


Chapter 5

The Joker: Transmedial Concept of a Comic Book Character

Vladimir Popov

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1493-6702>

Independent Researcher, Serbia

ABSTRACT

This academic paper explores the transmedia narrative of the comic book character of the Joker across various media platforms. It delves into the complex creation and evolution of the Joker, highlighting the collaborative efforts of Bob Kane, Bill Finger, and Jerry Robinson, and the character's profound impact on cultural and societal norms. By examining the Joker's transmedial storytelling, the paper underscores the character's ability to adapt and resonate across different contexts, from comics to films and beyond. It further investigates the Joker's role as a mirror to societal dynamics, embodying themes of chaos, resistance, and critique of biopolitical control. The paper concludes that the Joker's enduring appeal and multifaceted nature exemplify the transformative potential of narrative characters within the transmedial landscape, serving as agents of critique and catalysts for discourse on identity, power, and resistance.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-3302-0.ch005

THE EVOLUTION OF THE JOKER'S ORIGIN STORY

The Joker's origin story has varied significantly over time, while it evolved through different cultural contexts, narrative needs, and audience expectations. These variations not only enriched character's mythos but also provided insights into the shifting paradigms of storytelling within comic book and film media.

The enigmatic origin and evolution of the Joker, has always been a subject of intrigue. Created by Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson, the Joker first emerged in the inaugural issue of the Batman comic book on April 25, 1940, published by DC Comics. The character's inception and the specific contributions of its creators to its visual and narrative identity remain somewhat enigmatic to this day, with each creator asserting a distinctive claim over the character's conception and evolution (Eason, 2008). This means that the authors created the concept of the Joker character by exchanging ideas with each other, based on the inspirations of other already existing characters, which were also designed based on some other ideas, thus making the concept and artwork of the Joker quite trans-artistic from the very beginning of its development (Šuvaković, 2005). However, the 1951 *Detective Comics no. 168* introduced him as the former Red Hood, a criminal who fell into a vat of chemicals which bleached his skin, colored his hair green, and stretched his lips into a perpetual grin. Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* from 1988 provided a more detailed and tragic backstory for the Joker, portraying him as a failed comedian who turns to crime to support his pregnant wife, only to suffer a series of catastrophic events. Moore's narrative introduced existential themes, illustrating the Joker's transformation as a response to an absurd and indifferent universe, resonant with Camus's notion of the absurd hero (Camus, 1942). This story emphasized the fragility of human psyche under extreme stress, suggesting that madness could be just one bad day away.

The Joker's affinity for offering different accounts of his origins, as seen in *The Dark Knight*, aligns with his portrayal as a figure that heavily relies on embodying chaos and unpredictability through his life. His self-professed approach to life, characterized by impulsivity and nihilism, is nicely captured in his line, "I just do... things," (Fhlainn, 2011). This narrative choice not only deepens the character's enigma but also reflects a postmodern skepticism towards fixed identities and histories. Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* further explores this narrative ambiguity, presenting the Joker's past as a 'multiple choice' scenario, thereby destabilizing any singular understanding of his origins (Moore, 1988).

The adoption of various aliases for the Joker, such as the name Jack Napier in Tim Burton's 1989 adaptation and a new name in Todd Phillips' 2019 *Joker*, shows the power of the transmedial exploration of the character's identity. The variability of the Joker's name across narratives shows in full scope the transmedia storytelling's

The Joker

capacity to adapt and evolve character mythologies in response to different narrative demands and cultural contexts.

