

THE CIGARETTE AS A NARRATIVE-AUDIOVISUAL STYLE. CONTENT ANALYSIS: *THE JOKER* AND *THE BRUTALIST*

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Audiovisual narratives offer endless meanings through the different elements that are shown on screen. Sometimes, they go unnoticed, but at others, the power they have in the hands of the protagonist of the films is such that it is impossible not to validate the importance of certain objects. For this reason, the following article presents an analysis of cigarette use and the messages it emits in two films: *The Joker* (2019) and *The Brutalist* (2024). In particular, the objective is to study the meaning that this object has from the number of scenes that are on screen and are used by the main characters (Arthur Fleck & László Tóth – respectively –), of these films. **Methodology:** This study has a qualitative approach, specifically, with the content analysis tool. **Results:** It is found that the cigar, in both feature films, is an extension of the body, part of the personality of the characters and is not only an object of decoration or an element of the scene. **Discussion:** Although the literature indicates that cigarettes are part of certain behaviors and characteristics of those who use them on screen, this is

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not always the case. **Conclusions:** The life that the characters have encourages them to use the cigarette as their own element. On the other hand, smoke and tobacco are linked to create stories that help describe complex and circular characters, where not everything is good, not everything is bad.

Keywords: cigar, smoking, content analysis, movies, semiotics, signs, meanings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Audiovisual narrative emerges from manipulated and ordered images that come to life through continuity; precisely for this reason, developing a single theory focused on narrative is complicated (Gutiérrez, 2006). If the goal is to conduct a narrative and audiovisual analysis, the following elements must be considered: 1) it involves a succession of images that recount events with meanings and symbolism, possessing ideology, social elements, aesthetics, etc.; 2) it focuses on the formation of a language specific to the product; 3) it is linked to structuralism, semiotics, and metaphor analysis (Yoel, 2004).

Film capitalizes on the visual and symbolic potential of objects within the frame; a prime example is the cigarette, which not only stands out as a primary object but is also associated with elegance, power, mystery, insecurity, nervousness, emotional instability, rebellion, and other feelings. Therefore, when cigarettes and smoke are shown in films, they create a mold of the character (mood, personality, feelings), and can also reflect the intensity and atmosphere of the scene; thus, it is said that the link between cigarettes and film lies in symbolism (Valente, 2024).

1.1. General Information About Cinema

There are two essential elements for filmmaking, the first is the image, its existence is situated at various levels of reality and by virtue of some general characteristics; the second is sound, which adds to restoring the environment of beings and things (Ayala, 2023; Martin, 2021).

In contrast, cinema is considered the “youngest” art form; moreover, the mass audience views it as a source of entertainment rather than as a subject for analysis or study, especially when it comes to stories that don't require in-depth analysis (Sikov, 2010). In this sense, starting with symbolism, what appears on screen is never neutral; it always signifies something more. This connection ranges from the belief in the reality of what is represented to the intellectual perception of signs as elements of a language (Carrière, 1994).

Conversely, discussing the true meaning of an image is complex because it often escapes the public; therefore, it is essential to know how to read an audiovisual product, decode the meaning of the images, understand the subtleties of the messages and symbols of the objects, and understand that words (dialogues) often have different nuances (McDonald, 2022).

It should be noted that an essential element of films is the role of the main characters; in this sense, they are the ones who drive the plots and carry the weight of the narrative. Specifically, there are four types: 1) main characters; 2) supporting characters; 3) special appearances; and 4) extras. Audiovisual narratives are presented through the interaction between these characters. It is worth mentioning that the concept of character development has changed over time; their complexity has increased, their dialogues can be more intricate, and the way they are structured has also been rethought. . Ultimately, they become an ideological tool for those who produce audiovisual content (Gutiérrez, 2006).

1.2. Metaphors, Symbols and Iconology

Semiology is the science that studies the life of signs in society; the meaning of an image depends on how it relates to others. If this is applied to audiovisual products, everything shown on screen has meaning. For this reason, most films have different interpretations depending on the audience's level of sensitivity, imagination, and cultural background (Ayala, 2023). Similarly, iconology focuses on the study of the representation of symbolic forms, their meaning, and the author's intention in including elements in the narrative (Carrière, 1994).

