

# “WHATEVER DOESN’T KILL YOU SIMPLY MAKES YOU STRANGER”: FEAR IN THE CHARACTER OF THE JOKER IN *THE DARK KNIGHT* AND *JOKER*.

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## ABSTRACT

The Joker is one of the most frightening comic book characters ever created and has, as a result, been the subject of numerous adaptations to film and television. This article analyses the portrayals of the Joker by actors Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix in *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Joker* (2019), respectively, and the differences in their representations of the Joker in relation to fear. It also explores how the two films serve as allegorical representations of public fears present at the time of the films’ creation, and how these fears are either embodied in or experienced by each films’ Joker. Fear elements utilized by each film’s Joker character are also analysed, i.e., acts of terrorism, use of make-up, and laughter. Moreover, the article’s treatment of the Joker reveals a character who is a victim both of public fears and of his own traumatic past—fearful experiences which come to shape the Joker’s violent persona. The article’s comparative analysis makes use of psychological and sociological explanations of fear and its characteristics.

## RESUMEN

El Joker es uno de los personajes de cómic más terroríficos jamás creados y, como resultado, ha sido objeto de numerosas adaptaciones al cine y la televisión. Este artículo analiza las representaciones del Joker por los actores Heath Ledger y Joaquin Phoenix en *El caballero oscuro* (2008) y *Joker* (2019), respectivamente, y las diferencias en sus interpretaciones del Joker en relación al miedo. También se explora cómo las dos películas sirven como representaciones alegóricas de temores públicos en el momento de gestación de las cintas y cómo estos miedos son representados o experimentados por el Joker de cada película. Se

discuten, a su vez, elementos del miedo utilizados por el Joker: actos de terrorismo, el uso de maquillaje y su risa. Por otro lado, el análisis del Joker revela a un personaje víctima de temores públicos y de su propio pasado traumático; experiencias temibles que ayudan a crear su violenta personalidad. El artículo hace uso de explicaciones psicológicas y sociológicas del miedo y sus características.

DC Comics character the Joker, created by Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson, made its first appearance in the Spring Issue of *Batman N° 1* (1940). The comic-book character then increased in complexity in the works of later authors including Alan Moore—e.g., *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988)—, Brian Azzarello—e.g., *Joker* (2008)—, and Grant Morrison. The Joker has become Batman's most dangerous foe, not only challenging the caped crusader physically, but, most importantly, psychologically. The comic success of Batman and the Joker has led to numerous cinematic adaptations. A first film inspiration for the Joker can be traced to Paul Leni's film *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). Although Cesar Romero was the first to perform the character of the Joker in Leslie H. Martinson's *Batman: The Movie* (1966), actors Heath Ledger—in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008)—and Joaquin Phoenix—in Todd Phillip's *Joker* (2019)—have, it could be argued, received more recognition and were both awarded the Academy Award for their performances in their respective films. The focus of this article is these two films' representations of the so-called 'prince clown of crime' in relation to fear as a fundamental element in the character's personality as well as in the world around him. This article provides an analysis of the two aforementioned films as allegorical representations of their time, focusing on how the Joker is represented as a figure of terrorism and as a victim of societal fears. The analysis also focuses on different elements of fear present in the character, such as madness, the use of make-up, and his violent past.

Before commencing my analysis of the character in relation to fear, let me first offer a summary of the two films. *The Dark Knight* continues the story of Bruce Wayne—initiated in *Batman Begins* (2005)—and his commitment, personified and enforced in the form of his alter-ego Batman, to eradicate organized crime in Gotham City. With the help of Commissioner James Gordon and District Attorney Harvey Dent, Batman successfully gathers evidence that leads to the

arrest and prosecution of the Mob-bosses of the city. Nevertheless, these Mob-bosses, given their judicial predicament, decide to hire the services of an anonymous man only identified as the Joker. From that moment onwards, the Joker seeks to create chaos in Gotham by challenging Batman to a game of cat and mouse while anarchy and death spread throughout the city as Batman tries to apprehend and stop the Joker. Eventually, Batman succeeds in stopping the Joker and the latter is sent, offscreen, to Arkham Asylum.

*Joker* tells the story of a poor and mentally ill man named Arthur Fleck (although the film later reveals that this name was given to him by his adopted mother, therefore his real name remains unknown). Arthur works as a clown—for example visiting hospitals to try and cheer up the cancer patients—and lives in a blue-collar and decrepit neighborhood in Gotham City with his mother, Peggy Fleck. Arthur then loses his job, gets beat up on several occasions, discovers the truth about his adoption, and is denied the psychological help his damaged mind requires. Eventually, Arthur descends into madness—thus becoming the Joker—and murders several people, including his mother and a television presenter named Murray Franklin, whom Arthur, in his imagination, considers a father figure. Finally, Arthur, already the Joker, is arrested for his crimes and taken to Arkham State Hospital.

