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“He Who Laughs Last!” Terrorists, Nihilists, and Jokers

Abstract

Since his debut in 1940, the Joker, famed adversary of the Batman, continues to permeate the American cultural mediascape not merely as an object of consumption but as an ongoing production of popular imagination. Joker mythmakers post-1986 have reimagined the character not as superhuman but as “depressingly ordinary,” inspiring audiences both to empathize with his existential plight and to fear his terroristic violence as an increasingly compelling model of reactionary resistance to institutionality. This article examines the recent history of modern terrorism in conjunction with the “pathological nihilism” diagnosed by Nietzsche in order to elucidate the stakes and implications of the Joker’s legacy and popularity. Our analyses of the Joker lead us to conclude that “lone wolf” terrorism is an inherent affordance of a politically pluralistic society, a morally relativistic culture that stresses self-determination and authenticity as top priorities. These values impact “lone wolves” like the Joker in their function as media-driven auteur killers—striving for post-mortem recognition and dissemination. Todd Phillips’ *Joker* (2019) then proposes that this type of criminal can ironically result from a media-induced contagion, a discursive fear propagated by twenty-four-hour news cycles that incidentally creates a path for the socially impotent to make their television debuts.

Keywords

Lone Wolf, Terrorism, Inspirational Contagion, Performative Violence, Auteur, Nihilism

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Author Notes

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Introduction

Dennis O'Neil writes: "Because he's inhabited that vast, unbounded mirror world known as Popular Culture, where realities shift from day to day and change is the only constant, the Batman has had to remake himself every decade or so or risk almost certain extinction."¹ The same equally applies to the Joker. This enterprise of regularly deconstructing and reconstructing the character – what we call "Jokerology"² – is artistic, popular, and academic. At a 2009 Comic-Con, Peter Coogan (Director of the Institute for Comics Studies) hosted a panel, "Is the Joker a Psychopath? You Decide." This developing clinical assessment of a fictional supervillain is one of the most intriguing features of the Joker's legacy and following. His unhinged psyche offers both creators and consumers alike a lasting playground within our changing social paradigms of mental health and illness. As the panel title suggests, the Joker is not merely an object of consumption but an ongoing production of cultural imagination.

This article is not interested in diagnosing the Joker's psychopathology; rather, we aim to explore the social pathologies articulated in and by the Joker's reinvention by content-creators and consumers alike.³ During the Q&A of the "Is the Joker a Psychopath?" panel, the speakers were asked a series of questions related to Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988) – the single most important Joker comic given its tragic retelling of the villain's origin. "Can a psychopath be created from a single traumatic experience or is it actually something you're born with?"⁴

Professor of Psychology Travis Langley explained that psychopaths are “grown...over the course of [an] entire lifetime.” In response, clinical psychologist Robin Rosenberg cited research suggesting a “genetic vulnerability towards psychopathy,” but that “just having the genes isn’t enough.” An environmental upbringing of neglect and abuse, coupled with genetic predisposition, would produce more psychopaths than a single traumatic event, she concluded.

Rosenberg refers to the traditional creation myth of the Joker, according to which the masked criminal escapes his robbery of a chemical processing plant through the toxic waste drain.⁵ To his horror, the unnamed man discovers that the chemicals have permanently bleached his skin white, stained his lips red, and dyed his hair green. *The Killing Joke* then layers further existential crisis onto this commoner. In just a matter of hours, the man is unconsolated by the police following the death of his wife and child, strong-armed by petty thugs into a robbery of his former workplace, and terrorized by a masked vigilante (Batman) with no opportunity to explain himself. “Just one bad day” can create a Joker, the comic suggests.

Psychological trauma and existential crisis are both dramatized in the recent *Joker* film (2019; dir. Todd Phillips), a new origin tale that meets Rosenberg’s conditions for the creation of a psychopath. Over the course of the film, Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix) transforms from a well-meaning son and aspiring comedian into a ruthless killer and a symbol of urban discontent. He undergoes this

transformation in response to a series of traumas (an assault, career failure, deprivation of his therapist and medication, etc.) – all of which Arthur perceives to be the fault of his society, its inept institutions and endemic inequalities. Thus, this article analyzes the social creation of such a Joker and the mythic conditions of Gotham seemingly responsible. Additionally, we transcend the confines of the original source material in order to analyze the “Jokerological” tradition from which such a character stems, the popular reception to the character and recent film, and the socio-historical conditions within which each took place.

Though thousands of iterations exist (saturating the popular culture industry with comics, television series, movies, toys, video games, and the like), after eighty years of success, Joker media remains intertextual by design, a stylistic residue given the character’s earliest publication form. The Joker, like the modern comic book that O’Neil describes, is “a strange amalgam of fiction, instant mythology, and imaginary history,” one that derives its value not from singularity but multitude.⁶ As O’Neil continues:

Editors are, of course, aware...that the modern comics audience demands continuity; readers insist that the characters’ biographies, and the fictional universes they inhabit, be consistent, logical, and self-referential. We don’t produce mere stories anymore; we produce something that hasn’t really been named yet. “Metafiction”? “Macrofiction”? Let’s settle for *saga*, and define it, tentatively, as a series of heroic tales that, although complete in themselves, are serially related and are part of a much larger fictional construct.

Outside the world of comics, Dan Hassler-Forest proposes the term of *transmedia* to further highlight the intertextuality or continuity that exists between modern popular culture properties.⁷ As the Comic-Con panel on the Joker's pathology demonstrates, artists, fans, and scholars are invited to interpret various elements of Joker transmedia in a collective ritual that reconfigures, and thereby embraces, the character as a member of our social mythos.

For this article, recognizing the separate traditions of Joker transmedia,⁸ we prioritize one genealogy of representation over others. Since his debut in 1940, depictions of the character oscillate from a violent criminal to a petty thief.⁹ While some recent comics have re-presented notable hyper-violent Jokers,¹⁰ we focus on a more popular Joker lineage (beginning with the comics of the late 1980s)¹¹ that portrays the character as a domestic terrorist and active nihilist – aspects we explore in the six sections that follow. This strand of Joker “macrofiction” then culminates in the pseudo-revolutionary of Arthur Fleck.

Unlike other traditions, which depict a superhuman and/or supervillainous Joker, the Phillips film recasts its protagonist as “depressingly ordinary.” Fleck is not a well-resourced prankster or expert chemist.¹² He isn't emotionally intelligent, charming, or possessing of a dominant personality.¹³ Instead, he's a thirty-something bachelor, living with his mother, working paycheck to paycheck, who struggles with depression and loneliness. Within the first act of the film, the audience is informed of Arthur's previous institutionalization, unproductive

therapy sessions, various psychotropic medications, and rare medical condition (likely the pseudobulbar affect) which causes "sudden, frequent and uncontrollable laughter" that often doesn't match the emotion of others. Despite such pathological signifiers, we cannot scapegoat Arthur (and those mentally ill) as the source of Gotham's dysfunction. Instead, we argue that this reinterpretation of the character inspires audiences both to empathize with his mundane plight and to fear his radicalization as representative of a dormant social reality. Accordingly, audiences began to fear the film itself – the empathy it generates – as a potential catalyst for radicalizing certain viewers and inciting offscreen violence.

This era's Joker functions as a cultural Rorschach test, our means of self-knowledge, prompting scholars to ask, "What are our cultural conditions such that we fear the Joker as a concrete possibility in our society?"¹⁴ Though set in 1981, the Gotham City of *Joker* is meant to reflect the social tensions of contemporary America; "the characters live in the real world and the stakes are personal," Phillips writes at the beginning of his script.¹⁵ Such "stakes" then include deinstitutionalization, the ineptitude of mental health services, the stigmatization of mental illness, the rise of celebrity worship, the glorification of White crime and violence, and so on.¹⁶ However, we identify the recent history of "lone wolf" terrorism as the most relevant factor in the fear surrounding Gotham's most famous criminal. The narrative of Arthur's psychological degeneration and eventual recourse to violence represents a possible, fearful, and, regrettably, familiar

outworking of actual contemporary conditions (e.g., poverty, social isolation, and the like). By this recourse to brutality,¹⁷ Arthur takes power (back) from a society that disempowers him. He justifies his killings not only as retributive violence but also as stages in a process of existential healing. Note that, at the film's conclusion, he is finally able to laugh without pain.

Thus, within the fictional Joker, the authors see a popular reflection and creative distortion of the violent extremists who exist among us. This article is then organized into two parts, each with three sections. First, we propose the Joker as a case study of the antics and motives traditionally associated with contemporary “lone wolf” terrorists – as both figures terrorize the current social imagination. Second, we offer a philosophical commentary on the social constructions and values that seemingly shape said figures – namely, moral relativism and a public disdain for institutionality. The writings of Friedrich Nietzsche are essential to this latter discussion. If the first three sections can be reduced to a demonstration of how the Joker advances academic discourse on “lone wolf” terrorists, then the latter three sections demonstrate how Nietzsche's diagnosis of Western culture as “pathological” and “nihilistic” further elucidates the stakes and implications of the Joker's legacy and popularity and his imagined connection to the disaffected killers of contemporary society.

To transition from one discussion to the other, the six sections that follow adhere to a chiasmic structure, a ring composition providing the authors an analytic

symmetry in presentation. The first three sections analyze the discursive terroristic ascension to (1) power, (2) self-realization, and (3) contagion, while the latter three analyze the nihilist descension into (4) commiseration, (5) dark comedy, and (6) reactionary resentment. The relationships between violent extremism and pathological nihilism (1 and 6), self-glorification and derisive expression (2 and 5), and *cultus* and *communitas* (3 and 4), we argue, are most apparent once discussed in such thematic sequence. In short, autonomy and artistry fuse into a performative violence governed by a systematic choice of death, whereby idiosyncratic killers are consumed, disseminated, and reproduced within popular media. At the same time, these active nihilists seek to commiserate with an audience, embracing an identity of institutional abuse or abandonment which transitions into a spirit of mockery and destruction.

Through our analysis of fictional and non-fictional violent extremists, we find that domestic terrorism and pathological nihilism ultimately stem from the neoliberal social conditions and hypermasculine revenge politics of postmodernity. One hears social cries over a loss of human decency, physical intimacy, and individuated masculinity. Such social impotence is reconfigured into a fractured yet popular resistance to institutionality and governmentality, especially within a pluralistic (that is, morally relativistic) society that prioritizes self-determination and authenticity over traditionalism and convention. Such Western values become weaponized against the public, as these terrorists/nihilists construct an idol of

themselves through acts of destruction. This, too, reveals the overarching cultural value attributed to public recognition, digitized identity, visual technology, and idiosyncratic artistic signatures.