Regarding cinematic images, there is explicit and implicit content. The former is immediate and directly legible, while the latter is constituted by the symbolic meaning given to the image (Sikov, 2010). Symbols exist when the meaning does not derive from the juxtaposition of two images; rather, they are shots or scenes belonging to the action that, in addition to their direct meaning, are imbued with a deeper and broader value. Hence, the following components are involved:

- Symbolic: an image in which two fragments of reality are associated so that, from the confrontation, a broader meaning is obtained and not just the material content.
- Latent: an image that has its own function in the action and that may appear to have no meaning, but its content takes on a more general meaning.

On the other hand, there is iconology, a branch of art history that focuses on the study of content and form as cultural symbols. When this concept is applied to film, the image manipulates reality through the instruments and resources specific to cinematography (Panofsky, 2004; Quintana Morraja, 2020).

1.3. Cinema and Tobacco

Once the essential elements of symbology, semiotics, and iconology have been identified, it is possible to establish a connection with the object analyzed in this paper: the cigarette, which has managed to convey a series of messages at an audiovisual level. Firstly, cigarettes have been stigmatized due to the health problems caused by excessive smoking; as scientific evidence grows, society perceives smoking as a dangerous behavior, generating rejection and disapproval of smokers; hence, it is considered irresponsible (Fernández Pérez, 2024).

Continuing with the topic of health, social policies and campaigns promote the idea that tobacco is a harmful and socially problematic product; but above all, the irony is that it was once a symbol of glamour and status (Aesthesis Psicólogos Madrid, 2016). The relationship between film and tobacco use dates back many years, as from the beginnings of cinema to the present day, scenes include characters smoking (Pacheco et al., 2022); this contributes to the image of the smoker in film becoming a symbol of rebellion or sophistication (González de Dios & de la Cruz Amorós, 2021). Therefore, in today's films, characters often display smoking as part of their character (Casitas et al., 2009).

Furthermore, studies show that characters who smoke are considered attractive and rebellious; smoking symbolizes social status, sophistication, and even loneliness and emotional tension (Fernández Pérez, 2024). Thus, the number of scenes in which smoking occurs varies depending on the film; however, the presence of the cigarette carries symbolic weight.

In contrast, tobacco is used as an element within the language of cinema to indicate the passage of time, and not only as a tool for art direction or set design (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016). Similarly, cigarette smoke provides elements that allow a scene to shine through lighting, visual aspects, and so on (Cook, 2016).

It can also enhance the atmosphere of the genre or create tension (Cinescopia, 2011). It appears in film as a turning point, marking a before and after in tense situations, helping to generate and maintain anxiety and nervousness. The cigarette and the smoke attract the audience's gaze in a dimly lit environment; the smoke, for its part, is said to convey an effect that brings dreams and desires closer to reality, and also marks the boundary between the material and imaginary worlds (Sussman, 2025).

It fulfills a symbolic function depending on its shape or who carries it; it evokes reflections such as forgetting, reflection, and contemplation; the smoke conceals, suggests, and disguises, plays with ambiguity, and even lends a dreamlike quality to the scene (Monaco, 2000). Holding a cigarette signifies reaffirming independence of spirit; the characters mark their territory, showing that they have control over themselves and their surroundings; it offers a narrative pause, that is, it becomes a sign of self-confidence and a stance towards the world (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016).

It provides a deeper meaning for the audience; sometimes, placing smoke in a character's hand makes them new, more powerful, or dangerous. Other meanings can be presented, for example, if the character is anxious, they smoke, play with the cigar, or, in some cases, inhale the smoke as if it were fresh air (Pérez, 2016).

The most significant element of the cigarette is that it can be held and moved by the characters; it is also an opportunity for the actors to showcase their range (Cook, 2016). Finally, when a character lights a cigar, the sound of the lighter and the inhalation draws the audience's attention to the screen, as such scenes are usually silent; in short, it immerses the audience in what they are watching (Monaco, 2000).

2. OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this research is to demonstrate the significance of the cigarette use in two films: *The Joker* (2019) and *The Brutalist* (2024). Specifically, it analyzes the messages and symbolism of this object when it appears on screen – considering when it is in the character's hand or mouth. The specific objectives include:

- SO 1. To number the scenes in which the character is “on camera” smoking
- SO 2. To quantify the seconds and/or minutes that the cigarette, along with the character, are on screen
- SO 3. To describe the actions the characters perform while the cigarette is in their hand or being smoked
- SO 4. To study the context of cigarette use within the scene

It is important to note that this study does not present value judgments on whether the film may or may not promote tobacco use, or even whether smoking is right or wrong; the focus of this research is to understand what the cigarette reflects and symbolizes at a narrative level. Likewise, it is crucial to point out that the justification for this study lies in the growing relevance of cigarette use in film, given the extensive discussion surrounding its influence on audiences. Therefore, it is deemed prudent to conduct an analysis to highlight what occurs with this object, particularly in two feature films. Finally, the selection of these films is based on a meticulous study of award-winning movies featuring main characters who smoke throughout the film, and not on previous research.

Finally, it is important to mention the limitations and scope of this research. First, it should be noted that this study does not analyze the editing, scenes, or sequences, nor does it compare the films to others. Specifically, the first limitation is that the text focuses on the case study of two films – whose characteristics are described later – which necessitates a more thorough and clear selection process. Regarding the primary scope, this text offers an in-depth study of the protagonists' use of cigarettes in both films and the significance of this object within the narrative.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a qualitative methodology, specifically content analysis. Qualitative scientific research is a systematic and reflective process that helps us understand the complexity of social, cultural, and human phenomena. It seeks to explore, describe, and understand the meanings and significance that people attribute to experiences and realities, through specific techniques and tools that capture language, emotions, and actions.

From a qualitative perspective, content analysis can incorporate statistical or numerical elements to record the presence or absence of certain themes, objects, or characters (Krippendorff, 2023). It considers aspects related to measuring the frequency or intensity of certain elements in the data; however, it maintains the qualitative perspective in that the main objective remains to understand in depth the

meanings, interpretations, and conditions of production of the content (Neuendorf, 2017). Finally, content analysis involves a systematic process that breaks down the information contained in the analyzed documents (Peña, 2022).

Once the work approach has been specified, it is necessary to specify the units of study; however, before mentioning them it is necessary to point out that the implementation of the Cigarette Act that prohibits smoking in public spaces in the USA comes into force in June 2003, considering that date as a starting point, it is decided to investigate films that have protagonists who not only smoke "on screen" constantly, but that this object is an essential part of the narrative.

To achieve a more precise definition, the selection process focused on actors and actresses who had received the most prestigious awards in the film industry worldwide for leading roles in films since the year the law was established. After applying the aforementioned criteria, two individuals were identified: Joaquin Phoenix, who portrayed Arthur Fleck in the 2019 film *The Joker*; and Adrien Brody, who played László Toth in the 2024 film *The Brutalist*. Specifically, Phoenix won the following awards: Oscar, SAG, Golden Globe, BAFTA, Critics' Choice Awards, among others; while Adrien Brody received the following awards: Oscar, Golden Globe, NY Film Critics Circle, BAFTA, Critics' Choice Awards, ARP Movie Grownups Awards, among others.

Thus, prior to the presentation of the results, and to have a clearer idea of the films analyzed, Table 1 and Table 2 present the respective technical data sheets of each of the feature films analyzed; with this, the aim is to make known the essential aspects of said films.

Table 1

General Information: The Joker

<i>The Joker (2019)</i>	
Director	Todd Phillips
Screenwriters	Todd Phillips, Scott Silver
Country of production	USA
Producers / Distributors	Warner Bros. Pictures, DC Films, Joint Effort, Bron Creative, Village Roadshow Pictures
Original music	Hildur Guðnadóttir
Main Cast	Joaquin Phoenix, Robert De Niro, Zazie Beetz, Brett Cullen, Frances Conroy, Shea Whigham

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 2*General Information: The Brutalist*

The Brutalist (2024)	
Director	Brady Corbet
Screenwriters	Brady Corbet, Mona Fastvold
Production countries	United States, United Kingdom, Hungary
Production Companies	Brookstreet Pictures, Kaplan Morrison, Intake Films, Andrew Lauren Productions
Original music	Daniel Blumberg
Main Cast	Adrien Brody, Felicity Jones, Guy Pearce, Joe Alwyn, Raffey Cassidy, Stacy Martin, Emma Laird, Isaach de Bankolé, Alessandro Nivola

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4. RESULTS

Having observed both films, particularly regarding the way the cigarette is depicted, the results of the methodology employed will be now presented. In this regard, two tables were constructed – Table 3 for the analysis of *The Joker* and Table 4 for *The Brutalist* – which shows the scene number chronologically according to the narrative in which the cigarette appears on screen, the duration of that moment, what the main character does, and some notes that aided the study. To provide a clearer understanding, each table is presented below, followed by not only its interpretation but also the results found.

