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The Politics of Circularity in Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019)

Guillaume Mouleux

- 1 Released worldwide in October 2019, Todd Phillips's movie *Joker* appears at first sight to rest on a rather simple and linear premise: the establishment of an alternate on-screen history of the advent of one of the most iconic "super-villains" in comic book history. Expectedly, the film takes us from a seemingly inoffensive character named Arthur Fleck to the inception of a number of landmarks of the Batman universe, such as the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents and the internment of the Joker in an asylum. But in spite of such a linear irreversibility, the movie also heavily relies on circular patterns, a notion which is to be taken in an extended sense beyond its sole visual dimension to include a large number of narrative devices—specifically, tortuous movements within the storyline (including repetitions, twists, analepses and prolepses), intertextual references (including reversals in representations), and vicious circles, all of which are essential in setting the movie's representations of society and violence. All of these involve endless two-way information circulation processes which are instrumental in shaping the viewer's interpretation of the storyline.
- 2 Based on these premises but also on an analysis of previous depictions of the Joker, this essay aims at demonstrating that circularity in the 2019 film is a prominent device used to both shape and blur the viewer's perception of the narrative arc. Its main role is to prompt a series of incompatible interpretations (not only of the story itself but of its possible political subtexts) that coexist within a single storyline. I also contend that circularity serves a dual "political" purpose: one, which may be called "macro-political," that addresses society as a whole; the other, which may be considered "micro-political," relates to corporate politics within Warner Bros. and the DC universe. The latter aspect borders on meta-myth, in this case through the creation and forceful promotion of a new arc within the DC universe in spite of corporate reluctance. In that sense, Phillips's *Joker* questions the very notion of canonicity within the Batman mythos.¹

From the Character's Genesis to a Rewriting of the Batman Mythos

- 3 *Joker* has long been described as a “Joker origin movie” (Kit, 2018; Acuna, 2018). While the question of the character's origins is central to *Joker*, an important part of the plot rests precisely on the impossibility of establishing at least parts of it. Although concentrated around the main character, this uncertainty also impacts the Joker archetype. At the same time, as circular patterns are central to the manifestations of Arthur Fleck's evolution, they contribute to the viewers' impression of coming full circle in their perception of the film's relation to the preexisting Batman universe.

An elusive characterization

- 4 If Fleck seemed to have made some progress towards the establishment of his family tree after reading his mother's letter to Thomas Wayne, he seems bound to start his quest all over again when he reads her medical file, which provides not only a contradictory version but also her own unverifiable refutation of it. From that moment in the plot, it becomes impossible to establish whether she is delusional or was actually made pregnant by Wayne before he used his influence to get rid of her with the complicity of an Arkham State Hospital doctor. This inextricable uncertainty undermines the character's potential ability to find both the truth and his place in society. Eventually, the moment when Fleck murders his own mother, Penny, symbolizes his acknowledgement of the ever-elusive nature of truth and of his quest to accomplish himself. To a certain extent, the killing of his mother provides a literal yet reversed illustration of Freud's oedipal theory, before Fleck eventually kills the fatherly figures of Randall and Murray Franklin. In that regard, while advertising the revelation of a possible origin of the Joker, the movie actually offers a genealogy of evil: all father figures in the film (Randall, Murray Franklin and Thomas Wayne) betray Arthur and set a crooked path for him to follow before they die and let him further develop their own original sins in a much more violent way. While the successive deaths of those three male characters re-establish the traditional oedipal pattern which “structure[s] most forms of popular fantasy,” they also mark the failure of the character to satisfy the typical “obsessive quest for re-establishing stable points of origin in semi-mythical father figures associated with omnipotent forms of power and omniscient forms of knowledge”² (Hassler-Forest 24 & 51-52).
- 5 Killing his mother also represents Fleck's renouncement to ever elucidate the question of his own origins, as it results in making any further confrontation between the two only characters likely to provide the truth impossible. Through this murder, not only does he renounce the truth but also the very notion of a family circle, reminding us of the traditional opposition between the Joker and the notions of family or tribe (Labrude 83-84). Building another bridge between the movie and the preexisting Batman universe, this event also explicitly confers the Joker the same status of orphan as his future archrival. The short sequence in which the camera focuses on the character's pain-stricken face after he has creased a picture of Penny at the back of which were the handwritten words “Love your smile—TW” (for Thomas Wayne) seems to indicate that the process is both conscious and painful (*Joker* 1:22:00-1:22:16). Paradoxically, Fleck's action takes him back to the start of his own quest—an idea only reinforced by the

movie's use of Gary Glitter's "Rock'n Roll Part 2," which is composed of endlessly repeating musical loops. Similarly, his apartment number is "8J", with the double-looped figure "8" comparable to a vertical transposition of the infinity symbol (∞).

- 6 However, the matricide that he commits brings him back to the start in an irreversible manner, breaking the circle and making repetition impossible. The ensuing permanent loss of innocence—as his murder spree and open enjoyment of violence only intensify afterwards—comes with an equally irreversible renouncement: he will never be able to elucidate past traumatic events in his life. As a result, it can be argued that the character renounces the classical Emersonian classifications of Hope (innocence) and Memory (experience) to embrace what R.W.B. Lewis describes as "the party of Irony." While seemingly anecdotal at first sight, such an observation, may however guide us toward a possible interpretation of the entire film: while it has been considered as disturbingly pessimistic, it may also appear to deliver a message not devoid of hope or guidance based on Lewis's view that "the shared purpose of the party of Irony was not to destroy the hopes of the hopeful, but to perfect them" (Lewis 192-193).
- 7 In some regards, *Joker* can be seen as a filmic anti-*Bildungsroman*—with too many missing elements and the main protagonist ending up in an asylum instead of finding peace and maturity. However, the movie and its main character are foremost to be considered within the frame of the archetype they are related to.

***Joker's* impact on the Joker stereotype**

- 8 With at least a couple of scenes explicitly revealed as outside the main narrative arc and taking place in the central character's delusional imagination, the constant unreliability of the visual narration built around him as a focalizer does not help the viewer either. The question of the Joker's genesis is even less clear when previous canonical versions of the Joker archetype are kept in mind.
- 9 The Joker's distinctive white face and permanent grin have been accounted for by two prominent sources in 1980s popular comics culture, the 1988 comic book *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Tim Burton's 1989 movie *Batman*—an accident involving acid, which took place as the criminal was chased by the Batman, was the reason for it (Moore *et. al.*, 1988) (*Batman* 0:27:15-0:30:25). In both cases, the character's subsequent behavior is at least partly explained by the trauma resulting from the accident, eventually turning a petty criminal into a powerful, ruthless, and delirious crime lord as his acquired physical monstrosity further develops into moral monstrosity (Nahoum-Grappe 126-130). Conversely, the 2019 movie shows a character whose physical features derive from his own mental condition and not the other way around, as shown in an early scene in which his naked, rounded back seen from behind is related with his depressed state, not with a hypothetical permanent infirmity or deformity as could be supposed at first sight (*Joker* 0:14:43-0:15:05). His smile is due to the uncontrollable laughter caused by his mental illness, and, as a clown, his face is deliberately painted white and his hair dyed green, consecrating the primacy of the mind over the body: in a way or another, be it willingly or unwillingly, his physical appearance entirely derives from his brain instead of dramatically shaping his state of mind.
- 10 The character's evolution into the Joker is also depicted as a slow, evolving process, rather than the result of a single event. Christopher Nolan's version of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) already insisted on the uncertainty of the Joker's origins, with two

different explanations of his scars being given by the unreliable character himself (*The Dark Knight* 0:30:08-0:31:10 and 0:50:45-0:51:52); Nolan's *Joker* also stood out by the character's use of face paint instead of a genuine skin discoloration. However, it remained consistent with the canon, as it still insisted on the physical dimension of his scars and the importance of physicality in his mental evolution. In Phillips's film, though, Fleck's scars are only mental and emotional, and the prevalence of the mind over the body—in this instance, that of his mental state over his physical appearance—is emphasized all along. The fact that most of the movie revolves around his quest of self (the underlying question being “how did the Joker become the Joker?”) also greatly diverges from the usual portrayals of the character: Fleck paradoxically uses makeup to reach the next stage of his own personal evolution, using artifices for the sake of uncovering his real self instead of using them in order to usurp other people's identities, as has often been the case in both comics and movies since the character's inception in 1940 (Pelissier 90-91).

