gun to protect himself. One night, on his way home after getting fired from work, Arthur is accosted by three Wall Street brokers. As the situation escalates, Arthur uses the gun to murder the three men. News of the murders sparks a wave of protests from disenfranchised Gotham City citizens who are inspired by a vigilante clown who is seemingly targeting the city's power elites. At the same time, funding for public health care systems is being cut in Gotham City, leaving Arthur without access to his therapist or medication for his mental conditions. As Arthur's mental health begins to deteriorate, so does the line between reality and fantasy in the film.

When Arthur discovers that his mother believes Thomas Wayne to be his father, he confronts him in a public theater restroom. Wayne tells Arthur that not only is he not Arthur's father but that his mother was delusional and severely abused him when he was a child. Shocked and enraged by this revelation, Arthur murders his mother and descends further into mental instability. Meanwhile, a clip of Arthur bombing at his first stand-up comedy performance is aired on the Murray Show and receives a large enough response from the audience that he is invited as a guest on the show, seemingly to laugh at him, not with him. Arthur, who has fully embodied the persona of the Joker, uses this opportunity to rail against society and murder Murray live on television. This prompts the protests occurring in the city to turn into dangerous riots. As Arthur is being carted away to jail, the police car he is in gets hit by an ambulance, killing the two police officers in the front of the vehicle. As the city erupts in chaos, Arthur is hoisted on top of the car and cheered on by the angry mob.

The primary reason I have selected the scenes I have for my analysis is that each of these fragments of the larger narrative has clear and identifiable elements of strategic ambiguity that let the audience members come to their own conclusions about what they just watched on the screen. Because of the film's open-ended plot and unreliable narrator, many of the movie's scenes exhibit strategic ambiguity. In selecting scenes for my analyses, I looked for moments in which the differing interpretations of the story stem from the audience members' socio-political background and ideological perspective.

The first scene presented in my analysis is the scene, which I have dubbed Sophie's scene, where Arthur enters his neighbor's apartment, and it is left open to interpretation as to whether he kills his neighbor or not. This scene was selected because it is a pivotal moment

where the audience member must decide if the Joker is a misguided vigilante hero or a psychotic and ruthless villain. This scene is also a key moment where audience members can have conflicting feelings about their perception of the character of Arthur. For instance, some members of the alt-right community can take pleasure in watching Arthur Fleck slowly transform into the Joker persona, while other audience members can pity or condemn his transformation into the prince of clowns.

The second filmic fragment for analysis includes the scenes pertaining to the childhood sources of Arthur Fleck's psychological trauma. These passages in the film were selected because the audience members' ideological perspectives can be the driving factor when coming to their own conclusions and interpretations of the film. In one interpretation, Arthur's mother has lied to him and abused him as a child; in another reading, Arthur is the son of business mogul Thomas Wayne, who has denied his existence and any financial responsibility for him. Throughout the film, there is ample evidence supporting both readings, which my analysis will discuss as I provide insight into the ideological perspectives guiding an audience member's decision on which interpretation to believe.

The third fragment for analysis is the two scenes that prominently feature Arthur's coworker, Gary, who has dwarfism. These scenes were chosen for analysis because not only does the film leave open to interpretation how Arthur feels towards his coworker but also because the director uses secondary characters and the *mise-en-scène* to either make jokes at Gary's expense or to highlight the struggles he faces as a person with a disability living in the harsh conditions of Gotham City.

The last and final fragment for analysis in this paper will be the third scene in the movie, which depicts Arthur interacting with a young Black boy and his mother on a bus. This scene was selected to highlight the way the film handles its secondary characters, particularly the ones that are both Black and women. The lack of depth and agency given to the film's Black women (Young, 2021) allows for some audience members to interpret racist tropes often found within the media. My analysis will show how the film's poor portrayal of these secondary characters lends to the film's strategic ambiguity allowing for both problematic interpretations as well as interpretations that highlight the harsh living conditions under neoliberal policy.

### **Joker Analysis**

#### **Sophie's Scene**

One of the most divisive scenes in *Joker* comes towards the end of the film's second act when Arthur breaks into his neighbor Sophie's apartment. In an interview with Indiewire, Director Todd Philips claims that the scene is a "litmus test for the audience to say, 'how crazy is he?'" (Garcia & Thompson, 2019).