Table 3*Analysis of The Joker*

Scene #	Duration	Character's actions	Relevant data
1	00:03-00:07	Psychiatrist's office. Arthur Fleck laughs because of his condition. He talks about his diary. His entries are jokes. He is trembling and sitting down.	Dialogues. Background music
2	00:21-00:23	Apartment, sitting, watching TV. "Playing" with the revolver (it fires), while dancing shirtless. Smiling and distressed face	Cello (original music from the film), with a melancholic and tense tune
3	00:26-00:27	Sitting in his apartment, he writes in his diary what he saw at the comedy club. Bare torso, smiling face, but not laughing.	Cello (original music from the film), with a melancholic and tense tune
4	00:38-00:39	In the apartment. Bare-chested, sitting next to his mother watching the news (subway murders, which he committed). His legs tremble (while seated); he gives an ironic smile at what he hears on TV.	Cello (original music from the film), with a melancholic and tense tune

5	00:40-00:42	Doctor's office, seated. He talks to the doctor about the lack of support for the medication; she tells him that she will no longer have a supply of it.	Dialogues. No music
6	00:56-00:58	Sitting outside the hospital. Dressed and deep in thought. Detectives question him about his activities the night of the murder and his use of a gun during his clown routine.	Dialogues. No music
7	01:01:00 - it lasts 30 seconds (Full scene at 1:02:10)	Overhead shot of him lying down; cigarettes and a pistol are visible on the nightstand. He's lying in the fetal position. The TV can be heard in the background (news). Fleck is watching Thomas Wayne on TV.	TV audio. No music.
8	01:08:00-1:09:00	Standing inside an apartment. He receives a call from Murray's show inviting him to record an episode; he accepts.	Dialogues. No music
9	01:19:00-01:20:00	Sitting in an apartment. Shirtless and laughing. He's just returned from his neighbor's apartment — she kicked him out.	There is no dialogue or music
10	01:20:00-01:22:00	Sitting down. Arthur is taking care of his mother in the hospital room. He talks to her and tells her he already knows what happened to him when he was a child (he reads from her mental hospital file). He puts out his cigarette, approaches her, and suffocates her with a pillow.	No music. Intense dialogue; Arthur says one of the film's most iconic lines, "You know what really makes me laugh? I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realize, it's a fucking comedy."
11	01:25:00–01:28:00 (the cigarette stops appearing), but it ends at 01:30:35	Arthur stopped taking his medication for several months. In his apartment, wearing only his underwear, he dyes his hair while dancing. Later, sitting down, he applies makeup. There's a knock at the door; he gets up and puts on pants; he's wearing nothing on top.	The song "That's Life" by Frank Sinatra is playing.
12	01:30:35-01:31:37	He leaves his apartment dressed as the Joker. Cut to a scene where he's seen descending a large staircase, dancing as he does so. The scene is interrupted when detectives yell at him from upstairs and he runs.	There is no dialogue. The song "Rock & Roll Part II" by Gary Glitter is the only thing heard until the detectives yell at the Joker.
13	01:34:28-01:34:49	Standing, dressed and wearing makeup, he exits the subway (heading to the TV studio to record the program). Detectives pursue him, but they are subdued. He smiles.	The action is in slow motion. The film's score is playing.
14	01:35:00-01:37:17	Sitting in his dressing room, he watches TV and laughs when he hears the news. The cigarette remains lit. While still seated, he places the pistol against the tip of his chin.	Audio: News report playing on TV in the background. Dialogue between Joker and Murray
15	1:52:40-1:54:52	In the asylum. Seated, dressed in white; he has a fit of laughter. While chatting with the doctor, he holds a cigarette in his hand and smokes.	Dialogue. He utters the phrase, "You Wouldn't Get It." Then, they play a Sinatra song.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Table 3 presents data that specifically illustrates some elements found during the analysis of the film *The Joker*. Firstly, there were 15 scenes in which the main character, Arthur Fleck, is holding a cigarette, either unlit, lighting it, or smoking it. This means that, out of the film's 2 hours and 2 minutes, a cigarette is visible on screen for 26 minutes and 50 seconds.