- 11 Another important reversal in *Joker* is that the Joker does not only precede the Batman, he also contributes to creating him instead of the other way around; he is indirectly involved in the tragic episode which causes the caped crusader's vocation, instead of being accidentally created as an indirect consequence of Batman's intervention. The contrast is only reinforced by the parallel in the accidental process involved: just as Arthur Fleck does not kill Thomas and Martha Wayne but unwillingly inspires the crime, previous geneses of the character insisted on the fact that the Joker's fall into acid was only an accident as he was trying to flee the Batman, and not the result of a deliberate act of violence. While Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* may be seen as a precedent to the Joker's involvement in forging Batman's vocation, it is important to note that Burton's version revolved around reciprocity and mutual influences in the geneses of both characters: Jack Napier turned Bruce Wayne into Batman when he murdered his parents, before Batman accidentally contributed to turning Napier into the Joker after an early chase scene in a chemical factory. However, the first event in the chronology is only revealed around the end of the movie in an analeptic scene that constitutes a major plot twist: in Burton's version, the episode presents both characters as intrinsically bonded by their mutual role in shaping and developing one another, although its late revelation prevents it from taking the role of a guideline. Conversely, Phillips's version gives a one-sided vision of this genetic relation: while Fleck's televised murder of Murray Franklin unwittingly signaled for the height of the violent riot which would eventually claim Martha and Thomas Wayne's lives, his transformation into the Joker had already taken place by then and owes nothing to Bruce Wayne's subsequent actions.
- 12 In previous versions, the Joker's survival after being immersed in acid also gave the character a supernatural dimension that contrasted with Batman's reliance on technology. Todd Phillips's insistence on the Joker as an ordinary man thus reinstates a sense of plausibility bordering on realism, which follows the trend developed throughout the Batman movies authored by Christopher Nolan (Brooker 88). In limiting the demarcation between the onscreen action and the domain of the possible, Phillips also advocates a vision of the overall Batman mythos as purely part of the realm of science fiction. Consequently, the most unrealistic aspects of the Batman universe are to be limited to the technologically advanced nature of the various gadgets associated with the hero, which are for obvious reasons absent from this very movie.

- 13 Even in that regard, though, the nature of the violence perpetrated by the 2019 *Joker* also introduces an important change compared with its predecessors: while Burton's fantasy-driven version of the character deployed various stratagems to dispense elaborate poisons and Nolan's more realistic one made constant use of explosives, Phillips's central character is characterized by unpreparedness if not improvisation. Several scenes clearly hint that his original intent was to kill himself at the Murray Franklin Show instead of murdering anyone there. His murders involve readily available elements that need neither plan nor particular organization to be put together: a gun which he was incidentally given, a pillow, a pair of scissors. He also constantly relies on circumstances to commit his crimes, taking advantage of Randall's impromptu visit and of Murray Franklin's invitation. At the end of the day, his chaotic *modus operandi* illustrates a democratization of high-profile violence: in *Joker*, the means used by one of the greatest comic book crime geniuses of all time are within reach of just about anyone, and seem to require no extraordinary ability or qualification.

Circular markers of the character's evolution

- 14 While it conforms to the tradition of "reboots" in successful film franchises in order to broaden their audiences through a combination of familiar references and novelty (Hassler-Forest 22-23), the regeneration of the mythos also physically translates on the screen through the main protagonist. Just as the progressive revelation of the Joker's new background history invites the comic-educated viewer to constant mental round trips between the various aspects (past and present) of this iconic character, Joaquin Phoenix's slow circular and elaborate dance movements coincide with moments of transformation or regeneration for Fleck, including shortly after his murders. The dance itself evolves: it begins with a failed attempt, interrupted when he accidentally fires his handgun in his mother's living room (*Joker* 0:21:48-0:22:14), to develop through more elaborate and successful iterations at various other key moments.
- 15 After killing the men who had assaulted him on the subway train, Fleck seeks refuge in an isolated public bathroom and starts a slow dance that seems at first a little awkward but gradually appears more controlled (*Joker* 0:33:20-0:34:44). The circularity of the movements of Phoenix's feet, body, arms and shoulders is only reinforced by the manner in which the camera first travels around him horizontally, then draws a slow, unachieved clockwise circle while focusing on his upper body before suddenly drifting to the left without completing the expected figure at the very end of the sequence. A lack of completeness is therefore embodied both in the camera movement and in the character's progress. When Fleck dances in circle again later in his apartment, shortly after killing his mother, the movements are definitely quicker and already a little bolder (*Joker* 1:21:11-1:21:36).
- 16 Then comes the now-iconic scene in which Fleck, dressed and made-up as the Joker, physically illustrates a downward spiral, dancing down an outdoor staircase and spinning his way in a manner that evokes an irreversible yet joyful descent into the abyss. The movements are now quicker and more fluid, as Fleck, who has just killed Randall in the previous sequence, appears to embrace his new persona: the impression is paradoxically enhanced by the manner in which the very end of the scene is shown in slow motion, as if to insist on its defining nature (*Joker* 1:26:53-1:27:51). The Joker's

spectacular entrance on the set of the Murray Franklin Show offers yet another iteration of his dance, this time starting behind the curtain with slow and awkward movements that remind of the initial bathroom dance scene before suddenly switching to fast and elaborate spins, illustrating if not summarizing the character's evolution up until that point (*Joker* 1:33:40-1:34:35). Finally, in the very last seconds of the movie, a handcuffed Fleck reaches the end of the corridor in the hospital and ignites one last spinning dance before fleeing from a member of the hospital staff who is trying to catch him after he possibly murdered the psychiatrist with whom he had just had an interview. As if to signal the end of circularity and its central part in the film, this very different type of linear choreography which goes one way then the other lasts until the words "the end" appear on the screen (*Joker* 1:49:51-1:50:50).

- 17 The development of Fleck's familiarity with these dance movements and his growing ease at performing them illustrates his own assimilation of violence and murder as part of his new identity in a sort of catharsis. Conversely, whenever a murder is being prepared (which only applies to his mother, Murray and the psychiatrist, all other crimes being improvised), another remarkable circular pattern is repeated on the screen at moments which signal the character preparing his misdeeds: the smoke curls from Fleck's cigarettes.³ The moment when he visits his mother at the hospital, and eventually kills her, features a series of medium shots on Fleck as he addresses her. All along these shots, some of them seemingly taken from the hospital bed of the visitée, Fleck creates spectacular curls which whirlwind in the air in front of him, blurring the viewer's perception of the character just before the crime, as if to announce it (*Joker* 1:16:50-1:17:46, especially 1:17:16-1:17:31). Later on, when Fleck, dressed as the Joker, waits backstage before appearing in the Murray Franklin Show, he smokes in front of the monitoring screens (*Joker* 1:33:19-1:33:34). In this scene, which likely corresponds to the character deciding between committing a public suicide on live television and killing the host, the shot highlights the curls of smoke over soundtrack composer Hildur Guðnadóttir's slow and languid background music made of repeating cello loops⁴. Finally, the same can be observed all along the penultimate scene, just before Fleck supposedly murders the psychiatrist, with a close shot which makes the smoke curls prominent (*Joker* 1:48:03-1:49:50). In the meantime, a similar effect has appeared in the scene which shows the Joker stand on the car in triumph in front of his admirers (*Joker* 1:45:52-1:47:53); this time, though, the smoke does not come from a cigarette but from the crowd, probably emanating from smoke bombs. This may even illustrate the extent of the influence the character has had on his followers, as illustrated seconds earlier by the murder of the Waynes by a protester just as the Joker regained consciousness. Such a recurrent pattern, which has these smoke sequences precede the cathartic dance (with a crime taking place in between), suggests that destruction (the cigarettes burning) precedes creation (*artistic* creation through dance, in that regard). These scenes illustrate the uroboric dimension of the transformation process of Fleck into the Joker.
- 18 To a certain extent, the character's spinning dance is a physical marker of various stages of his own evolution within the storyline. Its circularity is also a reminder that the aim of the movement (that is, the result of the evolution it stands for) is bound to be the landmark character which has been iconic for decades. In a way or another, *Joker's* central character is to connect with the Joker stereotype everyone already had in mind at the beginning of the film—a process which is only plainly fulfilled at the very end of the film, when Fleck turns from killing people he held a personal grudge

against to the apparently gratuitous murder of the psychiatrist. But the variations within this same set of circular patterns can also be read as conveying the idea of a whirlwind of change all along the movie, with the progress and changes of the character possibly announcing those that the film proposes to bring to the Joker archetype.