The Deliberate Pursuit of Death

The rise of transnational terrorism has significantly impacted the stories of the Joker (and superheroes more generally). Consider the Joker's recent targets of attack: mass transportation services, state institutions, and public spaces meant to garner media interest.¹⁸ While much has been written on the aftermath of 9/11 and depictions of foreign terrorism,¹⁹ we devote our attention to the more recent face of extremism: those domestic terrorists who act without traditional forms of radicalization. The "lone wolf" moniker remains best suited for an introduction to this type of criminal: "a perpetrator of violence who does not have a political motivation, and is better described as either a vigilante or mentally disturbed."²⁰

Olivier Roy dubs this modern phenomenon "the Columbine syndrome":

[A] youngster goes to his school premises heavily armed, indiscriminately kills as many people as possible – students and teachers, acquaintances and unknowns – then kills himself or lets himself be killed by the police. Prior to this, he has posted photos, videos, and/or statements on [the internet]. In them he assumed heroic poses and delighted in the fact that everyone would now know who he was.²¹

Suicide as spectacle, Roy argues, should be understood in the context of the "generational nihilism" that shapes today's global youth culture, rather than as an

expression of specifically religious (i.e., Muslim) extremism. For Roy, then, nihilism refers to both the "futility of life" and the "systematic choice of death":

What fascinates [contemporary radicals] is pure revolt, not the construction of a utopia. Violence is not a means. It is an end in itself. It is violence devoid of a future. If this were not the case, it would be merely an option instead of a norm and a conscious choice.²²

This is a new Joker – one that views death (of himself and others) as the only way to construct a lasting image in the postmodern world of digitized identity.

Though he laughs in the face of death and post-death,²³ in past iterations, the Killer Clown is not a suicidal maniac. The Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008; dir. Christopher Nolan), for instance, wears a suicide vest in order to escape a Gotham mafia meeting and later puts a gun to his head when proving a point about the fairness of chaos. Yet such death-may-come schemes are rarely the true "payoff" of his grand designs, save for two exceptions. The first is Joker's suicide in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) where the Grim Jester goads Batman into killing him so as to incriminate the vigilante for murder, while the second is the "comedy routine" of Arthur Fleck in *Joker*.

In the film, Arthur yearns for the approval of celebrity-idol Murray Franklin, a late-night television host akin to Johnny Carson or Jerry Lewis.²⁴ After humiliating Arthur on his show (via footage of his failed stand-up performance), Murray's office calls a disaffected Arthur, inviting him to perform a bit of his act live. Arthur agrees and begins to orchestrate a proper television debut. "I don't want

to die with people just stepping over me,” Arthur writes in his journal. “I want people to see me.” Arthur is not given an audience during the course of his life and, thus, seeks to capture Gotham’s attention with his death. In his apartment, Arthur methodically rehearses his TV appearance. He sets up a sheet on the doorway, sharpies *Live with Murray Franklin* on a mug, sits on the couch, and practices his dialogue with a phantom host. The climax of his act involves a single “knock knock” joke, whose punchline will be a gunshot beneath his chin. In these rehearsals, Arthur hears laughter and applause whenever his act is complete. Although he had every intention of performing his suicide live on camera, the Joker aborts his plan after being repeatedly antagonized by Murray. Arthur confesses to the subway murders of three Wall Street bankers and labors his pain and frustrations at Murray and his audience (representative of Gotham as a whole). Prior to shooting his former idol in the face, the Mirthful Menace delivers one final joke: “What do you get when you cross a mentally-ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? ... I’ll tell you what you get: You get what you fucking deserve!”

Auteur Theory

How then are we to interpret such “performative violence”? As Mark Juergensmeyer observes, “lone wolves” are never truly alone: “in each case there is an audience in mind and a larger network of imagined supporters whom the act

is meant to impress.”²⁵ After his final “joke,” Arthur is subsequently arrested as footage from his late-night appearance dominates the news cycle. As chaos ensues in the streets, bringing a smile to Arthur’s face, his cop car is T-boned by a speeding ambulance driven by two rioting Gothamites. Arthur awakens from the crash and dances in glee atop the car before dozens of protestors in clown masks who shout and cheer as Gotham burns. Arthur has finally achieved recognition and empowerment, yet, unlike other “lone wolves,” he lives to witness the impact of his performance.

Since Columbine, “lone wolves” continue to be media-driven.²⁶ Consider the Virginia Tech Shooter, twenty-three-year-old Cho Seung-Hui who killed thirty-two people and himself in 2007.²⁷ Despite reports of the shooter’s antisocial behavior and mental illness, Vinay Lal observes that:

Cho’s insanity was not such as to preclude him from understanding that contemporary world views are fundamentally shaped by the image. Secular life long ago banished the idea of transcendence, but the image is the incarnation in which the ideal of the afterlife survives and flourishes. The police say that the QuickTime video files and still photographs Cho sent to NBC studios are demonstrable proof of the preparation that went into the massacre, but what they do not appear to have understood is that Cho was directing his own film, playing the lead role in it, creating – on reel and in real life – a montage of shots, and acting every bit the auteur. The death of the auteur was heralded some time ago, but Cho...paves the way for a new conception of the Killer as Auteur.²⁸

In film studies, “auteur theory” provides a framework for which to deconstruct cinema, the inherently collaborative product of filmmaking, into a range of artistic

choices made by individual writer/directors. According to such a theory, artists that construct a consistent vision (a creative signature) across their filmography should be respected and celebrated.²⁹ A future project, for instance, could offer analysis of Joker directors (i.e., Burton, Nolan, Phillips, Snyder) using such a framework,³⁰ similar to Dan Hassoun's performance analysis of Joker actors.³¹ Our use of the term "auteur," however, deviates from the tradition of film studies and specifically follows Lal's observations above – arguing that contemporary terrorists are not just media-driven but aesthetically-driven.

Another way of formulating such an artistic criminal design is the theory of "idiosyncratic terrorism," which Jesse Norris uses to study the "strange or unusual characteristics" surrounding terrorist motives, ideologies, tactics, and strategies.³² To use Jack Nicholson's Joker from *Batman* (1989; dir. Tim Burton) as an illustrative example, the Ace of Knives, recently disfigured, wishes to impose his trademark image onto anything he can (e.g., televised broadcasts, banknotes, people). He develops a toxin called "SMYLEX," triggered through a secret combination of conventional household items. This "Joker Venom," as it is called in the comics, forces the human body to smile and/or laugh uncontrollably, killing the victim within seconds of exposure and affixing their jaw muscles into a grotesque rictus grin. Gothamites then live in fear of their food, drink, and beauty/hygiene products after the Joker "markets" his new concoction over the local news. His motivation is then personal, subconsciously misogynistic (as

women are predominantly targeted), yet embellished within a novel ideology of transcending traditional beauty standards.³³ His tactics (e.g., embracing the image of a grinning playing card jester) are equally as novel as his forms of strategic thinking (i.e., his plan to replace "The BAT" as the most newsworthy quasi-public figure in Gotham City).

Arthur's explicit idiosyncrasies, far less extravagant, are then found in his tactics (dark comedy) and strategies (televised death). His novel ideology, like that of other "lone wolves" and iterations of the character, Alec Opperman traces to the "politics of recognition."³⁴ As Lal suggests, this type of killer speaks to contemporary American experience, namely "the nature of freedom, the persistence of loneliness amidst intimacy, and the overarching importance attached to 'image,' thanks to the power of visual technology."³⁵ Within such a nihilistic ideology, public recognition (in modern standards, the achievement of a digitized identity) provides Arthur a warped form of human dignity. As Anthony Kolenic writes of both Cho and the Joker:

[I]t becomes clear that, at least potentially in his mind, this attack was built for reproduction, staged to be seen: an authenticity contingent upon acknowledgement and dissemination. ... His attack was for spectacle, to disrupt governance; it was staged for TV because that is what authenticity...looked like. The camera (which reproduces) is not only part of it, but is what makes it real.³⁶

Let us not forget that the Joker in *The Dark Knight* sends two self-directed home videos to the Gotham City News station as a way of informing the public of his antics and demands. Though this Joker is far more sinister and organized than Arthur Fleck, each of them (Nicholson too) feels personally validated once their schemes and faces occupy air time.

Infamy and theatricality are sure to dominate Gotham news media. Though Arthur wished it followed organically from a successful stand-up career, his self-realization can, in his mind, now only occur through the performance of auteur death. The Joker has constructed the clown to be his lasting image – *lasting* thanks only to its consumption and reproduction by *both* copycats *and* various media outlets. Arthur’s flamboyant costume (new red suit and slick make-up) also serve as a residual self-image (the clown being his last chosen form of identity, emblematic of his failed career and the “happiness” commissioned by his mother). Elsewhere, this costume serves as an intimidation tactic.³⁷ But in *Joker*, the idiosyncrasy is embraced as artistic and expressive. On his way to the show, Arthur even performs a dance of triumph down the stairs near his home – dancing towards his auteur death, never feeling more in (creative) control. Gary Glitter’s “Rock & Roll Part II” (1972) plays as if Arthur is going to the “big game.” Most importantly, Murray’s studio marquee lists Arthur as a “Special Guest” on the evening’s show. Arthur has become *special*. He is given the opportunity to be a star – to package his art into an exposé for a new audience – and he doesn’t disappoint.

Inspirational Contagion

Kolenic was correct to bring the Joker into conversation with shooters like Cho. The Thin White Duke of Death, though fictional, would later be implicated in the performance of domestic terrorism – more so, at the level of discourse. In 2012, the Aurora Theater Shooter, then-twenty-four-year-old James Eagan Holmes, dressed in tactical clothing, set off tear gas grenades and fired multiple weapons into the audience of a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012; dir. Christopher Nolan). Twelve people were killed and seventy others injured, with reports that the gunman referred to himself as “the Joker” during his interrogation, booby-trapped his apartment for the police, and dyed his hair orange for theatrics.³⁸ Did Holmes adopt the persona and antics of the Dark Clown as a matter of personal taste, or did the Joker’s onscreen philosophy in some way radicalize the young man into an idiosyncratic terrorist? Popular consensus supports the latter – so much so that before the release of the Phillips film several media outlets expressed fear of another mass shooting occurring at the film’s premiere.³⁹

Joker received additional backlash over the lead character’s association with misogyny, with behaviors reminiscent of the recent “incel” hostility. In an early script leaked online, Arthur throws a tantrum after entering the apartment of his neighbor, Sophie, whose kindness he mistakes for romantic interest. “I just...felt sorry for you,” she says. “I have a boyfriend.” In his outburst, Arthur berates Sophie in front of her daughter, calling her a “bad person” and “whore” for

“seeing two men at once.”⁴⁰ Thus, the fear that the film would incite violence (in theaters and/or against women) intensified within the echo chambers of social media.