Now, regarding the character's actions, these tend to vary; however, many situations are repeated while the cigarette is shown, including the character's despair, somber demeanor, bare torso, and sparse dialogue. Furthermore, throughout the film, the cigarette becomes an extension of the character's behavior; in fact, it is conceived as an extension of his personality.

In fact, the reasons why Arthur Fleck smokes have no direct relation to the dialogues, the music, or even the interaction he has with other characters; however, the cigarette has an essential presence at certain moments in the character's life, that is, before he kills his mother, or when he leaves his apartment — transformed into the Joker —, after killing his work colleagues.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the cigarette, or even its smoke, when on screen, is shown for only a few seconds; however, the film's narrative rhythm, the character's development, and the actions performed, suggest the idea that the cigarette is shown every time the character is on screen, or even that more minutes are given to this object.

Continuing the analysis, it was found that the character smokes in 12 enclosed spaces, primarily in his apartment, but also in the hospital room, the doctor's office, and even the asylum. There are only 3 scenes where he smokes outdoors. It should be noted that the character Joaquin Phoenix portrays suffers from mental and physical disorders, leading to a breakdown in his physical and behavioral state. This necessitates dividing the analysis of Arthur Fleck's smoking into three phases: one where he is dressed in civilian clothes, another where he is in character as the Joker, and a third (usually at home) where he is shirtless. In this regard, it was found that of the 15 scenes, he has some part of his body exposed in 7, while he is clothed in 8. Of those 8, he is dressed "normally" in 4, dressed as the Joker in 3, and in 1, in his asylum attire.

Following these observations, and in accordance with the information presented in Table 3, it is important to mention that the character has many scenes without dialogue, during which the music dominates the screen and amplifies the character's emotions. Thus, it should be clarified that, throughout the film, the use of the cigarette is neither diminished nor amplified by Arthur Fleck's transformation into the Joker; the rhythm remains the same, the cigarette's screen time is not increased, and its narrative significance does not change.

It is necessary to point out certain essential aspects that reinforce the use of cigarettes. The first is the use of two different pieces of music; as indicated in Table 3, the first appears in scene 11. Frank Sinatra's "That's Life" is heard; at that moment, the Joker kills Randall. The second is Gary Glitter's "Rock & Roll Part II," which is heard in scene

12, when Arthur Fleck has assumed the Joker persona and leaves his apartment; these compositions are used when the character has completed the transition.

The next element to consider is the lines (script) that the character utters at key moments in his life. The first is: “You know what really makes me laugh. I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realize, it’s a fucking comedy ” (Phillips, 2019); this occurs in scene 10, and he says this to his mother before killing her. The other is: “You wouldn’t get it ” (Phillips, 2019); this occurs in the final scene – scene 15 – where the character is seen smoking. These lines are mentioned because they became famous phrases that not only transcended the screen and became part of the collective consciousness worldwide, even appearing in digital media as memes, but they also became essential to the main character.

Finally, whether standing, sitting, alone or accompanied, the character smokes regularly; therefore, the cigarette has the same weight every time it appears on stage. This object ceases to be just another element of the scenery and becomes an inherent element of the character; far from being separated from him, it is integrated into his way of being.

To conclude the analysis of this feature film, Figure 1 shows some frames where the main character can be seen smoking in different circumstances. It should be noted that these are only a few examples of the moments in which the cigarette can be observed on screen.

Figure 1

The Joker / Arthur Fleck Smoking or With a Cigarette in His Hand



Source: Elaborated by the author using images obtained from screenshots of the feature film.