The character of the Joker has, since its comic book inception, inspired admiration among Batman fans, and both Batman and the Joker have been objects of scholarly study. The long-standing success of both characters can be explained given their “evocation of deep-seated social and psychological tensions” (Nichols 236). Whereas Batman represents order, absolute control, and justice (the character’s psychological problems notwithstanding), the Joker, on the other hand, has been described as a “portrait of mental disease, of insanity and irrationality” (Rodriguez 9). Furthermore, the Joker has been catalogued as a “madman” (Kolenic 1034) living “outside of reason and [a] governed narrative” (Kolenic 1028); as a murderer; as a man seeking chaos in order to “break down human moral codes and reduce society to the state of nature” (Nichols 241); as a representation of the lack of control within society and social structures; and as “a sadistic purveyor of anarchy” (Nichols 239). Guerric Debona, in an analysis of Tim Burton’s film *Batman* (1989), stated that “[t]he Joker is the true anarchist” (60). Anarchist is, indeed, the most common denomination applied to the Joker and his anarchic behavior has been analyzed in various works

(e.g., Brooker, *Hunting the Dark Knight*; Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*; Cox and Levine; Langley; White and Arp). Moreover, Debona claims that “if Wayne’s Batman is the personification of Wayne’s best self, the Joker is the expression of anarchy in high relief, and here is where the allegory of culture versus anarchy becomes most overt” (57). In Debona’s analysis, Batman represents culture whilst the Joker represents anarchy. It is not coincidental that Debona contrasts the two comic characters in this way, since upsetting an established order—in other words, the culture that Batman represents—is a direct consequence of the anarchic behavior caused by the Joker, a behavior which ultimately brings about fear. The portrayals of Batman and the Joker in *The Dark Knight* and the origin story of the latter in *Joker* concur with Debona’s conclusions about culture and anarchy and, by extension, fear.

The Batman and Joker films deal with various representations of fear. It is not surprising that fear is a common element included in the films since “[f]ear is ubiquitous. All of us experience it at one time or another” (Akhtar, “Fear, Phobia, and Cowardice” 3). Moreover, psychologists have explained that fear “is one of the basic emotions characterized by highly negative affect and psychologic excitation” (Gervaise vii) and that fear “is a central feature in human emotional life and this emotional state is perfectly normal” (Velardi et al. 143). Also, fear can be understood “as a perspective for viewing social experience” (Hill 53). Taking these definitions of fear into account, it makes sense that directors Christopher Nolan and Todd Phillips portray fear in various ways in their films since “we live in a culture dominated by fear and this fear has damaging social consequences” (Canini, *The Domination of Fear* x). Finally, if one considers these concepts of fear, new historical readings of the films arise.

On the one hand, Nolan’s film has been extensively analyzed as a film in direct dialogue with the events of September 11 (e.g., Birkenstein et al.; Kellner; Prince; Hoberman; Bassil-Morozow; Lewis; McGowan). *Joker*, on the other hand, was released during former President Trump’s administration in a nation divided into opposing political ideologies. The United States, at the moment of the film’s release, was a country suffering from racism, misogyny, and increasing levels of violence (see Giroux; or Pulido et al.; or Battaglia et al.). The two films consider the fears of their respective times since “[c]ultural narratives can embellish existing fears, create new ones, and offer rich iconography for both. All this becomes evident in the

realms of regional concerns, prejudice, politics, literature, and even entertainment" (Akhtar, "Fear, Phobia, and Cowardice" 17). Borrowing representations of fear from the extradiegetic world, the worlds of *The Dark Knight* and *Joker* include representations of fear, in the Joker in this case, that "disturb a culture's slumber and mobilise adaptive and maladaptive responses" (Akhtar, "Fear, Phobia, and Cowardice" 17). In the world of the Batman films, the adaptive response to fear that disturbs the fragile calm of Gotham City is embodied in Batman while the maladaptive response, in Akhtar's terminology, is the Joker.

