That joke isn't funny anymore: a critical exploration of *Joker*: Introduction

Sean Redmond

Published online: 07 Mar 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

That joke isn't funny anymore: a critical exploration of *Joker*: Introduction

Sean Redmond

School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

In a recent interview for the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper (Collin 2019), film-maker David Fincher commented on *Joker's* 'surprising' success:

> I don't think anyone would have looked at that material and thought, 'Yeah, let's take [*Taxi Driver's*] Travis Bickle and [*The King of Comedy's*] Rupert Pupkin and conflate them, then trap him in a betrayal of the mentally ill, and trot it out for a billion dollars.

Fincher's position on the undeserved success of *Joker*, and his criticism of its representation of mental illness, are found across numerous critical commentaries published at the time of the film's release. With regards to *Joker's* worth, for example, a number of journalists strike up a similar note to Fincher. In Peter Bradshaw's review, titled 'the most disappointing film of the year', he calls *Joker* 'shallow', 'tedious', and 'a laborious and pointless homage to the Scorsese/De Niro classic *The King of Comedy* with a bit of *Taxi Driver*.' A.O. Scott (2019) observes that *Joker* is 'stirring up a fierce debate, but it's not interesting enough to argue about'. When it comes to the film's depiction of mental health, Driscoll and Husain (2019) also view it negatively, observing that 'Arthur's descent into violence and destruction is triggered by his mental deterioration. The result of this is to – disappointingly – remove Arthur's agency and divert attention from a potentially more stimulating conversation about wealth inequality and its responsibility for societal collapse'.

By contrast, however, favourable reviews of both the film and its representation of mental illness were also published. In a highly positive assessment of *Joker*, Justin Eager concludes that, 'I can't think of a more subversive mainstream film, especially not in the sanitised, spandex-clad, wholesome worlds of the superhero genre. Unlike Heath Ledger's Joker, Arthur Fleck's violence isn't chaotic, it has angry purpose, and he unwittingly creates a vent for the dispossessed' (2019). Writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, psychiatrist Kamran Ahmed champions the film's representation of mental illness:

CONTACT Sean Redmond ✉ s.redmond@deakin.edu.au

> In the current political climate all over the world, public health services are shamefully underfunded and public sector health workers feel devalued. The scene where the jaded social worker interviewing Arthur tells him "they don't give a shit about people like you ... and they don't give a shit about people like me either" will resonate with the mentally ill who feel abandoned and the healthcare professionals struggling to help them (2019).

Such opposite readings of the film – that for some, it is completely vacuous and prejudiced, while for others it is subversive and authentic or realist – straddle other aspects of *Joker's* reception. The film has been both admonished for its representation of race and complimented for its racial complexity. Beandra July (2019) argues that in *Joker*, 'Black characters, and especially black women, are relied upon to call out Fleck's insanity, but their perspectives are repeatedly undermined'. Tambay Obenson (2019) suggests a different position with regards to race, writing that

> Phillips seems to align Arthur's trials with those of working-class (itself a racialized term) people of color who apparently populate much of his world; and with the 1980s, a period in which America under Ronald Reagan saw his socio-economic policies further disenfranchise African Americans. It's possible that Phillips had the presence of mind to recognize how black people were negated at that time, and by aligning Fleck with these prominently featured and anonymous people of color, created a commentary that sympathizes with their plight.

Joker has been adopted by the alt-right who claim Fleck/Joker as the embodiment of the disenfranchised white male (Watson 2019), and conversely, utilised by the left as a powerful fiction for how austerity and neo-liberalism create an underclass, enabling an anti-hero to emerge through the 'cracks' or 'stains' of society (Žižek, 2019). Such reception binaries have emerged in other discourses, of course, including how *Joker* deviated from the comic book's origin story, or in contrast, reinvigorated his storyworld. Devotion to the character of Joker resulted in accusations of desecration, and resurrection (Wilkinson 2019).

I begin this introduction with this 'split' reception overview for two central reasons. First, the film has similarly divided academics, as this Special Issue will go onto demonstrate. Second, it is felt that the opposing readings of *Joker* reveal something inherently interesting about the film's textual and ideological operations: that they are built or seeded on ambiguity or ambivalence. While film texts are always involved in a tussle over their meanings and messages, very often the narrative trajectory leads to one place only: ideological resolution and the restoration of the status quo. What *Joker* arguably does is refuse this coherency as it simultaneously resists dominant ideology's demand for closure. Into this yawning gap falls numerous projections, phantoms, interpretations, readings and counter-readings. *Joker* is a film that belongs to everyone and no one, and as such contextually speaks

to the collapse in grand narratives and to the moral and social uncertainty in contemporary life. The film tells us that *things are falling apart. The centre is not holding. Mere anarchy – for good or bad– is being loosed upon the world.*