Table 4*Analysis of The Brutalist*

Scene #	Duration	Character's actions	Relevant data
1	00:08:38-00:08:50	László Tóth leaves a nightclub. Standing, chatting with the manager. Night. At that moment, he lights a cigarette.	Dialogue complemented by a melancholic piano melody
2	00:22:00-00:22:15	Standing. At night, lined up for his meal. Talking to Gordon about job opportunities.	There is no music. Only dialogue
3	00:24:22-00:25:00	Standing still, at night. The cigarette is already lit; then he lights another. Direct cut and he's in a factory. Close-up of his hand holding the cigarette. Another cut and he's watching the sparks from the welding machine, cigarette in hand.	In the background, news reports about Hungary and WWII can be heard. Tense music is being played
4	00:25:46-00:26:09	Daytime, standing still, cigarette lit. Chatting with a client about the design of the furniture made	Dialogue only
5	00:39:58-00:40:33	Standing still. Daytime, at Van Buren's house. Working on the renovation of the assigned space. Giving orders to those working in the studio/library.	Piano playing melancholic music
6	00:40:30-00:41:03	Standing. Daytime. Outside Van Buren's house (rooftop). He interacts with Gordon.	Piano playing melancholic music. Dialogue
7	00:45:00-00:45:37	Standing still. At night, he argues with Van Buren. He lights his cigarette when his employer is "on camera."	Dialogue only
8	00:59:39-1:00:12	In a nightclub, he sits down and then stands up. He dances and you can see him light a cigarette. He smiles; he's drunk. In the bathroom, he's smoking and injecting heroin.	Nightclub music (Jazz/Blues)
9	01:02:49-01:03:31	Standing still. Daytime, on the street. He picks up a cat and walks. Van Buren's driver is waiting for him to go to work for the businessman.	News about the opioid crisis
10	01:31:58-01:34:10	Standing. Van Buren's house. The architect explains the work. He uses a cigarette to point. You can't see him light it.	Dialogue only
11	01:58:23-01:58:58	Standing. He's arguing with Leslie (another architect) about the modifications. He's shown taking a cigarette out of the pack. László Tóth "goes out of frame" while smoking.	Dialogue only

12	02:12:00-02:13:00	Dinner at Gordon's house. László and his family ask about the family; they exchange conversations. He lights a cigarette.	Dialogue only
13	02:24:00-02:24:55	Daytime, at a new job. László draws and smokes his pipe with his other hand. Michael (his friend) asks him to return to Van Buren.	Piano playing melancholic music. Dialogue
14	02:30:50-02:32:09	Outside. Sitting with Van Buren in an Italian cafe waiting for Orazio.	Dialogue only
15	02:32:20-02:33:00	Walking towards quarry mines; very short scene. László is holding a cigarette.	Dialogue only
16	02:36:08-02:36:40	Party in Italy (at the quarry). Standing, dancing, under the influence of alcohol and drugs. He moves away and goes somewhere else.	Music and very little dialogue (almost inaudible). After the dancing, the scene where Van Buren rapes him is shown.
17	02:45:27-02:45:57	Daytime. At the construction site. Standing, he explains the changes that were made to the work. He uses the cigarette to point.	Dialogue only

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The data presented shows that of the 3 hours and 36 minutes that the film *The Brutalist* lasts, the cigarette is only shown "on screen" for 16 minutes and 15 seconds; the interesting thing here, as in the other film analyzed, is that it would seem that this object is on screen for more time, and that the main character smokes in each of the scenes in which he interacts; but this is not the case, once again, the narrative rhythm, the tension with which the character lives, the pressure to which he is subjected, the life story, his actions and so on make it seem that the smoke and the cigarette itself, or the simple act of smoking, are present in all the sequences where László Tóth interacts.

On the other hand, Table 4 shows that the cigarette appears on screen in 17 scenes. Of these, the main character is seen smoking in 8 scenes indoors, while 9 scenes take place outdoors. In this sense, the cigarette is used as an extension of the character, part of his personality, and is used interchangeably on the street, in the office, in a nightclub, or wherever László Tóth happens to be.

Furthermore, his interactions with others don't affect how much he smokes, and even the dialogues he has throughout the film don't represent a turning point that leads him to quit or smoke more frequently. As we've seen, the cigarette serves the character to point out an object, express a viewpoint, and even calm himself. It could be said that it's an element that "is there, yet isn't"; it is possible to know that at any moment it will become part of the character and will be shown partially or completely.

It should be noted that regardless of whether it is morning, afternoon, or night, the cigarette is present. It has no temporal function, nor does it serve as a symbol for the character to frame certain narrative issues. When László Tóth smokes, it is because he chooses to, not because it is required in every few scenes or because it helps him solve a problem. Thus, this object, along with all that it implies, has an artistic nuance, but

also a natural and inherent one for the main character. It adapts to the story and is not conceived as an object that must necessarily appear to revitalize the sequences or the story itself.

