

‘Nobody ever thinks what it’s like to be a guy like me’

How Arthur and the Story are Developed in *Joker* (2019)

Zhen Zhang

University of Technology Sydney, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Ultimo NSW 2007,
Australia

Abstract

The way people interact with space appertains to the idea of territory. Territory is claimed by people all the time in communication. This article will explore how the lead actor, Joaquin Phoenix, of *Joker* (2019) develops Arthur Fleck and the story with the support of Method Acting, territorial theories and film techniques. More specifically, the study will consider (1) how Arthur interacts with other characters and narrative space in different territories naturalistically; and (2) how Method Acting, territorial theories and film techniques facilitate Arthur’s characterisation and the story development. The study of Arthur reveals that he undergoes a metamorphosis during resisting his tormentors in the story. The study of Arthur also shows that it is meaningful to introduce territorial theories to film analysis and Method Acting.

Keywords: territory, narrative space, characterisation, Method Acting, film techniques

1. Introduction

Joker (2019) is an American psychological thriller directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix as the Joker. The film’s creation is characterised by Method Acting (Pisapia, 2019), manifesting naturalistic techniques and improvisation (Pisapia, 2019; Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020). Firstly, Joaquin Phoenix’s acting in *Joker* (2019) embodies naturalism

(OSSA, 2019; Roebuck, 2019; Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020). Naturalistic acting aims to portray the character's emotions and behaviours exactly like those of human beings in real life. Phoenix engaged in extensive preparation for this role. That, to name a few, included losing weight, researching the mental illness people, working on joker's makeup and laughter.

Phoenix did a lot to his body to prepare for the role as the Joker, (...) it seems Phoenix is living up to the image.

(Pisapia, 2019)

Phoenix researched mentally ill people's behaviour. (...) When approaching Joker's laughs, (...) he was inspired by people affected with pathological laughter.

(OSSA, 2019)

In preparation, (...) I took pictures of different stages of looking. There's one where it's just the white paint and there's something very haunting about that look. It seemed almost more scary than the full Joker makeup (...) Todd and we decided to kind of use that look for a scene in the movie.

(Joaquin Phoenix cited in DCComics, 2019)

Secondly, the work of Joaquin Phoenix and Todd Phillips embodies the characteristics of improvisation.

Todd Phillips: All we really talked about was script and story and character but we never talked about how you are gonna do it.

Joaquin Phoenix: We were working spontaneously which was just the flavor of this movie and what made the most sense for it was something that you really couldn't figure everything out in advance. We had to find it in the moment.

(Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020)

Thirdly, the set design of the film strives to provide a photographic reproduction of the story's reality.

Todd Phillips: (...) my memory of [New York City 1981] was kind of what you see in the movie a very kind of run-down broken-down city on every level.

Mark Friedberg: In fact we actually made a map. It helps us understand (...) the places Arthur travels to, and where's haha, where's Wayne Hall, (...).

(Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2020)

This article will use the case study method because the method allows this research to investigate how Arthur develops his role and the Joker's story through interacting with narrative space and other scene partners under the guidance of Method Acting, territorial theories, and film techniques in great detail. The article will approach this research question by discussing how Arthur respects and encroaches various spaces in communication through his verbal and nonverbal activities and the support of film techniques. In the next section, this research will review the theories related to the research question.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Method Acting, narrative space and film technique play a vital role in crafting Arthur. The theories about them will be reviewed in this section one by one.

2.1 Method Acting

Lee Strasberg develops Method Acting based on Konstantin Stanislavski's system for stage acting. Strasberg takes the system from stage to screen by redefining the relationship between the director and the actor and equipping actors with film acting techniques. On one hand, Strasberg follows Stanislavski and emphasises the importance of acting training. He requires his actors to find characters within themselves by falling back on their personal experiences

and analysing appropriate incidents from their repertoire. On the other hand, Strasberg challenges Stanislavski's proposition that acting is the result of actors' analysis of plays. He claims that it is the director who sculpts characters and manipulates acting (Carnicke, 1999, p. 83). Nevertheless, there are many contradictory claims in Strasberg's Method Acting. For instance, he stresses the importance of actors in charge of acting but insists on the director's authority; he highlights the role of emotional memory but holds that what goes on in actors' minds is less important than their physical expression.

Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner (Krasner, 2010) also explore Method Acting. Adler recommends the actor to approach a role by relating to the character's time and situation and the play's given circumstances from a sociological approach. Meisner advocates the actor to prepare for acting by studying his/her scene partners and adjusting acting to correspond to partners' changed signals and stimuli from a behavioural perspective.

It should be emphasised that the positions taken by Adler and Meisner are not mutually exclusive with Strasberg's psychological point of view. They all advocate memory recall, allow actors to improvise, and uphold naturalistic acting. To credibly portray the multiple facets of a character, the Method actor needs to consult different techniques, including the 'mask acting' – hiding a character behind a 'mask' – in some situations.

In real life, we rarely act directly from our emotions. Feeling (...) is followed by an adjustment of the individual to the situation and to the other people involved in it, (...). Since most dramatic conflict arises either from characters trying to get behind the personality masks of others or from trying to prevent others from seeing through their own masks.

(Carney, 2001, p. 53)

Method Acting, particularly Adler and Meisner's (Krasner, 2010) techniques, provides actors with guidance on how to naturalistically approach their roles and respond to their scene partners in the given environment of the story. This research will use it to explore how Arthur's liminality¹ is crafted in *Joker* (2019).

