

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Literary forms in this contemporary era have intersected with other areas of study, such as that of motion picture or film. According to Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell (2012, p. 455), a film is any kind of motion picture; or a series of shots edited together. The film is considered a powerful medium of communication for a spectator. Due to their audiovisual nature, films can convey many unique messages in a short time. In addition, films may potentially provoke emotions and deep interpretations of reality to the spectator through the plot, character, and setting. Further, films provide us with a way to watch and feel the messages we discover, for example, the actor's emotion conveyed through their facial expression or body movements.

Joker (2019), directed by Todd Phillips, premiered on October 2, 2019, in Indonesia. *Joker* was an American film that featured Joaquin Phoenix as Joker or Arthur Fleck, the protagonist. The story was about the dynamic process of changing Arthur's character into Joker's.

At that time, Gotham City was full of crime and poverty. Everyone is depressed over the inflationary economic situation in Gotham. Arthur's dark life in

the decaying Gotham City affected his transformation process. He struggled to live a life that led to severe depression characterized by Schizophrenia.

In the story plot, he is first described as a kind and happy boy, but in the middle of the story, several things trigger him to change his attitude. Moreover, he felt neglected by people. When he was bullied, no one helped and listened to him. When he was slandered for possession of a gun by his coworkers, no one believed him. When he tried to comfort a little boy on the bus, he was scolded by the mother for being an annoyance. He swallowed many disappointments until he turned into a murderer. The lowest point in his life was when he knew the truth about his mother who had abused him since childhood, in addition, the fact that Penny Fleck was not his real mother has added to his hurt. Ergo, Arthur changed his usual identity and appearance into a clown killer.

Moreover, Arthur's character development progresses gradually. Everything starts from his uncontrollable laughs when his emotions are unstable. In contrast to *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker was the second lead actor and a pure crazy criminal. Whereas Arthur Fleck or Joker in *Joker* (Phillip, 2019) was the main character and identically connoted with psychological aspects for the reason that everything he did was a form of expression as a human who suffered a mental health issue.

According to the complexity of the characters built, Joaquin Phoenix in delivering the story was quite successful. Because of Phoenix's epic performance as a Joker, he won the best actor at the 92nd Oscar and The Academy Awards for his

performance as a Joker. Besides, this film narrated the *Joker* (Phillip, 2019), providing good plot and character development. Joker or Arthur Fleck, as the diegetic character in the film, is commonly and immediately perceived from psychological aspects alone. This is true and does make sense as the film is a psychological thriller genre in nature. However, the writer decided to analyze it differently. Therefore, the transformation of Arthur Fleck being a Joker will be analyzed furthermore through this study. The writer intends to examine it from the trace of German Expressionist elements shown in the film. This is aimed to provide a new perspective and interpretations in this film.

As revealed by Razzano & Smith (2018, p. 59), German expressionism cinema has a unique quality because it can aesthetically raise the emotions of the spectator through the scenes displayed. In essence, this genre originated from the interpretation of post-war German psychological and social conditions. The German people began to feel dissatisfied with their leaders because they brought endless suffering, just as Gotham's people protested and needed a revolutionary figure. Arthur as a Joker indeed inspired chaos and anarchy, but since the 'Brutal Triple Tragedy' is rampant in every corner of the city, Joker is considered a revolutionary figure.

In this study, the writer will critically examine *Joker* (Phillip, 2019) to interpret and prove that the film can be regarded as an expressionist film from the context of the German Expressionist Movement. In terms of storyline, Expressionism films chose to use symbols and cinematographic techniques that highlight the

portraits of the lower class. Kanerva (2020, p. 2) has noted that some things are not explicitly spelled out in *Joker* due to non-aesthetic responses being elicited by the movie, such as interpretations of various scenes or symbols. Yet some others are well expressed. From an aesthetic point of view, Expressionist films can create an aura of pessimism, despair, and sadness into a single unit.

Although the golden era of expressionism cinema reached in the mid-1920s in Germany, its influence was so great for the development of the film industry in the world, including American Cinema or Hollywood. The influence of German Expressionism Cinema in American Cinema can be seen in *Joker* (Phillip, 2019). As a case in point, *Joker* (Phillip, 2019) strongly depicts the quality of the German Expressionist Movement with the addition of elements of American Cinema where close-up techniques, highly detailed and realistic sets are seen in each film scene.

The elements of the German Expressionist that will be described by the writer are the plot of the story, the protagonist, the set design, and the cinematography, as references by Britannica, 2020; Crabbe, 2016; Elsaesser et al., 2016; Kuhn & Westwell, 2012; Razzano & Smith, 2018. The writer chooses and uses those elements for highlighting the presence of the German Expressionist elements in this undertaking. Additionally, Tortolani (2013, p.4) stated that German Expressionist films highlight themes such as madness and inner emotional conflict through anti-realistic and fantastic images.

Barlow as cited in Tortolani (2013, p. 5) stated that Expressionist cinema chose a considerable contrast between light and shadow, using heavy cast shadows to

reflect the darkness and despair of the characters. Also, Crabbe, in his article of *The Shadow of German Expressionism in Cinema* (2016, p. 1) added the plots of German Expressionism were usually full of madness, unexpected, and insanity. These have plenty of subtexts for the spectator.

According to Britannica (2020, p.1), expressionism is an artistic style. The expressionist artists try to describe subjective emotions and reactions caused by objects and events in a person. When combined with the ability of film as a medium, the unrealistic aspects of German expressionism have been able to bewilder and exaggerate the situation to provide a deeper and more perceptual interpretation.

A study on *Joker* (2019) has been carried out by several scholars, but the topics chosen are different from the writer's. For instance, Hadiid Al-Fattah (2020), wrote: "Representasi Oligarki pada Media Film Joker 2019 Karya Todd Phillips". In his thesis, Al-Fattah (2020) discussed how society can change another person (The Joker) into different figures as a result of the community's treatment of themselves in the light of Oligarchy's reality.

1.2 Field of the Study

The field of study is film analysis.

1.3 Scope of the Study

The scope of this research is how the *Joker* (Phillip, 2019) can be classified as an expressionist film. This research focuses on the elements of German Expressionist Cinema, such as the plot of the story, the protagonist, the set design, and the

cinematography. This aims to construct the framework and to generally show the interpretation of the expressionist film in *Joker* (2019).

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. What are the elements of German expressionism cinema in *Joker* (Phillip, 2019)?
2. Why can *Joker* (Phillip, 2019) be interpreted as an expressionist film?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The purposes of the study are:

1. To identify and describe the elements of German Expressionism Cinema in *Joker* (Phillip, 2019).
2. To explain the reasons why *Joker* (Phillip, 2019) can be considered an expressionist film.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research is seminal for those interested in the study of film analysis, especially in providing a new shed of light about *Joker* (Phillip, 2019). This is achieved through taking the point of view of the expressionist film as presented in the film.

1.7 Definition of Term

1. Trace

Trace is to describe how something has developed (Cambridge, 2021).

2. Expressionism

Expressionism is an artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person (Britannica, 2020, p. 1).

3. Expressionist Film

The expressionist film is marked by distinct visual features and performance styles that rebel against prior realist art movements (Tortolani, 2013, p. 4).