It is important to note that in this feature film, music becomes a constant throughout. The soundtrack, which is mostly composed of piano-based scores, helps to understand the moments that not only the character goes through, but also creates an atmosphere that helps to understand the deficiencies, needs, and suffering of the migrant population in the United States; in particular, it serves as a lens that reflects the mood of László Tóth, who, throughout the film, lives in constant depression and sadness.

On the other hand, this study does not aim to conduct a comparative analysis of the main characters; however, there are some points that should be mentioned to gain a clear understanding of both characters' psyches. First, László Tóth differs from Arthur Fleck because when he smokes, he is clothed—he is never naked in any scene. Second, he doesn't kill anyone. Third, he is addicted to drugs and alcohol. In addition, it is important to note that both men were abused by another man. In Arthur Fleck's case, his stepfather abused him constantly as a child; László Tóth was raped as an adult by his boss, Van Buren, during a party ².

Although the films analyzed had two completely different themes, the use of the cigarette in both films shares some elements regarding the meaning of the cigarette; however, there are other aspects that, although the theory indicates that the cigarette is used for a certain symbolism, the feature films do not take it as such.

To conclude the study of *The Brutalist*, Figure 2 shows several frames where the main character can be seen smoking in different circumstances. It should be noted that these are only a few examples of the moments when the cigarette can be observed on screen.

² In the film *The Joker*, a rape scene is not shown, but Arthur Fleck discovers it while reading his mother's medical records, and the text and some newspaper clippings specifying it are even shown. In *The Brutalist*, the rape scene is explicit.

Figure 2

László Tóth Smoking or With a Cigarette in His Hand



Source: Elaborated by the author using images obtained from screenshots of the feature film.

To clarify the aspects that the cigarette showed in both films, Table 5 was developed. In this sense, and based on the theoretical information, the columns indicate what this object usually implies or what it alludes to in the films; but, to achieve a better understanding, a division was made of what the cigarette represents and does not represent in both audiovisual products.

Table 5

Aspects that Cigarettes Reflect and Do Not Reflect in Films

What It Does Represent	What It Does Not Represent
It's not part of the scenery	Personal independence
Character tension	Passage of time
Character style and form	Fashion
Reflection	Turning point
Emotional state	Dreams and desires of the person
Anxiety experienced by the character	Dark/gloomy environment
Loneliness of the character	Sensuality
Impulsiveness of the character	forgetfulness
Character's anguish	Ambiguity of smoke
Character's nervousness	Self-control
Part of the personality	Self-confidence
	Freedom of the character
	Contemplation of the scene
	Dreamlike elements

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Firstly, the cigarette was presented as an integral part of the plot; it wasn't merely decorative or part of the set design. It didn't contribute to the decor or the color palette; on the contrary, it embodied the tension, style, and character of the characters. It helped us reflect on the situations experienced by both Arthur Fleck and László Tóth, allowing an understanding of the loneliness of the two protagonists. It also represented the impulsiveness of both the comedian and the architect's actions. Furthermore, the cigarette amplified the characters' anguish, filling them with nervousness, and it can certainly be inferred that this object constitutes an essential part of their personalities.

On the contrary, in these films, the cigarette did not represent social status, nor did it grant the characters authority, much less become a symbol of power over others. It also did not serve as an icon of independence, self-confidence, or autonomy for either Arthur Fleck or László Tóth. It is not a fashionable accessory, nor does it offer the characters the idea of a better future or even dreams of grandeur. Given the type of films, the cigarette is far removed from the meaning associated with sensuality, self-control, and oblivion; moreover, both characters lack these qualities and characteristics, they lack freedom, and it seems that at times they are "bound" to a destiny of solitude, misadventure, suffering, and madness.

The cigarette is not portrayed as a commercial product; it is not sponsored by any brand, nor does it become an object that the audience must possess in order to achieve social status. Furthermore, the characters' use of the object is not conditioned by any specific interaction, nor does it become a symbol that replaces any element on screen. On the contrary, it is an object that, like the character, is "on screen" to show something the character feels.

Regarding the elements that can or cannot be reflected in relation to the narrative, there are some that the cigarette, on this occasion, did not represent; for example, the passage of time, at no point is the cigarette smoke or its consumption used to establish any kind of ellipsis; nor does it become a turning point where the audience locates that from a certain act of smoking the character has changed.

