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Exploring affect, identity, and populism in and around Todd Phillips' *Joker*

Explorando la afectividad, la identidad y el populismo en torno a Joker (2019) de Todd Phillips



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ABSTRACT

Cultural identity has become a fluid concept in which several positionalities converge; most of them are influenced greatly by popular culture, causing a constant individual negotiation between their real lives and the image on the screen. In 2019, Todd Phillips's *Joker*

achieved worldwide success not only at the box office but also in critical appraisal. Unlike previous representations of this villain as a disruptive social persona, *Joker* showed the main character as a political figure that gives agency and voice to the people who are socially

repressed. The impact of this representation transcended Anglo cultures to the extent of symbolizing a populist uprising and a growing anti-government sentiment. Nevertheless, this figure's appropriation brings two problematic ideological standpoints to the goal these groups aim: violence as the only alternative to restoring

equality in society and color blindness that silences the struggles that cultures face depending on their context.

Keywords: Social identity, representation, Joker, violence, color blindness

RESUMEN

La identidad cultural se ha convertido en un concepto fluido en el que convergen varias posiciones; la mayoría de ellas están fuertemente influenciados por la cultura popular, provocando una constante negociación individual entre la vida real y la imagen en la pantalla. En 2019, Joker de Todd Phillips logró el éxito mundial no solo en la taquilla sino también en la evaluación crítica. A diferencia de las representaciones anteriores de este villano como un personaje social disruptivo, Joker mostró al personaje principal como una figura política que da voz y agencia a las personas socialmente reprimidas. El impacto de esta representación trascendió

las culturas anglosajonas hasta el punto de simbolizar un levantamiento populista y un creciente sentimiento antigubernamental. Sin embargo, la apropiación de esta figura trae dos puntos de vista ideológicos problemáticos al objetivo que persiguen estos grupos: la violencia como única alternativa para restaurar la igualdad en la sociedad y el daltonismo que silencia las luchas que enfrentan las culturas según su contexto..

Palabras clave: Identidad social, representación, Joker, violencia, daltonismo

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of *Joker* (2019), Arthur Fleck, Joaquin Phoenix's character, in his full clown-adorned glory, basks in the adulation and chaos his actions have caused. Protestors around him riot on Gotham's streets, devoted to the clown prince. Since the film's release, several critics lashed out at the movie for the seemingly celebratory portrayal of an otherwise dreaded, diabolic supervillain. Critics deemed the film to be irresponsible for its propensity to incite white rage and violence. However, worldwide audiences seemingly loved the dark take on the character, eventually leading

to one of DC's biggest successes, grossing over \$1.074 billion at the box office and leading to a Best Actor Oscar for Joaquin Phoenix.

The Joker's character has a mystique, a factor of the unknown of the "human" behind the clown. The character seemingly embodies the deep "insecurities" of audiences as his motivations are "out in any logical way", converting him into a "wildcard, a force of will, a compelling power that finds creative ways to unleash chaos..." (Peaslee & Weiner, 2015; p. 16). Several attempts have been made to explore the origin story of

the mysterious character in comic books and even animated adaptations such as *The Killing Joke* (1988) and *Mask of the Phantasm* (1993). Even the more recent TV series *Gotham* (2014- 2019) introduced and explored a character whom the showrunners referred to as a “pro-joker” (Alter, 2019). On the big screen, one of the more popular takes on the character comes from Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989), with Jack Nicholson playing this part. Burton’s take had the character “Jack Napier” as a powerful hitman, who later has a “chemical” accident that disfigures and colors his face/hair. The aspect of the Joker falling into a “vat of chemicals” is one of the more familiar approaches to the origin story seen in various adaptations (Alter, 2019). Nevertheless, through the years, the character mainly remained mysterious, existing solely to terrorize his “nemesis”— Batman.

With Todd Phillips’s *Joker* (2019), the supervillain’s cinematic origin story took a different turn. There was no falling into the chemicals, no criminal background; only a frail, ordinary man named Arthur Fleck, struggling with Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA)¹, who aims to be a successful comedian. The story was grounded and rooted in real-world situations leading to Arthur’s eventual turn into a supervillain (or a hero?) rather than involving a sci-fi/supernatural element of drowning in a chemical tank. Here, the Joker is the outcome of a vicious and corrupted social system that marginalizes and disregards the needs of those who do not fit into the standards of the status quo (e.g., non-white, females, or those with mental disorders). However, despite inciting violence as predicted by the critics, the film inspired fans and protestors across the wide to wear Joker’s masks or paint their faces as clowns. For instance, Chile demonstrations derived from the increase in subway fares (see Fig. 1), the marches in Lebanon against the corruption and wealth of politicians (see Fig. 2), and the protests in Hong Kong against the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill on extradition (see. Fig. 3). These demonstrations

symbolized a globalized, populist uprising – a growing anti-governmental sentiment (Clarke, 2019; Sharf, 2019; Kaur, 2019). How did an unhinged evil criminal in popular culture become a symbol of resistance in the current milieu? Moreover, how does its discourse invite the audience to conceptualize a racially colorblind zeitgeist? Furthermore, why does this character attract audiences to adopt him as an icon for social change, and what does this action imply?