The 2019 film *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix, represents a significant evolution in the portrayal of the iconic character within the cinematic domain, offering a deep exploration into the origins and development of the Joker persona. This iteration distinguishes itself by presenting Arthur Fleck, a character grappling with social marginalization and a neurological disorder that triggers involuntary laughter, as the embodiment of the Joker. Situated within a narrative framework that critically examines the repercussions of a capitalist democratic society on individuals living on its fringes, Arthur's transformation into the Joker is shown as a manifestation of societal failure rather than a villainous ascent. On the other hand, Phillips' film provides a psychological study focused on societal neglect and mental illness, offering a social commentary on the failures of societal institutions to protect the vulnerable. This narrative draws on the theories of social constructionism, suggesting that identity and madness are constructed through social and interpersonal experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The collaborative nature of the Joker's creation also reflects the concept of collective intelligence in transmedial storytelling, where multiple participants contribute to the development of the narrative universe (Jenkins, 2006). Despite the disputes among its creators regarding the Joker's origins, it is evident that the character's development was a collaborative effort that benefited from the inputs of Finger, Kane, and Robinson. This collective creation process has allowed the Joker to evolve into a multifaceted character with a rich narrative depth.

Moreover, the influence of external sources, such as the photograph of Conrad Veidt, highlights the intertextuality inherent in transmedial storytelling that refers to the relationship between texts and how they transform one another. The Joker's creation, inspired by Veidt's portrayal in *The Man Who Laughs*, shows us how existing texts can inform and enrich new stories, contributing to their complexity and appeal. In other words, the Joker not only reflects the collaborative efforts of his creators but also embodies the dynamic interplay between different texts and media, contributing to the richness of the Batman universe and the broader landscape of popular culture.

It can be argued that the evolution of the Joker's origin stories reflects broader societal changes and anxieties, particularly concerning the nature of evil and madness. The varied stories highlight a societal shift from viewing villainy as an inherent trait to understanding it as a complex product of social, psychological, and existential factors.

CONTRASTING THE JOKER'S EVOLVING ORIGIN WITH BATMAN'S STABLE NARRATIVE

Batman's origin story has remained remarkably consistent since his inception: as a young boy, Bruce Wayne witnesses the murder of his parents and vows to spend his life fighting crime. This narrative, embedded in *Detective Comics no. 33* from 1939, serves as a foundational myth that defines Batman's moral and existential framework. The stability of Batman's origin story contrasts sharply with the mutable and often ambiguous origins of the Joker, offering a rich area for analysis regarding the implications of these narrative choices. Batman's stable origin story aligns with Jungian theories of archetypes, particularly the hero archetype, which involves a journey that begins with a personal loss and transforms the individual into a figure of justice (Jung, 1959). Batman's consistent narrative reinforces his role as a symbol of order and justice, contrasting with the Joker's representation of chaos and moral ambiguity. This relation showcases the thematic depth of their rivalry, presenting an everlasting battle between order and chaos.

The constancy of Batman's origin story has several implications. First, it establishes a clear moral foundation, positioning Batman as a character with unwavering principles. Unlike the Joker, whose fluctuating backstories invite empathy or repulsions by turns, Batman's fixed origin story offers a stable moral compass for the audiences (Eco, 1972). This stability is crucial in a genre where complexity often blurs the lines between heroism and villainy. Furthermore, Batman's unchanging origin story reflects societal values that emphasize the importance of personal tragedy in defining identity and purpose. In cultural terms, Batman presents the ideal of turning personal grief into a catalyst for improvement and societal contribution. This narrative choice resonates with the American ethos of individualism and redemption, potentially explaining the enduring appeal of Batman's character across different cultural landscapes (Bellah, 1985). In contrast, the Joker's evolving origin stories reflect a postmodern fascination with ambiguity and the complexities of identity. Each version of his backstory—from the Red Hood to the failed comedian and beyond—serves to destabilize the audience's understanding of his character, challenging them to reconsider their perceptions of morality and sanity, like Lyotard mentions in his postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1984). This fluidity allows the Joker to embody contemporary anxieties about the unpredictability and inherent chaos of modern life.

In other words, contrasting narrative stability of Batman and the fluidity of the Joker's origins significantly enhance the thematic and psychological complexity of their stories.