Joker arrived at a time of what has been defined as 'unprecedented' political, social, and economic turmoil (Kellner 2017). President Trump's lacerating discourse, funnelled through ugly tweets and spectacular rallies, legitimised conspiracy theories while denying the indexes of truth-telling for fakery. Alongside Trump's fictionalisation of the real was an appeal to alienated and disenfranchised (white) men, fuelling and flaming a toxicity that sought to poison the democratic well. In cities and towns Black men found themselves under greater surveillance and in increasing risk of mortal harm from the forces of law and order. Black Lives Matter and they didn't. Walls were being built to keep immigrants out and great Americans in. Under the banner of making America great again, geopolitical isolation and exceptionalism became the yarns of the national imaginary. Many Americans gravitated to or were seduced by this populism. In the precarious marketplace, tens of millions of people found themselves living below the poverty line, on zero hour contracts, unable to afford basic food or health-care. Social support services had been cut and a despairing loneliness had affected all demographics, becoming the crisis of the age. And yet, of course, people had also got (super) rich, the value of the stock-market had risen, and those on the breadline also lined up to celebrate this new Trumpian nationalism. In *Joker* we find these realities, collisions, and intersections played out.

And yet, the film is also *past-tense*, set in an alternate New York in 1981.

'Unprecedented times'? No. What *Joker* also reminds us is that we have been here before and that perhaps we have never left the wasted 1980s period it references. Through its dark or dystopian nostalgia, *Joker* obliquely reveals that the bitter fruit of today was first harvested under the rancid politics of the 1980s: the decade when Reaganism was born and with it the forces of neoliberalism. We are reminded that the very first celebrity president to occupy the Whitehouse was Ronald Reagan and that he set in train the social and economic conditions that run on through today. In this context, the sea of cinematic allusions and references found in *Joker* are not empty nostalgias but ghosts that refuse to leave because they remain at home in the graveyards of today. Nonetheless, as apparition, as haunting, they occupy an in-between space: they are, as is the film, ambiguous or ambivalent about the world they find themselves in. *But where does that leave us?*

The Special Issue is made up of nine articles: each author focusing upon one aspect of the film as they navigate its politics and poetics. They have been ordered so that there is a journey of sorts being undertaken, with each article leading to the next. In the same way that Arthur/Joker walks through Gotham, the reader is being offered a route with which to navigate the themes taken up by each author.

In 'A City without a Hero: *Joker* and Rethinking Hegemony,' Jeffrey Brown argues that the film offers a radical, counter-hegemonic representation of Joker, one which enables him to be a radical hero for the underclass. Brown suggests the film inverts and transgresses the usual binaries found in Batman comic books since the normatively heroic Batman is absent and the chaos that Joker unleashes on the world goes unpunished. In 'The *Joker* City, or the Mysteries and Miseries of Gotham,' Jesús Jiménez-Varea, Alberto Hermida, and Víctor Hernández-Santaolalla discuss how a nineteenth-century literary phenomenon, the city mysteries, is transcoded into the visual and narrative landscape of the film. This translation manifests through *Joker's* alienating urban labyrinth, its deployment of the crowd to depersonalise interactions between people, the lack of a controlling point of view, and its use of documents to create puzzles and enigmas. Ultimately, the film's homage to the city mystery genre is a subversive one since *Joker* ends not with resolution but with the city burning.

In 'A Tale of Two Masculinities: Joaquin Phoenix, Todd Phillips, and *Joker's* Double Can(n)on,' Misha Kavka looks at doubling but here not between Batman and Joker, but between the opposing masculinities offered up by Todd Phillips, the film's director, and Joaquin Phoenix. Kavka suggests that the heterosexual, charged and indemnified masculinity found in Phillips' other films finds its way into *Joker*, but that it exists in tension with Phoenix's alienated masculinity, a 'deforming' role he has taken on before. These two versions of male identity run through the film, ultimately confirming and reinforcing a star system that celebrates male power. In 'Repeated Failure: Time, Dressage, and Thingness in *Joker*,' Merlin Seller suggests that Joker's bubbling bones, revealed beneath thin skin, resists the type of heteronormative masculinity that men are historically trained to embody. The 'thingness' of Joker's body, its refusal to conform to regulation or to bend to heteronormative masculinity, exposes the rigidity of male embodiment.

