Circular Journey:

A Psycho-biographical Study of Joseph Bruce (AKA Violent J of the Insane Clown Posse)

Terror Management Perspective

Joseph Bruce, aka Violent J of the Insane Clown Posse (ICP), is one of the creative forces behind what could be described as one of the most perplexingly twisted musical forces of our time. With lyrics fueled by violence, profanity and rage, ICP has found itself on the receiving end of multitudes of protests, and have been all but completely marginalized from the mainstream music industry. Despite this, the diehard fans of the ICP- called 'Juggalos'- have sworn a near-religious loyalty to their music, painting their faces to attend shows and swearing that there is more behind the music than most people seem to believe. The intention of this paper is to explore, from the perspective of Terror Management Theory (TMT), which processes may have led to the creation of music that is so commonly reviled by the public, yet so highly revered by those who take the time to put together the pieces. The main focus of this paper will be to explore the psychological function (based on Terror Management Theory) of the lyrical concepts and album themes underlying the 12-year, 7-album saga: ICP's 6 Joker Cards.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) stems from the research of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, and has been conceptualized in full by others

since the original work (Greenberg et. All, 1991). TMT serves as a broad social theory that attempts to explain the rational motivations for various facets of human belief and behavior. Its' focus is the way in which people buffer themselves against the terror that naturally arises from our awareness of death. Because people have a natural instinct to stay alive, yet have the temporal capacity to know that death is inevitable, we are faced with death anxiety. TMT asserts that we deal with this death anxiety by investing in what is known as a cultural worldview. A cultural worldview is essentially our belief system; it serves to give the world order, predictability, meaning and permanence, and provides a reassurance of our ability to transcend death. The cultural worldview is comprised of an idea of who we are, moral conceptions of right and wrong, and an idea of what will happen to us after we die.

The cultural worldview acts to buffer us against death by assuring us that, if we follow the dictates of our worldview, we will be able to achieve some level of immortality in the sense that we can live on through our children, our creations, the memories of loved ones, etc. It also buffers against the anxiety of death by assuring us that if we are to follow the moral principles of our worldview, we may be rewarded in the afterlife. This works only to the extent that our cultural worldview is supported by others; as the more widely received it is, the more plausible it seems, and thus the more effective its' function.

Jock Abra supports many aspects of this theory in his paper (1995), in which he asserts that artistic creation is a process of self-immortalization, and

functions as a cathartic relief of the fear of death, often in the reflection of it. This, along with the prime dictates and focus of TMT, does well to explain the works of the ICP. Throughout the history of the 6 Joker Cards, death, along with violence, depravity, and cultural exclusion, is a highly salient theme. The reasoning behind this thematic focus, the conceptual changes in the Cards progression, and the need for the specific theme of the final Jokers card, can easily be understood through the understandings of TMT.

Joseph Bruce was born in the tiny suburb of Berkley, Michigan. One of his first reported memories was of his father, Richard Bruce, building a Halloween haunted house in the basement of his home for him and his brother Robert to play in. This was a time of happiness and security for Joe, but it was short lived. At the early age of 2, Joe can still remember the violent breakup of his parents, as father Richard became abusive, and finally moved out in a cathartic fight which saw Joe in the middle.

At the age of 4, Joe had an experience that affected the rest of his life. He and his brother Rob managed to capture a large butterfly, and put it into a bottle. They took it to their room, and kept it for the night, intending to release it the next day. In the morning however, they found it dead, and were crushed. It was their first experience of death, and they held a tiny funeral for the butterfly in their backyard, swearing to each other that they would one day go to heaven and apologize to the butterfly for killing it. With this experience came the concept of death, and thus death anxiety. It was presumably here that Joe

first truly realized that living things are temporary, and that even he would someday cease to be.

Joes' mother, Linda Harwood, was a devout catholic, and worked nights cleaning the basement of a Church in a neighboring suburb. With such limited means, and being a single mother of 3, she could not afford life in their pleasant suburb alone for long, and thus had no choice but to remarry; this time to an older, well off man named Lester Wool. Lester provided Joes' first notion of evil. A rich man, he would provide lavish gifts to Joes' mother Linda, but when Linda was away, a different side came out. A serial molester, Lester had been an unwanted member of several families before Joes', and presumably several after. He molested Joe, as well as his two siblings, until his older sister Theresa left a note telling their mother of his acts, before running away. Lester was thrown out.

