

NIETZSCHE AND THE BIRTH OF JOKER



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ABSTRACT

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche employs the dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian to explain artistic phenomena. The film *Joker* shows the origin story of the Joker, a comic-book supervillain. This paper offers a reading of *Joker* through Nietzsche's ideas from *The Birth of Tragedy*. By doing so, it aims to achieve three things: first, to demonstrate the relevance of Nietzsche's aesthetic theory in analyzing culture; second, to reveal the political dimension of Nietzsche's thought in *The Birth of Tragedy*; and third, to shed light on the ominous implications of *Joker's* popularity.

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I. APOLLONIAN AND DIONYSIAN

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche introduces the Apollonian and Dionysian. Nietzsche's purpose in formulating these two drives is to explain artistic phenomena. The Apollonian drive gives rise to "that which appears to us" (i.e., dreams and the visual arts).¹ The Apollonian drive is also associated with the pleasure one feels at such aesthetic phenomena: "our innermost being . . . experiences the state of dreaming with profound pleasure and joyous necessity."²

The Dionysian, on the other hand, can be understood as the drive that lures us to "the reality that lies beneath," an experience of which is likened to intoxication.³ The dissolution of the Apollonian world of semblance leads to a profound ecstatic response, in which the essence of the Dionysian drive in art can be found. The essence of the Dionysian lies in the profound experience of a "blissful ecstasy" that occurs when the Apollonian world breaks down.⁴ But there is an inherent terror associated with Dionysian: in the eruption of the Dionysian drive an "enormous horror . . . seizes people" because the destruction of the world of semblance leads to confusion and cognitive dissonance.⁵ Furthermore, in Dionysian experiences, pain and pleasure are not clearly distinguished; pain seems, in fact, to be an inherent part of Dionysian pleasure. In it are found excessive experiences of "pleasure, suffering and knowledge," "contradiction," and "bliss born of pain."⁶

Thus, Apollonian limitation is necessary to salvage the individual from the overpowering and ecstatic pain/pleasure of Dionysian intoxication. Apollonian allows one to cope with the knowledge of "the terrors and horrors of existence" (i.e., Dionysian), and the Dionysian is necessary because it drives the creation of Apollonian illusions: "[Apollo] shows us that the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate the releasing and redemptive vision."⁷

In short, the Apollonian and Dionysian are antagonistic but also interdependent. The Dionysian brings about the creation of Apollonian illusions, while the Apollonian contains the Dionysian in order to make it bearable. The constant tension between the two gives rise to artistic

1 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14–16.

2 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 16.

3 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17.

4 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17.

5 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 17.

6 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 27.

7 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 26.

phenomena, and, if they manage to reconcile for a moment, art of a high degree can be born—an example of which is the "sublime and exalted art of *Attic tragedy*."⁸

II. THE APOLLONIAN IN JOKER

The 2019 film *Joker* shows the transformation of Arthur—a troubled man suffering from financial and psychological issues—into the supervillain Joker. This transformation is portrayed in a thoroughly Nietzschean way. Arthur's tragic life leads to his transfiguration into the Joker, a Dionysian figure who finds artistic reverie in tragedy and pain.

Throughout the film, several illusions are shown that drive Arthur. The first is his dream of appearing on the late-night show of the comedian Murray. While watching Murray's show, Arthur fantasizes about being present at the show. Arthur's fantasy appears as a semblance of reality, or an Apollonian vision. In his fantasy, Murray and the audience vindicate Arthur's struggles. Murray assures Arthur that there is no shame in living with his mother and shows fatherly affection which seems to have been lacking from Arthur's life.⁹ Other illusions function similarly: Arthur's illusory romance with a single mother named Sophie who lives in his same apartment complex, his imaginary success in a stand-up comedy act, and his belief of being the illegitimate son of Thomas Wayne—a millionaire running for mayor.¹⁰

These illusions all serve to make Arthur's tragic reality bearable. The tragic conditions of Arthur's life give rise to fantasies in which the conditions are justified. His fantasies redeem his suffering, seducing him to go on living. In Nietzsche's words, "by means of an illusion spread over things, the greedy Will always finds some way of detaining its creatures in life and forcing them to carry on living."¹¹ Thus we are offered a glimpse at the Apollonian drive in Arthur: a will to create illusions that make the tragic conditions of life bearable.