In this paper, we examine the Joker’s portrayal in the film *Joker* (2019), considering the character’s evolution through the depiction and progression of his relationship with mass media. We argue that the character’s description is an output of the zeitgeist (the time the film was either released or set in), and the Joker’s turn into a populist symbol is interlinked to his devolving relationship with the media. The Joker then manifests as the media rebel populist symbol in Todd Phillips’s *Joker* (2019) in times where movements against the status quo frequently influence political agency. We also claim that the film deploys the character and his actions according to a populist political figure who gives agency and voice to socially excluded, forgotten, or repressed people. This representation’s impact has transcended Anglo cultures and provided avenues for symbolizing populism and growing anti-governmental sentiment in an international context. Simultaneously, the film rather proposes a colorblind discourse that is problematic when adopted by minorities out of the screen, as it ignores racial disparities and enables the hegemonic structures of white privilege to perdure.



Fig 1.

¹ According to Ahmed and Simmons (2013), the Pseudobulbar affect (PBA) refers to the act of crying or laughing with no correspondence with the events experienced. This disorder can be related to other mental or physical diseases and negatively impacts a patient’s life quality and expectancy. Because of PBA, patients can experience anxiety, psychiatric disorders, and depression.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

THE ZEITGEIST OF THE 1980'S

In the film industry, setting a period piece reminds us of historical moments that have forged our society. Forgetting the past negatively impacts the effectiveness of the political agency and the decision-making process in the present time. Since memory tends to select fragments of the past according to an individ-

ual or social bias, period pieces provide a lens through which we can examine the past and a mirror to reflect on the current zeitgeist (Araújo & Santos, 2009). As *Joker* (2019) was set in the 1980s, we provide a brief history of the times' socio-political environment.

By the end of World War II, several soldiers came back to the U.S looking for employment. Soon, the country saw an increase in manufacturing of consumer goods (e.g., cars, TV's) and spending. However, after the initial boom, there was an economic stumble around the late 1960s and 1970s due to several economic and cultural disasters in the nation's collective. The Watergate Scandal, the Vietnam War, and rising crime led to most Americans being dissatisfied and less trustworthy of the government (History, 2018; Whiteley, 1987). Many Americans welcomed a change through the politics and policies of President Ronald Reagan. Eventually, the progressive spiritual zeitgeist of the 1960s gave way to the material capitalism of the 1980s.

Reagan was elected president in 1981, creating a social and economic culture of materialism, consumerism, and capitalism. However, Reagan's economic policies—also known as “Reaganomics”—were unsuccessful initially (Collins, 2006). A year into his first term, the United States experienced one of the worst periods of recession since the Great Depression:

Huge increases in military spending (during the Reagan administration, Pentagon spending would reach \$34 million an hour) were not offset by spending cuts or tax increases elsewhere. Nine million people were unemployed in November of that year. Businesses closed, families lost their homes and farmers lost their land. (History, 2018, para. 9).

The previous crisis was not lasting as the economy slowly began to rise; the middle class and the rich began to prosper due to tax cuts and increased spending power (Collins, 2006; Wellman, n.d.). Consequently, there were record budget deficits, and several new rising problems were experienced by American society. Concerns included an increasing homelessness crisis, cocaine crisis, crime, and substandard living condi-

tions for the community's lower sections (Encyclopedia, 2020). These issues, however, did not begrudge the middle class and the rich. By the end of Reagan's presidency in 1989, his approval rating was one of the highest for presidents at the end of their terms since Franklin Roosevelt (Collins, 2006; History, 2018).

During this period, the higher spending power of the middle class and the rich meant that the service industry boomed:

With thousands of malls, supermarkets, and restaurants to visit, everything necessary for the good life appeared to be for sale. And Americans bought. It was the greatest spending spree in America. By 1985, there were more than twenty-six thousand shopping centers in the country, with total annual purchases at those centers reaching \$1 trillion. (Encyclopedia, 2020, para. 2-3)

Popular culture references included Madonna singing, "I am a material girl" and the movie *Wall Street* declaring, "Greed is good" (Wellman, n.d.; Collins, 2006; History, 2018; Encyclopedia, 2020). The previously considered "luxury" cable TV became more of a necessity in the 1980s, with MTV booming, featuring the newest artists and fashion. The "Reaganomics" of increased spending power, materialism, and popular culture amalgamated to create the "Young Urban Professionals," popularly known as Yuppies. Unlike the Hippies of the 1960s, the Yuppies were more focused on style, money, and success. The "Greed is Good" quote from the movie *Wall Street* aptly captures the Yuppie collective psychology of the 1980's milieu. Yuppies desired to be successful, wear expensive trendy clothes, make a lot of money, and live the "American Dream." This symbolic transformation meant that the "American Dream" signified money and wealth rather than freedom (Wellman, n.d.; Collins, 2006).

This economic, political, and cultural landscape underlies the film, *Joker*. Because of this context, the movie's commentary on elite capitalism's political and economic structures is as prevalent in current times as it was in the 1980s. However, other factors influence

how this rhetoric is conceived and operates in the current social context. One of these factors is colorblindness due to a post-racial discourse prompted by politics.

The film *Joker*, while released in 2019, was set in the times of 1980s. However, the film's commentary on elite capitalism's political and economic structures is as prevalent in current times as much as it was in the 1980s.

THE EMERGENCE OF COLORBLINDNESS IN THE CURRENT ZEITGEIST

Post-racial rhetoric was not part of the 1980s U.S. social landscape; it took two decades to become a discourse that would permeate social policies and cultural products. After the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, the country's cultural zeitgeist presented as post-racial. In the American population's collective imagination, electing the first Black president signified that racism was a matter of the past. Thus, colorblind integration efforts drove the present (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015). In other words, having a Black president meant that race was no longer a source of inequalities; thus, there should not be any distinction based on race (Ferber, 2012). White individuals usually adopt this rhetoric to present themselves as unbiased and nonprejudiced towards any race, as well as distance themselves from any racist practice (Plaut, Thomas, Hurd & Romano, 2018). Although this outcome could be considered positive, individuals who rely on a colorblind perspective are less sensitized to understand the minorities' issues and elicit negative sentiments toward racial problems (Holoien & Shelton, 2012).