In *Arthur*, critics began to see the “lone wolves” radicalized by the hypermasculine revenge politics of 4chan and Reddit,⁴¹ namely the Isla Vista Killer. In 2014, twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six people then himself in the college town near the University of California, Santa Barbara. Before dying, Rodger uploaded a “Retribution” video online along with a link to his 137-page autobiography (“MY TWISTED WORLD”) – both of which detail the reasons behind his “retributive” violence. In short, Rodger, who described himself as the “ideal magnificent gentleman,” resented the popular women on his campus for his “involuntary celibacy.” Such “ideological masculinity” has since produced many followers – both abusers online and terrorists in public.⁴² In 2018, for instance, twenty-five-year-old Alek Minassian killed ten people in Toronto, Canada, moments before tweeting: “The Incel Rebellion has already begun! ... All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!”⁴³ Thus, although the Isla Vista Killer gained nothing material from his terrorist attack and suicide, the dramatic spectacle of his violence succeeded in garnering the attention for which he hoped and of which he felt wrongly deprived.

As one reviewer writes: “[*Arthur*] could easily be adopted as the patron saint of incels.”⁴⁴ Yet throughout the film’s entire theatrical run, the “lone wolf” violence

associated with the Joker never escaped off the big screen. This calls into question not just the impulse to politicize Arthur's psyche (his actions and ideologies) but the role news and social media play in constructing our fear of this character.⁴⁵ In fact, according to George Brauchler, the Colorado District Attorney who prosecuted the Aurora Theater Shooter, Holmes' identification with the Joker "never happened." Brauchler and other Colorado officials have attempted to clarify for years that the rumor spawned from misinformation given by then-New York Police Commissioner Ray Kelly at a Manhattan press conference. The target selection of a Batman-themed film was simply incidental, the goal was to attack a high occupancy movie theater.⁴⁶

For many, this era's Joker represents the threat of radicalization. Two generations ago, "lone wolf" terrorists (e.g., the Unabomber, Oklahoma City Bomber, the Columbine High School Shooters) largely created their own ideologies.⁴⁷ However, with the advent of the "dark web," these personalities can be exalted in death, providing a terrorist lineage, or viral continuity, for any member of the online community to appropriate.⁴⁸ "Inspirational Contagion," as it has been called, speaks to the discursive fear that has then engulfed the fictional terrorist and nihilist Joker. Contagion refers to "a form of copycat crime, whereby violence-prone individuals and groups imitate forms of (political) violence attractive to them, based on examples usually popularized by mass media."⁴⁹ Within his vast comic book mythology, the Joker has a long history of copycats and appropriators of his

image and philosophy – most of which he rejects and loathes. One recent issue, for instance, features many Joker-themed gangs that parade around Gotham with names like “Die Laughing,” “League of Smiles,” “Funny Bonez,” and “Punchline.”

As Batman observes:

[The] Joker has a tendency to attract anybody who’s not in his or her right mind. Not just the obsessives, the nihilistic fanatics looking for a hero. But the depressingly ordinary as well. The ones who finally have an excuse to give in to their darkest urges. Who need nothing more than a bit of inspiration.⁵⁰

As the Joker says in *The Dark Knight*, “Madness . . . is like gravity. All it takes is a little push.”⁵¹

The recent Phillips film is paradigmatic of such contagion in two respects. First, Gotham erupts in flames once its marginalized denizens appropriate the Joker’s image in their practice of “uncivil disobedience.”⁵² All of Arthur’s victims (corporate investors, his mother, a bullying coworker, his celebrity idol, and his psychiatrist) draw their power from institutionality. But while feelings of impotence and abandonment motivate his choice of victim, in the film, the killings take on an unintended social significance once politicized by the media – thereby, ironically producing the very followers the Gotham reporters fear.

Initially catalyzed by Arthur’s subway shootings, this “clown” uprising is further galvanized when billionaire Thomas Wayne, in a TV interview, publicly condemns Gotham’s lower class, whom he describes as envious “clowns,” for manifesting “a groundswell of anti-rich sentiment.” Even before the film’s final act,

people gather in the streets to protest Wayne's comments, with signs that read "Kill the Rich," "Wayne = Fascist," and "We are all clowns." "The Joker" is simultaneously created by the social elite that fear the political implications of his actions and a popular uprising that embraces the folk devil that the news media condemns. Offscreen, this image of the Phoenix Joker has been appropriated as a form of cosplay-protest, with numerous appearances in political demonstrations around the world – i.e., Beirut, Santiago, Hong Kong, France, and elsewhere.⁵³

Thus, we arrive at the second respect in which this discussion of media-induced contagion remains pertinent to *Joker*: its "real-world" implications. The Joker's crimes, which we have shown reflect the recent waves of "lone wolf" terrorism and other violent acts,⁵⁴ recently produced mass-mediated fear in their potential not to create violent criminals *per se* but to radicalize certain individuals⁵⁵ – namely, young White men, suffering feelings of abandonment, impotence, and entitlement. Despite the nearly century-long popularity of the character, the Joker became a focused object of cultural anxiety particularly after the financial success, critical acclaim, and media coverage of *The Dark Knight*. The character reached new heights in the popular reception of his mythological reconstruction, and the discursive fear since is that his form of nihilism and terrorism will spread to others in society, as has occurred with the consumption of other fictional characters – most notably, Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who inspired the assassination of John Lennon in 1980, and Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver* (1976;

dir. Martin Scorsese), who inspired the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan in 1981.⁵⁶

In actuality, within the idiosyncratic crime around the world, one finds appropriation of the (Heath Ledger) Joker image.⁵⁷ Yet these criminals (of the shooter, arsonist, cyber-terrorist variety) did not execute the number of casualties as the Aurora Theater Shooter and, as a result, did not generate the same level of media interest. Most of the anxiety around the *Dark Knight* Joker contagion then stems from the popular stories of the actor's death. According to production lore, because of Ledger's intense personal investment in portraying the character, Christopher Nolan allowed the actor to stage and direct the homemade terrorist videos himself.⁵⁸ Ledger would eventually be found dead by his housekeeper due to an accidental overdose of prescription medications three months after his work on the film. Public perception immediately ruled his death a suicide as a result of his derangement from over-identifying with the character. In a German docuseries in 2012, Ledger's father Kim shared one of his keepsakes from his son's career: the now-infamous "Joker diary."⁵⁹ In this document, filled with manic musings, Ledger participates in the popular enterprise of Jokerology whereby one deconstructs and reconstructs the Jack of All Crimes. Ledger's "diary" is a collage of intertextual madness: words on the page juxtaposed with images of joker playing cards, clown faces, hyenas, *Batman* comic strips, and screenshots of the fictional sociopath Alex

DeLarge from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971; dir. Stanley Kubrick).⁶⁰ One should note that Arthur's fictional diary in *Joker* is similarly constructed.

Did Ledger, in fact, dip too deep into madness during his portrayal of the Joker? In 2017, for another documentary, his sister Kate attempted to clarify the matter: that contrary to the popular urban myth, Ledger's dedication to playing the Joker in *The Dark Knight* did *not* contribute to his tragic death or suggested mental illness.⁶¹ Regardless of the rumors' validity, speculations like these exacerbate the anxiety regarding this character and his allegedly contagious pathology. The Joker's writers and creators then use this complex mythos to confirm one of society's worst fears: that this type of character exists among us. The public has come truly to fear the Joker – not as the Ringmaster of Riotous Robbery but as the Tycoon of Teasing Terror. A fictional comic book villain has become so *realistic* that he presumably has the power to corrupt his viewers via the nihilistic path to madness, to radicalize the impressionable (youth) into terrorists, and, as such, ultimately is perceived as bearing responsibility for their performative acts of self-destruction and social mayhem.⁶² In these ways, the Joker's recent history is deeply enmeshed with the same key issues that concern the study of "lone wolf" terrorists, viz., violence devoid of a future, the construction of a lasting image, and the potential radicalization of others. "Lone wolf" terrorists like the Joker seem to strive for the last laugh – and laughter, as we know, can be contagious.

Dysangelism

Following Lal and, especially, Kolenic, we, as scholars of American culture, should approach “lone wolf” shooters (like Cho Seung-Hui) and the Joker – in all of their respective iterations – as evidence of separately emerging yet now mutually recognizant forms of criminality and resistance to institutional power:

[In his sermon designed to corrupt Harvey Dent, *The Dark Knight*] Joker goes on to explain the danger of adhering to governmentality, describing a world where even the most horrifying acts and events are tolerated as long as they adhere to the provided narrative. Clearly he aligns chaos with a brand of fairness, altruism, and purity as an alternative to this institutionality, which somehow makes it right and without alternative in his mind, not unlike Cho in that respect. Further, and particularly important in this current mixture of strong global forms of governmentality and both justified and unjustified resistances to them is this Joker’s ability to create panic and disrupt social order from within and with very low-scale technologies [i.e., “a few drums of gas and a couple of bullets”].⁶³

This observation of social disruption from Kolenic provides us with another principal basis to interpret the motivations of violent extremists. Thus far, we have analyzed a novel ideology by which systematic death and murder are rendered artistic (due to the construction of a lasting digitized identity) and expressive (due to an embrace of various idiosyncrasies as auteur signatures). Yet if such destructive behavior is routinely labeled as *madness* (in both popular discourse and media), how are we to explain the penchant of such jokers to narrate to, and perhaps share their madness with, an audience? This is the first principal concern of the three sections that follow.

Here, we analyze Jokerology within the context of Nietzschean philosophy, as both engage nihilism, impotence, and reactionary outworkings of resentment. The relation between these two discursive traditions is not a merely thematic coincidence. Nolan's Joker explicitly presents himself as a Nietzschean disciple of sorts, proclaiming, "I believe that what doesn't kill you simply makes you . . . stranger," an obvious adaptation of the cliché made famous in *Twilight of the Idols*.⁶⁴ The Joker thus performs, even if by caricature, key elements of Nietzsche's thinking – what Gavin Smith elsewhere refers to as an "ersatz-Nietzschean" tradition found within popular culture.⁶⁵ To treat Joker media as social critique through such an interpretation raises the second principal concern of the remaining sections: Is "lone wolf" terrorism an inherent affordance of a pluralistic culture? In other words, is such individualized violence the inevitable result of a morally relativistic society that prioritizes self-determination and authenticity over traditionalism and convention?⁶⁶ As the Joker says on *Live with Murray Franklin*:

You think [billionaires] like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? I don't. They think that we'll just sit there and take it like good little boys. That we won't werewolf and go wild.

