Physiognomy and Freakery: The Joker on Film


ABSTRACT

Veidt had a face well suited to these tormented dreamscapes: “His lanky figure, his angular facial features perfectly suited the nightmare aesthetic of expressionism” (Story). [...]the stage was set for Conrad Veidt’s portrayal of Gwynplaine to define the physiognomy of the Joker, a sinister character that fits squarely within the history of the horror genre and its Hollywood roots, and that furthermore connects the Joker’s physiognomy with the aesthetic of German expressionism in terms of his gaunt, angular features, which were evocative of its nightmarish aesthetic. With reference to the original Red Hood mythos, Moore and Boland depicted the Joker’s original identity as a former chemical plant lab assistant trying to make ends meet with his pregnant wife by working as a stand-up comedian. According to one DC executive, director Tim Burton would bring The Killing Joke when he attended DC meetings before the making of 1989’s Batman and emphasize that this “is how we want the movie to look” (Legends).

FULL TEXT

Introduction

It has been over twenty-five years since Jack Nicholson’s performance as the iconic Joker in the 1989 Batman, and still the Joker on film mesmerizes audiences. This study will examine depictions of the Joker in the American motion pictures Batman (1989) and The Dark Knight (2008), beginning with a brief description of the disputed origins of the Joker in the annals of the comic book industry and inspiration for the character in early film, with a word about physiognomy. Next, the paper describes the nebulous origins of the Joker within the narratives of the Batman movies by way of comparison to background given in comic books. After establishing the Joker’s history (or lack thereof), I argue that the character comes to embody different kinds of collective fears and evils in different eras, and these have a relationship to physiognomy. In the 1980s, which saw the rise of neoliberalism, the Joker embodied anxiety surrounding America’s inner cities. In the post-9/11 era, he represents anxiety regarding new global cities and the threat of terrorism, institutional evil, and mental illness. In these two films, the Joker embodies the tensions of whiteness and blackness, beauty and disfigurement, and commentary on institutions and networks. I examine these tensions with reference to the history of physiognomy and contextualize the Joker’s relationship to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Bruno Latour) and cyborgs (Donna J. Haraway). The paper concludes with a reflection on the meaning of Batman’s intimate relationship with the Joker, that is, if Batman and the Joker could have been two sides of the same person.

Comic Industry Origins

There is some debate about who originally conceived of the Joker (Daniels 40-41). Batman creator Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger insist that they originated the character, but Kane’s artist, Jerry Robinson, who was hired to work on the first issue of the actual Batman comics, claimed that he invented the character when, while trying to cook up a super-villain, he came across the Joker in a deck of playing cards. Kane and Finger deny this story, claiming that they originated the Joker, but all agree that the final appearance of the Joker was influenced by photographs provided by Finger of the actor Conrad Veidt as the disfigured protagonist of The Man Who Laughs (1928), which
was based on the 1869 Victor Hugo novel. In the film, the protagonist is the son of a nobleman who offended King James II in seventeenth century England. The nobleman is sentenced to death and the King orders his torturers to cut a permanent smile on the boy’s face. The boy, Gwynplaine, subsequently ends up in a carnival sideshow and later becomes the plaything of a duchess before falling in love with the only person who could love him without judgment, a blind girl. The German actor Conrad Veidt (who played the killer zombie Cesare in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari [1920]) was tapped to play the part of Gwynplaine. The sets and atmosphere of German expressionism were more psychological than their literal American counterparts, a place of nightmare. Veidt had a face well suited to these tormented dreamscapes: "His lanky figure, his angular facial features perfectly suited the nightmare aesthetic of expressionism" (Story). Thus the stage was set for Conrad Veidt’s portrayal of Gwynplaine to define the physiognomy of the Joker, a sinister character that fits squarely within the history of the horror genre and its Hollywood roots, and that furthermore connects the Joker's physiognomy with the aesthetic of German expressionism in terms of his gaunt, angular features, which were evocative of its nightmarish aesthetic.

Origins Within the Batman Narrative

For over a decade after his debut in the 1939 seminal edition of Batman, the Joker enjoyed free reign as a total lunatic with absolutely no background. He was originally chaotic evil in the Nietzschean sense evoked by Robin R. Means Coleman and Jasmine Nicole Cobb - evil that exists beyond worldly notions of right and wrong and material gain. However, the Joker received a demotion early on in Detective Comics #168 (February 1951), "The Man Behind the Red Hood," in which he was revealed to have been a lab worker exposed to a pool of chemical wastes during a heist at the Monarch Playing Card Company:

Heretofore the Joker had been the Clown at Midnight, the Acolyte of Absurdity, a fantastic figure from a nightmare whose rictus grin of death had denigrated all human endeavors. Batman had been the control freak, and the Joker had been chaos. Now, for the sake of rationality, the spirit of anarchy was squeezed down into the body of an embittered employee who took the wrong kind of dive. (Daniels 65)