Besides considering how to represent characters and their interactions believably, Method actors also need to consider how to reliably communicate with the film's narrative space. That is because characters and their interactions are developed in it. The important role of narrative space brings me to the discussion of the following part.

2.2 Narrative Space

Stephen Heath (1976) coins narrative space. He regards narrative space as an implicit physical space created by camera work. Gabriel Zoran (1984) expands Heath's (1976) research on narrative space by distinguishing it into the topographical, chronotopic, and textual levels to represent the space created by static entities, movements and verbal communications in films. Miss Yujin (2009) further stretches the boundaries of previous research by defining narrative space as any space where a narrative can occur. Her narrative space can be physical, emotional, psychological, or other intangible forms (Cutting, Iricinschi, & Brunick, 2013, p. 64). However, these narrative space discussions do not specify the method of analysing each type of space.

To overcome this shortcoming, this research will use theories developed from daily communication to explore how Arthur interplays with different types of spaces in *Joker* (2019). Theories based on human communication can be applied to study *Joker* (2019), because the film is a naturalistic film that focuses on reproducing reality.

Space is 'an ambivalent "medium" which is dialectically constructed between subject and environment, between human being (physical and psychological) and environment (Bollnow cited in De Silva, 2007, p. 40)'. In everyday life, space is purposefully created to serve use and

‘acts as background to other objects and relationships (Gaines, 2006, p. 173)’. The way people own or use space in the course of interaction has to do with the concepts of territory and proximity. Scholars take different perspectives to inspect territory and proximity.

The territory is defined as the restricted physical area(s) where an individual claims as his/her own (Lin & Armstrong, 2019, p. 435). Experiments show that the lack of territory potentially leads to social deviations and physiological problems of an individual (Moore, Hickson, & Stacks, 2014, p. 106). Laura K. Guerrero (2015) reviews the classification of physical territories, the territorial encroachments, and the reactions to encroachments based on the research carried out by Stanford Lyman and Marvin Scott (1967) and Irwin Altman (1975) in the context of American society (see Table 1).

Table 1 Guerrero’s (2015) Review of Human Physical Territories

Physical Territories		Encroachments	Reactions
Lyman and Scott (1967)	Altman (1975)		
Public territory	Public territory	Violation	Turf defense
Interactional territory	Secondary territory	Invasion	Insulation
Home territory	Primary territory	Contamination	Linguistic collusion
Body territory			Withdrawal

According to Guerrero’s (2015) review, public territory is available to anyone temporarily, provided that the person acknowledges interaction order. Secondary territory is an area where a person or a group of people share use with others periodically. Primary territory is a private place where the owner has exclusive rights to use or own it. Territories are sometimes encroached in the forms of violation, invasion, and contamination. A territory will be violated if someone enters or uses it without permission; it will be invaded if someone tries to take it over permanently; and it will be contaminated if things like odor, and graffiti alter it. In response to these three types of encroachments, the encroached tends to respond with

unwelcome claimants in forms of turf defense, insulation, linguistic collusion, or withdrawal. While turf defense is a necessary confrontation with the unforgivable intruder, insulation is installing a barrier to protect the occupant of a territory from being invaded. An intruder is labelled as an outsider in linguistic collusion. If an encroached 'runs away', the withdrawal will occur.

However, Guerrero (2015) only accounts for the three types of territories distinguished by Altman (1975). She does not clarify the differences and connections between Altman's (1975) territory classifications and those of Lyman and Scott's² (1967) in her review. Based on studying their definitions, this research finds that public territory in these two classifications is probably interchangeable, second territory can be considered equivalent to interactional territory, and primary territory incorporates home territory and body territory.

Using different criteria, Erving Goffman (2010, p. 29) identifies the 'fixed' territory and the 'situational' territory. The 'fixed' type is staked out geographically and attached to one claimant. Fields, yards, and houses are examples. The 'situational' type is made available to people in the form of claimed goods while-in-use. Goffman (2010, pp. 29-41) affirms that 'the territories of self' is situational and portable and can be further discerned into: (1) Personal Space, (2) The Stall, (3) Use Space, (4) The Turn, (5) The Sheath, (6) Possessional Territory, (7) Informational Preserve, and (8) Conversational Preserve.

Of the 'eight territories of self', six seem particularly relevant to this study. Personal Space is a sphere of space that surrounds a claimant. It is equivalent to Lyman and Scott's (1967) concept of body territory (Moore et al., 2014, p. 109). People always carry with it wherever they go to public, secondary, or primary territory. Use Space is the space that one needs to take to perform personal functions. Possessional Territory consists of objects – such as jackets, hats, matches, bags – that a claimant claims as his/her own. The Sheath refers to the skin covering

the body and the clothes covering the skin. An individual exerts control over the access of his information in Informational Preserve and who can engage in a talk in Conversational Preserve.

Goffman (2010) furthers Lyman and Scott's (1967) and Altman's (1975) territorial discussions by adding to self-violation and preclusiveness onto the form of encroachment and by addressing violation and territorial preserve markers. A claimant defiles himself as a preserve in self-violation. Improper attire or behaviour in public is an example of this type. '[T]he effort of an individual to keep persons at a distance he has no right (in their eyes) to maintain (Goffman, 2010, p. 58)' is defined as preclusiveness. Refusal to answer a police officer's question is a case for this point. Goffman asserts that territorial encroachments can take multimodal forms such as gaze, body heat, odor, noise, talk other than a physical attack. A claimant can either use objects (central markers), bars (boundary markers), or signatures (ear markers) to claim his territory.