Nevertheless, the adaptive response represented by Batman, tasked with fighting crime in Gotham, produces negative effects given that Batman is also to blame for the spread of fear, madness, and chaos in the city. Several characters in *The Dark Knight*, as a matter of fact, accuse him of this. For instance, Commissioner Gordon's wife, Barbara—after believing her husband to have been killed by the Joker—, declares: "You brought this craziness on us. You did! You brought this on us!" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). The Joker also holds Batman responsible for the anarchy spreading in Gotham as seen in a video-recording broadcast on Gotham television. In this video, the Joker interrogates a tied-up man named Brian who dresses up as Batman. The Joker asks Brian why he dresses in that way, to which Brian responds that Batman is "a symbol that we don't have to be afraid of scum like [the Joker]," to which Joker responds: "Yeah. You do, Brian. You really do" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). The Joker, after ordering Brian to look at him, turns the video camera towards himself and speaks to the audience:

You see, this is how crazy Batman's made Gotham. You want order in Gotham, Batman must take off his mask and turn himself in. Oh, and every day he doesn't people will die. Starting tonight. I'm a man of my word. (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*)

It is not clear if the madness of the Joker seen in the above quotation refers to himself or to the fact that other individuals have deemed it appropriate to imitate Batman—both in attire and action. Regardless, the Joker believes Batman to be responsible and that only by eliminating the vigilante can order be restored.

Finally, even Batman himself wonders if he is responsible for the Joker's existence. The morning after the death of Rachael (Bruce Wayne's childhood friend and love interest), Wayne—partially

dressed in his Batman attire—asks his butler, Alfred: “Did I bring this on her? I was meant to inspire good, not madness, not death” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Wayne’s pessimistic commentary in this scene mirrors a belief he has had since the trauma of witnessing his parents’ murder, an event included in *Batman Begins*. Some days after the murders, Wayne—then a young boy—is looking through his room’s window after the burial of his parents. Alfred goes in to check on him and Wayne bursts into tears. Wayne expresses how guilty he feels for having been scared at the opera the three of them were watching and for having asked his father to leave—concluding that if they had not left in the middle of the performance, the crime would not have taken place. Researchers investigating guilt after trauma have explained that “guilt is associated with mental health problems” (Aakvaag et al. 17). For Wayne, the murder of his parents is the cause of his mental health problems, which he disguises and avoids dealing with when he embraces his Batman persona.

Returning to both Batman and the Joker, the truth is that without Batman there is no Joker and without Joker there is no Batman; this conclusion is evident in Nolan’s film. David Brooks explains the symbiosis between the two antagonists (including in his analysis the character of Harvey Dent as well). In his comparison of *The Dark Knight* to U.S. political reprisals for the aforementioned terrorist attacks, Brooks explains that Batman and the Joker “serve as a reflection of one another while also serving as each other’s ‘raison d’être’” (3). Brooks’s conclusion is verified in the film’s famous interrogation scene when the Joker asks Batman: “What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off Mob dealers? No, no. No. No, you complete me” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Furthermore, Brooks explains that “[w]ithout villains to capture and prosecute, Batman and Dent serve no purpose, while it is clear in the film that the Joker is intentionally provoking Batman to the point of his capture” (3). Moreover, Batman and the Joker “rely upon fear to maintain their power” (Brooks 3). In *Batman Begins*, a film which deals in depth with fear, Alfred asks Wayne why he chose to use a bat for a symbol. Wayne explains: “Bats frighten me. It’s time my enemies shared my dread” (Nolan, *Batman Begins*). It is through the fear that Batman is capable of instilling in his enemies that he maintains the upper hand as a crime fighter. The Joker uses the same tactic both against the film’s heroes as well as the villains. Scholars have analyzed this link between Nolan’s Batman trilogy and fear; Brooks considers that “[t]he series invokes the politics of fear and fear plays an enormous

role in the plots of each film" (2). In reference to *Batman Begins*, Brooks explains that two of Batman's main foes—the Scarecrow and Mob-boss Carmine Falcone—understand "the importance of fear as a weapon" (3) and it is the latter who "speaks of the power of fear as the highest power attainable, and, because [Falcone] holds that power, he can continually control crime in Gotham City" (Brooks 2–3). Moreover, Falcone explains to Wayne that people fear what they do not understand. In an ironic turn of events, little does Falcone know—in that first face-off with Wayne—that he himself will experience the very fear of the unknown he once described to Wayne when, later in the film, Falcone faces Batman.