Then in 1988, writer Alan Moore and illustrator Brian Boland reinterpreted the origin of the Joker. With reference to the original Red Hood mythos, Moore and Boland depicted the Joker’s original identity as a former chemical plant lab assistant trying to make ends meet with his pregnant wife by working as a stand-up comedian. He stumbles into the midst of a crime racket in which gangsters coerce desperate individuals with specialized knowledge to don a red helmet and cape and act as ringleader. In order to rob the Ace Chemical Plant, they nab the comedian - who is to become the Joker and who used to work at Ace Chemicals. The plan unravels when his compatriots are shot down, however. The Joker jumps into a vat of chemical waste to escape Batman and is disfigured, driving him insane. According to one DC executive, director Tim Burton would bring The Killing Joke when he attended DC meetings before the making of 1989's Batman and emphasize that this "is how we want the movie to look" (Legends).

From an origins standpoint, here is a complex interweaving of backgrounds. The Joker goes from chaotic evil to evil-for-itself and back again to chaotic evil in the 1980s, only to reappear as evil-for-itself one last time in the 1989 film (although arguably retaining elements of chaotic evil in Nicholson’s portrayal). However, it would take another two decades for Moore’s ironic vision of the Joker as an anonymous face in an institution to hit a pop culture nerve through Heath Ledger’s performance in The Dark Knight (2008).

Screen Evolution

Psychologist Fredric Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent (1954) had a chilling effect on the post-WW II comics industry. Wertham claimed that comic books were to blame for postwar delinquency among youth. The television adaptation of the Batman comics reflected this repressive atmosphere with its campy humor. Batman (1966-1968) ran for only two and a half seasons, but in that time produced an impressive number of episodes and gained a substantial following. The show also resulted in a feature-length film, Batman: The Movie (1966), staring the regular cast of Adam West as Batman, Burt Ward as boy-wonder Robin, Burgess Meredith as the Penguin (Batman's most frequent enemy in the comics), and Cesar Romero as the Joker. In the movie, Romero portrayed
the Joker as a giddy henchman to the other criminal masterminds. Considering that the villains assail Batman with Cold War-era Polaris missiles from the sanctity of Penguin's submarine and that Romero himself was a Cuban American born in New York City (indeed, Romero's moustache is clearly visible beneath the thick white makeup), the portrayal of the Joker in Batman could be interpreted as an allusion to the specter of nuclear annihilation in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Yet, just as the origins of the Joker in the comic series have changed over time, similarly on screen the Joker gets updated and transmogrified in response to contemporary political and cultural trends. The character was originally interpreted as a benign trickster during the Cold War but later manifested as a gangster reflecting neoliberal trends and anxiety about the 1980s urban landscape. The Joker eventually evolved into a figure riding a wave of chaos, embodying chaotic evil, networks of evil and Arendt's banality of evil (1963) as a way to make tangible an opponent in the post-millennial, post-9/11 global War on Terror. It is the unfolding of the Joker as an onscreen representation of evil to which we now turn.

Batman (1989)

In the film, Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) is a playboy who moonlights as the Caped Crusader. His love interest, photojournalist Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger), appears in Gotham City to photograph the mysterious "Bat." Meanwhile, Batman confronts the gangster Jack Napier (Jack Nicholson) during a heist at the Axis Chemicals plant and mistakenly sends him plunging into a vat of toxic chemicals, creating the Joker. Throughout the film, Bruce Wayne/Batman and the Joker vie for Vicki Vale's affections. The Joker unleashes complicated schemes to kill innocent civilians, such as tainting their beauty products with Smilex Gas (a trademark item that leaves victims' corpses with a wide Joker-like grin), or releasing Smilex gas during a parade where the Joker is distributing free money. Finally, after Batman foils the Joker's parade plans, the Joker steals Vicki Vale away to the top of Gotham Cathedral. There, Batman confronts the Joker, and in a final showdown the Joker falls to his death after Batman ties his leg to a stone gargoyle that plunges from the side of the building.

According to Robert E. Terrill, the marketing alone could not explain why a movie with a protagonist who is clearly schizophrenic by the finale would be a hit with the American people. Terrill applied Jungian psychological analysis to explain its great success and suggested that Batman's increasing dementia sent the message that late twentieth century American society does not need a savior who can fully integrate his psyche. Rather, Batman insulates viewers from the pressure of psychological reintegration of the self, a task which has become too dangerous. Within this framework, Batman is the Self and the Joker is the Shadow. If Gotham is "persona-possessed," the Joker is persona-possessed par excellence. He has regressed to a childlike state and has an obsession with destroying the persona; for example, by creating a cosmetic scare, the Joker attacks Gotham at the level of its persona-obsession.