While Lyman and Scott's (1967) and Altman's (1975) territories mainly focus on the interaction between people and physical territory, Goffman (2010) balances that by giving more attention to the communication between people and sensory territory. Furthermore, Goffman (2010) broadens the research of Lyman and Scott (1967) and Altman (1975) by offering more detailed classifications. His territorial theory can be applied to investigate how people communicate with space and with others in space.

It needs to stress that the above-reviewed territory theories (Altman, 1975; Goffman, 2010; Lyman & Scott, 1967) pay close attention to how individuals claim and defend their ownership of a territory. They view violations negatively. Judee K. Burgoon (2015) departs from these studies in that violations are not always unfavourable. She believes that if a violation is better than a confirmation, then it is better to violate.

Specifically, Burgoon (2015) proposes Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) to study how an individual's behaviour can be used to confirm or violate another individual's expectations or social norms in interpersonal communication. EVT predicts that 'positive violations produce better outcomes than positive confirmations, and negative violations produce worse outcomes than negative confirmations' (Burgoon, 2015, p. 5). The theory explains the communicative effects of nonverbal violations, such as proxemics, eye contact, touch, body orientation. Burgoon's (2015) EVT can be used to study how film characters follow and violate nonverbal communication rules.

Unlike Burgoon (2015), W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen (Pearce, 2004) posit Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), which pays special attention to how individuals create, coordinate and manage meanings in verbal communication under the influence of sociocultural norms (Pearce, 2004). The theory seeks to improve and promote interpersonal communication by encouraging individuals to avoid potential conflicts and enhance mutual understanding. CMM can assist the exploration of Zoran's (1984) defined textual space in films.

Edward Hall (1966) develops a proxemic theory to study how different individuals and ethnic groups adopt appropriate distances to use space in various social interactions. He identifies four major human interaction distances. Intimate Distance (< 0.45m) is reserved for intimate or secret interactions, such as embrace, touch, whisper. While Personal Distance (0.45m – 1.2m) is used for interactions among good friends or family members, Social Distance (1.2m – 3.6m) and Public Distance (3.6m – 7.6m) are for acquaintances and public speaking, respectively. Hall (1966) emphasises that the interpretation of these distances varies from culture to culture. Hall's (1966) proxemics can be applied to study the distance between characters, between the camera and characters and the placement of *mise-en-scène* elements in films.

Pearce and Cronen's (Pearce, 2004) CMM and Burgoon's (2015) EVT deepen Goffman's (2010) territorial research on interpersonal communication in verbal and nonverbal aspects. Hall's (1966) proxemics broadens Goffman's (2010) territorial research by discussing the appropriate interpersonal communication distances. These theories (Burgoon, 2015; Hall, 1966; Pearce, 2004) will be affiliated with Goffman's (2010) territorial theory to study how characters use and claim their territories in this article. To clearly locate characters, Altman's (1975) territorial classifications will be consulted when necessary.

These territorial theories (Burgoon, 2015; Goffman, 2010; Hall, 1966; Pearce, 2004) are used to guide human beings to maintain the order of interaction, thereby avoiding potential conflicts in real life. However, in films, they are often deliberately employed to formulate violations to promote the development of the story. Therefore, although naturalistic films imitate human communication, the communication of characters in films is not always exactly the same as people in daily interactions.

2.3 Film Techniques

Method actors need to collaborate with mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound effects carefully because these film techniques reveal how characters interact with each other and narrative space. Film techniques have been researched by scholars (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Monaco, 2009). They are the toolbox with which the filmmaker guides, modifies or even alters the audiences' reading of the iconographic elements on the screen (Monaco, 2009, p. 205). According to James Monaco (2009), mise-en-scène includes the study of settings, props, lighting, costumes, and makeup; cinematography is about the manipulations of camerawork; editing refers to juxtaposing shots to create ideas more than what audiences can see from the screen; and sound effects consist of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds.

The above reviewed Method Acting (Krasner, 2010), territorial theories (Altman, 1975; Burgoon, 2015; Goffman, 2010; Hall, 1966; Pearce, 2004), and film techniques (Monaco, 2009) will be utilised to study how the lead actor develops Arthur and the story through interacting with narrative space and other scene partners in the following section.

3. *Joker* (2019)

The story of *Joker* (2019) is set in the fictional lawless city Gotham, in which the upper class and the lower class are clearly divided and in which the rich can capriciously trample down the destitute. The main character Arthur Fleck is a comedian working as a clown for 'Haha' entertainment business. Arthur has several mental illnesses. One of them is his uncontrollable laughter under stress. After being frequently abused and disregarded by people and society, Arthur embarks on a series of revenge acts by committing bloody crimes. In the film, Arthur's life can be divided into two stages based on his communication behaviours. The first stage is called subservient time, when he withholds emotions and be submissive. The second stage is named liberated time, when he expresses his inner feelings straightforwardly and openly.

3.1 *How Arthur Interacts with Narrative Spaces?*

Firstly, Arthur's liminality is revealed by his behaviours in public and private spaces. Figure 1 shows Arthur obeys Gotham's accepted communication orders in public. His arms are habitually crossed in front of his body and his upper body always slightly bows to the interactant. On one hand, the body language suggests Arthur is submissive, and on the other hand, it reflects he is uneasy when exposed in public space and needs his arms to form a barrier to offer him a sense of security. From the distance (1.2m – 3.6m) and the way he communicates with others we can conclude that he strives to comply with interaction norms, at least seemingly.