However, neither the election of Obama nor the post-racial/colorblind rhetoric eradicated racism from the public sphere. Quite the opposite, this context fosters a "new racism" that, instead of inheres less in public displays of discrimination towards racial minorities, depends more on hegemonic structures that facilitate segregation and exclusion by privileging white people (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). In this new racism, meritocracy, a system in which opportunities depend on individual efforts, is used as an argument to discard any question regarding white privilege (Ferber, 2013). Such a system

also appeals to “cultural deficiency” as a way to explain why racial minorities have not been capable of adapting to the U.S. conditions; in this context, their performance is the barrier that impedes minorities’ access to the same opportunities that the white population (Flores, Moon, & Nakayama, 2006). Moreover, this new racism employs diverse tactics such as the suppression of racial connotations, reverse racism, a political agenda that avoids considering racial particularities, and the invisibility of all those practices that promote racial discrimination to benefit whites systematically (Bonilla-Silva & Ashe, 2014). Three pieces are fundamental in these tactics: standard frames (interpretations used by individuals to filter, make sense, and explain racial matters), style (the rhetorical strategies and terms implemented in the racial discourse), and racial stories (storylines in which whites are detached from discriminatory practices and subject to discrimination) (According to Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

The new racism permeates media representations, using four strategies to portray racial minorities. First, it can be the case of nonrecognition, the absence of these groups from representations. A second strategy appeals to ridicule them, using stereotypes and misrepresentations of those groups. Third, minorities can be portrayed as protectors, playing secondary roles at the protagonist’s service, sometimes relying on stereotypical archetypes. Finally, they can also rely on representations of various characters (Bonilla-Silva & Ashe, 2014).

Contemporary media content has embraced a multiracial cast; in doing so, however, they have built utopian universes in which characters from these racial groups represent stereotypes that do not appeal to the social, financial, and political realities of these audiences (Bonilla-Silva & Ashe, 2014). Conversely, these characters’ presence without their racial struggles transforms them into “honorary whites,” disconnected from the realities these racial groups experience. Moreover, facing these representations, individuals from minority groups “force themselves to regulate their behavior and emotions in order to avoid being a target of prejudice” (Holioen & Shelton, 2012; p.562).

In this media landscape, representations of some other characters that correspond to specific archetypes

become quite problematic as they are not rooted in the reality of minorities. Thus, if the Joker is developed as a populist rebel, despite the references to the current political context, it is necessary to consider how the film relates to this new racism.

THE COLORBLIND JOKER: MEDIA POPULIST, REBEL SYMBOL

“If you think GREED is bad, wait until you hear about CAPITALISM,” reads one of the signs (see fig. 4) displayed by a violent group of protestors wearing Joker masks towards the end of the film. Like many others in the movie, these protestors embrace the titular character and his message.



Fig. 4

In *Joker* (2019), the character is not a mysterious anarchist with no agenda à la *The Dark Knight* (2008). Instead, Arthur is a product of an unfair, traumatic system that methodically destroys his physical and mental state. Director Todd Phillips takes the story back to the zeitgeist of the 1980s, subtly referenced by posters of films such as *Blow Out*, *Zorro the Gay Blade*, and *Excalibur* (all released in 1981) adorned across the city of Gotham.

The city’s design preserves Tim Burton’s construction of a place in literal and metaphorical decay portrayed in *Batman* (1989)—an overcrowded location rumbling with people with withering buildings and roads. The wealthy are secure and safe, while ordinary people are crumbling under the literal and figurative structures that support crime, poverty, and hunger. Hence, set in the zeitgeist of the 1980s, the film employs

a discourse on the political and social structures that underlie elite capitalism.

In *Joker*, a strike of sanitation workers— accurate and frequent incidents in New York during the 1980s— has stirred Gotham City. The capitalistic society disregards the strike to overshadow the working-class unions and collective action. In this context, the film centers on a white man named Arthur Fleck, frequently bullied by the people in the society (primarily by people of color), who decides to get revenge. Because the film foregrounds this plot and mass shootings were rampant in the U.S. society (including a specific mass shooting incident during the screening of *The Dark Knight* in 2008), the movie *Joker* was seen by many critics as a justification for white rage (Devega, 2019). However, the film's ideological underpinnings require more than such a surface-level rejection.

Despite the criticism pointing out how the film would elicit white rage, it is possible to notice the movie's appeal to a colorblind discourse, mainly due to the way the protagonist, Arthur Fleck, relates to other characters, especially those from minorities. To achieve this goal, the film places the spectator from Arthur's point of view. According to his narrative, the rich elite is society's real "villain." This assertion is further illustrated by a scene on a train where Arthur shoots three men harassing him and a woman. The men are white and referred to as the "Wall Street men" — (see fig. 5)—the same part of the rich elite he comes to hate. Henceforth, Arthur does not see race, only class (unequal opportunity and wealth in an elitist society). Arthur continuously faces situations where a capitalist government is blocking his right to mental health treatment while ignoring and exacerbating his mother's deteriorating health. Hospitals and mental institutions are under-resourced with the government slashing welfare budgets: "They don't care about people like you, Arthur," says Arthur's therapist, who is Black, when she tries to explain that she cannot treat him anymore due to government funding cuts, "and they really don't care about people like me either." In these lines, Uetrict (2019) writes:

The black, female public-sector worker is telling the white, male public-service user that their in-

terests are intertwined against the wealthy billionaire class and their political lackeys who are slashing public services. Across racial and gender boundaries, the two have a common class enemy. (para. 12)

This scene illustrates that a surface-level rejection of the film as a justification for white rage is somewhat inadequate. The film's affect, especially when considering the international audience, is much more nuanced than a simple illustration of "White rage." Nevertheless, even in the scene above, the film perpetuates a particularly colorblindness discourse, which we dive into in the next section.