Consequences on the viewer

- 19 Unprecedented on the silver screen, such a paradigm shift between the vision of the character in the DC Comics universe and the version presented in the movie leaves the viewers with the same feeling as the character: that of having acquired more doubt than knowledge as to the question of origins, bringing them back to their starting point while developing their empathy toward the character through this shared experience. Furthermore, even the well-publicized absence of direct connection between *Joker* and the rest of the Batman cinematographic canon (Spencer, 2019) is more than questionable. While this “origin movie” is in no way supposed to be an analepsis embedded in the frame of a previous given storyline, it references enough elements for the viewer to identify it as a possible and plausible genesis of the entire Batman mythos—including the founding traumatic episode in which young Bruce Wayne witnesses the murder of his parents. The violent talk show scene in *Joker* also references a central episode from Frank Miller’s 1986 comic *The Dark Knight Returns* in which the Joker kisses an old, unattractive female guest on live television before starting to kill. With one significant difference, however: the comic depicts the collective and undifferentiated murder of over two hundred people including the crowd, instead of the sole and personally-motivated murder of the host (Miller 121-131).
- 20 To make things more confusing still, the viewer is even invited to reconsider the entire movie in the very last moments of the film. The central character’s ambiguous last words, “I just thought of a funny joke [but] you wouldn’t get it,” have sometimes been interpreted as meaning that the entire story was a tale made up by Fleck, potentially turning the entire purpose of the film into a joke made on the audience while questioning the film’s nature as narrative or meta-narrative.⁵ The latter hypothesis, which debunks the promised revelation as insignificant, condemns the entire story to the margins of the DC universe as un-canonical while turning this supposed “origin movie” into a sheer betrayal of the author-viewer compact. At what point, then, is the viewer’s suspension of disbelief supposed to end? Filmmaker Todd Phillips has so far refused to confirm or refute this hypothesis, which seems to have grown popular among fans (Rottenberg, 2019) and is made plausible by the brutal fade-out ellipsis that makes the Joker’s triumph and Fleck’s internment collide in two immediately consecutive scenes (*Joker* 1:47:54-1:48:03). I personally tend to prefer a number of other possible interpretations which will be developed further on.

Revolutions and Evolutions in and around the Film

- 21 Another troubling change contributes to that feeling of mismatch between this and previous versions of the Joker: while the traditional evilness of the Joker often derives from his success in turning inoffensive practical joke props into deadly weapons, the character played by Joaquin Phoenix owes his social demise to his own failure to have a

real gun, which he did not even intend to use, pass for a prop. This causes his fall, as this episode costs him his job and incidentally leads to the subway episode that marks his first killings. But while the Joker is turned from a super-villain to a mere anti-hero, his unlikely triumph echoes the movie's success in questioning the limited status originally assigned to it by the studio system.

An accidental revolution come full circle

- 22 While Fleck's psychotic personality is made clear at the beginning of the movie with early evocations of both his past internment and the heavy medication he has to take,⁶ the subway scene marks the beginning of his killing spree—hence his transformation into the Joker. Ironically, even then, the gap is immense between the scene itself and its interpretation by other characters and subsequent effects within the storyline. While Fleck first acts in self-defence against his beating by a group of men who interpreted his pathological laughter as sarcasm,⁷ the context collectively eludes the press, the commentators, and the Gotham public opinion, who all concur to create a political narrative around the event. Not only are the initial aggressors turned into innocent victims, but the act, although wrongly described as a class-motivated hate crime, gathers supporters as such. As a result, the central character is dispossessed of his own experience—as is the viewer. Deprived of his name, Arthur Fleck is now known as “the clown,” and his individuality dissolves in a sea of protesters wearing a clown mask as a tribute to his action—or, more precisely, to *their own interpretation of it*. Appearances and misinformed interpretations have superseded facts, a recurring theme within the entire Batman universe where the hero himself often appears more as a rumor and a myth than a reality (Tomasovic 20-23). The truth and the entire world's perception thereof appear unable to meet. The borders of sanity are disturbingly confused, creating a sense of dizziness that echoes the main character's thought that “[it is] getting crazier out there.”
- 23 Even before its release, the movie had been depicted as an apology of violence. Among its most outspoken critics are relatives of people killed in the 2012 Aurora shooting, when a murderer dressed as the Joker shot twelve people during a screening of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* (Parker, 2019). Ironically, the accusations by several medias that *Joker* was likely to spread a wave of violence (which eventually did not occur) has distorted its perception, reminding us of the way the press misinterprets Fleck's subway murders within the diegesis. This misunderstanding is all the more surprising since the film contains clear indications as to its intents: even before Fleck's transformation into the Joker persona, the mismatch between his initial killings in the subway train and the media reactions to it (which only make matters worse) had already created a sense of absurdity, conveying a clear message of defiance towards excessive responses to uncertain events and circumstances.
- 24 Around the end, the movie also contains a scene whose significance seems to have eluded a number of commentators but which I consider central to correctly apprehend the movie's criticism of violence. After the Joker has killed Murray Franklin on live television, he is taken aboard a police car which is deliberately hit by an ambulance driven by a protester wearing a clown mask. In the following sequence, Fleck's unconscious body is extracted from the car by protesters, and they subsequently bow down to him after he is put on the hood of the car, which they seem to use as an altar.

While this scene may be interpreted as signifying the triumph of evil (or, at least, a recognition of its ability to fascinate the masses), it most importantly represents a stark criticism of the inconsistency of mob rule. The crowd's act of veneration borders on the cult of personality, which is incoherent given the egalitarian symbol of the identical mask chosen by all the protesters. The absence of any attempt to provide first-aid also indicates a collective subjugation that lacks the practical, no-nonsense aspect often claimed by so-called "populist" movements. Added to the fact that the victim's body is displaced onto the hood of the police car, this apparent indifference to his health can even be analyzed as the cold and cynical staging of an apparent accident in which a protester would have been run over by a police car. This latter interpretation underlines the careless instrumentalization of an individual to serve a political purpose—in this case, turning the protest movement into the victim of police violence.

- 25 However, while the movie does certainly not condone his crimes, it does question the expected impunity of his victims for their initial misdeeds. Most importantly, it definitely suggests that the transformation of Arthur Fleck into the Joker is actually the predictable product of the Frankensteinish society of Gotham,⁸ echoing a previous quote by the Joker in *The Dark Knight*: "I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve" (*The Dark Knight* 1:28:52-1:29:02). However, while *The Dark Knight*'s Joker unsuccessfully attempts to turn ordinary people into criminals by placing them in front of a moral conundrum somehow reminiscent of the Milgram and Stanford experiments (*The Dark Knight* 2:01:00-2:12:53), Arthur Fleck actually succeeds without even trying. In spite of the fictitious setting, the movie is also not devoid of social criticisms that evoke a number of current issues in the metropolises of our globalized world, as is to be developed later.
- 26 In all these possible readings of the situation, the protesters appear as the equivalent of the dehumanizing power against which they revolt, evoking the risk of turning a political revolution into an astronomical one: a return to the initial situation, perhaps with a change in roles but not in the system itself. The apparent veneration that surrounds the Joker also reveals him as an antichrist figure, who keeps his own blood to draw his distinctive smile instead of sharing it with his "disciples" and only does so after (instead of before) his apparent "resurrection." When he regains consciousness and stands on the car, his arms are outstretched on either side in a paradoxically Christ-like pose, but in a gesture of triumph—not sacrifice or pain. This contrast clearly depicts him as a failed prophet and leaves the viewer to ponder whether such an observation is to be extended to the kind of popular protest movements associated with him in the film. This contrasted portrayal of the character in this scene is also a recurring theme that develops throughout the screenplay—another source of ambiguity in its interpretation.