The Joker

THE JOKER'S PORTRAYAL IN COMIC BOOKS

Originating in the Golden Age of American comics, the Joker was initially intended to be a short-lived character, appearing in just one or two issues of Batman (webarchive, 2021). However, editorial decisions, particularly by Whitney Ellsworth, significantly extended his presence, leading to appearances in nine of the first twelve Batman episodes (Eason, 2008). Initially portrayed as a psychopath, the Joker's character underwent a notable transformation in 1942 when DC Comics' editorial team reimagined him as a prankster. This shift aimed to make the character more palatable to a younger audience, reflecting broader societal and cultural trends of the time.

The transition into the Silver Age of American comics marked a significant turning point in the portrayal of the Joker, against the backdrop of declining comic book popularity in America since 1954 (Reynolds, 1994). The criticism of comics, as voiced by German-American psychiatrist Frederic Wertham, who contended that mass media, and comics in particular, contributed to rising delinquency, violence, and even homosexuality among teenagers, played a crucial role in altering public perception and consumption of comic books (Webster, 1981). The backlash from parents, coupled with instances of public comic book burnings and the regulations enforced by the American Association of Comic Magazines, necessitated another transformation in the Joker's character. DC Comics editors redefined the Joker as a comedic and humorous figure, devoid of his previously murderous intent (Cohen, 2008). By 1964, this transformation had led to a significant decline in the Joker's popularity, resulting in his removal from monthly publications (Eason, 2008).

The shifting portrayal of the Joker, from a psychopathic villain to a harmless prankster, mirrors broader societal concerns and the comic industry's responses to cultural and regulatory pressures. The character's adaptations highlight the dynamic interplay between creators, audience expectations, and societal values, underscoring the fluidity of narrative characters in transmedial contexts. Moreover, the Joker's evolution reflects Jenkins' notion of "narrative architecture," where characters and stories are not fixed but are continually reshaped by their interactions with audiences and their cultural contexts (Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore, the Joker's character development can be situated within broader discussions of media effects and moral panics, as illustrated by the reactions to Frederic Wertham's criticisms. The comic book industry's self-regulation, through the creation of less controversial characters, demonstrates the impact of societal concerns on media production and the complex relationship between media creators and their audiences.

The resurgence of the Joker during the Bronze Age of American comics marks a pivotal moment in the character's evolution, reflecting broader shifts in the comic book industry and American culture. Screenwriter Dennis O'Neill and illustrator Neal

The Joker

Adams played instrumental roles in this revival by returning the Joker to his roots as an impulsive psychopath in 1973 (Eason, 2008), thus reinvigorating interest in the character. O'Neill's exploration of the Joker's origins and insanity (rocketllama, 2009), coupled with Adams' redesign of the character's physical appearance to a gaunter and more sinister figure, redefined the Joker for a new generation (Phillips, 2008). This period also witnessed the collaborative efforts of screenwriter Steve Englehart and illustrator Marshall Rogers in 1977-78, further expanding the Joker's persona and visual design. Their contributions would significantly influence Tim Burton's 1989 film adaptation of *Batman*, setting a precedent for the character's portrayal in various media (Eason, 2008).

A central theme in the Joker's comic book appearances is his representation of chaos and anarchy that challenges Batman's order and control. This theme is vividly portrayed in *The Killing Joke* (Moore, 1988), where the Joker's actions are driven by his philosophy that "one bad day" is enough to drive anyone to madness. This graphic novel explores deeper psychological motivations of the Joker, setting a standard for his character complexity in later narratives. Moore's narrative suggests that the Joker's anarchism serves as a mirror to the absurdity and unpredictability of life, a theme that resonates deeply with existentialist philosophy (Camus, 1942).

The 1990s and 2000s saw the Joker's character delve into darker territories, with a marked increase in psychological complexity. A seminal work from this period is, for example, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (Morrison, 1989), which presents the Joker not only as a villain in the story, but as a deeply disturbed individual, as well. Morrison's portrayal of The Joker in this story was deeply influenced by psychoanalytic theories, particularly those concerning the formation of identity and the Jungian concept of the shadow self, reflecting the darker impulses within all individuals (Jung, 1953).