It is here that we take the recent terrorist-construction of the Joker as a spokesman for the real-life "lone wolves" of previous sections⁶⁷ – as both stem from the neoliberal social conditions and hypermasculine revenge politics of postmodernity (of which Nietzsche provides much insight). The Joker fancies himself not as

contagion risk but as a truthsayer. Blaise Pascal writes that “Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.”⁶⁸ Thus, the Joker invites us to understand his craziness as a form of “super-sanity,” and everyone else’s healthy-mindedness as a normalized pathology.⁶⁹ The Joker takes Pascal’s message as the bad news he must deliver to the world:

When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot! I admit it! So why can’t you [Batman]? You’re not unintelligent, you must see the reality of the situation?⁷⁰

Like the Biblical evangelists, who set about to deliver a liberating truth to those who would have ears to hear, so the Joker endeavors to deliver the eye-opening truth to those who live with scales on their eyes (Matt. 11:15, Acts 9:18). The Joker’s gospel is not the “good news” (*eu-angelion*) of Christ’s resurrection; it’s the decidedly “bad news” (*dys-angelion*) that the world, its morals and code, is “a bad joke.” The Joker, then, embodies yet inverts a biblical archetype as a committed dysangelist, a preacher of the gospel of nihilism. “It’s not about money, it’s about sending a message,” says the Ledger Joker. “Everything burns.”⁷¹

In his dysangelicalism, the Joker resembles Nietzsche’s “madman” – an untimely messenger delivering the news that “God is dead.”⁷² His madness then consists not in his own insanity but in the unwillingness of the “sane” populace to countenance his message. When the madman runs to the marketplace and delivers the grave news, “he provoked much laughter” among those who heard him. The truth lands like a punchline among the crowd, but what’s so funny? Immanuel Kant

observes that "in everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical. . . . Laughter is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing."⁷³ Kant's formula articulates a basic incongruity theory of comedy, which grounds humor in a disjunction between expectation and reality.⁷⁴ The proclamation that "God is dead" therefore provokes laughter because the very idea of God is incongruous with the thought of his death; the reality itself is so taken for granted that the possibility of its nonexistence is comical. What then are the tenets of the Joker's dysangel that, like the madman's proclamation, contradict the basic assumptions of its hearers?

Most of the Joker's sermons pertain to human nature and society. The *Dark Knight* Joker, for instance, contends that "the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules," that "when the chips are down, these . . . 'civilized people' [will] eat each other." Presumably, as in *The Killing Joke*, his own experiences serve as the basis of the message he wishes to deliver to the world: "It's all a joke! Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for . . . it's all a monstrous, demented gag!" The Joker's musings about the divine are then quite rare. In one recent comic book, the Joker sequentially executes an entire wedding party in a cathedral, proving that God wouldn't stop him – only Batman would. It is unclear, however, from his monologue whether he believes that God is absent from *just* his life or *all* lives.⁷⁵ Thus, insofar as the Joker experiences the world as a godforsaken place, he must prove to everyone else that such is "the reality of the situation." In this way,

the “joke” of his particular post-theological atheism operates on two levels: the Joker himself was the butt end of a joke which he now wishes to play on everyone else, but getting the joke, he thinks, amounts to a spiritual awakening to his dysangel.⁷⁶

To Laugh Out the Whole Truth

In detailing the Phoenix Joker as an auteur killer or idiosyncratic terrorist, we examined the fiend’s appearance, brute violence and killing techniques, and novel ideology through which public recognition awards a semblance of human dignity. And yet none of these discussions elucidate the comedic aspects of the character. Namely, what are we to make of the Joker’s laughter and joviality, especially in terms of their incongruity with the character’s depressive and violent characteristics? Consider Arthur’s experience of incongruity in *Joker*, specifically when he conveys crisis to his hospitalized mother:

You remember how you used to tell me that God gave me this laugh for a reason? That I had a purpose. Laughter and joy, that whole thing? ... HA! It wasn’t God, it was you. Or one of your boyfriends. Do you even know what my real name is? Do you even know who I really am?⁷⁷

In this scene, Arthur has just done some research on his mother’s past, and discovers (1) that he was adopted; (2) that his mother was institutionalized for abusing him; and (3) that his painful laughing condition was a result of head trauma from domestic abuse at the hands of either his mother or her partner. These

discoveries disrupt his most basic assumptions about himself and his world – the foremost here being the belief that God was benignly orchestrating his trials to foster a sense of purpose in Arthur’s life. Though he asks his mother, “Do you even know who I really am?” the question is truly posed to himself: “Who even am I?” These discoveries hit Arthur like the punchline of the world’s sickest joke by contradicting his longest-held expectations about the unfolding of his life. He captures the existential whiplash and its darkly humorous inflection with his final remark to his mother before he kills her: “You know what *really* makes me laugh? I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize . . . it’s a fucking comedy.”⁷⁸

Nietzsche writes that, on the whole, “Man seeks ‘the truth’: a world that is not self-contradictory, not deceptive, does not change.”⁷⁹ However, both Nietzsche and the Joker ask us to consider that a world free of contradictions, free of incongruities between expectation and reality, would be an all-too serious world – one without any sense of humor. The Nietzschean injunction to “kill the spirit of gravity [by laughing]” reverberates into the Joker’s modern persona and especially the famous Ledger mantra of “Why so serious?”⁸⁰ Batman’s “misplaced sense of self-righteousness,” according to the Joker, is ultimately unsustainable. It is a heavy burden that only weighs down the hero, chaining him to a failing conception of morality that society no longer values and thus he must impose it upon Gotham City. The Caped Crusader is the spirit of gravity incarnate and thus he isn’t risible. On the other hand, the Joker’s sinister humor can be seen as a form of coping

whereby life's incongruities become an occasion for laughter rather than weeping and the gnashing of teeth. "Smile tho' your heart is aching" – a message delivered multiple times during the Phillips film. Arthur's mantra to "Put on a happy face!" is consistently associated with the Joker's "joyful wisdom," or gay science. This exhortation to levity voices one of Nietzsche's central questions: "Why is it that [Man] derives *suffering* from change, deception, contradiction? and why not rather his happiness?"⁸¹ Thus, we understand further Arthur's gleeful dance towards death and the dark comedy associated with his planned suicide.

Will to Kill / Will to Die

Arthur's personal transformation, in part, is a progression from suicidal despair to self-affirmative violence. In Nietzschean vocabulary, he transitions from "passive" to "active nihilism."⁸² "I just hope my death makes more cents than my life," he writes in his joke diary. As Arthur recounts in the *Joker* script, "My mother told me I had a purpose, to bring laughter and joy to the world."⁸³ Unfortunately, his mother was a pathological liar, and most of what she told him about himself, even his own name, was a fabrication. In the absence of God, Arthur faces a vertiginous purposelessness in his life, similarly revealed in the villain's sermon to Harley Quinn after he assumes divine status in the "Emperor Joker" comic arc:

The world...as I've come to understand it through intimate and inappropriate contact, is sick. Flawed. Broken. There is not, never was, never will be a master plan, a divine order, or a gentle white-

bearded shepherd who will instill harmony in the wee brains of the galaxial host. ... And we're all suffering for it. Be it behind a desk or in a straight jacket – everyone feels the pain of life. [M]y utter destruction of all things that are will have a healing effect. ... I'm fixing everything. I'm leaving behind a clean, quiet universe. A place where people like me...won't ever come in existence.⁸⁴

What these two extremes reveal, the lower and higher traditions of Jokerology, is that the character consistently encompasses the precise criterion of Nietzsche's nihilism: "The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer."⁸⁵ With great power and with no power, the Joker still arrives at the dilemma posed famously by Albert Camus: "There is but one truly serious philosophical [question] and that is suicide."⁸⁶

According to Nietzsche, nihilism uniquely emerges from the rubble of a collapsed theological view. "The nihilistic question 'for what?' is rooted in the old habit of supposing that the goal must be put up, given, demanded, *from outside* – by some *superhuman authority*."⁸⁷ In this way, for Arthur, the death of God is tantamount to the pointlessness of existence, the purpose of life must, according to cultural habit, be posited from something beyond just the self. This aimlessness, characteristic of nihilism, also defines the Joker of *The Dark Knight*, as he explains to the Gotham District Attorney, Harvey Dent:

Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. You know, I just *do* things. The mob has plans. The cops have plans. [Commissioner] Gordon's got plans. They're schemers. Schemers trying to control their little worlds. I'm not a schemer. I

try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are.

Once he receives the traumatic blow of the punchline that God is not merely dead but was never alive, as staged literally in “Emperor Joker,” the Joker himself must assume the place once held by God as the ultimate arbiter of his own purpose in an existence which itself lacks one. “Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos,” the Joker says.

The Joker’s claim that social order, functioning like a disguise or veil, covers over the fundamental truth of chaos articulates a basic social constructivist (that is, postmodernist) theory of reality and, relatedly, a moral relativism, according to which social convention, while empirically “there,” is either “less real” or outright illusory because it is historically constructed rather than ahistorically given.⁸⁸ On *Live with Murray Franklin* for example, Arthur proclaims that “comedy is subjective.” “All of you, the *system that knows so much*, you decide what’s right or wrong. The same way that you decide what’s funny or not.” In this resentful remark, the Joker makes the Nietzschean point that judgments of goodness and evil are not determined by any inherent quality of the thing being judged but, rather, represent subjective determinations by those in power, which are internalized by the weak-willed masses as taken for granted “facts.”⁸⁹ Like humor or art, morality is a matter of taste; what we call “good” is whatever the powerful have a taste for.

Per this perspective, as Nietzsche claims, the reliance on an external authority (be it God or society) to posit one's purpose and morality is an implicit attempt "to get around the will...the risk of positing a goal *for oneself*" whereby one "rid[s] oneself of the responsibility" of being a free individual.⁹⁰ To properly divorce oneself from social convention remains key to Nietzschean resolve. Along these lines, the Joker's rampaging could be interpreted as an anti-heroic assumption of responsibility for himself – thus, the fear of radicalization that consumed the Phillips film.⁹¹

Max Haiven, for instance, interprets Batman and the Ledger and Phoenix Jokers as proxies for the hypermasculine character drama performed within the alt-right mythos:

Ledger's Joker [was] the nightmare version of hegemonic, hypercapitalist masculinity: a self-made man fully in control...a judicious investor in his own criminal ventures.... The real-life [Aurora Theater Shooter], an awkward, unpopular, alienated young man (not, ultimately, unlike Phoenix's Fleck) found in Ledger's Joker [sic.] the apotheosis of a kind of agentful, vengeful masculinity he, like all of us raised men in this society, was taught to adore and emulate. The false choice of masculinity under revenge capitalism is to be caught between Batman (the suave but vengeful boy-king who takes the law into his own hands to save it) or the Joker (the nihilistic icon of the will-to-power). Both see through the veil of social norms and niceties, and presume to know how the world "really works," and take individuated masculine action to rectify or destroy. By contrast, even in his moments of vengeful glory, [Phoenix's Joker] appears out of control, a victim, a strangely feminized subject to whom the world happens. Even his metamorphosis into the supervillain is...accidental.⁹²

A prominent concept within Nietzsche's writings, the "will to power" serves as an encapsulation of the philosopher's high esteem for strength and acumen – "the strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant."⁹³ As Haiven observes above, one shouldn't ignore the masculine encoding of this Nietzschean principle nor the two fictional "alpha males" battling for control of a fragile (weak-willed) city.⁹⁴ Though Arthur exists within a world initially devoid of costumed vigilantes empowered through violence, he belongs in conversation with the popular narration of men's crisis.