It is revealed early in the film that Arthur is an unreliable narrator when he fantasizes that he is on the set of a television talk show. He begins interacting with the host of the show, although the audience is aware he is at home in his living room. Despite this, throughout the first half of the movie, the audience is led to believe that Arthur has begun to court his neighbor after she catches him following her to work. "I wish you would come in and rob the place," she jokes when confronting him for stalking her. As the film progresses, whenever Arthur is placed in an extremely stressful situation, she is there to provide him comfort and support. After Arthur murders three Wall Street bullies on the subway, he runs to her apartment and is

embraced with a kiss. When he starts to bomb at his first stand-up comedy performance, her encouragement from the audience helps him win the crowd over. And when his mom is in the hospital with a stroke, she is right there by his side to bring him coffee.

After Arthur discovers his mother has lied to him and abused him as a child, he again returns to Sophie's apartment for comfort and support. However, this time, he is not welcomed with a loving embrace. Instead, he wanders through her apartment, running his hands along her child's paintings and toys. When a frightened and confused Sophie finds Arthur sitting on her sofa, it is revealed that their romantic relationship was merely Arthur's fantasy. Through a series of flashbacks, it is shown that every time Sophie has given Arthur emotional and physical support, he has been alone, imagining each scene. After Sophie asks Arthur to leave, he turns towards her and points his fingers to his temple in the shape of a gun. The film then jump-cuts to Arthur abruptly exiting her apartment. The audience is left to come to their own conclusions as to whether he has murdered her.

This scene becomes a pivotal moment where the audience must decide for themselves whether Arthur Fleck is a vigilante-style antihero or a psychopathic villain. By leaving this scene open to interpretation, the filmmakers allow for the rest of the film to be viewed in different ways. The audience can be left hoping there's still some good in Arthur, or they can abandon all hope in redemption and watch Arthur succumb to the Joker persona. Depending on the audience's ideological perspective, at least three different interpretations can be drawn from the scene.

From a feminist perspective, Arthur murders his neighbor and should be viewed as a villain who has gone too far to receive any sympathy for his actions. In this viewing, the scene

becomes the moment in which the audience member can no longer hope that there is any sort of light at the end of the tunnel for Arthur. This reading also allows for criticism to be made about how director Todd Phillips handles such a serious subject matter within a superhero movie.

From an extreme Alt-right and incel perspective, Arthur murders his girlfriend and can be cheered and rooted for in committing the act. In this reading of the film, Arthur mirrors and acts upon the anti-feminist rhetoric that can be found in the darker corners of Reddit and 4chan. This rhetoric blames feminism for giving women personal agency that allows them to be less reliant on their male counterparts. It also asserts that this personal agency gives women more freedom in choosing their male partners and condemns them for choosing Alpha-male types. Like Arthur, the incel community views themselves as victims of both societal change and physical inferiority. In this reading, their darker fantasies of violence towards women can be seen as actualized.

From a third perspective, Arthur spares his neighbor and can still be viewed as a vigilante who only kills those who have harmed him in real life. This interpretation allows for both a sympathetic and an empathetic reading. From a sympathetic reading, the audience can pity Arthur when they discover his one source of happiness was a psychotic projection and a fantasy. In this reading, Arthur might not be a laudable antihero, but he at least isn't causing such unnecessary violence towards women. On the other hand, from an empathetic perspective of those who identify with Joker's character but whose views are not as extreme as incels, Arthur can be seen as the film's admirable antihero, who only kills those in society who deserve to be killed. In this reading, Arthur is far from perfect, but he isn't the film's true villain.

With this scene, Todd Phillips is not only using strategic ambiguity to appeal to a wider audience, but he is also encouraging public discourse surrounding the film. By intentionally omitting what happens to Sophie before Arthur leaves her apartment, Phillips is inviting the audience to engage with the film both actively and critically.