Another recurring theme is the Joker's duality with Batman, which has been one of the most prominent focal points in understanding both characters over the years. The graphic novel *Batman: The Man Who Laughs* (Brubaker, 2005) revisits the Joker's origin in parallel to Batman's, emphasizing that both characters were born out of personal tragedies. This narrative explores the philosophical questioning of how trauma can lead to vastly different outcomes—heroism, or villainy. This duality is often framed within the context of Nietzschean philosophy as well, where Batman and the Joker represent opposing moral aesthetics, one adhering to a moral code and the other absurd nihilism (Nietzsche, 1886).

It can be argued further that the Joker's enduring appeal in comic books stems from his ability to embody extreme philosophical and psychological themes that challenge both the protagonist and the audience's moral compasses. His complex relationship with Batman provides audiences a complex and dynamic frame of

The Joker

reference to explore themes of trauma, morality, and personal identity within both the characters and themselves.

THE JOKER'S CHARACTER IN FILM ADAPTATIONS

The Joker's transition from comic books to films has allowed for a rich exploration of his character through various cinematic interpretations, each reflecting different societal contexts and filmmaking styles. This examination focuses on key film adaptations, noting the significant differences and constants in his portrayal, which highlight broader cinematic and psychological theories.

In the 1966 film *Batman*, played by Cesar Romero, the Joker character is depicted with a campy and playful demeanor, reflecting the pop art movement and a more satirical approach to superheroes typical of the era (Sabin, 1996). This portrayal aligns with the theories of Susan Sontag on camp as “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag, 1964), which suggests that such a style celebrates the absurdity and theatricality inherent in the comic book medium.

Jack Nicholson's portrayal in Tim Burton's *Batman* from 1989 marked a significant shift towards a darker and more serious Joker. Burton's gothic aesthetic and emphasis on psychological complexity introduced a version of the Joker that is both a flamboyant criminal mastermind and a deeply disturbed individual. This adaptation resonates with the Freudian concept of the uncanny, where the familiar is made disturbingly strange and unsettling (Freud, 1919), thus enhancing the Joker's menacing qualities while maintaining his comic undertones.

Heath Ledger's interpretation in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* from 2008 is widely regarded as a seminal depiction, bringing intense psychopathological dimensions to the character. This portrayal that dives into themes of anarchy, terror, and the abyss of the human psyche, significantly is influenced by existentialist philosophy. Ledger's Joker is a force of nature that disrupts social order, that, it can be argued, embodies Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, which operates beyond conventional morality (Nietzsche, 1883).

The most recent major film portrayal by Joaquin Phoenix in Todd Phillips' *Joker* from 2019 shifts focus from the grandiose criminal aspect to an intense, character-driven study of societal neglect and mental illness. This film portrays this version of the Joker's character with a focal point on critique of social systems. The concept of the Joker as a biopolitical apparatus also intersects with Michel Foucault's notions of biopower and governmentality, wherein power is exercised over populations through an array of governmental techniques and procedures aimed at regulating social bodies and managing life (Foucault, 1978). In other words, Phoe-

The Joker

nix's portrayal brings a raw, unsettling realism to the character, emphasizing the impact of societal structures on individual psychopathology.

The evolution of the Joker's portrayal in films reflects changing societal norms and anxieties about morality, chaos, and the human psyche, and each actor and director brought a unique vision to the character, influenced by contemporary cultural and psychological theories, which allows the Joker to remain a relevant and compelling figure in popular culture.

THE JOKER'S REPRESENTATION IN OTHER MEDIA FORMS

The Joker's portrayal extends beyond the realms of comic books and films into video games and animation as well, where his character continues to evolve, adapt, and engage with new audiences. Video games offer a unique interactive experience, allowing players to engage directly with the character of the Joker. Notably, in the *Batman: Arkham Asylum* series, the Joker is portrayed not just as Batman's adversary but as an omnipresent force influencing the game's narrative and player decisions (Rocksteady Studios, 2009-2016). The concept of agency in video games, as discussed by Jannet Murray (Murray, 1997), suggests that this medium allows for a deeper exploration of character's motivation and player-character relationships, giving the Joker a platform to manipulate both characters within the game and the players themselves.