Following Henry Giroux, one could see male violence in *Joker* as a "performative basis on which to construct masculine identity." Furthermore, if we bifurcate Arthur from the Joker, we can project each onto the dual protagonists of *Fight Club* (1999; dir. David Fincher): "[One] represents the crisis of capitalism repackaged as the crisis of a domesticated masculinity, [while the other] represents the redemption of masculinity repackaged as the promise of violence in the interests of social and political anarchy." "By constructing masculinity on an imaginary terrain in which women are foregrounded as the Other," Giroux continues, "the flight from the feminine becomes synonymous with sanctioning violence against women as it works simultaneously to eliminate different and opposing definitions of masculinity."⁹⁵ As Pablo Castillo Diaz and Nahla Valji warn, however, to approach misogyny (the system that polices and enforces gender-based norms and

expectations) as an ideology in and of itself overlooks the circumstances that purportedly affect "a sense of failed masculinity" within men.⁹⁶

Arthur's "disaffection and aggrieved masculinity," as with many of the "lone wolves" mentioned previously, stem from his inability to perform the traditional gender roles of family provider, community protector, and/or father/procreator.⁹⁷ The Joker certainly asserts his own "will to power" by setting his own goals and operating with his own sense of right and wrong (divorced from social convention). And yet, does the Joker embody the Nietzschean ideal of the affirmative superman,⁹⁸ or is he (and those he represents) symptomatic of precisely the pathological nihilism that Nietzsche diagnoses and whose advent he seeks to mitigate? We propose the latter.

Nietzsche remarks that "It was morality that protected life against despair and the leap into nothing, among men and classes who were violated and oppressed by *men*; for it is the experience of being powerless against men, not against nature, that generates the most desperate embitterment against existence."⁹⁹ What Nietzsche is calling "morality" functions like Marx's and Engels' notion of "ideology": a normative conception of social reality in the imaginary of the "classes who are violated and oppressed" that perpetuates their oppression through a false consciousness (whereby the oppressed believe in the legitimacy of their own oppression). In *Joker*, Arthur undergoes an increasing disillusionment with the legitimacy of the structural conditions of his own impotence, and his violence

targets those who directly exercise power over him. Indeed, Arthur's character arc is a movement from resignation to power. However, while Marx and Engels hoped that the overcoming of this false consciousness would galvanize a revolutionary spirit (like the clown mob Arthur inspires), Nietzsche seems concerned that the collapse of ideology and its reasons for resignation could just as easily devolve into a sheerly destructive nihilism (exhibited by Arthur himself), owing to an emergent relativism.

“The untenability of one interpretation of the world...awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false.”¹⁰⁰ Hence, the collapse of a given moral order (be it for a group or individual) will lead not to a sort of blank slate on which to build anew, but will instead engender “the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure.”¹⁰¹ In this way, the Phillips film stages two trajectories, one Marxist and one Nietzschean, of the collapse of social convention – political revolution and nihilistic violence. Much less optimistic than Marx and Engels, Nietzsche worries that nihilism is a “symptom that the underprivileged have no comfort [in life], that without morality they no longer have any reason to ‘resign themselves’ – that they place themselves on the plane of the opposite principle and also want power by *compelling* the powerful to become their hangmen.”¹⁰² The psychological impetus left in the wake of a categorical suspicion of moral order itself will be an assertion of power meant to achieve death, albeit with a symbolic statement, rather than to accomplish a strategic political end. On this point,

Nietzsche echoes the analysis of Roy and the "lone wolf" terrorists who construct an idol of themselves by their destruction.

In these ways, "lone wolves" like Arthur Fleck appear not so much to fulfill the Nietzschean ideal of the self-assertive and responsible will, but rather embody the worrisome endpoint of an individual rejection of inherited values, which at a certain critical threshold, loses the constructive edge of a revolutionary spirit and devolves instead into an embitterment against existence itself. Nietzsche famously calls this pathology *resentment*. Rather than asserting themselves constructively, the resentful "compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge...say[ing] No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'."¹⁰³ Resentment therefore does not mark the assertion of oneself (i.e., the "will to power") but merely the negation of what is Other. Like the popular constructions of masculinity, that Giroux argues can easily be used to sanction violence against women, "its action is fundamentally reaction," not proaction.¹⁰⁴ Reactionary resentment is neither restorative nor revolutionary in its vengeance, which is to say it lacks a future entirely, being neither conservative nor progressive in its aim. In this way, this inflection of nihilism, though it rejects the current order of the world, expresses itself as "'life against life'...the physiological struggle of man against death...against disgust with life, against exhaustion, against the desire for the 'end'."¹⁰⁵ Although the revolutionary and the resentful erupt from the same

sentiment – “It’s enough to make anyone crazy” – unlike the former, the latter often does not wish to live anew but only to live no more.

Joker media since the 1980’s, understood in terms of the historical and philosophical legacies it explicitly and implicitly invokes (that of domestic terrorism and existential nihilism, respectively), represents a cluster of concerns about modern society – namely, the pathological affordances of political pluralism, or neoliberal authoritarianism. Originally an ecological term, an *affordance* refers to what possibilities are furnished by the environment to a given individual within it.¹⁰⁶ The pluralistic environment structures itself around the axiom of mutual respect or tolerance. Contrary to culturally monopolistic environments wherein one value system is deemed authoritative and thus enforced by the state, a pluralistic society operates according to the principle that, within a minimum of legal parameters, any value system is viable and that, therefore, allegiance to any one way of life should be voluntary rather than coerced. Emphasizing an ethic of voluntarism over determinism, autonomy over heteronomy, a pluralistic system operationalizes a *laissez-faire* policy not only towards ideas about right and wrong but also towards notions of true and false. In this way, as Peter Berger observes, “the pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*.”¹⁰⁷

Pluralism creates a minimally regulated market situation in the sense that value systems that could in other political contexts impose themselves authoritatively now must be marketed to a population whose allegiance is, in

principle, voluntaristic. Definitions of reality "must be 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy'."¹⁰⁸ However, the implicit affordance of this cultural environment is that one can reasonably abstain from the existential consumerism of selecting at will one's definitions of true and false, good and evil, and the purpose of life from the ideological emporium that is a pluralistic society. In fact, the individual's ability to say "No, thanks" to any given value system is precisely the goal of a pluralistic society, indeed the very definition of liberation: freedom to choose. In short, some people will survey the menu of options and simply say, "I don't buy it." This refusal marks simultaneously the greatest success and fundamental danger of pluralism.

While abstention can mark a key revolutionary moment,¹⁰⁹ as we have seen, the spirit of denial can remain stagnant and fester into reactionary resentment. Where does it leave a person, being trapped in such a vast marketplace with no interest in making a purchase? Resigned boredom, at best, and violent escapism at worst – with Nietzsche's madman somewhere in the middle. This categorical skepticism towards commodified definitions of reality seems to be the logical extremity of pluralism's basic premise – that all ways of life are viable and therefore should be voluntarily enacted. The concern articulated comically by the Joker is that modern political pluralism is a euphemism for moral relativism. If we don't accept the Joker's dysangelism as revealed truth, perhaps we should at least heed it as a warning.

Nihilism no longer just “stands at the door”;¹¹⁰ it invades our homes, schools, churches, public transportation, and the like. We wish these “lone wolves” were just “comedians,” as Nietzsche saw himself, iconoclasts who “philosophize with a hammer” and wage war with “ideals.”¹¹¹ Modern terrorists, instead, find recourse in philosophizing through more socially destructive means. Unwilling to buy what others are selling, the resentful (those discussed in this article and whatever future iterations they inspire) attempt to disrupt the market through terroristic entrepreneurship. We fear their mass appeal. “See, I’m a guy of simple tastes,” says the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. “I enjoy dynamite. Gunpowder. And gasoline! And you know the thing that they have in common? They’re cheap.”

Conclusion

This article examines a specific genealogical sequence within Joker transmedia, beginning with the comics of the late 1980s whereby the character is reimagined as both a domestic terrorist and active nihilist. The selection of such material allows the authors to triangulate a conversation between the “lone wolf” terrorists of contemporary society, the fictional villains that saturate Western popular culture, and the pathological ideologues presented in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Each of our selected sources then features a particular social and philosophical drama staged before the public. To rephrase our previous quote from Dennis O’Neil, the “lone wolf” terrorist is “a strange amalgam of fiction, instant

mythology, and imaginary history," one that derives its value from singularity and multitude. In the hands of such extremists and those they inspire, the "dark web" becomes a space to commiserate, an occasion for the performance and radicalization of social resentment. It is also a site for the creation of "macrofiction," a "saga" whereby "heroic tales," although complete in themselves, are collected and serially related as "part of a much larger fictional construct." This analytic synthesis is our first major contribution to the study of modern terrorism, film/popular culture, and continental philosophy.

Our more specific contribution to the study of domestic terrorism then lies in our analysis of the mythological construction of such personalities. To assume that the creation of a terrorist lineage occurs entirely within private or encrypted spaces online is demonstrably misguided. While it is true that such terrorists strive for post-mortem recognition and dissemination, such transcendence into digitality simultaneously occurs within the echo chambers of twenty-four-hour news cycles and social media. Todd Phillips' *Joker* then proposes that this type of inspired criminal can ironically spawn from a media-induced contagion, a discursive fear propagated by a hyperactive news media, incidentally creating a path for the socially impotent to make their television debuts. Fortunately, despite months of televised anticipation and discursive dread, no form of "lone wolf" violence associated with the Joker ever escaped off the big screen in 2019 or 2020. Nor was Arthur Fleck "adopted as the patron saint of incels." And yet, scholars would be

wise to approach these characters – in all of their respective iterations – as evidence of separately emerging yet now mutually recognizant forms of criminality and resistance to institutional power.

We don't need to wait for the Joker to be fully implicated in the performance of domestic terrorism before we consider his violent ascent to power and nihilistic descent into madness. The Joker presents an opportunity to learn about auteur killers. "I make art until someone dies," Nicholson says in *Batman* (1989). "I am the world's first fully functioning homicidal artist." Through him, we learn how such criminals view themselves and those they hope to inspire. In the "That's Entertainment" episode of *Gotham* (2018; dir. Nick Copus), a proto-Joker says before death to Detective Jim Gordon:

I'm more than a man. I'm an idea. A philosophy. And I will live on in the shadows, within Gotham's discontent. You'll be seeing me soon.

Finally, the Joker teaches us more about how such figures view others, society, and madness. "Everybody is awful these days," Arthur says in *Joker*. "It's enough to make anyone crazy."