Figure 1 Arthur's Body Language in Public Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

Arthur's behaviours in private space are not the same as in public space. He is very relaxed when staying at his dim and small apartment. That can be seen from his freely swung legs and widely stretched arms in Figure 2. The demeanour at home suggests Arthur feels safe and removes camouflage. The private zone offers him a sense of protection.



Figure 2 Arthur's Body Language in Primary Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

Secondly, Arthur's liminality is revealed by his emotions in public and private spaces. Arthur is obedient in public space in front of authorities but riotous in private space when he is alone during his subservient time. Images on the left and right sides of Figure 3 illustrate his differences. He is silent and keeps wearing a happy face when reproached by his boss Hoyt (*It's bullshit. It doesn't make sense.*) (3a), but desperately kicks abandoned dumpsters in a quiet lane after the conversation to show his anger (3b). He implores Hoyt to keep his job over phone

in a low, feeble voice (*Wait. Please. I love this job.*) (3c), but hits the wall of the phone booth hard after being fired to express his helplessness (3d). In these two examples, although Hoyt contaminates Arthur's conversational preserve by refusing to trust him (see the two short dialogues below), Arthur responds to him with remedial smiles and imploring to comply with the grammar of Gotham's social interaction.

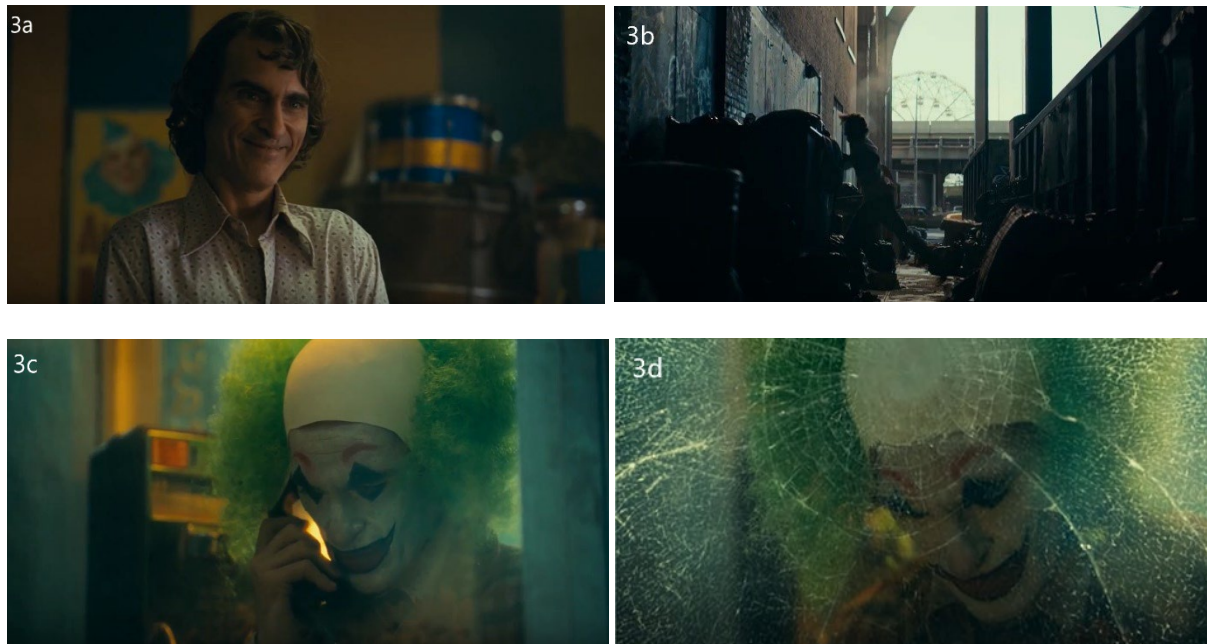


Figure 3 Arthur's Emotions in Public and in Primary Territories – Masked vs Unmasked

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screensaps

(3a-b) Arthur: I got jumped. Did you hear?

Hoyt: It's bullshit. It doesn't make sense.

(3c-d) Arthur: Wait. Please. I love this job.

Hoyt: I need to know why you brought a gun into a kid's hospital?

Arthur: It's a prop. Part of my acting.

Hoyt: That's bullshit. Bullshit. ...a liar. You're fired.

In addition to physical and emotional activities, dance, makeup, and laughter are other ways Arthur interacts with narrative space. Their changed forms indicate the changes in Arthur's personality. In the first place, Arthur uses dance to interact with primary and public territories. In the four dances, Arthur successively dances in a public bathroom, in his bathtub at home, on outdoor communal staircases, and on the top of a police car on the street (see Figure 4). The dancing places shift from primary (4a and 4b) to public territories (4c and 4d), implying Arthur's resistance becomes open. The dancing places also adhere to the symbolic meaning of 'stage', on which Arthur 'accepts, acknowledges and becomes free of his repressed self (Singh, 2019)'.