Furthermore, in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and its sequels, the Joker's strategies and actions can be directly countered or supported by the player, creating a dynamic narrative that emphasizes the character's chaotic nature. This interactivity is aligned with Manovich's theory of the language of new media, which posits that digital environments transform narrative structures and user engagement (Manovich, 2001).

Animation is another form of media that provides a versatile medium for exploring the Joker's theatricality and psychological complexity. In animated series like *Batman: The Animated Series* (Timm & Radomski, 1992-1995), the Joker is both a comical and menacing figure, showcasing his dual nature in a format accessible to both younger audiences and adult viewers. The flexibility of animation allows for exaggerated expressions and actions that highlight the Joker's maniacal behaviors and elaborate schemes. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, which celebrates subversive and alternative voices in literature, can be applied to understand the Joker's appeal in animation (Bakhtin, 1965). His portrayal often disrupts the established order, embodying the spirit of carnival through his chaotic actions and disdain for societal norms.

The Joker

In other words, the Joker's adaptability to video games and animation is not merely a testament to his complexity as a character but also an indicator of the shifting paradigms in narrative consumption and audience engagement in digital and animated media. The interactive nature of these video games in general enhances the depth of his character by allowing players to explore his psychological attributes firsthand, while animation leverages visual storytelling to highlight his iconic status.

LITERACY IN COMICS AND THE JOKER'S NARRATIVE IMPACT

The concept of literacy in comics extends beyond basic textual understanding to include the decoding of visual language and complex narrative structures. The Joker's portrayal across various media—especially in comics—offers a unique case study for exploring this broader definition of literacy. This discussion contextualizes the findings of the Joker's multifaceted character within the scope of comic literacy, emphasizing how his portrayals challenge and redefine traditional narratives.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993) provides a foundational framework for analyzing how comics communicate through a combination of visual and textual elements. McCloud discusses how the integration of words and images in comics creates a unique language that requires a specific form of literacy. The Joker's narratives often exploit this language, utilizing visual cues, textual ambiguity, and the interplay between the two to engage readers in a deeper interpretative process. The Joker's character consistently challenges traditional narrative structures and moral binaries often found in comic books. Unlike typical villain archetypes, the Joker operates within a moral grey area, often embodying a philosophy that questions societal norms and ethics. This complexity engages readers in a critical analysis of morality and justice, pushing the boundaries of traditional comic book storytelling.

For example, in *The Killing Joke* (Moore, 1988), the Joker's attempt to drive Commissioner Gordon insane by exposing him to extreme violence challenges the notion of resilience and the inherent goodness assumed of heroes in comics. This narrative invites reader to question the stability of morality and the impact of trauma, enriching the reader's literary and psychological engagement with the text. The Joker's adaptability also reflects changes in sociocultural narratives over time. As societal issues evolve, so too does the Joker's character, often mirroring or satirizing contemporary concerns. This adaptability not only demonstrates the Joker's relevance across different eras but also highlights the role of comics as a medium for social commentary. The Joker's enduring appeal suggests a collective fascination with exploring themes of chaos, order, and morality through a familiar yet unpredictable character.

The Joker

It can be argued that the Joker's engagement with complex narrative structures and challenging traditional narratives enhances comic literacy among readers. His character acts as a catalyst for deeper literary and cultural discussions, encouraging readers to engage with and interpret comics at a more sophisticated level.

LITERACY IN COMICS AND THE JOKER'S TRANSMEDIAL NARRATIVE

The Joker's presence across various media platforms provides an excellent opportunity to examine how complex storytelling and character development in comics can enhance literacy. This section delves into the ways in which the Joker's transmedia narrative promotes a deeper level of literacy among audiences, through the lenses of narrative theory, psychology, and media studies. The Joker's character is renowned for its depth and complexity, which challenges readers and viewers to engage with the content on multiple levels. According to narrative theorist Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1986), engaging with complex narratives enhances the reader's capacity to construct reality and understand diverse perspectives. The Joker's stories often involve intricate plots, moral ambiguities, and philosophical questions that require readers to employ higher-order thinking skills.