Falcone's point about fear is again taken up in *The Dark Knight*. After the first encounter between Batman and the Joker, Wayne is analyzing images from the videorecording of the Joker explained earlier. In the scene, Alfred explains that it was Batman who pushed the Mob-bosses to a point in which they were so desperate that they had to hire the Joker, a man who—in the butler's estimation—they failed to understand. However, Wayne believes the Joker to be another ordinary criminal, just like the rest of the criminals he has faced as Batman. Alfred is quick to correct Wayne: "With respect, Master Wayne, perhaps this is a man you don't fully understand either" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). It is not until Wayne understands the fear the Joker represents that he is capable of arresting his foe.

As I have stated, the Joker characters of *The Dark Knight* and *Joker* are allegorical representations of the films' extradiegetic times. Firstly, scholars have argued that "[a] great deal has been made of a post-9/11 world, where security concerns ring loudly around the globe and fears of 'the next inevitable attack' are rampant" (Kolenic 1023). The North American cinema industry, as an active and critical medium capable of reaching the masses through its fictions, has produced films dealing with the fears Kolenic mentions—films such as *Body of Lies* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), or *Eye in the Sky* (2015). Interest in fear seen in films is likewise found in the analysis of academics given that

[m]uch scholarship in Popular Culture—analyzing media content, performances, television, films, and other cultural products and phenomena—and other fields have rightly been dedicated to these fears and threats, as the anxieties that accompany them are most certainly worthy of attention. (Kolenic 1023)

It can be concluded that during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century “there appears to be a post-post-9/11 tone circulating, a waning of gut reactions to continual acts of violence around the globe” (Kolenic 1023). *The Dark Knight* supports the above affirmation given that the film deals with fear of terrorism and how to control said fear when eliminating the threat of terrorism is an unattainable task. Scholars contend that *The Dark Knight*'s Joker is depicted “in the mould of the popular conception of terrorism” (Nichols 243), and the Joker himself is “terror incarnate—a true domestic terrorist” (Kolenic 1025). According to these opinions, it can be argued that the Joker is a terrorist due to his violent actions and the fear he instills in his victims.

Psychologists have explained that:

[F]ear is an emotional response to a perceived threat or to a dangerous condition. It is a basic survival mechanism occurring in response to a specific stimulus, such as pain or the threat of adverse situations. (Balconi 32)

Balconi's explanation when used to analyze *The Dark Knight*'s Joker can lead to the conclusion that the Joker is the threat, the dangerous condition, and the adverse situation that Gotham endures. In the film, the Joker holds the city hostage to the fear he instills via a so-called “culture of fear” (Canini, “Horror and the Politics of Fear” 203). In relation to Canini's concept, fear is considered to be “a singular, primitive force, the subsets of which (anxiety, terror, etc) are measured by proximity to threat and their attendant affective intensity” (Canini, “Horror and the Politics of Fear” 203). In Canini's explanation, the proximity threat the Joker represents to Gotham's inhabitants is enhanced due to the character's ubiquitous nature—another characteristic also present in Batman—making him, as a result, even more terrifying. The two characters' similarity is clear given that the Joker “is a carnivalesque figure, a parody-cum-mirror of Wayne/Batman himself” (Fradley 22). In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker, like Batman, appears and disappears undetected without apparent explanation of how he got there; examples include the scene in which the Joker meets with the Mob-bosses or the hospital scene with Harvey Dent. Moreover, the Joker has the capacity to move about Gotham without being seen. Even the aforementioned Mob-bosses who hire him are terrified of him. Mob-



boss Maroni, when being interrogated by Batman about the Joker's whereabouts, explains to the vigilante that "no one is gonna cross [the Joker] for you" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*); it can be inferred that terror of the Joker's reprisals should he be betrayed is greater than the fear at Batman's non-murderous punishments (for additional analysis of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, see Camp et al.; and Lowe).

Let us move on now to another characteristic element of fear used by the Joker. Ledger's Joker applies make-up as "war paint" in order to "scare people" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*), thus enhancing his frightening character. The character's use of make-up to induce fear makes sense since the "[f]ace conveys a variety of information about individuals" (Gervaise 34). By hiding his face behind make-up, the Joker, both in *The Dark Knight* and *Joker*, can leave behind his former self to fully embrace his terrifying other. Gervaise explains that some of this information about the individual and the face

is semantically derived, that is it can be accessed only after the perceived representation of the face makes contact with a corresponding stored representation from which biographic information about the individual can then be reactivated. (Gervaise 34)

Although in *Joker* the character's use of make-up is attributable to his profession, and not to any evident biographical information, Arthur Fleck murders his victims—with the exception of his mother—while in his clown disguise. In contrast, Ledger's Joker applies warlike clown make-up to make more frightening use of the scars seen round his mouth, scars which may reveal biographical information about the character.