A super-villain turned into an anti-hero

- 27 At first sight, the choice of the movie played in the theatre outside of which Bruce Wayne's parents are killed, *Zorro, the Gay Blade* (1981), could also be seen as a manner to heroize the Joker. A particularly untraditional Zorro movie, *Zorro, the Gay Blade* is a comedy by Peter Medak in which the masked avenger's trademark black attire is replaced by colorful outfits including a purple one, all worn by a caricature gay character⁹. The very color traditionally associated with the Joker supersedes that which is known to characterize Batman. Although discrete (the purple Zorro is never seen or

mentioned in *Joker* and requires extradiegetic knowledge of this detail by the viewer), this hint at an unexpected resemblance plays on the same fluid complementarity bordering on interchangeability between both characters, as noted by Will Brooker about *The Dark Knight* (Brooker 186-196). This aspect is further reinforced by the manner in which the attitude of Thomas Wayne to Fleck and his mother turns the background story into a family feud in which the line between good and evil is largely blurred, compared with the vision traditionally given of the Batman universe. However, both the parodic nature of Medak's film and the unauthentic aspect of its storyline compared with the original Zorro mythos hint at Fleck being a sorry excuse for a hero and at the absurdity of glorifying him and his actions.

- 28 The fact that he only incidentally inspires the murder of the Waynes also insists on the difference between the inspirational Batman, who tries to inspire a virtuous mimesis (Bott 239-243), and Fleck's self-centered and almost nihilistic approach, which only incidentally contaminates the society around him. Compared with his onscreen predecessors, while it can very well be argued that Jack Nicholson's larger-than-life Joker was driven by life and that Heath Ledger's disturbing version of it was driven by death (Ducreux 235), the motivations of Joaquin Phoenix's character appear too hesitant and contrasted to be classified in either category. In many regards, this Joker appears to be more a banal antihero than the expected super-villain. But beyond the sole character, the very architecture of the genre and of the industry behind it also finds itself questioned by the very existence of this movie.

A palace revolution in the studio

- 29 While all the aforementioned differences and variations could be enough to distance *Joker* from the official canon of the DC universe, it is important to also consider the genesis of the film itself. Reportedly, executives at Warner Bros. were originally reluctant to associate Todd Phillips and Scott Silver's script project with "the" Joker; also reportedly, they even suggested disconnecting the movie's main character from its illustrious model to avoid a risk of confusion within the Batman franchise, due to the existence of other projects based around the same character with another actor and part of an entirely different story arc (Lee, 2019). Phillips's reply to this corporate politics dilemma was to preserve the identity of the character as the Joker, but to insist on the film's disconnection from the current or already planned DC universe story arcs through an incompatible timeline: with *Joker* taking the viewers back in the 1980s while all other ongoing projects revolved around current-day settings, the movie was strongly stated as part of "a separate universe" unlikely to collide with other past or foreseeable future movies (Davis, 2019).
- 30 However, in spite of the movie being unrelated with other Warner Bros. and DC projects, the movie's constant insistence on the ties between its own Joker and the Joker stereotype actively keeps the door open for an alternate canonicity. While unrelated to previous or already planned releases, the movie retains the possibility to become the first in another series of films (instead of a marginal standalone movie) thanks to its open ending and constant exploitation of canonical references. Variations, an element complementary to and as important as repetition in defining the notion of genre (Grant 21), allow the resulting onscreen narrative to remain compatible with an inscription within an alternate canon, while also extending the film's aura beyond the

sole circle of Batman connoisseurs. In doing so, Phillips conceded to the Warner Bros. executives in making a film which was not likely to interfere with the studio's projects regarding the DC "extended universe," but he also opened the possibility to create his own alternate universe in a separate diegetic timeline. In spite of persisting rumors in that regard, it remains too early as of writing these lines to say whether one or several sequels to *Joker* will ever be produced, but the point is that the manner in which the character has been carved in the movie has been instrumental in preserving such a possibility: while not *the Joker* that Warner Bros. intended, Arthur Fleck has been depicted as a *possible and worthy Joker* in the world of comics adaptations where coexisting alternate timelines and parallel universes are common.

- 31 In that regard, *Joker* is to be seen as an artistic attempt to infiltrate the corporate world of the superhero film industry, or, as Todd Phillips himself summarized it, "as a way to sneak a real movie in the studio system under the guise of a comic book film" (Sanchez, 2019). It can even be considered as a way of imposing an alternate vision of a character, not thanks to inside support but to the popularity of the movie and to the moviegoers' reaction to it, turning the character into a legitimate version of the archetype inside which it inscribes itself. In the end, this would amount to not only sneaking one movie inside the studio system, but most importantly infiltrating one of the most iconic fictional universes—that of Batman—to impose an alternate arc built around a genuine auteur film. In a sense, it would make the movie mimic Fleck's role as an unlikely underdog turned into an unexpected sensation through popular support in spite of the establishment. At the same time, as is often the case with auteur films, *Joker* also develops a strategy to convey a complex political and social message.

From 1980s Gotham to the Restless 21st-Century Society: A Cultural and Political Round Trip

- 32 While the entire plot is coherently set in the early 1980s, a large number of references feed a constant exchange between the past and the late 2010s. Filmic intertextuality brings into a 2019 movie a number of detailed and easily identifiable past cinematographic references, most of them from the plot's era. It does so however in a manner that prevents a genuine nostalgia from developing on screen, as it mostly emphasizes the hardships of the early Reaganian society and insists on the well-known parallel between the city of Gotham and New York City. From that initial, carefully crafted visual setting, the many parallels that are easily drawn with our own time become all the more striking as they suggest that many social issues tend to repeat themselves throughout the decades with only minor variations. *Joker* hence insists on history as a repetitive process which—like the movie itself—leaves little place for a real feeling of closure.

A movie inscribed in the 1980s

- 33 Referential aspects in *Joker* are not limited to the Batman universe, and Todd Phillips's choice to set the action in or around 1981 comes with his constant use of cinematographic nods to the 1970s and 1980s. This happens as early as the opening credit, which makes use of a vintage Warner Bros. Pictures logo that was historically used only during a period circumscribed between 1972 and 1984 (Cecchini & Crow,

2019). However, the movie addresses the viewer both as a moviegoer and as a citizen, and its use of such intertextual references to play on contrasts results in a similarly contrasted yet coherent coexistence of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia.

- 34 Certainly the most emblematic moment in the movie, the scene in which Arthur Fleck dressed as the Joker dances down the outdoor stairs has been interpreted as a reverse staging of a similarly iconic scene in John G. Avildsen's 1976 sport drama *Rocky*. Rocky Balboa's triumphant climbing of the stone steps leading to the entrance of the Philadelphia Museum of Art similarly illustrates the hero's realization of his full potential (Holzman, 2019). The opposition in the movements of both characters only highlights their antagonistic trajectories: one is bound for fame, the other for infamy. While Rocky Balboa's successful climb illustrates his perseverance after several failed attempts, the Joker's effortless descent indicates that he has actually chosen the easy way, contrasting with his own difficult climb of the same set of stairs in an earlier scene (*Joker* 0:18:25-0:18:33). In another intertextual reference, the subway murder scene is reminiscent of Michael Winner's controversial 1974 film *Death Wish* which famously features a similar setting, although Fleck's act happens coincidentally—not as a premeditated act of vigilantism. The most obvious reference, however, brings the viewer much farther back in time with the projection of a scene from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), of which Fleck attends a public screening. Chaplin's careless circular skating on the verge of a tragic fall mirrors Fleck being constantly on the edge, as his life, career, and quest only seem to run in circles. This interfilmic gesture makes the character's wholehearted laugh while watching the scene with Chaplin all the more significant since it ironically points to his lack of awareness of his own trajectory at that point in the film (*Joker* 1:01:10-1:01:35).
- 35 As has been well documented, *Joker* also abounds with specific references to movies by Martin Scorsese, making the association between the fictional Gotham and real-life New York City all the more explicit considering the filmmaker's close association with the "city that never sleeps." Among them, one can mention the 1982 release *The King of Comedy* in which Robert De Niro plays Rupert Pupkin, an aspiring stand-up comedian whose red stage costume resembles that worn by Fleck¹⁰ and who is literally obsessed by a talk-show host. As if casting De Niro in the opposite role was not enough, *Joker* borrows a number of themes and even scenes from Scorsese's movie, but also from many others.
- 36 The already mentioned antichristic scene in which a triumphant Joker is acclaimed by protesters is also to be read against the crucifixion scene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). One scene depicts the Christ's death and agony, the other the Joker's apparent resurrection; Willem Dafoe's facial and body expressions evoke pain, humility, and doubt, with frequent close-ups, while Joaquin Phoenix's stance illustrates triumph and pride seen from a distance. The Christ is only one among a multitude of people being crucified, whereas the Joker is sole to occupy his prominent place so that everybody can see him; Scorsese circles between evolving shots on the suffering character and others in the crowd who witness the scene either in horror or amusement, while in *Joker* the masked crowd remains anonymous and its emotions appear irrelevant (*Joker* 1:45:33-1:47:54) (*The Last Temptation of Christ* 2:02:57-2:08:52 and 2:38:20-2:39:35).
- 37 Various minor Scorsese references can also be spotted here or there. The shot from behind of Arthur Fleck performing his comedy skit in a club reminds one of similar shots in *Raging Bull* (1980)—except for the fact that in *Joker* the darkness of the room