In *The Killing Joke* story (Moore, 1988), the narrative structure itself—interweaving the present actions with flashbacks and possible hallucinations—demands a sophisticated level of narrative literacy. Readers must navigate through these layers of reality and non-reality. This reading action as a form of mental exercise enhances their ability to interpret complex texts and images simultaneously. The development of the Joker's character over time exemplifies how dynamic and evolving character arcs can maintain reader engagement and promote literacy. The transformation from a mere villain to a deeply troubled individual with a backstory invites readers to explore themes of psychology and human behavior through engagement with their identity and the self. This engagement is not just passive consumption but an active interpretation and synthesis of the information presented.

Visual literacy plays a crucial role in understanding comics, and the Joker's portrayal utilizes this to its full extent. McCloud (1993) emphasizes the importance of interpreting visual cues in comics, which range from panel transitions to color usage and framing. The Joker's varied appearances, from his sinister smile to the chaotic environments he often inhabits, are meticulously designed to convey psychological depth and emotional states, encouraging readers to develop skills in visual analysis and interpretation. The Joker's narrative also reflects societal issues and critiques, promoting media literacy by encouraging audiences to analyze and critique the role of media in shaping perceptions and attitudes. It can be argued that

The Joker

the Joker's transmedia narrative significantly contributes to enhancing narrative and visual literacy by engaging audiences with complex storylines, sophisticated character development, and reflective societal critiques. This engagement not only promotes a deeper understanding of the content but also encourages critical thinking and discussion among its audiences.

The interaction between a media text and its audience is fundamental in shaping both the narrative itself and its interpretation. In the case of the Joker, the audience's engagement across various media platforms—comics, films, video games, and animation—plays a critical role in both the evolution of his character and the thematic complexity of his stories. This section explores how audience responses and participatory culture have influenced the Joker's transmedia narrative. According to Stuart Hall (Hall, 1997), media texts are encoded by their creators with intended meanings, but it is the audience that decodes these messages, sometimes aligning with and at other times diverging from intended interpretations. This encoding and decoding process highlights the active role of the audience in constructing meaning, which is particularly evident in the varied receptions to different portrayals of the Joker.

Henry Jenkins' concept of participatory culture explores further this dynamic, suggesting that audiences are not merely consumers but also creators of content, engaging with and responding to media in ways that can influence its direction and interpretation (Jenkins, 2006). In the context of the Joker, fan reactions, discussions, and even fan-created content contribute to the ongoing development of his character across different media.

The varied reactions to different film portrayals of the Joker illustrate how audience perceptions can influence media representations. For instance, the dark and chaotic Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) resonated with contemporary audiences' anxieties about terrorism and societal breakdown, leading to widespread acclaim and further dark, complex portrayals of characters in superhero films. Conversely, the more controversial depiction in *Joker* (Phillips, 2019) sparked intense debate about mental health and violence in society, demonstrating how audience reactions can provoke discussions that extend beyond the film itself. In comic books, the Joker's evolution has also been partially guided by audience reception. Storylines that resonated strongly with readers, such as the tragic elements introduced in *The Killing Joke* (Moore, 1988), have often been revisited and expanded in later issues and adaptations. Reader feedback through letters, online forums, and social media has influenced writers' and artists' approaches to the character, encouraging more sophisticated and layered narratives.

It can be argued that the Joker's character serves as a reflection of societal and individual anxieties, with audience engagement playing a crucial role in shaping his narrative across media. The feedback mechanisms inherent in fan culture and media

The Joker

consumption ensure that the Joker continuously evolves in response to changing societal contexts and audience expectations.