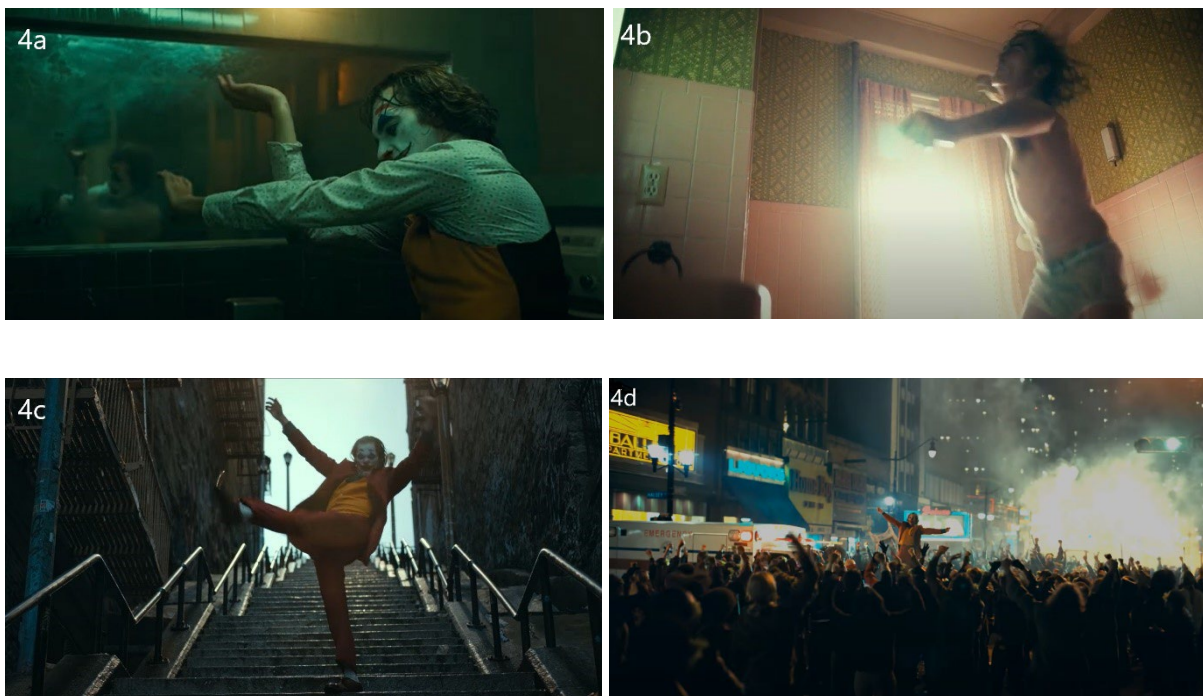


Figure 4 Arthur's Dances – in Primary and Public Territories

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

Dance is another mask that Phoenix employs to develop Arthur. Dancing moments emerge in the film each time after Arthur faces intense situations like slaughtering Wall Street brokers (4a), smothering his mother (4b), butchering his former colleague (4c), and murdering Murray

(4d). These dancing pieces seem to be Arthur as a clown's performance but actually are articulating his inner feelings. Arthur dances to calm himself after the first killing but uses it to celebrate the success of his revenge after other killings.

Arthur's psychological metamorphosis is reflected in his different gaits and demeanours in the four dancing pieces. The first piece (4a) is fragmental, consisting of slow arm drags, pushes, and feet-drawn circles. The second dance (4b) is smoother and more energetic than the first and is primarily formed by bodily wiggles. The third (4c) is the most complex and performance-like dance constituting stretches, kicks, jumps, and whirls. The last piece (4d) is the simplest of the four and is a statue-like one, making up of whirls and opening arms. The changed dancing styles, from drag and push to wiggle and then kick and jump, 'signify a butterfly trying to leave its cocoon (Scottshak, 2019)' and further symbolise Arthur's transition from a clown to a murderer. Todd Phillips comments:

the dancing was, 'something that kind of evolved' to show how the music within Arthur was 'fighting to get out.' When it does, each dance marks an important point along Arthur's narrative journey.

(Looper, 2019)

In the second place, the joker's makeup and laughter provide other methods for Arthur to communicate with narrative space. They, like the dance, form a mask for him to hide his inner world in front of people. Under the mask of happiness lingers his frustration, anger, and despair. The joker's makeup, dance, and uncontrollable laughter can be viewed as Arthur's self-violation of the public territory when they are not applied to work. The process from trying to use makeup, dance and laughter appropriately to using them at will suggests Arthur's transformation. Arthur's physical and emotional disguises give offenders an illusion that he is

a pushover, thereby bullying him unscrupulously. Offenders' misinterpretation of Arthur foreshadows the serial murder afterward.

3.2 How Arthur Interacts with Scene Partners

'Conflict is the central feature of the screen story' (Dancyger & Rush, 2013, p. 3). Territorial theories (Altman, 1975; Burgoon, 2015; Goffman, 2010; Hall, 1966; Pearce, 2004) reveal how characters and stories, particularly conflicts, are created through scene partners' interactions. In the 'man against man' pattern of *Joker* (2019), Arthur is assigned distinct goals to propel the story. To help Arthur achieve his goals, Phoenix applies territorial and behavioural violations to make Arthur against offenders in his second life stage. The shooting of three Wall Street brokers is seen as the dividing line of Arthur's stance, demarcating the boundary between protecting 'the territories of self' and building 'the territories of self' and Phoenix's masked and unmasked acting.

Arthur only preserves his territory when it is violated in his subservient stage. For instance, at the end of the opening scene, a group of teenagers snatch Arthur's signboard and run away when Arthur is in a clown costume, twirling a sign and cavorting for passers-by at Gotham Square. Arthur chases the teenagers into an alley to get his possession back but is assaulted (5a) by them soon after (see Figure 5). The film shows Arthur withdraws (5b) – only curls up on the ground and pants – even though his possessional territory and personal space are violated in the public territory. To track characters' activities, this scene's field is switched between deep and shallow with the assistance of cut and alternated camera movements and shot sizes.



Figure 5. Street Scene – Arthur is Violated in Public Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

In Subway Scene, Arthur laughs uncontrollably when three young Wall Street stockbrokers are flirting a young girl. Being irritated by Arthur’s inopportune laughter, the three snatch his hat and bag (6a) and then assault him (6b). Arthur’s possessional territory and personal space are again violated in the public territory.