reduces the spectators to mere shadows in the eyes of the viewer (*Joker* 0:43:10-0:43:17) (*Raging Bull* 1:39:43-1:39:51 and 1:41:32-1:41:40). The spectacular murder of Murray Franklin arguably follows the principle enounced in *Gangs of New York* (2002), according to which “when you kill a king, you don’t stab him in the dark: you kill him where the whole court can watch him die” (*Gangs of New York* 0:33:50-0:34:05). Even the background radio news flash which begins the movie has been linked with the pivotal scene in which the main character learns of the success of his big score in *Goodfellas* (1990) (Cecchini & Crow, 2019).

- 38 But the most obvious and present Scorsese references are to *Taxi Driver* (1976). Both movies can be similarly summarized: they feature a socially awkward low-key worker who is obsessed with a high-profile personality and happens to achieve fame and some sort of recognition through a particularly violent episode, with an epilogue that presents the aftermath of the said episode. If it were not enough to ring a bell, a number of more precise details further the evocation. Early in both movies, Travis Bickle and Arthur Fleck are offered the opportunity to protect themselves with a gun by a senior coworker (although Bickle is offered connections to get one, while Fleck is given the gun itself); the layout in the clown agency’s office in *Joker* is reminiscent of the taxi headquarter in Scorsese’s movie; after the stairs dance scene, the Joker’s flight to escape the two police officers who are after him is slowed down when he is hit by a typical “yellow cab” reminiscent of Bickle’s; finally, when the police car in which the Joker is being transported is violently stopped, the masked protester who drives the ambulance and helps extract him from the car wears the exact same attire as that was worn by Bickle in his final killing spree.
- 39 While there is no doubt that these references to Scorsese considerably shape the visual aesthetics of *Joker* and the viewer’s perception of it, they are also essential in connecting the movie with the realism that characterizes the Italian-American director, who stated that “there should be no difference” between documentary and fiction (Lattanzio 2019). Consequently, it contributes to distance Phillips’s film from the traditional and expected fantasy universe of comic books. Along these lines, the references which are scattered along the film are not limited to cinematographical evocations but extend to the 1980s society, however with a strikingly different effect.
- 40 Alongside the chaotic sociopolitical situation described in the movie, the unambiguous insistence on the ties between Gotham and New York City contributes to tone down any possible feeling of nostalgia considering that the “Big Apple” was then undergoing a peak in violence and crime with a record number of 1,814 murders committed in 1980 (to be compared with the latest available yearly figure of 318 for the year 2019) (Buder, 1981; Szekely, 2020). One particularly violent event was also specifically an avowed inspiration to shape the lead character: the 1984 New York City subway shooting during which a man named Bernhard Goetz wounded four men who were reportedly attacking him in circumstances comparable to those in which Fleck gets attacked in the subway and kills his assailants (Desowitz, 2019). In another crime-related reference, the comedy club in which Fleck performs is called “Pogo’s,” after serial killer John Wayne Gacy’s clown persona, confirming the movie’s universe as profoundly anchored in an eminently violent setting. As a result, while its many cinematographic references do concur to a certain cultural nostalgia¹¹, the film conversely cannot be read in terms of social nostalgia as it constantly depicts the 1980s as an era of violence, hardships and

chaos. This point, however essential, seems to have led to a number of widespread misunderstandings of the movie's social and political message.

Past, present, and continuity: the social and racial questions in *Joker*

- 41 In spite of its supposed setting in a fictional city in the 1980s, the movie actually illustrates a number of recent or current social preoccupations, as if history were repeating itself. Yet, its message has been largely blurred by a number of interpretations that ended up depicting the film as a nostalgic and ethnocentric rant advocating violence and populism. A close analysis tells otherwise, and reveals a much more subtle point.
- 42 In one of its earliest scenes, Fleck is shown, dressed as a clown, working in front of a music shop which is going out of business, holding a sign that mentions that "everything must go." While Fleck initially holds the sign upside down, he then turns it upright to make it readable, but is immediately attacked by a group of young thugs who confiscate the sign then beat him up with it after he has chased them in order to get it back (*Joker* 0:01:32-0:03:33)¹². Should we apply the "everything must go" slogan to the protesters' intent to do away with the city's political administration, then this scene illustrates both the difficulties to obtain change and, most importantly, the violence with which such demands are bound to be met. The fact that this segment coincides with the opening credits of the film and ends with the display of its title only confirms its significance and centrality.
- 43 Later on, the dark, slummy apartment in which Fleck and his mother live contrasts with the luxury exhibited in Thomas Wayne's life. This sense of inequality is only made worse by the indifference that accompanies it and the spectacular lack of interactions between different social classes—an impression of social segregation reinforced by the fact that Fleck's only known neighbor is Sophie, a Black single mother. The scene in which the social worker announces to Fleck that the office is about to close due to funding cuts adds to the portrayal of a population left on its own, with no prospect of social mobility, as classes seem to work in closed circles. Deprived of any possibility to become a stereotypical "displaced working class hero" through merit or education (Dittmer 88), Fleck only manages to stand out through violence and media coverage, with his appearance on the Murray Franklin Show paradoxically sparking both attraction (one may even say emulation) and repulsion, evoking our own time's complex relationship with "trash TV" (Binik 121).¹³
- 44 The fact that funding cuts in the City's social budget result in Fleck being deprived from access to his well-needed medications just as he seems to begin to assert himself also reinforces the idea of the community's responsibility for his future actions. This leads to a second possible reading of Fleck's final remark regarding a joke that his interlocutor "wouldn't get": ironically, having committed a series of murders entitles him to benefit from the medical treatment of which he was previously deprived, echoing in the minds of late 2010s audiences a number of publicized cases in which, in the past decade alone, American citizens have committed petty crimes in order to be jailed and enjoy better health care than what they could afford (Moisse, 2011; Quigley, 2013). As it is also mentioned early on that Fleck was previously interned, another possible interpretation would be that he found that option to ensure being removed from a society he did not belong in, also evoking comparable situations that have been

relayed in the media in recent years (Craft, 2017; Lapin, 2019; Associated Press, 2019). On this view, crime appears to provide a way to overcome and escape the fate of human powerlessness traditionally associated with representations of the underclass in Gotham all along the Batman universe (Leverenz 753-754). Consequently, the film questions the nature and limits of a system which allows such evolutions and dilemmas to take place.

