

Alexia Kimmich (JSB287): *The Joker* (2019 film)

Can Society Create a Villain, or is it all a Joke?

Joker is a psychological thriller directed and co-written by Todd Phillips, best known for his comedic work on the Hangover Trilogy. Featuring a haunting score and outstanding cinematography, *Joker* is the story of troubled comedian Arthur Fleck, played by Joaquin Phoenix. Fleck, a middle-aged loner who lives with his mother and harbours unreciprocated feelings for his neighbour, works as a sign-spinning clown and idolises comedic talk show host Murray Franklin, depicted by Robert De Niro. Arthur suffers from a neurological condition that causes him to burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter at inappropriate moments, a souvenir from his abuse as a child. When the funding for his mental health medication and treatment is cut, the disregard he feels by a system that should have protected him sends him on a downward spiral where he descends into madness and transforms into the violent villain we know as the Joker.

Phillips wrote his *Joker* into a Gotham City of the early 1980s, where the cityscape resembles that of a gritty New York City. This is an astute move by Phillips, as it allows this film to stand apart from other films featuring characters from the DC Comic world. Released at a time when the audience was flooded with big-budget superhero franchise films replete with CGI and over-the-top action, *Joker* allows its audience to appreciate the subtle yet powerful art of film. Phillips' prudent choice of the era means the film is set in a pre-web age, absent of keyboard warriors and internet trolls, so Arthur's oppressors surround him in his daily life, and his unhinged acts of retaliation are in the real world, making the violence appear more real to the audience.

In an interview with Entertainment Tonight, Phillips said the film is a nod to the eighties Scorsese picture *The King of Comedy*, which also stars De Niro. Critics and audiences alike have echoed this comparison, with many critics also saying the film is a blueprint of *Taxi Driver*, which ironically is another Scorsese/De Niro collaboration. Although the apparent comparisons between *Joker* and *Taxi Driver* can be made (a lonely white male who suffers from unrequited love and is fed up with the way society treats one another), I find the distinctive difference between these two characters and their stories the most interesting difference of all – how they were created.

Tim Burton's 1989 *Joker* was thrown into a vat of acid to be come to live, yet Phillips' *Joker* is, in a true reflection of the enemies we face today, created from the pain inflicted upon him by the world he lives in. *Joker* is the story of the making of a villain and implies how mental health, when left unchecked, can lead an individual to commit acts of violence to be seen and heard by the world around them. This begs the audience to ask, does the *Joker* create chaos, or has chaos created him?

A key theme of *Joker* is Arthur's struggle with mental illness. Although it was not the intent of Phillips and his co-writer Scott Silver, Arthur's dark journey to become the *Joker* delivers the opinion that a person suffering from poor mental health is a threat to the society in which they live.

In the opening scene, Arthur is set upon by a gang of youths, which portrays the sad reality that the mentally unwell are greater targets for violence. And as Arthur's profound alienation arises from social inequality due to his mental illness, he is goaded to murder by the meanness and abuse of the world. Yet his violence in the form of self-defence soon turns into crimes of misguided intent. Killing empowers him, and violence makes him feel like he is doing the work for the people and bringing balance to the world's injustices. This

sense of freedom and power is particularly evident when comparing the two scenes with Arthur on the ominous stairwell. We see a defeated and conquered Arthur slowly ascend the stairs at the beginning of the film and then literally dance up the staircase in a colourful suit after he has committed horrifying acts of violence.

But is glorifying a mentally ill loner who turns to violence for the greater good a story that needs telling these days? One simply has to scan the US headlines to realise that this ubiquitous narrative is, in fact, reality. Although the film sheds light on many issues relevant to today's audience – riots against corrupt leaders and systems, rebellion against greed, the prevalence of mental health – it does not try to solve these issues. Instead, it leaves them up to the audience to interpret.

Donald Trump once infamously said, “Mental illness and hatred pulls the trigger, not the gun”. Does *Joker* give weight to this unfounded and dismissive way of thinking, and was it Phillips' intent to open the dialogue on gun violence in America? I don't believe so. Phillips wished to write a deep dive character study on a villain, and besides, since when did it become the responsibility of filmmakers to teach their audience morality?

I do not view this film as glorifying mental illness and violence but rather as a cautionary tale to consider the consequences of our actions on those we repress. As American author James A. Baldwin once wrote, “The most dangerous creation of any society is the man who has nothing to lose”.

While audiences and critics continue to debate what this film depicts, with a sequel currently in production and *Joker* still ranking as the highest-grossing R-rated film in history, Phillips and his team are having the last laugh.

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