Figure 6. Subway Scene – Arthur is Violated in Public Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

Unlike before, Arthur defends this time. He takes out the gun given by his colleague Randall from his pocket and fires one in the head, one in the chest, and the last one on the back (see Figure 7). Arthur, at this point, becomes an invader of these brokers’ sheaths as he does physical harm to their bodies. It needs to stress that from this moment, he begins his journey of transformation, metamorphosing from not being able to do anything to ultimately fighting

back. *Joker's* (2019) makeup artist Nicki Ledermann also believes the subway scene is a turning point for Arthur.

‘It’s pretty clear that his character is really vulnerable, and starting from that really vulnerable place, there’s a turning point [in the film] that turns into a liberation,’ she says. ‘And when we talk about the subway scene, at that point it’s like the turning point of the liberation.’

(Taylor-Foster, 2020)



Figure 7 Subway Scene – Three Brokers are Invaded in Public Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screencaps

The intervention of the black screen and the rattle of train carriage collaborate to create an authentic subway feel. The camera moves along with Arthur, panning, tilting, or zooming to track his movements. Editing alternates shot sizes and cuts them back and forth to enable audiences to see the overall picture of the killing from the screen. The low and high alternation

in camera angles (7c and 7d) manifests Arthur's positions and reactions, thereby highlights his reverse from an intruder to an intruder.

Arthur constructs 'the territories of self' in his liberated time. After learning that his mother Penny and her ex-partner were responsible for his disturbing laugh and unstoppable tic in horrible circumstances, Arthur is on the brink of madness. He dashes to Penny's ward and queries her about his condition in a soft but furious voice. The camera zooms to Arthur to open the scene. The ward, divided into two parts by lighting and furniture, can be compared to their primary territory (see Figure 8). Although Arthur is entitled to be in the ward as a son, he intrudes Penny's personal space from the moment he puts a pillow onto her face with the intention of murder. Penny is given time to defend herself in this scene, but given her health condition, her strength is not enough to push the pillow away before being suffocated to death. Their offensive and defensive actions are recorded by the interchange of the pan and the tilt, and the shift between the medium and the medium long shots.

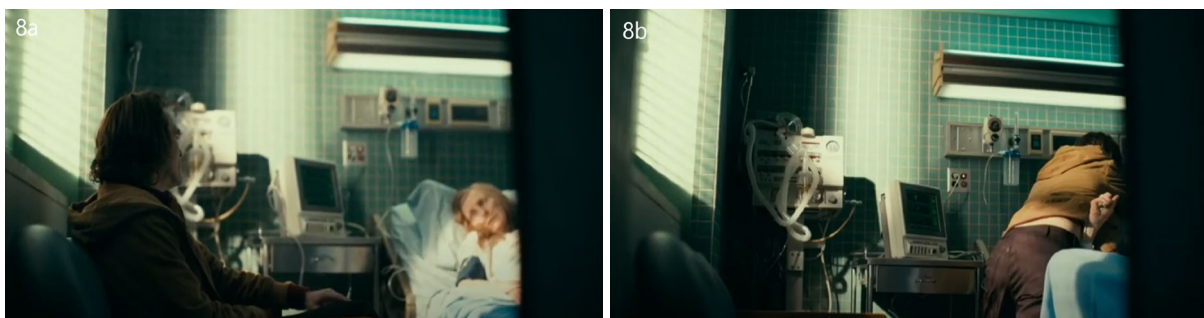


Figure 8 Ward Scene – Penny is Invaded at Primary Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

Arthur holds different attitudes towards Gary and Randall – his colleagues in 'Haha' entertainment – because Gary is a person who cares for his well-being but Randall is a person who is hypocritical and always incriminates him. Arthur brutally murders Randall in his apartment when realised Randall comes to frame him again.

Randall: Hey, listen. I don't know if you've heard but the cops have been coming around the shop talking all the guys and those subway murders, and...

Gary: They didn't talk to me.

Randall: That's because the suspect was a regular-sized person.

More precisely, Gary's discoordination in the conversation reveals that the purpose of Randall's visit is to trap Arthur. Realising that, Arthur tauntingly fights back, '*Thank you Randall. Thank you so much*' while quickly takes out a pair of scissors from his back pocket, stabbing deeply into Randall's neck and eyes (see Figure 9b). In this scene, Randall contaminates Arthur's right of information preserve with deceptive words first and then Arthur reacts him with a retaliatory murder. Although Arthur invades Randall's personal space and sheath, it happens so fast that Randall even does not get time to react before losing his life. Their actions are highlighted by their foregrounded position (9a) and by the alternation between the medium and the medium close-up shots. The violent atmosphere is accentuated by the sounds of blood splashing and the head hitting the wall. It needs to point out that the violations in dialogue play an essential role in inventing conflicts in this scene and the talk show scene below.



Figure 9 Visitors Scene – Randall and Arthur Offend Each Other at Primary Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

The talk show scene happens in a secondary territory. In this scene, Arthur's use of space is continuously violated as his self-revelation is snapped from time to time by the audience's groans and Murray's cut in. Examples of characters' uncooperative verbal communication include:

1. Arthur: Oh, why is everybody so upset about these guys?
(groans from the audience)
If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me!
2. Arthur: Have you seen what it's like out there, Murray? (...) You think men like Thomas Wayne, ever think what it's like to be a guy like me? (shaking his head, voice rising)
Murray: (shakes his head) You finished? I mean, it's so much self-pity, Arthur.