Regarding the environment, the cigarette doesn't define it; rather, it's the character who, by using it, dictates how the story and events unfold. In this sense, it's not a gloomy atmosphere; the films themselves possess an aesthetic that isn't interrupted or altered by the cigarette. The smoke itself doesn't become an object that denotes ambiguity. The characters experience a series of disturbances, but these aren't caused by the cigarette. In fact, both films are perfectly clear and leave no room for doubt or misinterpretation.

Regarding other characters featured in the two films, it is important to note that the cigarette—held by the characters—may be incidental within the context of the entire scene; however, it is an essential part of the character's arc, that is, it is intrinsic to both of them, and although the object itself does not interact with other people within the scene, it becomes necessary to establish the attitudes of Arthur Fleck and László Tóth.

On the other hand, while both films can be highly contemplative in terms of character development and the dream sequences themselves, the cigarette doesn't inherently

provide these elements; the story does, but the object isn't presented as an element that encourages contemplation of the spaces. The power of the dialogue doesn't lie in its use, and even the musical pieces aren't enhanced by the smoke or the cigarette itself. This is how Table 5 is interpreted, which, as mentioned, helps to understand which aspects the cigarette does represent in both films and which it doesn't.

It is important to mention some essential similarities and differences that can be observed in the two films analyzed. Namely, both films present the story of a male character around fifty years old, depressed due to his social, familial, and health circumstances, and with difficulty socializing. In addition, both Arthur Fleck and László Tóth have a woman in their lives; the former lives with his mother, while the latter lives with his wife. They appear to be close to their respective partners, but this is not the case, as they are solitary characters who lack empathy for those around them.

Finally, the stories unfold in distinct time periods: *The Brutalist* is set in the late 1940s, while *The Joker* takes place in the 1970s – a conclusion drawn from the events depicted and Batman's own history. Both stories converge in a narrative framed by a society polarized by economic issues, particularly the oppression of the working class by the ruling class. Aesthetically, the color palettes are dark and lack saturation. The original music for both films is somber, decadent, and melancholic; this sonic landscape helps to define the psyches of the main characters.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that cinema possesses a language that can be both subtle and complex, conveying events, behaviors, feelings, and ideas through implicit or explicit actions. Furthermore, the use of cigarettes in the various scenes analyzed becomes a device that not only reinforces the character's ideology but also lends them a distinct personality, which deserves to be analyzed and understood as an integral part of the story.

Also, as the investigation progressed, it was found that the use of cigarettes is not only related to consumption mechanisms that a person may have in certain situations, such as nervousness, depression, sadness, agitation, etc., but it can be linked to the psyche of the characters, the way they speak and express themselves; however, it was also found that the use of this object does not always follow the canons that literature specifies, since it is not always given the same symbolism and representation that it might have in other films.

The above does not mean that the resource of tobacco is more or less valuable; in these cases, the cigarette gives the feature film other meanings that perhaps are not present in other films; in this case, the characters – Arthur Fleck and László Toth –, present several similarities in terms of their way of being and even pathologies, such as being depressed or having difficulty living with the people around them, they are even somewhat self-destructive and it seems that the context in which they develop disappoints them.

In the case of *The Joker* and *The Brutalist*, the cigarette grants the main characters a certain autonomy, but also imbues them with a distinct personality that, in one way or another, resonates with the viewer/audience. The use of this object is not intended to encourage its consumption or glorify smoking; it should be understood as an extension of the narrative that helps tell a story.

Finally, the objective of this research is achieved by identifying that the use of cigarettes in the two films analyzed has different meanings. While literature sometimes identifies this object as an accessory that grants autonomy, independence, security, and other power-related qualities to characters, this is not the case in *The Joker* and *The Brutalist*. Both Arthur Fleck and László Toth possess certain characteristics that, in short, contradict what theory—regarding the use of tobacco—states. Furthermore, the cigarette is not merely an aesthetic decoration; it becomes an integral part of the narrative. Meanwhile, the smoke, when it appears on screen, does not have a symbolic interpretation or refer to the points discussed in previous paragraphs.

Thus, it can be said that the cigarette, in both cases, becomes an extension and form of expression for the characters, who share similar ailments and personalities. Ultimately, both films are audiovisual works that successfully capture, through their characters, the significance of the cigarette in storytelling.

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