In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker offers two explanations for how he got the scars—the narration of a third is abruptly interrupted by Batman. In his first explanation, the Joker holds a Mob-boss by the neck while sticking a knife into the man's mouth. The Joker explains that his violent and alcoholic father murdered his mother "laughing while he [did] it" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Then, the father went after his child and cut him around the mouth. In the second story, the Joker has crashed a fundraising party thrown by Wayne to raise money to help Harvey Dent's district attorney campaign. Wayne, exiting the violent scene to suit up in his Batman attire, grabs Dent and hides him. Meanwhile, the Joker asks numerous attendees about Dent's whereabouts until Rachael confronts him. Identical to

his Mob-boss encounter, the Joker restrains Rachael and explains that he was once married. His wife used to tell him that he worried in excess and that he ought to smile more. Also, the wife had money problems and “[got] in deep with the sharks” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*) who ended up cutting her face. The Joker explains that they could not pay for reconstructive plastic surgery and the wife did not smile any longer. The Joker, in an unfortunate attempt to empathize further with his wife’s feelings and wanting to see her smile again, cut himself around the mouth—thus scarring his face like his wife’s. However, this action did not have the sought-after effect since she ended up leaving him. The Joker concludes the story: “Now I see the funny side. Now I’m always smiling” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). Though one cannot know which story, if any, is actually true, it does not matter; the two stories are violent depictions of how the Joker ended up scarred. Moreover, the two narrations depict a traumatic family situation in which high levels of violence are present.

The aforementioned quotation from Ledger’s Joker concurs in meaning with another delivered by *Joker*’s Arthur Fleck. After discovering horrifying facts regarding his infancy, i.e., Fleck was sexually assaulted and beaten by one of his mother’s partners (something I will address further on later), Fleck returns to the hospital his mother is at. Angry at his adopted mother, Fleck says: “I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it’s a fucking comedy” (Phillips). He then smothers his mother with a pillow. The Jokers of the two films are created—based on the two stories told by Ledger’s Joker and the report read by Fleck—by violent and traumatic events. These traumas signify the moment of no return for the character, transforming him into the violent criminal portrayed in the films.

Returning now to *The Dark Knight*’s Joker and the two stories about the scars, it has been argued that “the Joker’s reiteration of his wound with different explanations of how he received his scars re-creates a repetitive loop of wounding and violence without critically engaging with the trauma” (Baxter 92). Furthermore, the varied accounts on how the Joker was scarred “can be read as simply him furthering chaos, or, perhaps as how that chaos becomes efficacious; the differing accounts can be read as the refusal of narrative, accountability, and governmentality” (Kolenic 1027). Regardless of the different readings that can be applied to the Joker’s scars, the two stories are used by the character to free himself from his former identity in order to embrace the Joker persona; a

personality which allows him to do as he pleases, making him an “agent of chaos” (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). On the other hand, the fact that the wounds are visible and permanent serves Ledger’s Joker as a constant reminder of “the origins of the traumatic event” (any of the two scarring stories told) which he channels by “re-creating fear through terrorist threats; exposing the victim(s) to corruption—the lack of ethics and morality—as the cause of traumatic events; and finally, by wounding and/or murdering others” (Baxter 92). Based on these affirmations and understanding fear to be a “dysphoric reaction” to an event or a situation “that is felt to be threatening” (Akhtar, “Fear, Phobia, and Cowardice” 4), we can conclude that Ledger’s Joker utilizes the fear he once experienced when getting the scars to his advantage when he deals with the rest of the characters of the film. The Joker, thus, takes “revenge on the political and judicial systems that he believes caused the injustices that led to this traumatic wound” (Baxter 92). In other words, the Joker takes the political and judicial systems which in his estimation are fearful and, as the Joker, he in turn becomes that which is felt, by society and institutions, to be threatening.

In the case of *Joker*, Arthur Fleck tells television showman Murray Franklin that his wearing make-up is not part of a political statement, though Fleck is conscious that some of the killings he perpetrated have led to the violent riots taking place on the streets. Regardless of the political implications of his disguise, the truth is that Fleck’s actions towards the end of the film (when he publicly admits having killed the three businessmen who assaulted him in the subway and when he assassinates Murray) do indeed correspond to actions of “domestic terrorists and other individuals who mean to upset social order by means of violence” (Kolenic 1031).