### **Origins**

Regarding polysemy, strategic ambiguity occurs when a text is intentionally crafted so that two or more conflicting groups of people can read the text in differing ways, resulting in different groups converging in praise of the text (Ceccarelli, 1998). As discussed in the previous scene analysis, one of the ways Todd Phillips achieves strategic ambiguity in *Joker* is to intentionally leave it open to the audience members' interpretations as to whether Joker is an amoral and ruthless killer or a misguided vigilante. This narrative fragment analysis will discuss how Phillips employs strategic ambiguity to leave it open to interpretation as to whether Arthur Fleck's psychological trauma stems from the fact that he was adopted into an abusive home or the fact that he is the illegitimate child of millionaire businessman-turned-politician Thomas Wayne.

From a socio-political standpoint, *Joker* is a critique of the neoliberal policies set forth by the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. For instance, just like real-life New York City in 1981 (Stetson, 1981), in the film, Gotham City is experiencing a garbage worker strike that leads to literal super rats terrorizing Gotham's citizens. Small businesses are closing while big businesses, like Wayne Enterprises, are on the rise. And Arthur Fleck's own transformation into the villainous Joker is accelerated when the funding for his public health care system is cut, leading him to lose access to both his medications and his therapist. While the film critiques

neoliberal policies, it doesn't offer any solidified political answers to the problems neoliberalism creates. In fact, the populist uprising that occurs in response to the socio-political atmosphere, which is in part inspired by Joker's murdering of three Wall Street bros, could also be seen as a critique of leftist politics, particularly in their thirst for unnecessary destruction of property and the fact that the mascot for their movement is a murderous psychopath (Mouleux, 2019).

The film also offers two diverging interpretations of the source of Arthur Fleck's psychological trauma and childhood abuse, which each have their own differing socio-political stances. From an alt-right perspective, Arthur Fleck's psychological trauma stems from being adopted by a narcissistic bipolar woman who allowed her adopted son to be abused by her boyfriend and then later uses her son to try to leech off the success of her former employer, Thomas Wayne. On the other hand, from a left-leaning perspective that views the social construction of a patriarchal society as benefiting toxic masculine behaviors, Arthur is the illegitimate child of Thomas Wayne, a man who has gaslit his mother to the brink of insanity by denying their relationship and forging his adoption papers. In doing this, Wayne also denies them any financial support, allowing them to live in poverty and unable to afford the health care Arthur so desperately needs.

In the film, Arthur lives with his fragile and aging mother, Penny Fleck, in a run-down apartment complex in an impoverished neighborhood similar to the Bronx. Arthur supports the two of them on a meager wage, working as a clown for hire until he is fired after being caught bringing a gun to a hospital where he was hired to cheer up terminally ill children. Hoping to receive charity from her former employer, millionaire Thomas Wayne, Penny begins writing him letters. "You worked for him 30 years ago. Why would he help us," Arthur asks his mother as he

helps her in the bathtub. "Because Thomas Wayne is a good man. If he knew how we were living, it would make him sick," she responds. When her letters go unanswered, her fixation only intensifies.

Finally, a curious Arthur opens one of the many letters his mother has written to Thomas Wayne and discovers that she believes Wayne to be his biological father. Upon this discovery, Arthur decides to take matters into his own hands. First, he shows up to Wayne Manor unannounced, only to be turned away by the family's butler, Alfred. He finally confronts Thomas Wayne in the bathroom of a movie theater that he snuck into by posing as an usher. After Arthur tells Wayne he is his son, Wayne refutes this claim, saying, "I never slept with your mother." He continues to tell Arthur that he was adopted, adding, "Then she was arrested and committed to Arkham State Hospital when you were a boy." This news sends Arthur into one of his painful laughing fits, which prompts Wayne to punch Arthur in the face before making an exit.

Determined to find out the truth, Arthur visits Arkham Hospital and steals his mother's confidential medical file. The file not only corroborates Wayne's claims but it also details the abuse Arthur and his mother endured at the hands of his mother's boyfriend at the time. As Arthur reads the file, which is accompanied by newspaper clippings of articles reporting on said abuse, the scene fades into a flashback of his mother being interviewed by a psychiatrist in Arkham Hospital. "We went over this, Penny. You adopted him. We have all the paperwork right here," her psychiatrist explains. "That's not true; Thomas had that all made up. So, it stayed our secret," she replies with an apparent black eye. While it may be left up to interpretation as to whether Arthur was adopted or not, it is not left up to interpretation that

Arthur and Penny were victims of abuse. Evidence of this is clear by the physical marks of abuse on Penny Fleck, as well as pictures and newspaper articles detailing the abuse in Penny Fleck's medical file.