The use of comic books and transmedia storytelling as educational tools has garnered significant attention, with the Joker's narrative providing a rich case study. This section explores the educational potential of these media, emphasizing how they can be used to develop critical thinking, cultural awareness, and complex literacy skills. Lev Vygotsky's theories on the educational potential of storytelling and narrative play (Vygotsky, 1978) suggest that stories are fundamental to cognitive development. Comics and transmedia storytelling extend this concept by offering multimodal narratives that combine visual, textual, and sometimes interactive elements, which can enhance learning and engagement. The complexity of these narratives, particularly in characters like the Joker, requires audiences to engage in higher-order thinking that involves analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Comics have been recognized for their role in developing literacy skills, particularly in reluctant readers. They offer a blend of visual and textual storytelling that can be more accessible than traditional texts, while still challenging readers to interpret narrative nuances (McCloud, 1993). The Joker's story arcs, often rich with complex themes and moral questions, provide material for discussions about ethics, psychology, and social issues, making them useful for educational settings.

Transmedia storytelling, where a single-story spans multiple media platform, offers unique educational opportunities. Jenkins (2006) highlights how transmedia storytelling can foster learning through layering information and perspectives across different media, enhancing engagement and comprehension. The Joker's narratives across comics, films, and video games invite audiences to connect dots and form a holistic understanding of the character and his motivations, practicing skills that are valuable in both academic and real-world contexts.

In other words, engaging with transmedia narratives like Joker's, for example is, can significantly enhance literacy and learning outcomes with audiences. This engagement not only improves traditional literacy skills but also develops critical media literacy, ethical reasoning, and cultural awareness among learners.

THE JOKER'S TRANSMEDIAL JOURNEY AND SOCIETAL REFLECTIONS

The Joker's evolution across various media—comics, films, video games, and animation—provides a compelling lens through which to examine changes in societal attitudes and values over time. His character serves as an example for cultural anxieties, moral dilemmas, and shifts in the collective psyche, reflecting broader societal trends through the nuances of his portrayals. Media theorists like Marshall

The Joker

McLuhan have argued that media are not just channels of information but also cultural artifacts that shape and reflect societal norms and values (McLuhan, 1964) The Joker, as a transmedia character, embodies McLuhan's idea of the medium as the message, where his portrayals across different platforms highlight distinct aspects of society at various times.

From his early comic appearances as a straightforward villain to more nuanced portrayals in films like *The Dark Knight* and *Joker*, the evolution of the Joker's character coincides with significant societal changes. During periods of relative stability, the Joker often appears more cartoonish and less threatening, whereas times of social unrest or complexity see him depicted with greater psychological depth and moral ambiguity. This correlation suggests that the Joker acts as a narrative device to explore and respond to contemporary societal fears and tensions. For instance, the anarchic Joker of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* reflects post-9/11 anxieties about terrorism and societal breakdown, while Todd Phillips' *Joker* mirrors contemporary concerns regarding mental health and socioeconomic disparities (Peacock, 2019). These films use the Joker to question and critique societal norms, using his chaos as a contrast to expose the failures and cracks within societal structures.

The showcasing of mental health issues in *Joker* (2019) offers a clear example of how the character's transmedia journey reflects changing societal attitudes. Once stigmatized and oversimplified, mental health and illness are increasingly recognized in media as complex issues deserving empathy and understanding. The film's sympathetic portrayal of Arthur Fleck's descent into the Joker persona challenged audiences to consider the societal factors contributing to mental health struggles, aligning with growing advocacy for mental health awareness and reform.

It can be argued that the Joker's shifting characterizations across media platforms are directly influenced by changing societal norms, values, and anxieties. His character offers a unique opportunity to engage with and critique these changes, providing a space for audiences to explore uncomfortable or controversial issues through a familiar yet unsettling figure.