If Fleck’s use of make-up is not associated with a political statement, why does he use it? Why does he act in a way that (however unintentional) upsets social order by means of violence? The answer to these questions can be found in Fleck’s need to fit in and be part of society—even if it is as a criminal, a madman, and a murderer. Applying psychosocial theories regarding human destructiveness and aggressions, it can be argued that Fleck, after all, is a human being and as such needs “a social system in which he has his place” (Fromm 107). The case represented in *Joker* of what happens to Fleck is an extreme portrayal of the isolation and the loneliness of the “modern mass man” (Fromm 107). It can thus be argued that Fleck, according to the conclusions of said

sociopsychological theories, “has no convictions which he could share with others” (Fromm 107) because if he did, he would be seen as crazy or a “freak” (a term used in both films to refer to the Joker). The last scene of *Joker*, for instance, illustrates the character’s unwillingness to share his ideas. In this scene, Fleck continues to laugh without an obvious reason for doing so. The psychiatrist interviewing him asks him why he laughs. Fleck explains that he just thought of a joke. When the psychiatrist asks him to tell her the joke, Fleck refuses and states that she “wouldn’t get it” (Phillips). There are several scenes in the film in which Fleck either refuses to share his thoughts with others or, when he does, he is laughed at. The end result for Fleck is the same: society isolates him and he feels ostracized.

*Joker* deals with what happens when humans live in fear—in this case, the individual’s fear of being alone, of being disregarded, and of being abandoned by society and losing everything one holds dear. Of course, it must be understood that what the film portrays is an extreme case. I have argued that the two Jokers here analyzed are, at some point in their respective films, called “freak” by other characters—e.g., two Mob-bosses in *The Dark Knight* and Fleck’s boss, Hoyt, in *Joker*. Scholars have considered the use of the term “freak” in relation to the Joker. Mario Rodriguez explains that “freak” “has the connotation of a medical malady that deviates from an assumed norm; thus, the Joker himself is like a malady to be identified, isolated and treated” (10). Following Rodriguez’s argumentation, Ledger’s Joker, after being detained by Batman, is sent to Arkham Asylum, where—we can assume—he will be isolated and given the proper treatment. In *Joker*, from the very beginning of the film, Fleck is treated by and attends regular sessions with a specialist at Arkham State Hospital. Nevertheless, the help he receives seems to be insufficient given that he explains to his psychiatrist that he does not “want to feel so bad anymore” (Phillips). Furthermore, Fleck explains to the psychiatrist that he “think[s] [he] felt better when [he] was locked up in the hospital” (Phillips). This quotation can be read in two ways. On the one hand, as Fleck knowing that he was better treated in the hospital than he is right now by this psychiatrist. On the other, that for Fleck the fact of being locked-up in an institution provided him a feeling of security the outside world did not and does not provide. Throughout the film, Fleck feels insecure, spied upon, judged, and laughed at by others—one of his entries in his diary reveals how social isolation and

society's having labelled him a freak make him feel. Fleck writes: "The worst part about having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don't" (Phillips). When he is uncomfortable with a situation, Fleck suffers from a maniacal laugh he cannot control. In order to explain his laughter to others, Fleck hands out cards in which there is a written explanation of his condition. The card reads:

Forgive my laughter, I have a condition. It's a medical condition causing sudden, frequent and uncontrollable laughter that doesn't match how you feel. It can happen in people with a brain injury or certain neurological conditions. Thank you! KINDLY RETURN THIS CARD. (Phillips)

Both Phoenix's and Ledger's Jokers show maniacal laughter that induces, at times, fear in the films' characters as well as the spectators. Similar conditions to the ones portrayed in the character of the Joker in the two films have been analyzed by scholars in relation to the connection between fear and laughter—some of these studies, although unrelated to the films, are carried out in relation to a phobia known as gelotophobia (e.g., Weiss et al.; Young), that is, the fear of being laughed at.

It can be argued that, in *Joker*, Fleck's maniacal and uncontrollable laughter is the result of numerous violent assaults and is a consequence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The first assault seen in the film—albeit not the first in Fleck's life—happens in the opening scene. Fleck, dressed in his clown-costume, is juggling an advertisement outside a store trying to attract customers to the shop. A group of adolescents steal the sign from him and he runs after them. Eventually, Fleck is beaten up by the children. Some of the children say: "Beat his ass up. Come on! This guy's weak. He can't do nothing. Beat him up! Take his stuff" (Phillips). Fleck is eventually abandoned by the group and lays on the ground. Fleck's first beating in the film serves to present the violent and dangerous Gotham City he lives in—a city in which children beat adults up gratuitously. It is a city where men like Fleck are considered to be weak and easy targets. Later on in the film, Fleck, whilst returning home dressed in his clown costume, observes three men in a subway car harassing a woman. Fleck starts laughing—not because he finds the harassment funny, but because he is uncomfortable—, and the men then focus their attention on him while the woman escapes. Eventually, after teasing him, the