After reading the hospital files, Arthur decides to take revenge on his mother by killing her while she is in a coma at Gotham Hospital. Cinematically, this action symbolizes the completion of his transition from Arthur Fleck into the villainous Joker. A few scenes later, Arthur is applying his dead mother's makeup to paint his face as a clown before his appearance on the Murray show. While rummaging through her belongings, he finds an old photograph of her as a young woman; on the back of the photo is the inscription, "Love your smile-TW." This is presumably Thomas Wayne's initials, and while it doesn't completely prove that Thomas Wayne is Arthur's father, it does seem to prove that their relationship was more than just employer and employee.

From the perspective of the alt-right, Penny Fleck is not only delusional but also abusive to her own son. In this viewing, she irresponsibly adopted a child as a single mother, allowed him to be abused by her boyfriend, and then tried to convince her successful former employer to send her unwarranted and unearned money. To the alt-right, Penny Fleck is reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's famous and stigmatizing campaign story of the "Welfare Queen," about a woman who will do anything to leech off government aid programs, including creating over 80 aliases (Brokell, 2019). Ironically, this trope helped usher in the neoliberal policies and suspension of welfare programs that the film critiques. However, on popular user sites like Reddit, this theory is supported by many users. Some go as far as to claim that, like Reagan's welfare queen, Penny Fleck forged the inscription on the back of her own photo:

The note that says “I love your smile -TW” is in the same handwriting as the notes she wrote to Thomas Wayne. Also, that doesn’t mean it’s a love letter, it could just be a compliment. Also, Thomas and Alfred probably remember Penny because she wrote a bunch of letters to them claiming that he’s their son, which would be creepy as fuck if they were never together. -Msboundybooty

Supporting this theory, Reddit poster Felixthecat128 (whose account has been suspended) replied, “Yeah, they remember her cause she was a crazy stalker bitch.”

From a left-leaning and more liberal perspective, however, Thomas Wayne is Joker’s biological father who lied about his son’s existence to maintain his public persona. In this reading, Wayne fabricated Arthur Fleck’s adoption papers and then gaslit Penny Fleck to the point of a mental break. This mental break ultimately led to her being coerced into a relationship with a man who was abusive to both her and her son. And when the Flecks fall on hard times financially, Wayne, who is portrayed as an elite member of the 1%, doesn’t offer so much as a penny to the downtrodden mother of his illegitimate child.

From this perspective, the film can be seen as not only critiquing neo-liberal policies but also patriarchal society and the cult of celebrity in modern life. Throughout the film, Arthur looks up to television talk show host Murray Franklin, whom he fantasizes as being a sort of paternal figure in his fatherless life. When a clip of Arthur performing stand-up comedy in a local Gotham night club ends up in the hands of Murray, he uses the clip to belittle and make fun of Arthur on national television. If Arthur’s father is the famous businessman Thomas Wayne, when he meets him in real life, it is outrageous that he is lied to, ridiculed, and physically attacked. This reading also falls in line with the perspective that the Joker is a mentally ill killer rather than a vigilante, as it is revealed that his anger towards his mother is unjustified and a result of psychopathic delusion.

### Gary's Scenes

One of the ways director Todd Phillips achieves polysemic interpretations of the film is how he portrays Arthur Fleck's interactions with his coworker Gary, who has dwarfism. During the two scenes they have together, audiences could read Arthur's interactions with Gary as either sympathetic and/or an example of *schadenfreude*. Todd Phillips, whose previous films include raunch comedies such as *The Hangover* trilogy and *Old School*, uses Gary's disability as the butt of a series of jokes throughout the movie. Arthur Fleck's response to these jokes lends to the film's strategic ambiguity. As I will detail below, from one perspective, Arthur's actions towards Gary can be viewed as sympathetic and show that Arthur takes pity on Gary. From an alt-right interpretation, however, Arthur's actions toward his coworker show his own dominance over a weak and ridiculous other. In this reading, Arthur can spare Gary's life out of a sense of generosity while still making fun of him for his disability.