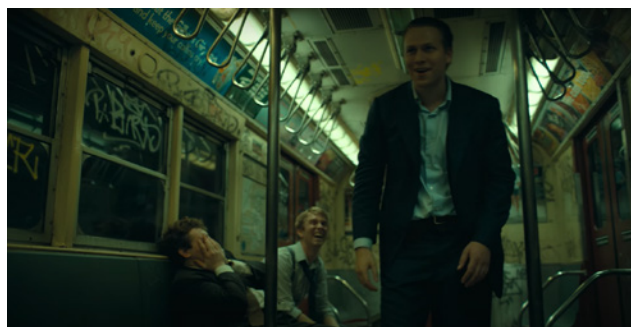


Fig.5

JOKER AMIDST THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

Although the film *Joker* was released in 2019, the story is set in the 1980s, portraying the heart of this decade's zeitgeist: Ronald Reagan's two presidential terms. Reagan espoused the economics of free-market capitalism across all walks of U.S life. Consequently, the government cut taxes for the rich and slashed welfare for the poor. The representation of the cultural zeitgeist in *Joker* is filtered and screened through the present zeitgeist lens of its production and distribution context. This aspect relationship is demonstrated by the *Joker*'s interaction with the media in the film.

The *Joker*'s origin story in *Joker* (2019) presents Arthur as an avid fan of the media—another commentary on the mass media consumer culture of the 1980s, where TV's influence cannot be understated. Ar-

thur's relationship with media is essentially his way of navigating and escaping loneliness. He frequently imagines himself as part of the media industry, where he seeks praise and appreciation, negotiated through the "culture industry"² lens. Arthur Fleck is in this uncritical relationship with a late-night TV show, simply becoming another passive fan of the elite manifestations of a capitalist media industry.

The film's mass media presentation evokes the conceptualization of the "culture industry," particularly relevant to the zeitgeist of the 1980s, as mass media and other industries were selling the American Dream idea to the enthusiastic consumer. "Happiness" and "freedom" are sold through a consumeristic lens that values fame, money, and success. Though set in the 1980s, the film stays relevant to the current zeitgeist by focusing on this notion of the "American Dream," where mass media is part of the elite system that enhances the existing hegemonic structures. The film then focuses on Arthur's relationship evolving (or devolving) relationship with mass media as an integral part of the elite culture industry.

Initially, Arthur is as an ardent fan of the show "*Live with Murray Franklin*." Watching the show becomes a ritual for both him and his mother. In one scene, while watching the show, Arthur imagines himself as one of the live audience members (see fig. 6 and 7). In his imagination, he gets called out by Murray (the talk show host) for his enthusiastic clapping and praise. The lights fall on Arthur, giving him the attention he seeks (see fig. 8):



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

2 The term "culture industry," developed by Adorno and Horkheimer (2007), describes a capitalist product economy that encompasses all entertainment fields, including film and music. While the entertainment industry's productions seemingly represent art, they are ultimately subject to the powers of economic gain. Art then becomes a product of consumerism, rendering itself to be stripped of the essence of art itself (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007). This phenomenon eventually strips the collective human consciousness of critical discourse and independent thought. The culture industry then takes over the reality of life. It manifests as a screen through which humans construct and experience life.

MURRAY: *What is your name?*

ARTHUR: *Hi, Murray. Arthur. My name is Arthur.*

MURRAY: *There's something special about you, Arthur, I can tell. Where you from?*

ARTHUR: *I live right here in the city. With my mother.*

The audience laughs at Arthur. Murray quickly stops them from laughing, telling his own story:

MURRAY FRANKLIN: Hold on. There's nothing funny about that. I lived with my mother before I made it. It was just me and her. I'm that kid whose father went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came back.

ARTHUR: I know what that's like, Murray. I've been the man of the house for as long as I can remember. I take good care of my mother.

The audience starts applauding Arthur for his response. As a consequence, Arthur seems more confident and at ease than he ever is in the ordinary world. He soaks in the approval of other members of this collective zeitgeist. Arthur is practically living out his insecurities through the late-night show, mediated through the TV screen's lens. He feels that society ridicules him for living with his mother. However, by receiving appreciation and validation (in his imagination) from a famous TV personality like Murray, Arthur can be a functional member of society. For Arthur, whom people around him have shunned since childhood, receiving adulation from the audience (and media) is a utopia that fulfills the American dream.

MURRAY FRANKLIN: All that sacrifice. She must love you very much.

ARTHUR: She does. She always tells me to smile and put on a happy face. She says that I was put here to spread joy and laughter.

At this point, everyone cheers for Arthur, including Murray. Arthur gets happier and happier as the audience cheers loudly. This moment is perhaps the most content we see the character in the film. Murray calls him down to the stage, Arthur goes down, and Murray raises Arthur's hand to more cheers from the audience. Arthur is where he wants to be—under the spotlight, receiving praise and adulation from the society that have continuously rejected him.