Another violent family breakup- the cycle of tribulations continued for Joe. Without any constant father figure, and a well-conditioned distrust of any who took the role, Joe had clear reason to harbor bitter feelings towards authority. Further, with the anxiety of death instilled in him from the butterfly incident onward, Joe was in need of a stable cultural worldview to buffer against this terror. But with no lasting family structure, few friends, and a pile of bitter experiences, it is presumable that any concept of steadfast morality seemed unlikely for Joe.

Things only got worse. Once again on her own raising 3 children, Linda had to move the family out of the expensive Berkley neighborhood, and into a tiny house in Oak Park, a low rent suburb on the outer limits of the Detroit ghetto zone. Violence and death were everyday realities for Joe now, as gang activity and shootings were common occurrences here. Further, Joe found himself a cultural minority in the heavily Afro-American neighborhood, and was constantly the target of the disgruntled and dangerous local teens. When traveling to nicer neighborhoods however, he was once again discriminated against due to his association with the Oak Park area. A reject in every level of society, it was clear that Joe would have trouble fitting himself into any existing cultural worldview.

Hated locally for his color, and in other areas for his class, Joe witnessed a constant stream of violence and death. In childhood, Joe coped by staying in a constant state of make-believe with his brother. As time passed however, his brother shipped off to the army, and he found himself joining the gangs that he once feared. It was a matter of protection and survival. In these gangs, rapping was always viewed as a goal, a way to escape and move beyond the local scene. So Joe and the gang started a group/gang: ICP, which then stood for Inner City Posse.

This group floundered, got into many dangerous fights, and eventually all but broke up, leaving only Joe and his friend, Joey Ustler (Shaggy 2 Dope). Joe knew that he would go nowhere as things were, and suddenly decided to re-frame the Inner City Posse as the Insane Clown Posse, keeping the old ICP

initials. They donned racially-ambiguous clown paint, and made a cryptic announcement: Their albums would each be a separate aspect of what they called the "Dark Carnival", each one in turn being called a Jokers Card. Inside of each Joker Card were 2 constant quotes. The first proclaimed: "There will be 6 faces of the Dark Carnival, after all 6 have risen, the end of time will consume us all". The second, in tiny print on the inside cover of each card: "Dedicated to the Butterfly".

With no basis for an understanding of morality in their violence strewn life, no friends, little family to support anything they cared about, and every reason to have a fear of death, ICP were left with no means of dealing with this death anxiety. As social rejects, the group had no means of identifying with any existing cultural worldview, and so, started their own.

The first Joker Card was called the Carnival of Carnage (1992), and the idea behind it was the events that would take place if all of the violence and suffering that they saw in the ghetto they lived in was suddenly tossed into the upper class towns of suburban America. It was violent, graphic, and filled with death, with lyrics that brought Joes reality home, such as:

"You wake up to gunfire,

thinking it was a dream

until you hear your neighbor howl

and a young child scream…"

In this album, Joe brought the mortality salient life he had lived to the eyes of anyone who bought his CD, and with it, the unaddressed death anxiety that he had lived with for so long.

As his work progressed, Joe began more and more to feature ideas of morality, justice, and distrust of authority. He sang of people suffering as penance for evils they had committed, and of people being forced to deal with the consequences of actions they'd assumed they were free of, as in the lyrics:

"Buy a richie home or two

This reflects the things you do

others starving down the block

richies heart is like a rock…/

/even though some down and out

you keep what you could live without…"

After only 2 albums, the ICP had created the start of a dynamic cultural worldview. They had shown people death as they saw it, and taught them of justice as they perceived it.

They had established their own death anxiety in others, and they had determined their moral attitude, but as explained earlier, a cultural worldview needs the support of others in order to function. ICP needed a focused and well-defined fan-base, a group who would relate in full to their line of thinking, and who would understand their methods. In the era around their 3rd Joker Card, The RiddleBox (1995), ICP sang a new tune. While maintaining the original

levels of mortality salience and vigilante justice, ICP began to express the rejection they felt, alongside the brotherhood they perceived possible among other rejected people; people that felt as forgotten, vulnerable, and scared as they did.

Death once again came into play, and using death as an active metaphor for societal rejection, they sang of the dead rising up to dance, of cast-aways forming their own carnival shows, and of learning to disregard the beliefs of others in order to cultivate understanding of yourself. The idea exploded, and they earned a nationwide, underground fan-base, all intent on understanding reality on their own terms, with lyrics such as:

"Throw all your (gang) signs in the air

what's that I don't check I don't care

'cause I'm down with the clown everywhere

and much clown love is in here"

Over the years, ICPs' focus on unity and internal support only grew, and by the time they had released their 5th Jokers Card, they had an enormous international fan base of 'Juggalos', who would follow the group around the country, buy every piece of merchandise available, wear the face paint on every possible occasion, and most importantly, argue enthusiastically that, behind the profanity of ICP was a clear cut, simple message to it's followers: stay true to your friends and family, be prepared to own up to your unjust actions, and accept yourself as you are: a reactionary set of rules opposed to the family

trauma, societal rejection, and evil deeds that Joe had been exposed to in childhood.