In the film, before Arthur transforms into the murderous clown prince, he is an occupational clown for hire. The film first introduces Gary in the changing room as Arthur is getting out of his clown outfit after a day's work. Gary informs Arthur that the boss would like to see him in his office. Before Arthur can respond, their coworker Randall interjects with a joke at Gary's expense. "Hey Gary, do you know what I've always wondered? Do you people call it miniature golf...or is it just golf to you?" Upon hearing this joke, Arthur bursts into maniacal laughter. As witnessed in the previous scene, when Arthur is in an uncomfortable situation, he is triggered into uncontrollable laughing fits. At first, it appears that Randall's unsavory joke about Gary's disability has triggered Arthur, but as Arthur gets up to leave the room, he instantly stops laughing.

This subtle but crucial moment in the film is the first time that we are shown Arthur controlling his laughter without being launched into one of his painful, wheezing fits that he cannot stop. From one perspective, Arthur could be using his laughter to avoid becoming the subject of future jokes by his coworkers. Here, he can be seen as playing along with the bully before he escapes around the corner and can stop acting. This reading views him as cowardly but hardly evil. From an alt-right perspective, Arthur can be seen as genuinely laughing along with the joke and code-switching into a serious demeanor as he prepares to meet with his boss. In this reading, Arthur wasn't uncomfortably laughing; he genuinely enjoyed the joke at the expense of his disabled coworker.

Gary is reintroduced in the third act of the film, shortly after Arthur murders his mother, and has made the complete transition into the Joker. In preparation for his appearance on the Murray Show, Arthur is alone in his apartment applying white face paint when he hears a knock at the door. Startled, he grabs a pair of scissors and slips them into the back pocket of his pants as he gets up to see who has arrived. Greeting him with a bottle of whiskey are his former coworkers Randall, whose actions led in part to Arthur being fired from his job, and Gary. Arthur lets them into his apartment and subtly locks the door behind him. Randall and Gary announce that they have come over to offer their condolences for the passing of Arthur's mother. It is soon revealed, however, that Randall has ulterior motives for their visit. "The cops have been coming around the shop, talking to all the guys about those subway murders." Randall, who loaned Arthur the gun he used in the subway murders, wants to make sure their stories are straight.

Arthur, who has now killed at least four people, wastes no time corroborating their stories and instead seizes the opportunity to kill again. He plunges the scissors into Randall's neck before brutally and gratuitously banging his head against the wall. Gary cowers in the corner as Arthur slumps to the floor, recovering his breath. Staring off into the distance, meditating on what he has done, Arthur seems to have forgotten Gary's presence until it dawns on him that his big performance on the Murray Show is later tonight. After informing Gary of his performance, "It's Fookin' crazy, innit? Me on the telly," he jokes in a mock cockney accent. Arthur is making light of the horrific experience he has just subjected Gary to.

After a moment of silence between them, Arthur tells Gary he may leave. As Gary hurries towards the door, Arthur jumps at him, yelling, "BWAAHHHH!" Aside from being covered in his deceased friend's blood, Arthur's action is more playful than menacing. He isn't threatening Gary; instead, his jump scare is more reminiscent of an adult pretending to be the boogeyman playing with a young child. Arthur, just as his coworkers had done before, is making a joke out of Gary's height, comparing him to a child. To emphasize this moment, director Todd Phillips uses the *mise-en-scène* to add to the strategic ambiguity of the scene; Gary is too short to unlock the door and let himself out of the apartment. In one interpretation, this could be interpreted as Phillips adding an element of classic horror shock as the audience realizes Gary is trapped. On the other hand, given that Phillips's previous films have all been raunchy physical comedies, it could be interpreted as another joke at the expense of Gary's short stature. In this reading, Phillips is also laughing along with the joke, saying, "Look he's stuck!" As Arthur gets up to let Gary out, he remarks, "Gary, you were the only one who was ever nice to me, skedaddle."