As mentioned before, the Phillips film stages two trajectories for the collapse of Gotham's social structure: a Marxist political revolution and Nietzschean nihilistic violence. In regards to the former, it is rare for the Joker's revenge on society to be motivated by strictly socio-economic issues. In one recent comic series, an elderly Bruce Wayne commissions the construction of the "Wayne

Family Center of Tomorrow," a metaphorical bridge between the street-level and elite towers of Neo-Gotham. Within minutes of its unveiling, however, the building is destroyed in a terrorist attack by the Joker via a hijacked train laced with explosives.¹¹² As he later explains:

[My friends] live down here on the streets. Victimized and taken advantage of. Because people like you get the towers...and they get slums. ... They know that since they can't move up to the luxury palaces in the sky...I'll bring the upper-crusters down here. To their level. So everyone can live together in peace, harmony and equal wretchedness.

Class warfare is typically foreign to the Joker's gleeful dysangelism – yet another reason why Arthur Fleck should be studied as a distinct iteration of the character.

Arthur is, indeed, more emblematic of the nihilistic violence that Nietzsche diagnoses and whose advent the latter seeks to mitigate. Our contribution to the philosophy of religion is then a contemporary staging of some of Nietzsche's most famous ideological dramas, recasting the "spirit of gravity" as Batman while the Joker simultaneously becomes the "madman" and "active nihilist." To elevate the Joker to the status of "affirmative superman" (who doubles as a Nietzschean "comedian") effectively ignores the villain's attachment to reactionary resentment. The Joker and the "lone wolves" he reflects ultimately stem from a bastardized form of the "will to power," one that projects of an image of terrifying strength (a virality of virility), often labored at those ideologically constructed as Other and/or institutionally empowered, and results in violence inherently devoid of future. In

contrast, nihilism, for Nietzsche, is simply another temporary stage of development in the reevaluation of societal norms.

For Arthur, as with other resentful Gothamites, the fault of the rich lies not in their control of the means of production but in their reconstruction of Gotham into, what Giroux calls, a “culture of cruelty,” a system governed by neoliberal authoritarianism and the “emergence of an unprecedented survival-of-the fittest ethos.”¹¹³ Such a “mean-spirited ethos,” Giroux continues, then “rails against any notion of solidarity and compassion that embraces a respect for others.” Note that it was this same force that seemingly created the Joker of *The Killing Joke*. Yet, given that Arthur ultimately survived his comedy routine, it’s unclear what kind of Gotham he seeks to make following his asylum escape.

This observed fear of cultural and religious pluralism, produced by popular and conservative discourse on crime and urban life, becomes the final contribution of this article. As Steve Macek argues, fear and loathing of the city (and the social chaos it allegedly harbors) is a central motif in contemporary conservative ideology, “one which appeals to a largely white middle class that is increasingly isolating itself from the rest of American society in ever more exclusive, ever more homogeneous suburban enclaves.”¹¹⁴ In his analysis of anti-urban paranoia and anxiety, as observed in American cinema post-*Taxi Driver*, Macek demonstrates how violent criminality is presented not as the product of systemic social and economic forces but as the result of individual psychological aberrations or

personal moral failings.¹¹⁵ The recent Phillips film then functions as an ideological critique of this type of narrative, highlighting the role that Gotham City plays in the ultimate creation of this era's Joker.

A future project, following this article and Macek, should investigate further the fatalist arguments present within popular condemnations of cities.¹¹⁶ Urban landscapes are characterized as a modern-day tale of Sodom and Gomorrah, suggesting that any effort to save these cities (and their denizens) will ultimately be in vain.¹¹⁷ This scathing political discourse is reflected within *Batman* transmedia (i.e., comics, films, games), particularly in their depictions of Gotham City. Recall that throughout Batman's mythic tenure as the city's champion and guardian, Gotham has only further receded into crime. Mobsters and gangsters still exist within the criminal underbelly but now alongside corrupt officials and far more bizarre and menacing predators. Gotham exists within an endless comic book cycle of progression and regression, one that should be studied in the same manner we study its most famous criminal (and others, its most famous hero). The political and economic failings of Gotham are consistently presented as the conditions that produce social unrest, organized crime, vigilantism, and new forms of terrorism within its streets. How well this mythic city represents current Western political economies, its societies, and denizens is a question that warrants academic consideration.

¹ D. O’Neil, “Afterword,” in *Batman: Knightfall* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 343.

² This neologism is a playful spin on the distinctions between “Higher” and “Lower Christology,” an academic spectrum used to elucidate the theological polemic between the divine and human aspects of Jesus Christ.

³ See T. Langley (ed.), *The Joker Psychology: Evil Clowns and the Women Who Love Them* (New York: Sterling, 2019), for a collection of mental health professionals analyzing the Joker character and mythos.

⁴ “Is the Joker a Psychopath? You Decide,” Comic-Con International: San Diego, Comics Arts Conference Session #9, Jul. 25, 2009 (Room 30AB, 10:30-12:00).

⁵ B. Finger et al., “The Man Behind the Red Hood,” *Detective Comics* 1:168 (New York: DC Comics, 1951).

⁶ O’Neil, “Afterword,” 347.

⁷ D. Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁸ There are many properties that recontextualize the Batman mythos. Our argument acknowledges but deprioritizes the more extravagant Joker stories like M. Pasko and I. Novick, “99 and 99/100% Dead,” *Joker* 1:10 (1976), published in *The Joker: The Bronze Age Omnibus* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2019), D. Moench and K. Jones, *Batman: Bloodstorm* (New York: DC Comics, 1995), B. Azzarello et al., *The New 52: Futures End* 1:38 (New York: DC Comics, 2015), and J. Tynion IV and R. Rossmo, *The Batman Who Laughs* 1:1 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2019).

⁹ *The Joker: A Celebration of 75 Years* (New York: DC Comics, 2014), 6-7, 48. For a case study of these dueling characterizations, examine B. Kane, “THE RETURN OF BATMAN: Original Story Treatment” (1986), Writers Guild of America West, esp. 3-4, printed in A. Farago and G. McIntyre, *Batman: The Definitive History of the Dark Knight in Comics, Film, and Beyond* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2019).

¹⁰ See B. Azzarello and L. Bermejo, *Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2008) and T. S. Daniel, “Faces of Death,” *Detective Comics* 2:1 (New York: DC Comics, 2011).

¹¹ This genealogical sequence primarily consists of F. Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986), A. Moore and B. Bolland, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), J. Starlin and J. Aparo, *Batman: A Death in the Family* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), G. Morrison and D. McKean, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1989), *Batman*, dir. T. Burton (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1989), P. Dini and B. Timm, *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love* (New York: DC Comics, 1993), J. Kelly and Kano, “He Who Laughs Last!”, *Action Comics* 1:770 (New York: DC Comics, 2000), G. Morrison and J. Van Fleet, “The Clown at Midnight,” *Batman* 1:663 (New York: DC Comics, 2007), *The Dark Knight*, dir. C. Nolan (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008), A. Kubert and A. Clarke, “Time to Monkey Shine,” *Batman* 2:23.1 – *The Joker* (New York: DC Comics, 2013), J. Layman and J. Fabok, “Nothin’ But Smiles,” *Detective Comics* 2:16 (New York: DC Comics, 2013), T. King and M.

Janín, "The Best Man, Part I," *Batman* 3:48 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2018), D. Jurgens et al., "The Final Joke," *Batman Beyond* 6:25-28 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2018-2019), and *Joker*, dir. T. Phillips (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019). While this essay exclusively uses "he/him/his" pronouns for the character, we would be remiss to not acknowledge that the character has been reimagined as a woman. To our knowledge, Bianca Steeplechase from H. Chaykin and D. Brereton, *Batman: Thrillkiller* 1:1-3 (New York: DC Comics, 1997) is the only female Joker to receive scholarly attention; see T. Taylor, "Kiss with a Fist: The Gendered Power Struggle of the Joker and Harley Quinn," in R. M. Peaslee and R. G. Weiner (eds.), *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 90-91. See also *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, "LaKeith Stanfield on Adam Sandler, Kevin Garnett & Loving the Joker," YouTube, Jan. 30, 2020, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSIHpr4wKME> for LaKeith Stanfield's ambition to play the next Joker – significant as the character is always portrayed as White.

¹² For many Joker writers and creators, the tradition of American clownhood is the ultimate spirit of the character, his *modus operandi*. Most of his gags are orchestrated to shock his victims, including an acid pie to the face, a poisonous snake hidden up his sleeve, deadly gas released from his lapel flower, and an electric hand buzzer; see D. O'Neil and I. Novick, "The Joker's Double Jeopardy!," *Joker* 1:1 (New York: DC Comics, 1975), G. Conway and J. L. García-López, "Last Laugh," *Batman* 1:353 (New York: DC Comics, 1982), D. Mishkin et al., "Only Angels Have Wings," *The Brave and the Bold* 1:191 (New York: DC Comics, 1982), and C. Dixon and T. Lyle, "The Funniest Thing Happened," *Robin II* 1:1 (New York: DC Comics, 1991). The Joker once even left behind a slippery banana peel in a courtroom, causing the death of the psychiatrist testifying against his sanity; see A. Kreisberg and S. McDaniel, *Batman: Dead to Rights* (New York: DC Comics, 2010).

¹³ The modern Joker is, in part, a cult leader, i.e., a wild charismatic that successfully bends others to his will via persuasion, conditioning, brainwashing, and/or emotional manipulation. His most noteworthy followers have been Gaggy, Bob, Harleen Quinzel, Joker Jr., Jackanapes, Marian Drews, and Punchline; see *Batman* (1989), *Mad Love*, *Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker*, dir. C. Geda (Warner Home Video, 2000), "Time to Monkey Shine," P. Dini and G. March, "The Last Gag," *Gotham City Sirens* 1:6 (New York: DC Comics, 2010), S. Murphy, *Batman: The White Knight* 1:4 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2018), and J. Tynion IV and J. Fernandez, *Year of the Villain: Hell Arisen* 1:3 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2020). It is specifically in the Joker's relationships with women, however, that the character becomes fully rendered as the human incarnation of the id – hyper-sexualized and aggressive. See F. Miller and J. Lee, *All Star Batman and Robin, the Boy Wonder* 1:8 (New York: DC Comics, 2008) and A. Conner et al., "Twenny Five Big One\$", *Harley Quinn* 2:25 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2016).

¹⁴ For praise of the *Dark Knight* Joker's sense of "realism" within post-9/11 American media, see R. Dreyer, "Clap If You Believe in Batman," *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* 45:1 (2009), 81 and producer Michael Uslan's comments during the "Is the Joker a Psychopath?" Comic-Con panel.

¹⁵ T. Phillips and S. Silver, "JOKER: an origin," Final Shooting Script, Dec. 1, 2018, ii.