men assault him, but Fleck then shoots them with a gun a coworker of his had given him. After the killing, Fleck, scared, runs and hides in a public bathroom. He locks the door and then starts dancing. Scholars have explained that the central feature of PTSD “is really the incapacity to integrate the fear and horror experience with the existing view of oneself and the world, with a sort of imprisonment” (Velardi et al. 118). Based on this explanation, Fleck’s dance can be interpreted as the first real moment of liberation he enjoys in the film. Moreover, it has been explained that fear

when unrelieved or indefinitely extended, can lead to stress-related distress and a chronic state of anxiety. Such chronic anxiety should ordinarily subside once the existing external threat or danger has dissipated. (Etezady 194)

Etezady’s statement applied to Fleck means that at this moment, Fleck is not afraid any longer; he has power, and he feels both free and good about himself. It is the first time he has confronted his aggressors and he has come up victorious. During his dance, Fleck develops a new image of himself in order to liberate himself from his trauma’s imprisonment. The bathroom scene is not, however, the only instance in which Fleck dances—and thus further liberates himself from post-traumatic imprisonment—following murder. Another notable example is the iconic scene in which Fleck descends a flight of stairs while dancing.

Regarding the traumatic events that marked Fleck, scholars have also studied the devastating consequences of child abuse (see Fulu et al.) In *Joker*, Fleck believes he is the product of an affair between his mother and billionaire Thomas Wayne. After failing to get an audience with Wayne to inform him of his paternity, Fleck confronts him in private. However, the meeting does not go as expected. Thomas Wayne denies paternity and informs Fleck that he was adopted and that his adopted mother, Peggy, was mentally ill. Fleck initially refuses to believe Wayne, though he decides to investigate the matter further. Eventually, Fleck obtains Peggy’s psychiatric records, reports in which it is stated that she “stood by when one of [her] boyfriends repeatedly abused [her] adopted son and battered [her]” (Phillips). Moreover, Peggy was “found guilty of endangering the welfare of her own child” (Phillips). The report reveals that Fleck was, in his infancy, a victim of repeated abuse. Scholars have studied the effects of victimization (both individual

and poly-victimization) and have found that it is a “risk factor for trauma symptoms” (Finkelhor et al. 19). It is not surprising that Fleck, a victim of abuse, suffers from mental health issues since “[m]ulti-victimization has been found to be associated with mental health” (Aakvaag et al. 21). Furthermore, scholars have explained that “[a]ll types of severe violence,” we could include here the violence suffered by Fleck, “are significantly associated with both shame and guilt” (Aakvaag et al. 21). While *Joker* includes scenes during which Fleck discovers the truth about his infancy, the film never shows Fleck remembering the abuse he endured. In other words, Fleck’s mind, to protect itself, has eliminated memories of the abuse. The elimination of said memories has not, however, freed Fleck from the consequences of said abuse. Taking this into account in conjunction with Fleck’s discovery that the name “Arthur Fleck” was given to him by his abusive mother (since his biological mother abandoned him without a name), it can be concluded that the trauma Fleck suffers from, as happens with Ledger’s Joker, “divide[d] or destroy[ed] his identity, causing the initial trauma to be repressed and at times denied” (Baxter 90). In the case of Ledger’s Joker, his trauma is recreated through his telling of the two scar stories. By telling the stories, Ledger’s Joker gives “narrative representations of traumatic events [that] are re-produced in order to create witnesses of the terrifying event” (Baxter 90).

Regardless of whether Fleck remembers the abuse he endured in his infancy or not, the trauma is there, as well as the feelings of shame mentioned earlier. To better illustrate the consequences of his childhood trauma, including persisting feelings of shame, let us analyze an important scene in *Joker*. This scene serves to demonstrate that Fleck believes that there is a part of his infancy missing: a father. In *Joker*, Fleck has fantasies which include TV-show presenter Murray Franklin, whom Fleck idealizes as a father figure. At the beginning of the film, Fleck imagines himself as a member of the show’s studio audience. When Murray makes his appearance on stage, the audience applauds, including an excited Fleck. Fleck yells “I love you, Murray” and this gets Murray’s attention. Murray asks Fleck to stand up and to tell everybody about himself. Fleck explains that he lives with his mother, a comment laughed at by the audience until Murray says that there is nothing funny about living with one’s mother and that he also never had a father. Fleck sympathizes with that feeling and explains that he has “been the man in the house for as long as [he] could remember;” and