The gratuitous murder of Randall is so salient and powerful that it can distract the viewer from the moments that follow, making it easy to chalk up Arthur's jump scare towards Gary as an act of insanity and allowing for polysemic interpretations. From the perspective of one interpretative community, Arthur has killed Randall out of vengeance but has spared Gary out of sympathy. Just like Arthur's own disabilities, Gary's disability has been made the punchline to an endless number of cruel jokes. Arthur recognizes this in Gary and lets him go. However, those situated in the perspective of the alt-right can take a far less sympathetic interpretation of the scene. They can laugh along with Joker as he makes a joke at Gary's expense, just as Todd Phillips does by making the lock on the door too high for Gary to reach. In this interpretation, Arthur has spared Gary out of a sense of loyalty because Gary has "always been nice" to him, but he can also make fun of him for his disability.

### **Mother on the Bus**

In the movie's third scene, and the last scene I will analyze, we see a dejected Arthur Fleck resting his head against the window of a subway train car. In the opening two scenes, he has already been robbed, beaten, and told by his social worker that she cannot raise the amount of medication he takes for his mental health issues. Slowly, something catches his eye. He turns his head forward to see a young Black boy peering over from the seat just in front of him. Seated next to his mother, the boy is pouting his lips into a frown. Arthur's eyes glimmer with hope as he engages the child with a game of peek-a-boo. But just as Arthur manages to get the young boy to crack a smile, the boy's mother chastises the strange man who is interacting with her child. Arthur is plunged into an uncomfortable situation again, triggering one of his painful laughing fits.

Up to this point, the audience has watched Arthur struggle and suffer as he navigates his way through a Gotham City, which mirrors early 1980s New York City. As I will show, this interaction could be seen as just another misfortune, another instance in which society isn't "kind or fair" to someone who has a mental disability, but it could also be read as making a statement on the loss of traditional family values in America. This third scene is a microcosm of the ideological battle that is occurring throughout the film between a leftist reading and an alt-right reading.

On the one hand, from a leftist reading, this scene showcases how the society surrounding Arthur isn't equipped to handle situations involving mental illness. This reading views the mother as a single, tired, and vulnerable individual who is wary of her young child interacting with this strange White man on the train; not understanding Arthur's good-willed intentions, she is not equipped to handle the situation even as Arthur presents her with a card explaining that he has a condition which sends him into uncontrollable laughing fits. From her perspective, she is protecting her child from a potentially traumatizing situation.

In this reading, the audience can pity Arthur for being misunderstood and pushed away from the society that he so desperately seeks to be a part of and bring joy to. They can see the mechanisms of neoliberalism at work, as public transit becomes an overcrowded and dangerous environment for its passengers. They are shown how those with disabilities struggle as they navigate society while simultaneously understanding the exhausting amount of endurance it takes to raise a child in such a landscape.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the right, we see a statement being made about how modern society is a degradation of our American family values. This reading recalls

the rhetoric of conservative talking heads à la Ben Shapiro or Tucker Carlson, the latter of which has claimed that “having kids without being married is the ultimate negligence” (Media Matters, 2014). This logic suggests that it isn’t neoliberal policy driving the disparity in our society but the erosion of the nuclear family, in which a proper father figure serves as the breadwinner, role model, and protector. To conservative thinkers, economic and social stability is achieved through an antiquated model of a patriarchal family unit. This reading ultimately falls in line with the plot of the film as we will later learn that Arthur’s own mental illness possibly stems from the neglect and abuse he endured as a child from his own single mother.

Instead of a woman protecting her child from a potentially traumatizing situation, the scene could be seen as blaming single mothers for raising their boys into becoming inferior young men. In this reading, the role of protective mother shifts into the stereotypical and racist trope of an angry Black woman. In the scene, when the mother notices her son interacting with Arthur, who is making innocent funny faces, she immediately shuts down the interaction by asking Arthur to stop bothering her child. Before Arthur can begin to explain that he was merely entertaining the young boy with a game of Beek-a-boo, “Just stop!” she barks, cutting him off and shutting down the conversation. This outburst of “unnecessary” anger sends Arthur into one of his fits. When Arthur hands her a laminated card explaining his condition, the camera pans to a close-up of the last line, which reads in all caps: KINDLY RETURN THIS CARD, a request which she ignores as she turns away from Arthur. The final frame of the scene is of her literally rolling her eyes back and forth.