- 45 As the social worker puts it bluntly, “they don’t give a shit about people like you [...] and they really don’t give a shit about people like me, either” (*Joker* 0:39:40-0:40:05): Gotham is explicitly divided between “the[m],” “you,” and “me.” In a relativistic world, devoid of absolutes and where language is left to deictics, there is not even an “us” to rally the two of them against the potential multitude included in “they.” While many of the criticisms leveled at the movie have evoked its supposed glamorization of violence and its complacency to vengeance and murder, the latent social violence has most often been left aside by the same critics. Phillips commented that “everybody always wants to talk about the spark and not the powder” (Howard, 2019), and seemingly reproached those critics for purposefully ignoring how both are part of the same vicious circle. The lack of communication and understanding of everyday life in Gotham is also illustrated in the bus scene in which a mother firmly asks Fleck, who was playing peek-a-boo with her child to entertain him, to “stop bothering [her] kid,” paying little attention to the card he shows her to explain his “condition” (*Joker* 0:07:30-0:08:45). Accordingly, Fleck’s escape from his own loneliness only proves delusional, and it is eventually revealed that his romantic involvement with Sophie only took place in his mind through a scene which circles through a number of previous ones so as to reveal to the viewer the reality of her absence in each of them. This relegates the perspective of an offset, grotesque desire of the beauty for the beast into the realm of the impossible, severing any further ties with Victor Hugo’s *The Man Who Laughs* (Grossman, 2005), a well-known model for the original Joker character.¹⁴
- 46 From that moment, when it comes to literary comparisons, the plot actually appears closer to that of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “Hop-Frog.” In Poe’s tale, a court jester outwits and kills the king and his ministers as the conclusion of a fool’s game which resembles Fleck’s acceptance of Murray Franklin’s invite, in spite of the obvious fact that Franklin only intends to further humiliate him publicly. The analogy is furthered when one considers Poe’s description of his central character as “a dwarf and a cripple” (Poe 261), a feature paralleled by Fleck’s (although non-physical) handicap.¹⁵ While parallels have also been drawn between the character of Hop-Frog and the fate of slaves, who were deported, exploited, and renamed (Jones 244), *Joker* can also be interpreted as the forceful emancipation of a lower-class person, a point reinforced by the main character’s reappropriation of the word “joker,” first used contemptibly by Franklin, before Fleck chooses it as his public name. Similarly, Fleck’s pursuit of comedy-related careers—first as a clown, then as a stand-up comedian—can be viewed as failed attempts to appropriate the nickname “Happy” given to him by his mother—a nickname all the more questionable due to the main symptom of his condition which definitely separates his uncontrollable laughter from his actual state of mind.
- 47 In some regards, Fleck’s initial clown persona and the expectations of a feigned jolliness that rested on him as a clown can be paralleled with the “Sambo” racist stereotype, a point which concurs with the representation of ethnic minorities around him as part of a subordinate class and with his calling of an African American hospital

clerk “brother” (*Joker* 1:08:07-1:08:15). In this view, the film’s social background can be interpreted as a metaphor of the social exclusion of African-Americans, as a reminder that social exclusion (not ethnicity) is linked with criminal propensity. That way, the film can be read as a “color-blind” advocacy of class as more determining than race in the manifestation, analysis, and possibly resolution of social issues, distancing *Joker* from the supposed “drama awash in racial iconography” denounced by critic Richard Brody in his review of the film for *The New Yorker* (Brody, 2019). According to Brody, the movie “whitewashes Goetz’s [...] racial motives” in the subway scene, and consequently the discourse in *Joker* and “the thought processes of Arthur Fleck are utterly devoid of any racial or social specificity.” I would argue against this as the central character’s likely *unconscious* part in a socially determined context can hardly amount to negate the said context’s “social specificity,” which remains perceivable to the viewer. *Joker*’s social discourse is strong enough, I contend, to disqualify Brody’s dismissal of the supposed “political cowardice” of the film.

- 48 Others have voiced similar concerns, including philosopher of race Lawrence Ware who analyzes the character’s incommunicability with Black female characters (the social worker, Sophie and the psychiatrist) as “an oppositional or antagonistic position to these women.” Ware overlooks the character’s mental disability when it comes to his unrealistic expectations, which he attributes exclusively to the character’s supposed feeling of entitlement as a White male. He goes as far as to claim that the movie “implies” that Fleck murdered Sophie and her daughter, in spite of no indication whatsoever of this in the movie itself (Ware, 2019).¹⁶ Other examples from various other sources could be quoted, including mentions of the film’s supposed advocacy of ableism, which overlook many characters’ onscreen reactions to Fleck’s mental disability as a crucial factor in shaping his actions, as well as the fact that the short-statured Gary is arguably the only sympathetic character in the entire film.
- 49 A well-established landmark in the Gotham underclass, social separateness is shared more widely. When Thomas Wayne praises his three dead employees as “good” and “decent” persons although he admittedly “didn’t know them personally,” it reveals Wayne’s favorable bias towards his own social class. All the more so since the viewer has previously witnessed the bullying that the three men inflicted on other passengers (including Fleck) on the subway train, in a scene alternately conveyed through a camera shot consistent with Fleck’s point of view and another one focusing on his face. While such shots tend to facilitate the viewer’s empathy with Fleck through a partially common visual experience, the process culminates sonically at the end of the scene. The last gunshot fired is immediately followed by a high-pitched sound evocative of tinnitus as the character raises his hand to his ear, sharing with the viewer the intimacy of a physiological phenomenon supposed to be perceived by Fleck alone (*Joker* 0:28:38-0:32:39). The gap between what the scene reveals and Wayne’s prejudiced rewriting of it is all the clearer, and takes a major part in distancing the viewer from the partial and uninformed interpretations which are to follow in some of the next scenes.

History repeating itself and the movie’s political statement

- 50 With the current global concerns regarding divisions between the ruling elites and large parts of the population, it is not surprising that, after the movie was released, the *Joker*’s mask and face paint soon became favorites of protesters in Hong-Kong, Chile,

Lebanon, France, or even the United States during the protests that followed the killing of George Floyd in 2020 (Mounier, 2019; Karthik Prasad, 2019; Djuric, 2020; Seidel, 2020)¹⁷. This of course reminds us of a similar phenomenon which had been inspired by James McTeigue's film *V for Vendetta* (2005), with the popularization of the now-iconic Guy Fawkes mask associated with the film by various protest movements, in particular international hacker-activist movement Anonymous (Montes, 2011; Waites, 2011). However, in the case of *Joker*, the trend has not come without controversy (Cereceda, 2019).

- 51 With the action specifically set in the early 1980s, the viewer is brought back to a period known to have fostered a dramatic rise in social inequalities in the United States (Collins 131). But if one of the points of *Joker* is to illustrate how history repeats itself, then its main character's Schopenhauerian thought on comedy being mistaken for tragedy makes the entire film echoes Karl Marx's idea that history only reiterates "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (Marx 9). The blurring between tragedy and comedy in the character's mind tends to create a similar fuzziness regarding past and present in the viewer's, leading to the same final realization that the movie is, indeed, about a present second (hence farcical) iteration. It can even be contended that the choice of the early 1980s is precisely meant to cast presidents Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump as respectively the tragic and farcical historical figures in a repetition of events. Considering the similarities between both men's claim to the support of a "silent majority" and advocacy of tax cuts that have been accused to worsen social inequality (two aspects particularly significant in the movie), the idea seems at least compatible with director Todd Phillips's criticism of the Trump presidency (Harrington, 2020).
- 52 The film, however, avoids a simplistic social caricature, and hypocrisy and pettiness are equally shared among many characters all over the social scale. Just as Thomas Wayne's public claim that "all employees are family" is obviously disproved by his willful ignorance of his former employee's fate; just as Murray Franklin's invitation of the future Joker to his talk show is aimed at ridiculing him on live television, Fleck is also betrayed by one of his colleagues, Randall. After providing him with a gun that Fleck was first reluctant to accept, Randall subsequently falsely claims that it was Fleck who was actively seeking to obtain one, costing him his job. In all three cases, the retribution for these sins is death. Randall is selectively killed by Fleck, who deliberately lets Gary go away. At that stage in the film, this proves his obedience to a certain logic which, although obviously criminal and discomfoting, clearly departs from the sadistic, chaotic and untrustworthy killer the viewer knows the Joker to have become through other, extradiegetic sources. Murray Franklin is shot publicly during his show, in the very circumstances in which he had planned to humiliate his guest. As for Thomas Wayne, he is murdered in an alley by a protester wearing a clown mask.
- 53 Considering that Wayne was the one who first labeled the protesters as "clowns" and indirectly influenced their adoption of the disguise, this does not come without a twist of irony, and may well account for Fleck's final remark about a "funny joke" that the psychiatrist—and perhaps the viewer?—"wouldn't get." Another possible interpretation of that final quote is that the uncontrollable protest movement which both Wayne and he unwittingly fueled eventually provided him with a sense of revenge from the man who rejected him as a son. The same words can however also be read as a precognition of the fact that the murder of Thomas Wayne would eventually prompt

his son, Bruce, to become Batman, the Joker's future nemesis. The process unwillingly started by Fleck would then lead to his eventual demise, precluding—although for different reasons—any possible catharsis for either the character or the viewer who witnesses the young Bruce crying next to the bodies of his parents. In attempting to extract himself from a doomed present, Fleck has in a way ensured his own fall. His entire path was in fact limited to a vicious circle—as hinted by his escape from the police using the “O” subway line en route to the Murray Franklin Show.