With music that provided its own source of mortality salience, and a moral code and sense of belonging to buffer against it, ICP was a self-made and independent cultural worldview. However, prior to the release of the 6th Jokers card, they were missing one very important thing. ICP would certainly be able to live on through their music at this point, and had certainly confronted the concept of death within their art. Their creation had formed a conception that gave the world order, predictability, meaning and permanence, but a cultural worldview is most effective at buffering against death anxiety if it includes some conception of what happens to us when we experience death. Before the 6th Card dropped, Joe knew it had to be significant, and before deciding what it was, reports feeling very empty. In his book, he writes "I was lost without the 6th…. Like we were running from the ending and it was killing me off". He knew, consciously or not, that the conclusion of his cultural worldview would be an intricate part of its efficacy in dealing with death anxiety.

The 6th Jokers Card was called "The Wraith", and was an allegory for the experience of death. It came in the form of 2 separate albums; Shangri-la (2002) and Hells Pit (2004). Hells Pit was the final word in their construction of morality, and featured songs such as "Walk into the Darkness" and "Burning Up"; cautionary tales about the results of a life lived poorly. Shangri-la was the other side, it opened with "Walk into the Light", and was a positive album focusing on

the rewards of a good life, the comfort of friends and family, and the promise of belonging and happiness resulting from just choices. The album concluded with a track called "Thy Unveiling", which explained that the "Dark Carnival" concept was a metaphor for God.

"It ain't about Violent J or Shaggy

the Butterfly or 17

When we speak of Shangri-la

What you think we mean

Truth is we follow God

We've always been behind him

The carnival is god

And may all Juggalos find him!"

The 6th card had dropped, and as prophesized since the first, the end of time had consumed its listeners. The end of time was death, and it had arrived to ensure protection against the fear of death, by completing the cultural worldview started 12 years prior. Therefore, the circularity of ICPs' journey was fitting in that it began because of, and ended with, death. The faithful reminder and predictor of this remained; as the first of the Wraith albums, Shangri-la, was dedicated, just as all previous, to the Butterfly that had first shown Joe the reality of death. This was also among the first occasions they chose to explain the significance of the ubiquitous butterfly dedication. Hells' Pit however, lacked this reference; the first album to not include it. While Shangri-la served as the

completion of the cultural worldview, and promise of salvation to those that fit within it, Hells Pit was the completion of their moral constructs, the promise of punishment to those who deviated. Referencing the Butterfly in this album would be unfit, as the Butterflies significance had already been dealt with. Instead, the album was dedicated to "The Underground": the forgotten, tossed aside, and misled of the world. It was a beacon to find understanding before it was too late, the final inclusion in a cultural worldview that had been a journey from forgotten and vengeful, to belonging and faithful; from fearing the uncertain eventuality of death, to accepting the purpose and freedom of it.

So the artistic journey ended by the same means it had begun. By tying their creation to as understandable and abstract a concept as God, Joe assured that his artistic creation, and the worldview created within, would have a level of permanence that he knew since the age of 4 he could not attach to himself. Joe did not know the exact path that his works would take at the beginning, but reports that it progressively made more and more sense as they went. It started out with an album that was angry, vengeful, violent and ungrounded, and ended with an album series justifying a morality of acceptance, honor, and faith. Due to his traumatic childhood, unstable youth, and violent, dangerous adolescence, we have seen how Joe was left with very little means to buffer against the anxiety of death, and thus created his own cultural world view. With a progressively defined concept of self, belonging,

morality, and transcendence, Joe met with the existential terror of death head on in his work, and proceeded to build a belief system which helped him and countless fans deal with both the feeling of exclusion, and the anxiety of death.

Without in depth comment on his own planning of the work, we cannot say with certainty exactly how conscious this process was. There is certainly evidence that he had a clear vision of what he wanted to create, but the underlying psychological reasoning for this was likely a subconscious drive. However, the transformation Joe experienced- from a street tough punk to a well off, self made family man- is clearly representative of the effectiveness of his artistic process to encompass a functional cultural worldview now embraced by Juggalos worldwide.

References:

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