All illusions eventually break down. Murray ridicules Arthur by playing a clip of his failed stand-up act on television.¹² Arthur's relationship with Sophie turns out to have been imaginary.¹³ Arthur's supposed relation to Thomas Wayne is revealed as a delusional fantasy

8 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 28.

9 *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019), DVD, 0:12:10 to 0:15:17.

10 *Joker*, 0:43:18 to 0:45:10.

11 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 28.

12 *Joker*, 0:59:37 to 1:00:45.

13 *Joker*, 1:17:23 to 1:18:42.



of his mother.¹⁴ No illusion proves to be sustainable considering Arthur's tragic reality. One might say that the Apollonian drive constantly tried to contain the Dionysian, but eventually lost the struggle. The dissolution of all illusions catalyzes Arthur's transfiguration into the Joker.

III. THE DIONYSIAN IN JOKER

The tragic conditions of Arthur's life strengthen the Dionysian drive in him, resulting in the birth of the Joker. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche points to the wisdom of Silenus as the essence of Dionysian: "The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be *nothing*. However, the second-best thing for you is to die soon."¹⁵ Arthur seems to have an intimation of this wisdom: he imitates suicide several times alone and eventually plans on committing it on Murray's show.¹⁶ He writes the following joke in his notebook: "I hope my death makes more cents than my life."¹⁷ The idea that death makes more sense than life is a reformulation of Silenus's wisdom. In the opening scene we see that the Dionysian is on the brink of eruption within Arthur. Arthur is doing his clown makeup, preparing for the day's work. He forces his mouth into a grin with his hands, but a teardrop falls from his eye. He trembles before letting go of his mouth, his face expressing misery afterward. It is as if the smile and frown were struggling against each other to take control over his face. Eventually, sorrow breaks through—the coerced semblance of happiness is now powerful enough to suppress the tragic reality.¹⁸ Thus we see that Arthur was always immersed in the tragic view of life.

Furthermore, music serves to accentuate Arthur's transformation into the Joker. Arthur is portrayed as a musical persona. Director Todd Phillips states that he conceived Arthur early on as "one of those people that has music in him."¹⁹ Music is intimately related to the Dionysian: "the imageless art of music . . . is that of Dionysus."²⁰ Whenever the Joker appears it is in conjunction with music, dancing, and rejoicing—a clear indication of his Dionysian nature.

¹⁴ *Joker*, 1:13:37 to 1:15:18.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 23.

¹⁶ *Joker*, 1:24:00 to 1:24:13.

¹⁷ *Joker*, 0:06:25.

¹⁸ *Joker*, 0:01:05 to 0:01:24.

¹⁹ The New York Times, "Watch Joaquin Phoenix Do a Creepy Dance in 'Joker' | Anatomy of a Scene," YouTube, October 7, 2019, 1:25 to 1:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTVdN6s3rXY>.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 14.

IV. THE JOKER AS TRAGIC "HERO"

As the illusions that sustained him break apart one by one, Arthur is faced with the tragic truth of his life. Not only is his wishful reality proven to be false, but his own maniacal laughing condition turns out to have been the result of abuse he received as a child, one of the causes of which was his mother's neglect. In other words, what Arthur believed as reality—the illusion of a happy life that he had tried to sustain—is now laid bare as a lie, and he gazes into the tragedy that is his true reality and laughs.

In the absence of illusions, Arthur is forced to fully embrace Dionysian wisdom; he kills his mother and plans suicide on Murray's show. This "wisdom" of the "true essence of things" is "an unnatural abomination: whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person."²¹ Having gazed into the tragic truth of his existence, Arthur finds that the solid ground for sustaining his identity as happy and hopeful melts into air; his individuated being is on the verge of breaking apart. Thus, the gaze into tragic truth brings out the Dionysian Joker in Arthur, leading him to dance ecstatically on the staircase. The act of matricide triggers Arthur's full-out descent into the Dionysian underworld of the Joker: "some enormous offence against nature . . . must first have occurred to supply the cause whenever prophetic and magical energies break the spell of . . . the rigid law of individuation."²² Right before committing the murder, Arthur articulates what is perhaps the central theme of the character of the Joker: "I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it's a fucking comedy."²³ Arthur's dream was to become a comedian. One might understand this quote as signaling Arthur's sublimation of tragedy into his art, comedy, after having gazed into the terrible truth.