MURRAY FRANKLIN: Okay, we got a big show tonight, stay tuned. We'll be right back.

Once the show goes into a commercial break, Murray turns to Arthur:

MURRAY FRANKLIN: That was great, Arthur,

thanks. I loved hearing what you had to say. Made my day.

ARTHUR: Thanks, Murray.

MURRAY FRANKLIN: You see all this, the lights, the show, the love of the audience, I'd give it all up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you.

Arthur has tears in his eyes and hugs Murray. The scene ends back in Arthur's living room. Through his imagination, Arthur lives out his sadness of not having a father, and through the mediation of a late-night TV show, Arthur negotiates his place in society. He imagines himself being accepted by society for his goodness and love towards his mother. Arthur does not know who his birth father is. At one point in the movie, it is revealed that his mother's boyfriend violently abused him when he was a kid. Therefore, through the show's mediation, Arthur negotiates the trauma of not having a father and being tormented by his mother's boyfriend while fulfilling his need for a father-like figure through Murray. The culture industry has consumed him. It takes a major shock for Arthur—through humiliation by none other than his father figure, Murray Franklin—to realize just how low a place in the class hierarchy he inhabits.

In a scene towards the film's last act, with his mother undergoing treatment in the hospital room, Arthur watches the "Live with Murray Franklin" show. He suddenly sees himself being telecasted; at first, he is ecstatic (see fig. 9). Murray plays a clip of Arthur's comedy act to entertain viewers with a snippet meant to be a "comedy fail" (see fig. 10). Murray and the audience laugh at Arthur because of his failed comedic act. At the same time, Arthur watches; his smile slowly turns into a frown, and his dreams are shattered (see fig. 11). For Arthur, this is a rude awakening concerning everything he believes about his idol and father figure in Murray Franklin. Arthur realizes he has been duped all along; he is just another pawn in an endless cycle of consumerism and elitism in the culture industry. This incident dramatically impacts the way Arthur views Murray, the show, and, in essence, society as a whole.

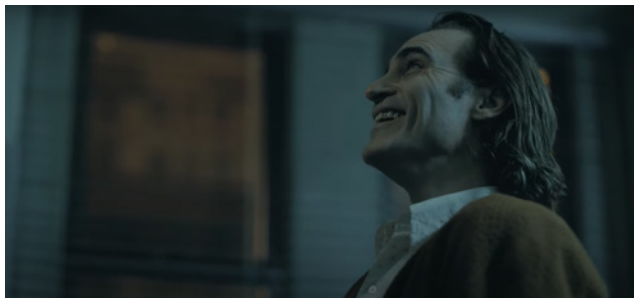


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Arthur is thus slowly transforming into the Joker, having lost one of his last remaining escapes in the TV show. Murray then invites him to the show to directly make fun of him. For the first time, we see the Joker manifesting into a media-savvy self, making an appearance on the show. In a tense exchange, in front of a live studio audience, Murray presses Joker after he reveals that he was the one who killed the Wall Street men. Joker justifies his actions by saying:

Have you seen what it's like out there, Murray? Do you ever actually leave this studio? Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody's civil anymore. Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy. You think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be a guy like me? To be anybody but themselves.

Joker's outburst is a reflection of his push-back against the elites. "Men like Thomas Wayne" are the powerful rich, the top 1 percent of the society that does not know nor care about "a guy like" Arthur. Thus, Arthur's abrupt awakening from the culture industry transforms him into a rebel who realizes how capitalism's promises have not been truthful per equal to all in society.

Because of the aforementioned reasons, it can be understood when questioned why many were wearing Joker makeup, one protestor in Beirut said, "it just felt right, it was the one and only thing I thought at the moment I could do to get a message out., We are hurt and simply disappointed." (Kaur, 2019, para. 14). There are several parallels between the quote from this protestor and Joker's outburst. Joker was a fan of the media, especially Murray's late-night show, but he was betrayed by the person he considers his idol. Moreover, Joker felt disappointed by the government and the system that endorses elite capitalism. Protesters (like the Joker) seem to think that they have been neglected by the rich and that the rich cannot comprehend ordinary people's everyday problems and struggles. For the protester (quoted above), they felt that wearing the Joker makeup was the only way to get the message across to the elite. They thought that the elitist system must notice them and many others like them—just like Joker felt the need to convey the ordinary citizen's message through his media appearance. While the Joker utilized media as a channel to express his ideas, the protesters used the Joker himself to gain attention from the press and government.

After Joker's outburst, Murray responds: "So much self-pity, Arthur," evoking the elite construction that everyday people are regularly bombarded with in their daily lives. Working-class and poor people world-

wide hear comments from the upper class: that they are responsible for their predicaments. Statements such as “you have to work harder” and “it is your fault that you are poor” are commonplace in a capitalist system. Szalavitz (2017) writes that this comes from a notion of “fundamental attribution error, where humans have a natural tendency to see the behavior of others as being determined by their character—while excusing our own behavior based on circumstances.” (para. 4). This rhetoric of meritocracy is frequently employed by the rich to attribute their success to their own hard work, assuming that everyone in a society has an equal opportunity for achieving success. Thomas Wayne (Bruce Wayne’s father), in the film, during a TV interview, disparagingly calls the protesting working class and poor citizens on the streets “clowns.” In response to this statement, fans of the Joker in the film dress up like clowns (akin to the Joker) and riot.

Similarly, during a demonstration, protesters in Chile painted on a statue, “we are all clowns” (Kaur, 2019, para. 3). The working class and poor embrace the film’s rhetoric. They manifest the Joker’s populist message that revolts against rich people like Thomas Wayne, who champion a “fundamental attribution error” towards the working class and poor.