adds that he “take[s] good care of [his] mother” (Phillips). Furthermore, Fleck explains that Peggy “always tells [him] to smile and put on a happy face. She says [he] was put here to spread joy and laughter” (Phillips). Murray then asks Fleck to come on to the stage and confesses to him that he would love to have a son like Fleck. Thus, in Fleck’s fantasy, the admiration the two of them feel for each other is mutual given that Murray likes Fleck for being a good son. The two of them hug. As can be seen, Murray represents the paternal figure Fleck never had. In his imagination, Fleck uses Murray to receive the approval, admiration, and love he never received from a father.

However, the Murray father figure idealized by Fleck collapses when Murray shows in his show a clip of one of Fleck’s real stand-up comedy performances—the clip was recorded without Fleck’s knowledge, hence his surprise when he sees himself on television. At the clip’s beginning, Fleck is over the moon, not only because he believes his sense of humor to be funny, but because Murray himself is playing a clip of his. However, Murray makes fun of Fleck’s humor and of his comedic inability. It is at this moment when Fleck’s admiration for Murray changes drastically. This scene triggers the violent events of the end of the film.

Scholars have explained that shame “is associated with a global punitive judgment of the self, which results in an intense emotional response” (Vizin et al. 62). Fleck’s intense response towards the feeling of shame and disappointment provoked by Murray is intensified when Fleck is invited to attend Murray’s show as a guest. When Murray introduces Fleck as his next guest during the show, Fleck starts off by telling a joke in bad-taste which nobody finds funny. Murray, after reprimanding Fleck for his sense of humor, also teases Fleck for his inability to tell a simple joke. Furthermore, in relation to PTSD, scholars explain that the disorder “consists in a prolonged anxious reaction in response to an extremely threatening or catastrophic event” (Velardi et al. 118). In the case of *Joker*, the last straw in a series of threats and catastrophic events in Fleck’s life is Murray himself and the realization that the presenter does not love him as a son nor finds him to be funny or special. Fleck explains to Murray that “everybody is awful these days” and that “nobody is civil anymore” and that nobody “thinks what it is like to be the other guy” (Phillips). Fleck accuses Murray of being awful for having played his video and making fun of him. Fleck then asks Murray: “What do you get when you cross a mentally-ill loner with a



society that abandons him and treats him like trash?" (Phillips) before producing a gun from his jacket and shooting him in the head. The murder of Murray, I argue, is Fleck's way of dealing with the traumatic events of his childhood and a way to express his disappointment with his life and the world around him—not that I justify his actions under any circumstances.

In summary, the two Joker films here analyzed include a similar moral. On the one hand, in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker tells Batman that the "only sensible way to live in this world is without rules" (Nolan, *The Dark Knight*). In the case of *Joker*, Fleck's transformation into the Joker and his succumbing to madness is in accordance with Ledger's Joker's tenet. Only by breaking with societal rules, only by becoming a demented and dangerous criminal can Fleck find his place in the world. The Joker in *The Dark Knight* explains that madness simply takes a "little push" (Nolan) and with that push, anyone can become a madman. The last "push" Fleck needs to fully embrace his Joker persona takes place when he is admiring the mayhem that has erupted in the streets of Gotham. Fleck states: "Isn't it beautiful?" (Phillips). After the police car where he is being transported crashes, Fleck is freed from the wreckage and put on top of the car's hood. At that moment of absolute chaos, while being admired, cheered, and encouraged by his audience, Fleck—already the Joker—feels truly happy and fulfilled. And, in accordance with other moments of liberation after having committed terrible acts, Fleck dances. However, *Joker* does not end there. The film's final scene shows Fleck in Arkham being treated by a psychiatrist. Just as in *The Dark Knight*, Fleck/Joker is taken to a mental institution. It can therefore be concluded that the Joker "like madness itself, cannot be annihilated, but he can be isolated, diagnosed, and compelled to enter a therapeutic discourse" (Rodriguez 10). Phoenix's Joker, in accordance with Ledger's, "represents a new global underclass" and "embodies the idea that there is some element of this hostile underclass that can be isolated. This element is mental disorders" (Rodriguez 10). In relation to Rodriguez's conclusions, I would also argue that the two Jokers here analyzed serve as representations of various fears that exist both in society and within the human heart. These allegorical representations seen in *The Dark Knight* and *Joker*, moreover, warn the audience that the human mind is delicate and that an individual, if isolated from society, is capable of terrible crimes.

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