- 54 To a certain extent, the chronology of the deaths of those three characters follows an ascending order in terms of responsibility and consequences—individual misconducts, then the media's carelessness, then political responsibility. Such logic reminds one of the famous principle according to which “with great power comes great responsibility” in the Spider Man franchise from the Marvel universe, DC Comics' main competitor, creating another intertextual arc.
- 55 The cult of hypocrisy through appearances and vanity in social relationships is also illustrated by Fleck's remembrance that, as a child, his mother encouraged him to “smile and put on a happy face” no matter what his real feelings were.¹⁸ Following this idea, the short scene in which Fleck also applies make-up to his tongue when preparing for the Murray Franklin Show (*Joker* 1:21:50-1:21:57) looks like an onscreen metaphor for his symbolic acceptance of social conventions, such as the necessity to disguise or to tone down one's real thought through one's speech even if it is to use them to denounce social hypocrisy—thereby turning conventions against themselves. If we consider his mother as an embodiment of the norm, killing her becomes a rejection of the supposed mission she had assigned him—to “spread joy” around him—in favor of a very different paradigm (the spreading of chaos and death). It also represents a symbolic challenge directed at society as a whole; not only does it foreshadow the spectacular televised murder of Franklin, but it also increases the irony that a public yet solitary act of rejection of the outside world should be seen as political and gather followers.
- 56 Symbolically, the opening and ending sequences preclude any possibility of closure in the movie. Both feature a succession of shots involving a frantic chase and an exchange between Fleck and a benevolent character representing the authority—a social worker in one case, a psychiatrist in the other. Despite this echo, or because of it, the end only insists on the lack of resolution of the main character's existential issues, while the viewer is left to ponder as to the meaning and significance of the bloody footsteps which he leaves behind him: has he actually killed the psychiatrist, or do they only symbolize the marks that he has left behind him and intends to continue spreading? Considering that up until that point in the film all of Fleck's murderous actions have been motivated by personal grudges and feelings of betrayal (not by mere chance or opportunity), the entire rationale of the character is ultimately put into question. The viewers are brought back to the start and invited to reconsider all they had thought they had understood of the character—and possibly the film.

Conclusion

- 57 The constant use of references, reversals, and the emphasis on twisted situations deemed normal eventually turn the utterly satanic dimension of the Joker, as previously portrayed by Jack Nicholson in *Batman* (1989) or Heath Ledger in *The Dark*

Knight (2008), into a reluctant and accidental Promethean figure who involuntarily adds fire to the flame of an already existing rebellion. Even from this perspective, though, his devilish character remains somewhat intact through the etymology of Lucifer as “light-bringer.”

- 58 But with the movie insisting on the limits and dangers of both the sociopolitical status quo and the anarchy-driven alternative that the character ends up embodying, the solutions to the ongoing chaos in Gotham (and our world) that his light allows us to see are so numerous that, in the end, they are left to the viewer’s judgment and interpretation. While the film advocates the urgent necessity to rethink the problem at hand instead of choosing between two equally unsatisfactory if not dangerous solutions, it either fails, or refuses, to state a convincing way-out, which makes of it, by any standard, more of a whistleblower than a prescriptive movie.
- 59 The *Joker*’s pattern of destruction leading to construction (through the smoke turned into a dance) reminds the viewer of the criticisms often directed against globalized capitalism. This turns the *Joker* into the paradoxical embodiment of the dangers of both a continuing unsustainable sociopolitical system (which he embodies through his transformation) and the violent and equally unsustainable alternatives aiming at overthrowing it (of which he accidentally becomes a figurehead)—each paradoxically feeding the other endlessly. The parallels which are constantly drawn between the 1980s and our own time also echo Dan Hassler-Forest’s conclusion that superhero movies “seem to indicate that little has changed since the establishment of neoliberalism as a hegemonic framework” (Hassler-Forest 259). In this view, *Joker* challenges Gregory Hood and Greg Johnson’s view that “vigilantism only becomes necessary when the liberal legal order fails to secure justice” (Hood & Johnson “Editors’ Introduction”). Indeed, in the film, the failure that leads to anarchy is not that of the socially liberal institutions but that of the economically neoliberal and socially conservative policies that have driven the people to take the streets. This constant and consistent defense of a left-leaning line throughout the movie also proves an exception to Liam Burke’s contention that political allusions in movies derived from comic book franchises “seem to be less about meaningful engagement than creating a semblance of sociopolitical relevance” (Burke 37)—reminding us again of how *Joker* is actually much closer to an auteur film than to the average superhero movie. The constant evocation, opposition and challenging of two opposite views also gesture toward Will Brooker’s analysis of Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* films as an exploration of “the key contradictions of the ‘war on terror’” following 9/11 (Brooker 208-210), although in *Joker* the absence of a proper hero to balance the anti-hero seems to indicate a refusal to choose either of the two sides and advocate a rejection of both alternatives altogether.
- 60 Eventually, the question of the *Joker*’s origin is left partly unanswered, at least when it comes to his paternal ascendancy, but also possibly when it comes to the meaning of his last words in the film, joining both origins and end in the same inconclusiveness. However, this lack of a definite answer appears almost anecdotic compared with the certain resulting chaos. This non-didactic approach is somehow particularly consistent with the 1988 comic book *Batman: the Killing Joke* in which the *Joker* states that he prefers his past “to be multiple choice” (Moore *et. al.*, 1988, emphasis added). It also echoes Dick Tomasovic’s view that everything within the *Batman* mythos is only a matter of perception, not facts (Tomasovic 16). In this regard, the constant hints at

previous celebrated landmarks throughout the Batman mythology precisely appear as a reflexive claim for canonicity by the very movie whose inclusion within the official DC universe was denied altogether from the onset (Bradley, 2019). All this contributes to make the movie a possible real-life counterpart to Arthur Fleck's—although short-lived—on-screen triumph as an underdog.

- 61 This approach also allows *Joker* to depart significantly from the classic superhero narrative structure, which relies on a closed scenario to adapt the semiotics concept of “closed text” as developed by Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader*. In this movie, the process of giving the viewer a certain power of interpretation (that is, the very process of “opening” the on-screen narrative) is inherently linked with the choice to depict a complex and ambivalent situation. In that sense, it departs from the codes of a movie genre that relies on the simplistic premise of a basic opposition between equally identifiable embodiments of good and evil—an opposition which is supposed to lead the viewer through “a predetermined path” with little room left for interpretation (Eco 8). While the storyline deliberately remains linear and exclusively centered around the main character's point of view in the director's own words (Garcia *et. al.*, 2019), the abundance of hints at both fictional and contextual references provides a constant invite addressed to the viewers so that they involve their own references, states of minds, or expectations into their real-time reading and interpretation of the on-screen narrative. With such an insistence on circumvolution and elusiveness so as to feed the viewer's imagination and thoughts, it is no wonder, then, that the movie was received so controversially, with many contradictory and utterly incompatible analyses being developed around it.
- 62 As a result, incompleteness turns out to be an integral part of the experience: while circles structure the entire film and are constantly present—in movement, evocations, occasionally shapes—, they rarely if ever materialize fully except perhaps in the viewer's mind. This on-screen policy of constant yet somehow illusory circularity highlights the political failure to “close the loop” and address a number of real-life social issues. It also hints at the inside politics related to the management of the DC Comics franchise within Warner Bros., illustrating in both cases, although with very different meanings, the company's statement regarding the controversy over the film's violence: “one of the functions of storytelling is to provoke difficult conversations around complex issues” (Parker, 2019).
- 63 On the screen, the visible challenge of authority echoes an invisible, behind-the-scene power struggle to assert the film's place in the Batman mythography. While the extent of these “conversations” remains to be seen, both issues may very well rejoin. While Todd Phillips's convoluted *Joker* has always been announced as outside of the official DC canon, only time and the movie's long-term impact on popular culture will tell if it will indeed remain a marginal standalone motion picture, or be given a more official status in the DC Extended Universe with possible sequels based on this story arc. If such were the case, it is very likely that the social questions that the film prominently raises would as well occupy a more important place within the DC universe in the future: after all, perhaps Todd Phillips's aforementioned quote about his film being “a way to sneak a real movie in the studio system under the guise of a comic book film” was actually to be understood as a way to sneak *class consciousness and class-related issues as well as the question of the current popular uprisings* in the studio system under the guise of a comic book film.