It is at the very end of the film that we see Arthur's full-fledged transformation into the Joker during the "blood smile" scene.²⁴ A frenzied crowd takes an unconscious Arthur from a crashed vehicle and lays him on the hood of a car, on which Arthur rises as the Joker—a clear imagery of death and rebirth. What dies is the individuality of Arthur; what is born is the mythical figure of the Joker, a Dionysian deity who finds laughter in pain. The car hood is the stage on which the tragic "hero," the Joker, stands. He is surrounded by the tragic chorus, the frenzied protesters who have also lost their individuality in a bacchanal ecstasy

²¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 48.

²² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 47–48.

²³ *Joker*, 1:20:57 to 1:21:12.

²⁴ *Joker*, 1:48:26 to 1:52:20.



of violence, who identify themselves with the Joker by wearing clown masks. They are the “Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apollonian world of images.”²⁵ Here the singularity of Arthur is transfigured into the universality of the Joker. Like the lyric poet Archilochus, Arthur speaks of the ‘I’ and “sing[s] the entire chromatic scale of his passions and desires,” (i.e., his subjective suffering).²⁶ However, “the ‘I’ of the lyric poet sounds out from the deepest abyss of being; his ‘subjectivity’ . . . is imaginary.”²⁷ Similarly, the tragedy of Arthur does not remain merely individual but achieves universal status in the crowd’s eyes. The tragic nature of his subjective life is shared by the poor citizens of Gotham, and thereby transcends the boundaries of his subjectivity. Much like how “Archilochus, the passionately inflamed, loving and hating human being, is nothing but a vision of the genius itself” who is “no longer Archilochus but the genius of the world which expresses its primal pain symbolically in the likeness of the man Archilochus,” Arthur is no longer Arthur but the Joker, a mythical figure embodying the universal status of tragic nature of existence and sublimating it into the art of comedy.²⁸ The blood smile is a symbolic gesture that conveys this message of sublimation: by means of pain, he creates joy.

V. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

In the last scene, the political dimension of *The Birth of Tragedy* becomes apparent. We see that the Apollonian-Dionysian antagonism within Arthur is mirrored in society as well. One might say that the last scene depicts an eruption of the Dionysian truth of tragic sociopolitical conditions against the narrative—the semblance of reality—of the ruling class. In the film, the media does not capture the truth of the subway murders. Nor does the would-be mayor Thomas Wayne, who intends to fix Gotham, understand the tragic lives of its lower-class citizens. He says on TV that “one of the reasons why I’m considering a run for mayor” is because “Gotham’s lost its way” and “until [people like Arthur] 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 clowns.”²⁹ The narrative propagated by the ruling class ignores the tragic truth, and so fails to contain it. The illusions of the state break down and eventually the citizens transfigure into Dionysian protesters, intoxicated by “cruelty and

25 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 44.

26 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 29.

27 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 30.

28 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 31.

29 *Joker*, 0:38:52 to 0:39:43.

sensuality” and “bliss born of pain.” In the image of the Joker, they find redemption as he offers a new vision of existence that incorporates the terrible truth: the tragic conditions of their lives, a diabolical existence for which beauty and joy is not different from pain and suffering, and which revels in the chaotic state of the world.

In *Joker* we see how the existential struggles of an individual can have political repercussions. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, we see how art relates to existential issues such as pain and suffering. Analyzing *Joker* through *The Birth of Tragedy* allows us to see that the three spheres—existential, political, and aesthetic—are deeply intertwined. What emerges here is the existential dimension of politics. Political action can be united not only around a specific policy or issue, but also around a shared consciousness of suffering. Furthermore, the aesthetic can provide an answer for both the existential and the political. How can we cope with suffering? Nietzsche says we can do so by creating something beautiful out of it. Much like how an individual’s suffering can be redeemed by art, political suffering can be redeemed by a new political vision. The Joker character provides a new myth in which tragedy itself is a precondition for the creation of a new vision, one which offers a new form of existence whose power stems from reverie in a perverse beauty. The film *Joker* offers hope that from turmoil something beautiful and powerful can be created. Thus, the Joker becomes a symbol of political demonstration.