After patronizing Arthur for indulging in “self-pity,” Murray continues: “You sound like you’re making excuses for killing three young men. Not everybody’s awful.”

JOKER: You’re awful, Murray.

MURRAY FRANKLIN Me? How am I awful?

JOKER: Playing my video, inviting me on the show. You just wanted to make fun of me. You’re just like the rest of them, Murray. Everything comes too easy for you.

With these lines, the Joker’s message is revealed. The Joker’s pushback is against the capitalist powers of society—people such as Murray Franklin. Through rhetorical questions/statements, such as, “Do you ever actually leave this studio?” and “everything comes too easy for you,” Joker references the class divide across society’s political and economic structures and places Murray right on the top of the hierarchy. Con-

sequently, such lines are repeated by protestors across the world who took to the streets to oppose against existing class inequality in their country, such as one individual protesting in Chile: “Joker is a misunderstood character, vulnerable and abandoned. Chileans, the ones who do not belong to the social privilege class – which are the majority of us – feel the same way” (Kaur, 2019, para. 21). The film wields a populist message that capitalism enables a hierarchy of elites controlling the resources, and ordinary people are left to survive on their own. On this aspect, Devega (2019) writes:

Mass media, schools, and other agents of political socialization have convinced many Americans (and other people around the world) that consumerism, capitalism, and democracy are the same thing. People who live in societies dominated by neoliberalism and gangster capitalism are told that they are ultimately responsible for their own suffering and lack of success, even as income and wealth inequality soar, life chances are truncated, and meritocracy is exposed as a sham. (par. 22)

The failure of the promises of capitalism is evidenced in Joker’s portrayal and interaction with mass media. Initially, he is smitten with the culture industry that promised him the American dream. Then, he realizes that people like Murray would only care about him to make fun of him. Moreover, his appearance on the show solidifies the populist ideology. The film’s ideological rhetoric, judging by protestors worldwide, has materialized in several anti-government and anti-status-quo demonstrations. Therefore, the film’s sway—referenced by protestors wearing the Joker masks across Chile, Hong Kong, Beirut, Iraq, and Bolivia—should not be dismissed as a surface-level justification for white rage. Protestors embraced the character and wielded their agency to fight against the dominant power structures in society:

What you’re doing when you put on this Joker makeup or Joker mask in a protest, what you’re communicating to the government in Hong

Kong or in Lebanon, is basically, 'I'm here at the very bottom right now, but be careful what you're doing next. (Kaur, 2019, para. 24)

The affectual implications of the film are deeply observed through this quote from a protestor. Not only is the protestor speaking for people across the world who dress up like the Joker, but they are also reiterating the film's message. The protestors are warning the elite that they need to be wary of the populist uprising of the ordinary citizen – that the appearance of the Joker is a harbinger of this uprising.

Therefore, the critics' and scholars' main interest in the film's discourse should not be whether Joker's actions towards combating class and economic inequality are justified but rather how his ideology resonates with people worldwide. Populism is an ideology by itself manifesting on both the left and right ends of political and ideological spectrums. However, Joker's ideology is more far-reaching than populism. He is a prisoner of the culture industry and a dispensable asset to the government and society. Joker speaks for and to people who are agitated with their governments. His rhetoric towards the end frequently reflects this agitation: "if it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me," he says to the audience who disapprove of his killing of the Wall Street men. A Lebanese street artist referring to the several protestors wearing the Joker makeup emphatically states: "The Joker is us, Beirut is the new Gotham City." (Kaur, 2019, para. 7). Another protestor with the Joker makeup says, "this is the Lebanese society situation at the moment, full of underdogs, full of oppressed people that are extremely frustrated and that is looking for a window of hope" (Kaur, 2019, para. 10). Joker's rhetoric resonates with people because they too believe that no one cares about them, that the government favors the rich, that the system is essentially socialism for the rich and scraps for the poor. Henceforth, the Joker becomes a populist and anti-establishment symbol fighting against the status quo. His mask and makeup manifest as a mark of resilience, agitation, and an anti-status quo uprising. The mask symbolizes a movement against systemic inequality and the powers of the cultural elite.

Remembering that protestors come from diverse backgrounds and countries is also essential. The Joker has been a popular character for decades, but Phillips' film made him more political than ever. His international popularity was further enhanced by the message that resonated with a diverse audience. Beer (as cited in Kaur, 2019) opines, "How do you connect your grievances with a potentially global audience, from Kenya to Cambodia to Chile? I think what you need is an item of current pop culture" (para. 27). Therefore, *Joker* represents a call to action from an international audience affected by the character and his message.

Moreover, using an internationally known pop culture character like the Joker as a symbol for the anti-status quo protests becomes a powerful way to attract attention from audiences across the world. For example, take the authors of this paper; we both consume and actively follow the Joker's representation in cinema, but the film's affect on the international audience invited us to work on this paper together. By wearing the Joker mask, protestors embraced the populist ideology of the film and stimulated a global discourse. Nevertheless, a contradiction seems to arise when looking closer at the dynamics of the new racism used within the film, as Arthur, opposite to most of the protestors around the world, has a racial characteristic that distinguishes him from the rest: he is white.



Fig. 12 - Street art during a protest in Beirut, Lebanon.