Physiognomy & "Black Humor":

Dehumanizing the Joker

Explanations for the Joker as an out-of-control Shadow archetype only go so far in explaining the character's resemblance to blackface. Andrew Ross claims that in Batman's world, blackness gets shunted off onto the Joker who parodies "minstrel blackface," "speaks in rappish rhymes and moves his body in a shapeless jive." The Joker's visage even consists of thick red lips, a wide grin, protruding teeth and (at times of stress) round eyes, all of which are distinct traits of the derisive portrayals of African Americans in early twentieth century minstrelsy, such as Al Jolsen in The Jazz Singer (1927). Furthermore, the Joker's purple suit with padded shoulders is evocative of gangsters, pimps, and the Zoot Suits that precipitated riots in Los Angeles during WWII.

Some examples of this jive-talking include the Joker's response to a photograph of Vicki Vale: "I'm of a mind to make some mookie." Here, the Joker reveals himself as the debased white man subject to primal whims. However, the Joker also becomes animalistic by abandoning language altogether. After killing Gotham's reining crime lord, the Joker notices Batman's front page appearance. The Joker adopts a pose of intense menace and, smiling, mutters, "Wait till they get a load of me," which he punctuates with widening lips, rounding eyes, and incoherent grunts. This is one of a few scenes in the movie in which we see the Joker devolve into an animal. But Nicholson
also resorts to blatant minstrelsy in his performance of the Joker. For example, when he burns one crime boss’s face with his high-voltage joy buzzer, he mimics the moves of Jolson while singing a line from the fin de siècle ragtime tune, “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.”

If we accept that Nicholson’s Joker is a parody of blackface, his portrayal in Batman (1989) suggests that his character is emblematic of a more complex tension of racial discourse in Late Capitalism. This tension recalls the anxiety of racial purity in the work of artists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century described by Kay Dian Kriz. This work took the form of parody and caricature, the “black humor” of artists like John Boyne (“A Meeting of Connoisseurs” [1807]), James Gillray (“Philanthropic Consolations After the Loss of the Slave Bill” [1796]), and Richard Newton (“What a Nice Bit!” [1796]). Most of this work was parody of racial intermixing and blacks themselves. However, in “A Meeting of Connoisseurs,” Boyne parodied the hypocrisy of attempts to clearly demarcate the races. While the physiognomist Lavater and the anatomist Petrus Camper attempted to rigorously demonstrate the superiority of the white race, artists such as Boyne responded with parody, for example, by depicting the body of Apollo (the epitome of Greek Platonic beauty and the racial ideal approximated by whites) being modeled by a black man.

What these scientific attempts and parodies had in common was a serious engagement with racial intermixing. In particular, the artists parodied the colonies of the West Indies. By way of contrast, another artist, James Gillray, published an engraving in 1791 entitled “Barbarities in the West Indies” depicting a West Indies English slave driver boiling a slave in molten sugar. The depiction was inspired by a written text read before English Parliament in 1791 that described a similar incident. The engraving was contemporary to a women’s movement in England that critiqued the corrupt system in the West Indies. The originators of the movement mobilized the campaign by linking the production of white sugar with the blood, sweat, tears, and flesh of the African slaves who produced it, a campaign meant to shock as much as to disgust by its suggestions of cannibalism of black bodies and contamination of pure sugar by unclean slave labor. Gillray’s depiction was then perhaps not so much a pro-abolitionist engraving as potentially a satire of abolitionism. Kriz noted, for example, the “large eyes, thick lips, prominent jaw, and thick body associated with most brutish stereotypes of Africans” (115). The engraving then is a commentary less on the exploitation of slaves than on the future of the colonies and an expression of anxiety regarding miscegenation:

Seen in this light, Barbarities provokes a question that is almost the inverse of one posed by Boyne’s print (can a rude black sweeper transplanted to Britain aspire to be a fit model for a Greek god?): would the corruption of the West Indian plantation system produce Englishmen who were so depraved that they assumed the debased, animalized forms of the very “savages” they brutalized? (Kriz 115)

The Joker in Batman (1989) is an updating of this hysteria regarding miscegenation for the modern city. Instead of the European colonialist who ran the risk of being degraded by contact with slaves, the jive-talking Joker with his pimp suit represents the white man who has been corrupted by urban blacks. Thus, there are implications for the meaning of urban space in the figure of the Joker. Nicholas Blomley described modern urban surveys as extensions of the colonial impulse to seize, parcel, and control the land of indigenous people. The constantly shifting boundaries of gentrification in American cities are actually the legacy of colonialism, with longstanding predominantly African-American communities of the inner city representing a new kind of “native” for colonization. The grotesque Joker becomes the intersection of various racial discourses, not just cultural and biological anxieties, but also those represented in the larger spatial structure of the city through gentrification. The Joker becomes the symbol for the confrontation of communities along racial lines in the spatial production of the modern city. An excellent example of this symbolism is the showdown between the Joker and Batman in his Batwing in downtown Gotham. The emergence of the Joker in the downtown area suggests that the late 1980s city is deeply invested in the geospatial parceling of the landscape and the character would have appeared particularly obscene to gentrifiers rehabilitating the inner city after years of post-war urban flight.