In these two examples, Arthur's revelation doesn't receive any understanding and sympathy from the audience and Murray. The anger of being humiliated and disregarded is displayed by his hysterical roar, shaking head, vibrating arms, and resentful gaze (10a). Arthur's speech patterns and body languages disclose the unmanageable ongoing tension and his emotional state. He explodes in the form of violating Murray's personal space and sheath (see Figure 10 b) – shooting him from a Personal Distance (0.45m – 1.2m). Like the first two Wall Street stockbrokers and Randall, Murray is not given any time to defend himself before dying.

It finds this 'non-resistance' reaction to encroachment recurs in this film but was not identified in the previously discussed territory literature. It is worth mentioning that this scene is the burst of the formerly accumulated conflicts and can be regarded as the peak of Arthur's retaliation for the reason that 'Joker' is brought out into complete craziness and opposes his tormentor openly in the front of other guests and audiences.

Film techniques, like other scenes, play an important role in shaping the conflict. When the non-diegetic beat functions to indicate the increased tension between Arthur and Murray, the joker's makeup and red suit, and the film's shallow focus help gather audiences' attention on Arthur and his behaviour. The frequently practiced fixed camera and close-up help audiences to grasp the swings in Arthur's mood.

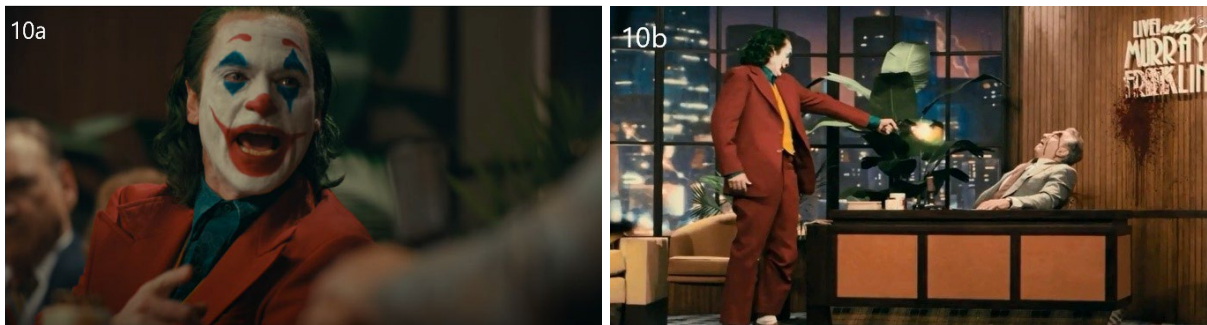


Figure 10 Talk Show Scene – Murray is Invaded at Secondary Territory

Source: *Joker* (2019) Screenscaps

The discussion of how Arthur interacts with scene partners finds that if everyone follows the rules of communication, communication can proceed smoothly. For example, Arthur acquiesces to be the bullied and does not resist the bullying in the street scene. However, if the role violates the accepted rules of communication, conflicts will arise. Characters' violations of the communication guidelines are reflected in verbal and non-verbal forms. The dialogue between Arthur and Murray in the talk show scene is an example of verbal breaches. In contrast, the fight between Arthur and Wall Street stockbrokers in the subway scene is an example of non-verbal aggression. Conflicts are realised through characters invading each other's territory in Intimate Distance ($< 0.45\text{m}$) or Personal Distance ($0.45\text{m} - 1.2\text{m}$). They are distances usually for partners, good friends, or family members, but are used by characters to attack opponents in this film.

4. Conclusion

This research explores how the lead actor of *Joker* (2019) develops Arthur Fleck and the story with the support of Method Acting, territorial theories and film techniques. The analysis of how Arthur communicates with the narrative space and his scene partners reveals Arthur's liminal personality. This liminality continuously misleads people and makes them unceasingly attack on his territories. These attacks have a catastrophic impact on Arthur's psychology, and eventually turn him from a victim of territorial encroachment to a perpetrator of other people's territories. The ongoing conflicts between Arthur and offenders drive the development of the Joker's story. In addition, Arthur's attitudes toward social rules divides his life to two stages. In his complying period, Arthur makes efforts to integrate himself into the social norms of Gotham through being a submissive citizen even has been treated aggressively. However, he begins to fight against his tormentors and the established controversial social orders when they keep attacking him.

Film techniques interact with acting in different forms. The field of the above murder scenes is deep at the beginning, discerning foreground, middle ground, and background, but becomes shallow as characters have physical conflicts. The shallow field together with the medium and medium close-up shots are frequently employed to highlight Arthur's emotions and physical activities. Makeup and props (dance, laughter) are employed to disclose Arthur's characteristics, particularly his polarisation. The design of set other than demarcates the authorised territories of characters also suggests their information. For instance, the graffiti and dumpster covered dirty streets, and the compact space of Arthur's home reveal his living environment and social class. The dark tone of the film creates a gloomy atmosphere.

It is beneficial to introduce territorial theories (Burgoon, 2015; Goffman, 2010; Hall, 1966; Pearce, 2004) to film analysis seeing that they help understand how established interaction orders of the story are respected or encroached by characters, and how characters and stories are developed in the course of conflict.

It is meaningful to introduce territorial theories (Burgoon, 2015; Goffman, 2010; Hall, 1966; Pearce, 2004) to Method Acting in view of the fact that these territorial theories, which ground on observing and researching people's daily communication behaviours can provide a new angle for Method actors to deal with characters' interaction and character-space interaction.