COLOR BLINDNESS IN AROUND JOKER

As mentioned, *Joker* takes place in a fictional Gotham City during the early 1980s, inspired, accord-

ing to its director and co-writer Todd Phillips, by the New York City part of Martin Scorsese's cinema representations (Sharf, 2019). However, this fictional universe sets up a post-racial society that distances itself from New York society's configuration in that period. During the 1980s, New York's Black and Hispanic population steadily increased; nevertheless, this did not represent an improvement in their living conditions. On the contrary, the breach between white and racial minorities increased (Roberts, 1992). Consequently, neighborhoods that were predominantly white and middle-class relied on discrimination tactics to avoid the integration of people from other racial groups; they "were deterred by fire-bombings or warnings spray-painted on sidewalks" (Roberts, 1992; para.7). This segregation does not imply that white people did not experience marginal conditions, but, during the period from 1980 to 1990, disadvantageous conditions materialized in different manners according to ethnicity: "African American disadvantage is substantially more concentrated than White disadvantage no matter which dimension is explored" (Krivo, Peterson, Rizzo & Reynolds, 1998, p.76).

In the 1980s' fictional post-racial Gotham City, these conditions mentioned above are not part of the social configuration. In *Joker's* world, society is divided into two groups, the wealthy and the poor. Without a middle class and in a decaying city, white people and minorities from lower classes experience marginal circumstances equally; however, this equity is not similar in wealthy classes. In the film, people in power are white; two segments of the film illustrate this argument. In one of the sequences, Arthur sneaks to the Gotham Museum to question Thomas Wayne during a charity gala. The attendants, individuals from Gotham's wealthy class, are all white. Later on, Arthur is invited to Murray's late-night show. Murray, the show's production team, and his guests are also white. Despite black news anchors' and reporters' presence during the film, they have just brief appearances and no meaningful interaction in the main storyline. Moreover, other characters in power positions interacting with Arthur, such as the police department members, are white. Only two black characters appear in situations where they can exert specific power over others, Arthur's therapist and Clark, Arkham's clerk.

The limited presence of these black characters in power positions suggests that, far from a respectful representation that should be the goal of a post-racial film, *Joker* relies on the archetypal presence of black characters as protectors, serving only the interests of the white protagonist. It is common in films where a colorblind perspective prevails that black characters holding power cannot exercise it (Smith, 2013). In that sense, in *Joker*, black characters are unable to assert their authority. Clark cannot stop Arthur from stealing his medical record, and, for her part, Arthur's therapist is unable to help him. During one of their meetings, she declares that the city does not care about people like Arthur or like her; when Arthur expresses his concerns about his treatment, she only apologizes, as she can do nothing. At the end of the film, Arthur's sentences summarize his therapist's limited value during their last meeting; he cannot explain the reason for his laugh because she would not understand it. In this way, the black character's power position is restricted.

Other characters who are also racial minorities only reinforce the film's colorblindness and stereotypical portrayals. One of the most prominent is Sophie Dumond, Arthur's neighbor, and love interest. Even though the movie presents her as a supportive friend, one narrative plot twist reveals that Sophie's attitude is only part of Arthur's hallucinations. Moreover, by obscuring her fate in the film—in her last scene, she confronts Arthur's intrusion into her home, but the consequences of this action are not shown—the movie disregards this character's value as part of the main storyline. A similar situation occurs with Arthur's therapist. Thus, by not having a clear resolution that indicates what happened with these characters, the audience disregards their dramatic function and "ignore[s] that the Joker is an ill, misguided man who resents accountability while being simultaneously hooked on his sense of entitlement and superiority" (July, 2019, para. 10).

Additionally, other secondary characters' portrayal addresses stereotypical images of minorities that describe their cultural deficiency to adapt to society positively. Such is the case of the black woman on the bus that disregards Arthur's note concerning his mental disorder or the Hispanic gang that assaults Arthur at the beginning of the film.

Hence, by presenting this perspective on minorities, the film deepens in the “aggrieved entitlement” of the white American individuals, “where the failure to procure the social status and goods you believe you deserve (money, employment, property, sex, family), leads to anger and violence at groups you blame” (Flood, 2019; para. 8).

The arguments mentioned above addressed the predominance of post-racial rhetoric that places whiteness at the center of *Joker*’s discourse by downplaying the role of minorities and their realities. Because of these arguments, film critics inferred a particular audience as the one the film addresses: “incels.”³ Hence, critics voices addressed Arthur’s portrayal and behavior as an exaltation to white rage (Edelstein, 2019), a “classic incel candidate” (Phillips, 2019), a “folk hero for the incels” (Newland, 2019), and “the patron of incels” (Zacharek, 2019). Interestingly, and related to the adoption of worldwide protestors of the film, this conceptualization of the audience is not akin to the ones expressed by film critics in those countries where social demonstrations occurred and where the *Joker* mask was adopted as a symbol of change. This fact causes many of the expressed racial dimensions to fade under the definition of another target audience.