In Caroline Bainbridge's article, 'Cracking up: *Joker* and the Mediatisation of the Arse-end of the World,' she draws upon Donald Meltzer's (1992) psychoanalytic theory of 'the claustrum' to show how the film brings to the surface deep anxieties and traumas that are produced by neo liberalism. Bainbridge sees *Joker* as a bridge between the hidden and the visible and nameable, creating a narrative which both negotiates neo liberal anxiety while drawing attention to it. In 'The Loneliness of *Joker*,' Sean Redmond examines the film through its representation of isolation and detachment. Redmond suggests that loneliness is initially coded as corrosive in the film, working its alienating affects through the mournful body of Arthur as he moves through the city. However, as Arthur becomes Joker, loneliness is recuperated, musically energised, becoming a conduit for embodied and joyous resistance.

In "'I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do": Music, Dance, and the Performance of Male Identity in *Joker*,' Amanda Howell examines the centrality of music and dance to the way Arthur, then Joker, embodies and translates the hegemony of white masculinity. Arthur's fantasy of the good or empowered body is seen to come from popular entertainment, from the Hollywood musical, a fantasy that shapes the way he moves through the film. Howell argues, however, that these fantasies are shaped by a longer history in which white male performers appropriate non-white cultural traditions, situating whiteness at the nerve centre of artistic production. In 'Hearing Reality in *Joker*,' Mark Kerins attends to the diegetic soundscape of the film, particularly its ambient noise, which is seen or rather heard as a gritty, foreboding set of audio envelopes. Kerin argues that it is the sound design which brings the danger of the metropolis alive, a danger that is also attached to Arthur. The city screams itself into the film, into Arthur's psyche, adding layers of tension as he transforms into Joker. In 'Ace in the Hole: Media Panics, Muted Voices, and Anxieties of Consumption in the Reception of *Joker*,' Ernest Mathijs explores the hyperbolic way the film was reviewed and received, charting the moral panics that came to define this much mediated field, and the 'muted voices' who were marginalised or denied access to these prevailing discourses. Undertaking small scale empirical research to access these contrary opinions, Mathijs shows how personal responses to the film can challenge orthodoxy, and reveal impressions that would otherwise go unreported.

Where does that leave us? Collected together, the articles in this Special Issue demonstrate how *Joker* negotiates, feeds off and into, the complex and messy politics of contemporary life. As a film, it has that rare power to speak to and from different political registers, revealing through its fractures the very fractured nature of the world as it is imagined to be lived. Its deep – or shallow – reach into history extends its import: it chillingly shows us that while the issues it raises to do with race, masculinity, loneliness, isolation, and resistance are of the here and now, it also situates them in the long night of neoliberalism.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Sean Redmond is professor of screen and design at Deakin University, Australia. He is the author of *Celebrity* (Routledge, 2019), *Liquid Space: Science Fiction Film and Television in the Digital Age* (I.B. Taurus, 2017), and *The Cinema of Takeshi Kitano: Flowering Blood* (Columbia, 2013). He is the founding editor of *Celebrity Studies*, short-listed for best new academic journal in 2011.

References

Collin, R. 2019. "David Fincher: Film Studios 'Don't Want to Make Anything that Can't Make Them a Billion Dollars.'" *The Telegraph*. November 14. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2020/11/14/david-fincher-film-studios-dont-want-make-anything-cant-make/

Driscoll, A., and M. Husain. 2019. "Why Joker's Depiction of Mental Illness Is Dangerously Misinformed." *The Guardian*. October 22. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/21/joker-mental-illness-joaquin-phoenix-dangerous-misinformed

July, B. 2019. "In *Joker*, Black Women Are Visible But They Are Not Seen." *Time*. October 11. https://time.com/5696670/joker-movie-black-women-characters/

Kellner, D. 2017. "Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism." *Fast Capitalism* 14 (1). doi:10.32855/fcapital.201701.013.

Meltzer, D. [1992] 2008. *The claustrum*. London: Karnac Books.

Obenson, T. 2019. "Joker' Makes a Strange Connection between Arthur Fleck and the Struggles of Black Women — Analysis." *IndieWire*. October 19. https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/joker-race-problem-black-women–1202182613/

Scott, A. O. 2019. "Joker' Review: Are You Kidding Me?" *The New York Times*. October 3. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/movies/joker-review.html?auth=login-facebook

Watson, P. J. 2019. "Why the WOKE Establishment Hates Joker." YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxLZv2qdlUI

Wilkinson, A. 2019. "Did Joker Deserve All the Discourse?" *Vox*. October 14. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/10/14/20906190/joker-film-controversy-discussion

Žižek, S. 2019. "More on Joker: From Apolitical Nihilism to a New Left, or Why Trump Is No Joker." *The Philosophical Salon*. November 11. https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/more-on-joker-from-apolitical-nihilism-to-a-new-left-or-why-trump-is-no-joker/