Notes

¹A liminal character 'is a both/and, neither/nor, betwixt/between character. [...] He lives on the border, [...], between civilized and uncivilized, [...], between good and evil (Poulos, 2012, p. 487)'.

²According to Lyman and Scott (1967, pp. 237-241), public territory is open to all who enter it and follow acknowledged social norms. Interactional territory is the space where a social gathering can take place. The boundary of interactional territory is invisible and impermanence. Home territory refers to the space that the regular occupants control and have the freedom to behave in their preferred manner. Body territory, which always co-exists with the other three territories, encompasses space reserved for our bodies. It, theoretically, is the most private space.

References

- Altman, I. (1975). *The Environment and Social Behavior: Privacy, Personal Space, Territory, and Crowding*. California: Monterey.
- Bollnow, O. F. (1963). *Mensch und Raum*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2008). *Film Art: an introduction, (8th ed.)*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Burgoon, J. K. (2015). Expectancy violations theory. In C. R. Berger & M. E. Roloff (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 1-9): John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Carney, R. (2001). *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*. United States: Faber and Faber Inc.
- Carnicke, S. M. (1999). Lee Strasberg's paradox of the actor. In A. Lovell & P. Kramer (Eds.), *Screen acting* (pp. 75-87). London and New York: Routledge.
- Cutting, J. E., Iricinschi, C., & Brunick, K. L. (2013). Mapping narrative space in Hollywood film. *Projections*, 7(2), 64-91. doi:10.3167/proj.2013.070204
- Dancyger, K., & Rush, J. (2013). *Alternative scriptwriting: Beyond the Hollywood formula (5th ed.)*. New York and London: Focal Press.
- DCComics (2019, 2019). Joaquin Phoenix on the making of 'Joker' [Youtube Interview]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WqVB7OcERU>

- De Silva, W. (2007). Otto Friedrich Bollnow's concept of human space. A Critical Discussion on the Fundamentals of the Concepts of Space. *Built-Environment Sri Lanka*, 7(2), 40-42.
- Gaines, E. (2006). Communication and the semiotics of space. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 1(2), 173-181. doi:10.1177/097325860600100203
- Goffman, E. (2010). *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. the United States of America: Transaction Publishers.
- Guerrero, L. K. (2015). Proxemics. *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication*, 1-5. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecp112>
- Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. Garden City: NY: Doubleday.
- Heath, S. (1976). Narrative space. *Screen*, 17(3), 68-112.
- Krasner, D. (2010). Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting. In A. Hodge (Ed.), *Actor training Second edition* (pp. 144-163). New York: Routledge.
- Lin, S., & Armstrong, D. (2019). Beyond Information: The Role of Territory in Privacy Management Behavior on Social Networking Sites. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 20(4), 434-475. doi:<https://doi.org/10.17705/1.jais.00540>
- Looper (Producer). (2019). We Now Know Why Joaquin's Joker Dances So Much. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBl2RcYg0>
- Lyman, S. M., & Scott, M. B. (1967). Territoriality: a neglected sociological dimension. *Social problems*, 15, 236-249.
- Miss, Y. (2009). Narrative Space in Sleepless in Seattle and Suspicion. Retrieved from <http://katrinah18.blogspot.com/2009/02/narrative-space-sleepless-in-seattle.html>
- Monaco, J. (2009). *How to read a film: Movies, media, and beyond*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, N.-J., Hickson, M., & Stacks, D. W. (2014). *Nonverbal Communication: Studies and Applications*: Oxford University Press.
- OSSA (2019). How Joaquin Phoenix Prepared For Joker [Youtube]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhkAmINJZ9M>
- Pearce, W. B. (2004). The coordinated management of meaning (CMM). *Theorizing about intercultural communication*, 35-54.
- Pisapia, T. (2019). The strange ways Joaquin Phoenix prepared to play The Joker. Retrieved from <https://www.looper.com/158478/the-strange-ways-joaquin-phoenix-prepared-to-play-the-joker/>
- Poulos, C. (2012). The liminal hero. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 12(6), 485-490. doi:10.1177/1532708612457633
- Roebuck, M. (2019). Method Actor Joaquin Phoenix Rumored to Have Developed Sense of Humor in Preparation for Joker Role. Retrieved from <https://thehardtimes.net/harddrive/method-actor-joaquin-phoenix-rumored-to-have-developed-sense-of-humor-in-preparation-for-joker-role/>
- Scottshak. (2019). Joker Movie Review (2019) | A Psychological Masterpiece. Retrieved from <http://straightfromamovie.com/joker-movie-review-2019/>
- Singh, S. (2019). Joker (2019): Film Psychoanalytical Review. Retrieved 2 June, 2020 https://www.academia.edu/43029014/Joker_2019_Film_Psychoanalytical_Review#:~:text=T%20he%20film%20is%20a%20beautiful,meaning%20of%20his%20own%20existence.
- Taylor-Foster, K. (2020). Slice and Dice: Breaking Down the Subway Shooting Scene in 'Joker'. Retrieved from <https://www.fandom.com/articles/slice-and-dice-breaking-down-the-subway-shooting-scene-in-joker>
- Warner Bros. Entertainment (2020, 20 April). Joker | Behind The Scenes with Joaquin Phoenix and Todd Phillips [Youtube video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLVNJ50vCDI>
- Zoran, G. (1984). Towards a theory of space in narrative. *Poetics Today*, 5(2), 309-335.

Author's Bio-sketch

Dr. Zhen Zhang is an early career researcher at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney. Her core research interests include film studies, visual communication, and social semiotics. She teaches language and culture- and design-related subjects.

ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-3357>