CONCLUSION

Exploration of the Joker as a transmedia character, enabled us to delve into his complex portrayals across comics, film, video games, and animation. Each medium has contributed uniquely to the development of his character, reflecting and influencing societal attitudes and values over time. The Joker's evolution from a mere antagonist to a symbol of chaos and critique of societal norms exemplifies the dynamic potential of transmedia storytelling to deepen character complexity and

The Joker

engage diverse audiences. I tried to showcase how the Joker's narrative in comics introduces themes of chaos and psychological depth, while film adaptations explore his sociopathy within varied societal contexts. Video games offer interactive experiences of his malevolent tactics, and animation reaches diverse demographics, broadening his impact. Each media portrayal invites audiences to reconsider morality, identity, and the human psyche, showcasing the Joker's role as both a narrative and cultural figure.

The exploration of the Joker also sheds light on the broader theme of literacy in comics. This form of literacy is not merely about reading and understanding text but involves interpreting complex narratives and visual languages that comics uniquely offer. The Joker's multifaceted character challenges readers and viewers to engage with sophisticated themes and encourages a deeper reading experience that transcends traditional literary forms.

The educational potential of comics and transmedia storytelling is significant, as evidenced by the Joker's use in discussing complex psychological, ethical, and societal issues. This engagement enhances critical thinking and interpretative skills, illustrating how comics can be potent tools for education and cultural critique.

In conclusion, the Joker's transmedia journey not only enriches his character but also highlights the evolving capabilities of comics and related media to engage with and reflect upon complex societal issues. His narrative across media platforms demonstrates the profound impact of storytelling in shaping cultural discourse and individual perception. As comics and transmedia continue to evolve, their potential to influence education, culture, and society remains a promising area for continued research and application.

The Joker**REFERENCES**

- Bakhtin, M. (1965). *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press, 15-16.
- Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press, 14.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor Books, 118-119.
- Brubaker, E. (2005). *Batman: The Man Who Laughs*. DC Comics.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Harvard University Press, 88.
10.4159/9780674029019
- Camus, A. (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Gallimard, 108.
- Eason, B. (2008). *DARK KNIGHT FLASHBACK: THE JOKER, PART 1*. Comic Book Resources. <https://www.cbr.com/dark-knight-flashback-the-joker-part-i/>.
- Eason, B. (2008). *DARK KNIGHT FLASHBACK: THE JOKER, PART 2*. Comic Book Resources. <https://www.cbr.com/dark-knight-flashback-the-joker-pt-ii/>
- Eason, R. (2008). The Birth of the Joker: The Men Behind the Clown. *Gotham Chronicles*, 12(3), 45–59.
- Eco, U., & Chilton, N. (1972). The Myth of Superman. *Diacritics*, 2(1), 14–22.
10.2307/464920
- Fhlainn, S. N. (2011). The Dark Knight: Heath Ledger's Joker, Anarchy, and Chaos in Gotham. *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 39(2), 82–83.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Vol. I). Random House.
- Freud, S. (1919). *The Uncanny*. Imago Publishing.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage Publications.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 5-6.

The Joker

- Jung, C. G. (1959). *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press. 117.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, 36.
- Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 91.
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harper Perennial.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 19–20.
- Moore, A. (1988). *The Killing Joke*. DC Comics.
- Morrison, G. (1989). *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics.
- Murray, J. H. (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press, 55.
- Nietzsche, F. (1883). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Ernst Schmeitzner, 26.
- Nietzsche, F. (1886). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Random House.
- Nolan, C. (Director). (2008). *The Dark Knight*. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Peacock, S. (2019). *Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*. University of Mississippi Press.
- Phillips, T. (Director). (2019). *Joker*. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Rocksteady Studios. (2009-2016). *Batman: Arkham series*. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.
- Sabin, R. (1996). *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. Phaidon Press, 61.
- Sontag, S. (1964). *Against Interpretation and other Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Šuvaković, M. (2005). *Pojmovnik suvremene umetnosti*. Horetzky, Zagreb, Vlees & Beton.
- Timm, B., & Radomski, E. (Creators). (1992-1995). *Batman: The Animated Series*. Warner Bros. Animation.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press, 80.