Both the left-leaning and alt-right readings of this scene are justified by the lack of depth the film gives to its secondary characters. If there was a follow-up scene that portrayed how the

mother interacted with her child following the incident on the train, the intended interpretation of the incident would be made clear to the audience. One could criticize Todd Phillips's portrayal of these secondary characters as lacking nuance and sophistication. However, it could be argued that the lack of depth Phillips gives to his secondary characters lends itself to the strategic ambiguity of the movie. By denying meaningful agency to its secondary characters, the film allows the audience members to come to their own conclusions and interpretations of the film based on their own predispositions.

### **Conclusion**

The controversy surrounding the *Joker* is crucial because the only profits to be made from the film come from movie theater ticket sales and streaming revenue. With traditional superhero movies, the subject matter is more accessible to younger audiences, and there is typically a clear representation of good vs. evil. This allows typical superhero films to make a substantial amount of profit from merchandise such as action figures, apparel, and cross-promotional products like fast food collaborations. Because of the film's mature content and graphic violence, *Joker* was unable to capitalize on the opportunity to make profits from these types of secondary markets. Who would buy their child a happy meal with Joaquin Phoenix's deranged smile printed on the wrapper of the cheeseburger? To turn a profit, the film needed a lot of publicity and incentives for audiences to view the movie multiple times.

To ensure the film would earn money in the box office, Todd Phillips chose to center his film around the character of the Joker because the character had become a controversial figure to the media. Even though the characters and landmarks are the same as in the Batman comics, there are few similarities with the lore of the Batman comics themselves. In fact, the

cinematography, plot, and ambiance of *Joker* draws more inspiration from the Martin Scorsese films *The King of Comedy* (1982) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) than anything related to DC comics. The film itself could have chosen any comic book villain and essentially functioned the same as it does with the Joker. On discussing the film with star Joaquin Phoenix, Phillips, in an interview with *The Wrap* (Sanchez, 2019), recalled telling him, “Let’s make a real film with a real budget, and we will call it fucking Joker.” By choosing to center their film on the Joker, the filmmakers knew they would stir up media controversy; this was especially the case given the narrative that the role of Joker in Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Night* was so psychologically taxing it led to Heath Ledger’s tragic death. In an appearance on *The Jimmy Kimmel Show* (2019), Joaquin Phoenix appeared shocked and disturbed when Kimmel played a clip he claimed was sent to him from Todd Phillips, which portrays a stressed and sporadic Phoenix berating the cinematographer on set. However, in an interview with *IndieWire* (Thompson, 2019), Phillips explains that the clip was not only a hoax but that airing it on *The Jimmy Kimmel Show* was Joaquin Phoenix’s idea. In airing the fabricated clip, the filmmakers understood that the controversy surrounding the infamous role of Joker in the media would spark intrigue amongst the public.

It is no surprise then that Todd Phillips deliberately crafted the film to be strategically ambiguous to appeal to a wider audience and to encourage public discourse surrounding the film. Because of the film’s open-ended plot, audience members from different ideological perspectives and political standpoints were allowed to enjoy the film for different reasons. For example, some members of the Alt-right could revel in watching a character they identify with act out on their darkest fantasies, while left-leaning audience members could take pleasure in watching a superhero movie that critiques neoliberal policy and the effects it has on vulnerable

populations. The intended multiple interpretations of the film also invited audiences to engage with it actively and critically. This active engagement prompted discourse surrounding the film on a macro and micro level. On a macro level, media outlets can report on the controversy surrounding the film, portraying the film's subject matter as both dangerous and alluring. On a micro level, audience members can discuss their own interpretations of the film with their friends and families. This helps bolster the film's profitability in two ways: first, it incentivizes people to see the movie so they can participate in said conversations about the film; second, it encourages repeated viewings of the film after those conversations have occurred. They can reengage with the film and either solidify or change their opinions.

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