¹⁶ See L. J. Scallet, "Mental Health and Homelessness: Evidence of Failed Policy?," *Health Affairs* 8:4 (1989), 184-8; A. Frances, "Repairing Our Broken Mental Health Care System: Advice for Policymakers," *Psychiatric Times* 37:1 (2020), 1, 14-6; M. E. Camp et al., "The Joker: A Dark Night for Depictions of Mental Illness," *Academic Psychiatry* 34:2 (2010), 145-9; J. Goodwin and I. Tadjudin, "'What Do You Think I Am? Crazy?': The Joker and Stigmatizing Representations of

Mental Ill-Health,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 49:2 (2016), 385-402; R. A. Sansone and L. A. Sansone, “‘I’m Your Number One Fan’ – A Clinical Look at Celebrity Worship,” *Innov Clin Neurosci* 11:1-2 (2014), 39-43; and J. M. Aultman et al., “The Segregated Gun as an Indicator of Racism and Representations in Film,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7:44 (2020), 1-11.

¹⁷ With the comics of the late 1980s, the Joker’s *modus operandi* came to incorporate blunt violence and more psychological targets. First, in *The Killing Joke*, the Joker shoots and paralyzes Barbara Gordon (who is secretly Batgirl) in an attempt to psychologically break her father, Police Commissioner Jim Gordon. Second, in *A Death in the Family*, the Joker kills Robin (Jason Todd) with a crowbar after audiences grew to hate the character and overwhelmingly voted for his death. This era’s Joker now uses blunt items like a ball ping hammer in combat and carries more sinister tools like a potato peeler; see E. Brubaker and D. Mahnke, *The Man Who Laughs* (New York: DC Comics, 2005) and *The Dark Knight*. He targets the loved ones of superheroes, authority figures, and civilians alike so as to maximize psychological torment; see *Dead to Rights*, T. Taylor et al., *Injustice: Gods Among Us Year One 1:1-2* (New York: DC Comics, 2013), and *Joker* (2008). For many, this terrorizing gimmick is the new essence of the character. Accordingly, Arthur Fleck murders only with a .38 snub-nose revolver and a pair of scissors and his victims are all authority figures that impose their will upon him.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Juergensmeyer, “Killing Before an Audience: Terrorism as Performance Violence,” in M. Stohl et al. (eds.), *Constructions of Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Research and Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 75.

¹⁹ N. D. Phillips and S. Strobl, *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

²⁰ G. Miller, “Blurred Lines: The New ‘Domestic’ Terrorism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:3 (2019), 66-8.

²¹ O. Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, tr. C. Schoch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 71-72.

²² Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 53, 2, 5.

²³ See *Batman* (1989), *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*, dir. E. Radomski and B. Timm (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1993), *Batman: Arkham City*, dir. S. Hill (Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2011), and “That’s Entertainment,” *Gotham*, dir. N. Copus (Warner Bros. Television Distribution, 2018) for examples.

²⁴ Cf. A. Robertson, “Joker Mimics King of Comedy and Fight Club, But It’s a Completely Different Kind of Film,” *The Verge*, Oct. 14, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/14/20905454/joker-movie-phillips-king-of-comedy-fight-club-scorsese-fincher-comparison-society>.

²⁵ Juergensmeyer, “Killing Before an Audience,” 67. See Juergensmeyer also for a discussion of Boko Haram kidnappings and ISIS killings; both involve “projection[s] of an image of terrifying strength” but for strategic and symbolic purposes, respectively (72-73).

²⁶ R. W. Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 194.

²⁷ F. J. Robertz, "Deadly Dreams," *Scientific American Mind* 18:4 (2007), 52-9; A. Kolenic, "Madness in the Making: Creating and Denying Narratives from Virginia Tech to Gotham City," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42:6 (2009), 1023-1039.

²⁸ V. Lal, "The Killer as Auteur: Insanity, Intimacy and Death in Virginia," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42:18 (2007), 1590.

²⁹ Auteur theory took shape in the 1950s following F. Truffaut, "Un Certain Tendance du Cinema Francais," *Cahiers du Cinema* 31 (1954), 15-29. The "death" of the auteur would be heralded not long after; see R. Barthes, "La Mort de l'auteur" (1968), *Mantéia* 5, reprinted in S. Heath (tr.), *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-8.

³⁰ For instance, the cinematic influences of the Phillips *Joker* film are significantly noted in A. Opperman, "Joker, Network, and the Politics of Recognition," *Wisecrack*, Oct. 7, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://medium.com/wisecrack/joker-network-and-the-politics-of-recognition-353962484bcb>; K. A. Collins, "Rewatching Taxi Driver in the Age of Joker," *Vanity Fair*, Oct. 9, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/todd-phillips-joker-rewatching-taxi-driver>; Robertson, "Joker Mimics King of Comedy and Fight Club"; and J. Tucker, "27 Years Ago 'Falling Down' Predicted Our Dumbest Timeline... Also, It Should've Been A Batman Movie," *Medium*, Feb. 29, 2020, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://jeremiahtucker.medium.com/27-years-ago-falling-down-predicted-our-dumbest-timeline-also-it-shouldve-been-a-batman-movie-c738570615c3>.

³¹ D. Hassoun, "Shifting Makeups: The Joker as Performance Style from Romero to Ledger," in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, 3-17.

³² J. J. Norris, "Idiosyncratic Terrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4:3 (2020), 3.

³³ As the Joker tells Vicki Vale in *Batman* (1989): "Let me tell you what I'm thinking about, Sweetie. I was in the bath one day, when I realized why I was destined for greatness. You know how concerned most people are about appearances. This is attractive, that is not. Well, that is all behind me."

³⁴ Opperman, "Joker, Network, and the Politics of Recognition."

³⁵ Lal, "The Killer as Auteur," 1589.

³⁶ Kolenic, "Madness in the Making," 1034.

³⁷ See explanation in P. Dini and A. Ross, "Case Study," *Batman: Black and White 2* (New York: DC Comics, 2002). The Joker's iconography remains quite consistent throughout transmedia. His body type ranges in its degrees of lankiness, emaciation, and proportionality (specifically the size of his head and teeth). For a notable exception to his general appearance, consider *All Star Batman and Robin, the Boy Wonder*. The Joker's large dragon back-tattoo that debuted in this issue would eventually appear on the merchandise of Jared Leto's Joker in *Suicide Squad*, dir. D. Ayer (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2016); see the Joker M18 4" unit (Metals Die Cast) from Jada Toys and the 12" *Suicide Squad* Joker statue from DC Collectibles. Leto's other tattoos include an arrow piercing the breast of a small bird (right bicep), a knife piercing the Bat-symbol (left bicep), a series of "HAHAHA" (left forearm, left pectoral), three separate large grins (left hand, right

forearm, another across his stomach), “JOKER” (across his abdomen), four aces with a skull centered in the spade, wrapped in a “ALL IN” banner (left collar bone), a skull-jester (right pectoral), “GOD’S ONLY CHILD” (right oblique), and the word “Damaged” on his forehead.

³⁸ S. Foxman, “12 Dead, 70 Wounded at Denver Screening of ‘Dark Knight Rises,’” *Business Insider*, Jul. 21, 2012, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/at-least-10-killed-and-30-40-injured-at-dark-night-rises-premiere-in-colorado-2012-7>; R. G. Weiner and R. M. Peaslee, “Introduction,” in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, xiv; and E. Sacks, “In ‘Dark Knight’ shooting at Aurora theater, eerie echo of seminal 1986 comic by Frank Miller,” *New York Daily News*, Jul. 20, 2012, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/dark-knight-shooting-aurora-theater-eerie-echo-seminal-1986-comic-frank-miller-article-1.1118713>.

³⁹ C. McPhate, “Texas Department of Public Safety Warns of a Potential Mass Shooting During Joker Film Premiere,” *Dallas Observer*, Sept. 27, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.dallasobserver.com/arts/texas-department-of-public-safety-find-credible-threat-for-a-potential-shooting-during-joker-premiere-11766959>.

⁴⁰ T. Phillips and S. Silver, “JOKER: an origin,” *Script*, Apr. 13, 2018, 81-2.

⁴¹ Cf. A. Nagle, “The New Man of 4chan,” *The Baffler* 30 (2016), 64-76.

⁴² P. Castillo Diaz and N. Valji, “Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism,” *Journal of International Affairs* 72:2 (2019), 41.

⁴³ *BBC*, “Elliot Rodger: How Misogynist Killer Became ‘Incel Hero,’” Apr. 26, 2018, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189>. See also Castillo Diaz and Valji, “Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism,” 42n.23 for examples of other terrorists that either self-identify as “incel” or praised such killers in their social media.

⁴⁴ S. Zacharek, “*Joker* Wants to Be a Movie About the Emptiness of Our Culture. Instead, It’s a Prime Example of It,” *Time*, Aug. 31, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://time.com/5666055/venice-joker-review-joaquin-phoenix-not-funny/>.

⁴⁵ The misogynistic readings of *Joker* were not misguided. Castillo Diaz and Valji, “Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism,” 38 demonstrates that “misogyny is often the gateway, driver, and early warning sign of most [acts of violent extremism].” Although Arthur’s “incel”-like outburst is altered in the final film (replaced with a wordless, existential breakdown and acceptance of his delusional condition), a gender analysis of the film is still warranted, namely in Arthur’s entitlement to physical affection, pressure to prove his manhood through violence, and resentment of women as insufficient feminized caring givers. See Robertson, “*Joker* Mimics King of Comedy and Fight Club”; D. Hamblin, “Toxic Masculinity and Murder: Can We Talk About Men?” *The Atlantic*, Jun. 16, 2016, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/06/toxic-masculinity-and-mass-murder/486983/>; A. Marcotte, “Overcompensation Nation: It’s Time to Admit that Toxic Masculinity Drives Gun Violence,” *Salon*, Jun. 13, 2016, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, http://www.salon.com/2016/06/13/overcompensation_nation_its_time_to_admit_that_toxic_masculinity_drives_gun_violence/; and M. Haiven, *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 142.

⁴⁶ Y. Desta, "The Joker Didn't Inspire the Aurora Shooter, but the Rumor Won't Go Away," *Vanity Fair*, Oct. 2, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/joker-aurora-shooting-rumor>.

⁴⁷ O. E. Danzell and L. M. Maisonet Montañez, "Understanding the Lone Wolf Terror Phenomena: Assessing Current Profiles," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 8:2 (2015), 135-159; Miller, "Blurred Lines."

⁴⁸ See Robertz, "Deadly Dreams" for a presentation of teen shooters Alvaro Castillo (Hillsborough, N.C.) and Sebastian Bosse (Emsdetten, Germany) who independently sought to replicate the grand design of the Columbine Shooters in 2006 – down to their idiosyncratic choice of clothing, weaponry, and speech; cf. "Sebastian Bosse's Journal," tr. B. Laramie, *Schoolshooters.info* (P. Langman), Jul. 29, 2014, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/bosse_journal_1.0.pdf, 2-3.

⁴⁹ B. L. Nacos, "Revisiting the Contagion Hypothesis: Terrorism, News Coverage, and Copycat Attacks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3:3 (2009), 3.

⁵⁰ We should note how this fearful discourse in "Nothin' But Smiles" mirrors the contagion theories of modern terrorism: "Just dumb kids playing dress-up. But I need them off the streets. Never a serious threat. Serious threats don't tweet about their upcoming crime sprees. It's all because of the Joker. Something about his latest reign of terror is worse than before. The repercussions around Gotham are worse, as well. And it can't be cured. Only contained."