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- Taxi Driver*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Written by Paul Schrader. With Robert De Niro, and Jodie Foster. Bill/Phillips Productions & Italo/Judeo Productions, 1976.
- V for Vendetta*. Dir. James McTeigue. Written by The Wachowskis. With Natalie Portman, Hugo Weaving, and Stephen Rea. Silver Pictures et. al. /Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005.
- Zorro, the Gay Blade*. Dir. Peter Medak. Written by Johnston McCulley, Hal Dresner, Greg Alt, and Don Moriarty. With George Hamilton, and Lauren Hutton. C.O. Erickson & George Hamilton, 1981.

NOTES

1. Please note that the character played in the movie by Joaquin Phoenix will be referred to under the name of Arthur Fleck (or Fleck), the movie itself as *Joker* (in italics), while the name Joker (without italics) will be used to evoke the generic character in its various incarnations all along the DC Comics narrative arcs through all sorts of sources (comics, movies, filmed or animated TV series...) from 1940 on—including *Joker*, when relevant.
2. In the case of *Joker*, the notions of power and knowledge are partly dissociated, with Randall symbolizing professional experience and Franklin representing the power of the media. As for

Thomas Wayne, he represents both as he detains economic power (and hopes to extend it to the political domain) and also possesses knowledge regarding the truth on the mystery of Arthur's origins.

3. While Fleck also smokes at other moments, these sequences differ as they feature a particular visual insistence on the smoke.

4. The cello's extended playing range makes it one of the closest instruments to the human voice, covering all types of voices from bass to soprano. It would be worth exploring the possible significance of the film's soundtrack: is this ersatz of a human voice the only comfort Fleck receives, which would be all the more ironical since it is not supposed to be audible by him? Is this a sort of voice in his head which is shared with the viewer? Such questions are of course brought by the ambiguity that the film introduces regarding sonic separateness with the tinnitus episode (see later in the text).

5. A leaked early version of the scenario more clearly suggested that the whole story could have been entirely made up by Fleck, as the journal in which he claimed to have reported all the recent events as he remembered them was left entirely blank.

6. The character mentions a total of seven different medications, and adds that he considers the doses to be insufficient.

7. While the last two men are arguably killed with murderous intents, the first shot is fired in the confusion of the then one-sided fight and could hardly be considered other than self-defence.

8. The word "Frankensteinish" is of course to be understood here as referring to the creator, not the creature.

9. Hints at homosexuality or sexual ambiguity have often been linked to the Batman universe. While they were most often directed to the Joker (Singer 65), it has also been stated that this was actually a way of "preserving Bat-heterosexuality" —that is, to divert attention from Bruce Wayne's own ambiguities in that regard (Medhurst 160-161), playing on the opposition between the hero's virility and a "sissy villain" archetype nemesis possibly attracted to him although with no reciprocity (Bonadè 441-442). This discrete, off-screen allusion in *Joker* (only the title of Medrak's movie appears) may be seen as a hint at the stereotypical Joker character still lurking around in its new variation, in spite of the heterosexual nature of the character's unrequited love.

10. This resemblance is certainly the key to Phillips's film deviating from the Joker's traditional purple suit.

11. While unrelated to cinema, another cultural hint with the same effect is the clown agency's name, "Ha-ha's," which is reminiscent of the global success of Norwegian music band "A-ha" in the 1980s. In another music reference, Frank Sinatra's 1963 "That's Life" may even be interpreted as an inclusion of nostalgia within nostalgia—that is a nostalgia for the 1960s expressed within a 1980s context.

12. To make matters worse, Fleck is subsequently told that his version of being attacked does not stand and is required to pay for the missing sign, marking the negation of his traumatic experience.

13. Arguably, Franklin's intent to invite Fleck in order to ridicule him would qualify as "trash TV" anyway, even if Fleck had not seized the opportunity to boast for previous murders and commit another one.

14. Numerous sources indicate the exact inspiration as being not only Hugo's book, but more precisely its 1928 cinema adaptation by Paul Leni.

15. There is, however, a small person in *Joker*, Gary, and Fleck expresses sympathy to him, calling him "the only one who has ever been nice" to him.

16. Todd Phillips has since explicitly denied this point, evoking original plans that would have shown Sophie witnessing Fleck murdering Murray Franklin on television (see García *et. al.*, 2019). Based on that misinterpretation which he takes as a precedent, Ware also contends that the fact

that the murder of the psychiatrist is not shown on screen is part of a deliberate will to make his Black victims invisible: on that point, I believe important to notice that the murder of the psychiatrist marks a huge step in the evolution of the character, as it is the first and only time in the movie that he commits a murder that is not motivated by personal grudge, illustrating his irreversible journey into madness. Not only may this point explain such an ellipsis at such a late stage in the film, it is also far from treating the event as banal.

17. The inclusion of a yellow vest in the 2019 *Joker*'s outfit may be seen as an allusion to the movement known by the same name.

18. The very same phrase is used as a slogan by the Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman* to advertise his "Smylex" poison (*Batman* 0:56:00-0:57:11), somehow suggesting the poisonous nature of Arthur's forced apparent disconnection from his real feelings. The parallel is all the more striking since, in Burton's film, the effect of "Smylex" is to create a Joker-like grin on the face of its victims as they die, linking poison with transformation and gesturing towards Fleck's uncontrollable laughter.

ABSTRACTS

In the wake of the worldwide box office and critical success of Todd Phillips's movie *Joker* (2019) and of the controversies which accompanied its release, this article focuses on the notion of circularity both in the film's storytelling and its interactions with the viewer, especially through the numerous intertextual references and evocations which are developed on screen. The point of this essay is to establish how circularity allows the film to deliver both macro- and micro-political statements, not only addressing issues relevant to society as a whole but also asserting against all odds the film's place in the official canon of DC Comics. Paradoxically, the process of circularity also contributes to blur the message, resulting in major misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the film in the public sphere.

Cet article propose une lecture du film *Joker* de Todd Phillips (2019), dont le succès commercial, mais aussi au sein de la critique, s'est accompagné de controverses dès sa sortie. Cette analyse se concentre sur la notion de circularité dans le film, tant sur le plan de la narration visuelle qu'en lien avec les nombreuses références intertextuelles adressées au spectateur. Il s'agit d'établir comment cette circularité permet au film de disséminer des messages macro- et micro-politiques, qui touchent non seulement à des questions sociales d'importance mais revendiquent aussi, contre toute attente, une place pour cette œuvre au sein du canon des œuvres de DC Comics. Paradoxalement, ce processus circulaire contribue également à brouiller le message, avec pour conséquences des malentendus voire des contresens majeurs dans les interprétations qui ont pu être faites du film dans la sphère publique.

INDEX

Subjects: Hors-thème

Mots-clés: cinéma, intertextualité, adaptation cinématographique de comics, violence, critique sociale, macro-politique, micro-politique, super-héros et super-vilains, DC Comics, Batman, mythographie.

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