But perhaps this picture is too hopeful. Is *Joker* really a film about social change? Nietzsche claims that the Dionysian individual is driven to inaction: he has “gazed into the true essence of things” and “regard[s] it as laughable or shameful that [he] should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint.”³⁰ Arthur’s claim that he is “not political” should be understood in a similar light.³¹ The presence of tragic events in his life is so blown out of proportion that it can only invite laughter. Throughout the film, Arthur’s jokes become more cynical and absurd. His disgust at the absurd and tragic is discharged by the artistic means of comedy. Indeed, this insight may explain the psychology behind Arthur’s strange “joke” on Murray’s show:

Arthur: Knock knock.

Murray: Who’s there?

Arthur: It’s the police, ma’am. Your son’s been hit by a drunk driver. He’s dead [*laughs*].³²

In the face of tragedy, Arthur can do nothing but laugh; the world

30 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40.

31 *Joker*, 1:39:30 to 1:39:39.

32 *Joker*, 1:40:34 to 1:41:02.



is inherently tragic, and any attempt to fix it is naïve. If one rejects any hope for actual change, what is left is to suffer through tragic conditions by accepting and reveling in the perversity and irony of tragedy. The sadomasochistic tendency behind this psychology is not too difficult to discern, especially in the case of Arthur's joke. Perhaps this is the source of the ominous feeling that lingers upon viewing *Joker*. After all, the film culminates in social violence and crime. This is why an attempt to view *Joker* as an incitement toward social change falls short. At best, it can act as an incitement only negatively (i.e., as a preview of what will happen in the absence of social change).

VI. THE JOKER AS MYTH: THE JOKER AND THE MODERN WORLD

It is already a cliché to note that stories of superheroes and villains have taken the place of mythology in the modern era. What then does the recent portrayal of the Joker imply for our times? Nietzsche claims that the Dionysian drive gives rise to myth: "The Dionysian, with the primal pleasure it perceives even in pain, is the common womb from which both music and the tragic myth are born."³³ One might say that the Joker myth was born from the Dionysian universality of pain and suffering, themes that are becoming more prominent in modern life. Perhaps modern culture is returning to the "tragic view of the world" based on Dionysian insight.³⁴ But could one say, much like how Nietzsche envisioned a "rebirth of the German myth," that this tragic insight will engender a "higher" culture in modern times?³⁵ The pessimistic violence the film portrays leaves room for skepticism.

The fact that this movie resonated with many people may seem foreboding. Perhaps we have reached a point where the visions and dreams of the past are not potent enough to justify and redeem the tragic conditions prevalent in many people's lives. Indeed, in view of history, Nietzsche's discussions about the culture of his times appear in an ominous light:

If the German should look around with faint heart for a leader to take him back to his long-lost home . . . then let him but listen to the blissfully enticing call of the Dionysian bird . . . which wants to show him the way.³⁶

One cannot help but be reminded of Hitler in this paragraph, as the "leader" who captivated the "faint heart" of German culture and wanted to "show [it] the way" back to its "long-lost home." If we replace "German" with "modern individual," does the quote not seem appropriate and foreboding for our times as well? In the absence of a powerful vision that incorporates the tragic truth of individuals, society may fall into Dionysian chaos.

Joker perhaps reflects our times in which no illusion is strong enough to justify the tragedy of life. If a figure arises, much like the Joker, who manages to create and embody a new vision that integrates the tragic within it, society will be swayed by it, for better or for worse. Thus, a Nietzschean reading of *Joker* offers insights into modern culture and politics. The dissolution of Apollonian illusions may lead to Dionysian madness and the creation of a new image, one that will have a lasting impact on both the individual and society as a whole.

33 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 114.

34 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 84.

35 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 109.

36 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 111.





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