⁵¹ Cf. F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals / Ecce Homo*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 155: "Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane – now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into – what? into nothingness? into a 'penetrating sense of his nothingness'?"

⁵² J. Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁵³ Haiven, *Revenge Capitalism*, 243n.10.

⁵⁴ The Joker reflects the trauma of a society abused by many different crimes, including home invasion, rape, kidnapping, and serial murder; see T. King and M. Janin, "The War of Jokes and Riddles," *Batman* 3:25-32 (Burbank: DC Comics, 2017), *The Killing Joke*, C. Dixon and B. Stelfreeze, "Fool's Errand," *Detective Comics* 1:726 (New York: DC Comics, 1998), and K. Garcia et al., *Joker/Harley: Criminal Sanity 1* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2019-2020).

⁵⁵ Nacos, "Revisiting the Contagion Hypothesis," 9.

⁵⁶ See D. M. Stashower, "On First Looking into Chapman's Holden: Speculations on a Murder," *The American Scholar* 52:3 (1983), 373-7 and M. Raymond, "Too Smart, Too Soon: 'The King of Comedy' and American Independent Cinema," *Film Criticism* 34:1 (2009), 26n.10. Other examples include Stephen King's *Rage* (1977) inspiring Jeffrey Lyne Cox (San Gabriel High School Hostage Incident, 1988) and the popular Guy Fawkes mask from *V for Vendetta* (2006; dir. James McTeigue) adopted as the signature of Anonymous, the international hacktivist group (f. 2004); see J. Katz, "A High School Gunman's Days of Rage," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 14, 1990,

Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-01-14-ga-143-story.html> and G. Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 110 for more.

⁵⁷ See *CBS News*, “Gunman Dressed As The Joker Shot By Police,” Mar. 12, 2009, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gunman-dressed-as-the-joker-shot-by-police/>; N. Donnelly, “‘Joker’ arsonist who set fire to school avoids Jail,” *Irish Independent*, Nov. 6, 2010, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.pressreader.com/ireland/irish-independent/20101106/282948151609918>; B. Waterfield, “Belgium’s ‘joker killer’ Kim De Gelder admits guilt,” *The Telegraph*. Jan. 27, 2009, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/belgium/4359612/Belgiums-joker-killer-Kim-De-Gelder-admits-guilt.html>; *Las Vegas Sun*, “A Look Inside the Lives of Shooters Jerad Miller, Amanda Miller,” Jun. 9, 2014, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2014/jun/09/look/>; and *CBS News*, “Man behind Joker mask in anti-Arab video pleads guilty to making death threat,” Feb. 24, 2017, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/joker-mask-threats-jesse-pelletier-plead-guilty-1.3997903>.

⁵⁸ *The Pure Cinema*, “Heath Ledger directed both homemade videos that the Joker sends to GCN himself,” Apr. 4, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1605926106208875>.

⁵⁹ *BroadviewPictures*, “Heath Ledger’s Joker Diary - Too Young To Die - Heath Ledger,” YouTube, Jan. 27, 2014, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJMoKMieNn8>.

⁶⁰ Ledger was given a copy of *The Killing Joke* for further inspiration; see S. Collura, “Dark Knight: Heath Ledger Talks Joker,” *IGN*, Nov. 7, 2006 (Updated: May 16, 2012), Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/11/08/the-dark-knight-heath-ledger-talks-joker>.

⁶¹ A. White, “Heath Ledger’s fatal overdose wasn’t a result of Joker role, claims sister,” *The Telegraph*, Apr. 24, 2017, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/heath-ledgers-fatal-overdose-wasnt-result-joker-role-claims/>.

⁶² On Halloween night, 2008, a sophomore at the University of Rochester, Kurt Scheele, was found dead in the nearby Mt. Hope Cemetery. Rochester police officials said the death was an apparent suicide, that the young man set himself on fire via gasoline just before midnight. See *MyDeathSpace*, “Kurt Scheele (18) lit himself on fire in a cemetery on Halloween night,” Nov. 6, 2008, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, [http://mydeathspace.com/article/2008/11/06/Kurt_Scheele_\(18\)_lit_himself_on_fire_in_a_cemetery_on_Halloween_night](http://mydeathspace.com/article/2008/11/06/Kurt_Scheele_(18)_lit_himself_on_fire_in_a_cemetery_on_Halloween_night). According to campus folklore, Scheele visited a few separate Halloween parties the night of his death; at each, he donned the costume of the Joker, mimicking Ledger’s iconic mannerisms and dialogue from *The Dark Knight* (which was released just that summer), never breaking character.

⁶³ Kolenic, “Madness in the Making,” 1031.

⁶⁴ F. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed./tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 467.

⁶⁵ G. Smith, "Inside Out: David Fincher," *Film Comment*, 1999, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/inside-out-david-fincher/>.

⁶⁶ Cf. F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trs. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 267 and P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 135-153.

⁶⁷ Kolenic, "Madness in the Making," 1035 has further applications to our analysis of Arthur Fleck: "Seung-Hui Cho's videos, writings, and images portray a self-proclaimed victim of institutions that he claimed supported classist and racist agendas in monolithic and one-dimensional understanding of American society. He repeatedly cited that 'they' could have made it better at any point, but left him, somehow, with no choice other than to do what he did."

⁶⁸ B. Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1972), [414]: "*Les hommes sont si nécessairement fous que ce serait être fou par un autre tour de folie de n'être pas fou.*"

⁶⁹ See *Arkham Asylum* and "The Clown at Midnight."

⁷⁰ *The Killing Joke*.

⁷¹ Cf. Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, 612.

⁷² Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, 95-6.

⁷³ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trs. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209.

⁷⁴ Cf. T. Langley and S. Doosje, "Humor: Who's Laughing?", in *The Joker Psychology*, 106-121.

⁷⁵ "The Best Man, Part I."

⁷⁶ See A. Glass et al., "The Hunt for Harley Quinn: Conclusion," *Suicide Squad 4:7* (New York: DC Comics, 2012) and *Suicide Squad* (2016). In both, a flashback reveals that the Joker took Harley to the Ace Chemical Processing Plant to be "reborn" as he was.

⁷⁷ Phillips and Silver, Final Shooting Script, 72. Arthur's mother Penny bestowed upon him the nickname of "Happy" in accordance with his life mission to "bring laughter and joy into this cold, dark world." The film's dialogue features further double entendres in regards to Arthur's name and condition. "Happy? I haven't been happy . . . one minute of my entire fucking life." "It's so hard to just try and be . . . happy all the time."

⁷⁸ Like Arthur, the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooter (Adam Lanza), the killer of twenty children and six adults in 2012, started his rampage by killing his mother and leaving a Word document on his computer explaining why women are inherently selfish; see Castillo Diaz and Valji, "Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism."

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 316.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *Portable Nietzsche*, 153.

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- ⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 316-317.
- ⁸² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 17.
- ⁸³ Phillips and Silver, Final Shooting Script, 12.
- ⁸⁴ “He Who Laughs Last!”
- ⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 9.
- ⁸⁶ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, tr. J. O’Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 11.
- ⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 16.
- ⁸⁸ M. P. Williams, “Making Sense Squared: Iteration and Synthesis in Grant Morrison’s Joker,” in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, 218 correctly observes how the Joker’s hyper-perception and resulting adaptation becomes a model for living in postmodernity, a subject undergoing constant flux: “always different yet always the same.” Postmodernity is a “blurry, relativistic morass where identity comes from assembling bits and pieces of refracted culture,” E. Garneau, “Lady HAHA: Performativity, Super-sanity, and the Mutability of Identity,” in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, 33. “[I]f identity is not fixed – if you can recreate yourself at will – *you can be whatever you want*” (44).
- ⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 14, 549-550.
- ⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 17.
- ⁹¹ B. Zachary, “Joker: The Problem with Rooting for Joaquin Phoenix’s Arthur Fleck,” *CBR.com*, Oct. 5, 2019, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/the-problem-with-rooting-for-arthur-fleck/>.
- ⁹² Haiven, *Revenge Capitalism*, 43.
- ⁹³ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 203.
- ⁹⁴ See C. E. Gentry, *Disordered Violence: How Gender, Race and Heteronormativity Structure Terrorism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), esp. 181 for the strict gender roles central to extremist men’s rights online forums.
- ⁹⁵ H. A. Giroux, “Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: ‘Fight Club’, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence,” *JAC* 21:1 (2001), 13-9.
- ⁹⁶ Castillo Diaz and Valji, “Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism,” 40-1.
- ⁹⁷ Castillo Diaz and Valji, “Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism,” 40.
- ⁹⁸ R. Litsey, “The Joker, Clown Prince of Nobility: The ‘Master’ Criminal, Nietzsche, and the Rise of the Superman,” in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, 179-193.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 36-37.

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 7.

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 12.

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 37.

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 120.

¹⁰⁶ J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 119-136.

¹⁰⁷ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 138.

¹⁰⁸ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 138.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), ix-x on the "Great Refusal," the French student protests of 1968.

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 7.

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 159-160, 218-221, 231-2.

¹¹² "The Final Joke." One thinks of the 2020 Nashville Bomber, Anthony Warner, who killed himself via car bomb, injuring a few people in the process, but, as designed, damaged dozens of historic buildings and major businesses in the downtown area. Since his death, we learned that the bomber sent numerous packages to friends and acquaintances across the country explaining not just his intentions to kill only himself but his motivations to terrorize big government. For Warner, the world was controlled by various alien species, reptilians and lizards posing as human, nefariously responsible for 9/11 and other attacks. Though distinct (e.g., notifying residents and pedestrians of the imminent blast), the Nashville Bomber belongs in conversation with the other "lone wolves" previously mentioned, especially due to his suicide, public destruction, novel ideology, digital manifestos, and untraditional radicalization. For more, see B. Hall and K. Wisniewski, "Nashville Bomber's Bizarre Writings Reveal Belief in Aliens and Lizard People," *NewsChannel5: Nashville*, Jan. 2, 2021, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.newschannel5.com/news/newschannel-5-investigates/nashville-bombers-bizarre-writings-reveal-belief-in-aliens-and-lizard-people>.

¹¹³ H. A. Giroux, "Culture of Cruelty: The Age of Neoliberal Authoritarianism," *Counter Punch*, Oct. 23, 2015, Accessed Mar. 29, 2021, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2015/10/23/culture-of-cruelty-the-age-of-neoliberal-authoritarianism/>.

¹¹⁴ S. Macek, "Places of Horror: Fincher's 'Seven' and Fear of the City in Recent Hollywood Film," *College Literature* 26:1 (1999), 94.

¹¹⁵ Macek, "Places of Horror," 92.

¹¹⁶ Macek, "Places of Horror," 93.

¹¹⁷ Macek, "Places of Horror," 88.

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