For instance, in Chile, Munizaga (2019) defines the target audience as millennials, the generation born between 1981 and 1999, and expressed what he considers are to be the characteristics portrayed by Arthur emulating those from that audience: “stressed, unhappy, with self-esteem problems, low tolerance to frustration, weak, insecure to deal with social relationships and hypersensitive” (para. 2). In Spain, Ocaña (2019) indicates that the only way to consider Arthur and his actions as heroic is if the spectator is “a dangerous radical from the extreme right or left; or an ignorant sofa anarchist who will never lift a finger except for the deception of social media” (para. 5). Following this line, Molina (2019), writing for *La Razón*, a Bolivian newspaper, argues that the only way that *Joker* could fos-

ter any violent action is if the spectators were “idiots... The intelligent people perfectly know that this reign of horror is not more than an altered version of fairyland, just as fantastic as the other” (para. 8). Even when these reviews, similar to those from the United States, denounce the moral and ethical ambiguity of the film’s social discourse, they convey certain skepticism regarding the audience’s adoption of Arthur as a role model to the extent of framing *Joker* as a transient trend (Munizaga, 2019). Moreover, these critics do not comment on the film’s racial discourses, narrowing representation issues to social oppression and the explosion of violence it causes. These reviews provide hints regarding the prevalent readings in these countries in which other factors such as poverty, inequity, lack of opportunities, and social class division are more relevant than racial segregation. The Bolivian newspaper *El Diario* supports these assumptions by compiling the remarks of several public figures of the country that addressed how the film “portrays the reality of the region” and shows it better than any documentary produced in Latin America (*El Joker...*, 2019).

In addition to these perceptions, the protestors’ voice in several demonstrations worldwide also appeals to a colorblind discourse. Protestors used phrases such as “the Joker is us,” compared the privileged social classes in the country with those in the film and embraced the Joker costume as a symbol of how harmful a society can be to other human beings (Kaur, 2019). However, their arguments did not address the racial inequalities many of these countries also experience. Using the Joker accessories appeals to what McGarry (2019) calls the “aesthetics of protest.” Individuals adopt figures from social dystopias to empower themselves through their anonymity, tie solidary bonds between participants, “build a counter-culture, express unity, claim visibility, and to challenge those in power” (para. 13). Therefore, for the protesters, the Joker’s adoption as a symbol is not intrinsically linked to the moral ambiguity of Arthur’s actions. Instead, they are adopting the contextual framework in which the film is inserted. The Gotham citizens that became protesters in *Joker* adopted the clown mask as an anti-status quo symbol without considering Arthur’s motivations to wear it (Mouleux, 2019). Likewise, in real life, the film’s

3 As Koller and Heritage (2020) define, an incel refers to white heterosexuals’ “involuntary celibacy” that develops “a hateful attitude towards the would-be partners (i.e., women) and those who do form relationships with them” (p. 153).

viewers who participated in the protests rose against the social system they lived in without considering the different discourses that converged in the movie or the character they adopted.

However, as the film's colorblind rhetoric deployment has suggested, the struggles of minorities are obscured in a white discourse against social inequality. The social demonstrations worldwide operate under the same post-racial logic without clarifying the needs of the minorities in those countries.

POPULISM AND COLORBLINDNESS AROUND *JOKER*

Todd Phillips's selection to frame the origins of the Joker in a Gotham City embedded in the zeitgeist of the 1980s is not a mere coincidence. During this period, capitalism was the perfect vehicle to sell the American Dream's promises of bonanza. Popular media emphasized money and presented it as the only way to achieve this goal. Simultaneously, the U.S. government fostered policies that supported capitalism and the free market as the best strategy to leave the economic crisis behind. However, these promises of a better future were not for everyone; racial minorities were excluded from this picture but were not the only ones.

Three decades later, the U.S.'s economic policies have not changed substantially; if anything, globalization has helped expand this ideology worldwide. However, inequity and poverty still play a critical role in this landscape. For their part, the media continues conveying and stressing many of these prosperity messages, emphasizing that the American Dream is possible for everyone who tries hard enough.

The journey of transformation Arthur Fleck goes through in *Joker* highlights this logic's fallacies. At the same time, his relationship with the media symbolizes his disenchantment once he understands that, for many individuals, it will be impossible to achieve that promised land called the American Dream. This feeling of frustration, dissatisfaction, and social boredom is a latent consequence of the economic zeitgeist based on capitalism. These feelings transcend fiction to be the reality of many societies that adopted capitalism as a panacea, thus increasing the disparities between the

wealthy and lower social classes. Therefore, as the Joker became a symbol for Gotham's inhabitants of awakening to a reality that will never make that prosperity promises valid for everyone, protesters worldwide saw themselves and their existence portrayed in the social configuration of Gotham.

While both sets of protesters, the fictitious and the real ones, consider Arthur's contradictions as an anti-status quo figure, it seems that none of them perceived the psychological problems that torment Arthur; problems that, by the end of the story, will reveal Arthur's crusade a mix of reality and fantasy. In addition, the post-racial discourse implicit in the film obscures the realities of minorities who have experienced segregation and lack of opportunities. By applying colorblind rhetoric, the film privileges white frustration over the unfulfilled American dream promises, a capitalist dream promised by whites for whites.

It is necessary to take with caution the Joker's adoption as a populist symbol in worldwide demonstrations because, although its appropriation refers to the people's exhaustion with the political and social system of those regions, it can also imply the silence of the needs and problems of the minorities within these populations. In these demonstrations, a "white discourse" (a discourse that privileges the majority) can leave minorities out of the picture. It is necessary to consider why these protestors adopted this character to understand how they conceive the Joker fully.

Finally, this case proposes an irony present in media consumption. On the one hand, Arthur's odyssey and his relationship with the media lead the spectators to witness an abrupt awakening. Phillips' stance is critical of the media, and it could even be said that the media bears much of the blame for creating social ills. On the other hand, in real life, the adoption of a media figure like the Joker in these protests around the world seems to contradict Arthur's journey. He claims that an uncritical adoption of media messages has strengthened the disparities in society. Are these protestors adopting this popular character critically? Is it possible to combat the media used to reinforce the status quo with the same media? As *Joker* has shown, it may be. The consequences of this social adoption are what remain pending. \

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