Disfigurement, Aesthetics, and Being a Freak

Nicholson’s rendition of the Joker is complex and cannot merely be dismissed as a rechauffe of blackface for the
jilted age of neoliberalism. Rather, it deserves a deeper reading. For instance, despite his intense egotism, Nicholson's Joker chooses to wear makeup when he meets Ms. Vale at the Fluggenheim Museum. He seems to have a sense of shame regarding his disfigured appearance and whiteness. At the museum, the Joker proclaims himself the world's first fully functional homicidal artist and invites Vale to join him in creating a "new aesthetic" of which his girlfriend Alicia (whom he has disfigured with acid to resemble himself) is "a sketch really" and like him "a living work of art" (Hamm, Skaaren, and Kane). Disgusted, Vale then throws water in his face, and he mimics the Wicked Witch in The Wizard of Oz (1939), only to reveal himself as bone white beneath the makeup with traces of dark flesh colored paint. Furthermore, whenever Nicholson's Joker appears on TV, he wears makeup. He goes on the air to bait the city with twenty million dollars in cash, appealing to Gotham's basest desires and intoning, "Commence au festival." The Joker declares Batman the real enemy of Gotham and taunts him: "I have taken off my makeup. Let's see if you can take off yours" (Hamm, Skaaren, and Kane). This is a lie: the Joker is wearing makeup.

Two elements are at play in this characterization of the Joker. First, the Joker refers to a "new aesthetic" of disfigurement as beauty that disrupts the original Neoplatonic ideal that beauty and symmetry are somehow associated with moral goodness. This was specifically the paradigm under which Lavater toiled to prove the moral superiority of whites to blacks (Kriz 80). Nicholson's portrayal of the Joker disrupts this Neoplatonic ideal by evoking a "new aesthetic" which prefigures Ledger's Joker and his reappropriation of the stigma "freak.

Second, in his parody of blackface, Nicholson performs a redoubled blackface: blackface over whiteface. Again, this performance suggests some degree of shame associated with not only disfigurement but whiteness. Darwin noted that the whiteness of early European explorers unsettled indigenous Africans who viewed it as obscene. In Chapter 19 of The Descent of Man on "Secondary Sexual Characters of Man," Darwin described how North Africans "knitted their brows and seemed to shudder" at the white skin of one explorer. Similarly, he reported that West Africans admired "a very black skin more than one of a lighter tint. But their horror of whiteness may be attributed...partly to the belief held by most Negroes that demons and spirits are white, and partly to their thinking it a sign of ill-health."

In contrast, Sander Gilman described how the Renaissance belief in the visibility of insanity in human characteristics was grounded in the work of religious scholars of the Middle Ages who associated madness with the color black (an association that is also Biblical) (Seeing 2-6). The blackness of insane bodies became a metaphorical blackening of the soul and that was also inscribed in the notion of "black bile" in the theory of bodily humors.

Thus, from the perspective of race, there is no simple reading of Jack Nicholson's performance, which resurrects many of the attributes and mannerisms of early twentieth century minstrelsy, but which also grapples with the slippery notion of the arbitrary interplay between blackness and whiteness as representing good and evil. If anything, Nicholson's masks upon masks merely reveal a postmodern nihilism and lack of true authenticity in the character, a state of being everyone and no one simultaneously that would be pushed to the limits by Ledger's performance when the Joker blends in under the guise of everyday institutional workers. In some respects, the Joker in Batman (1989) stands for an endless spiraling between conceptions of black and white, and at best a confused equivocation of racial identity, much as Kriz noted of Boyne's eighteenth century parody "A Meeting of Connoisseurs," "that caricature is a site where the assertion of the incommensurability of the black body and the white ideal can be questioned" (94). (Still, Boyne's was the exception, not the rule.) Finally, the Joker's appearance is a reference to the "nightmare aesthetic" of German cinema and Conrad Veidt. The fact that this reference gets conflated with the performance of minstrelsy reinforces the possibility for a more complex, ambiguous reading of Nicholson's Joker.

Finally, Nicholson's Joker may not be black or white, but he is at times Irish. As Romero before him, Nicholson's ancestry is appropriate for the reigning social anxiety of the time. The suggestion that the Joker is an Irish hoodlum hearkens back to the distinction between white and black Irish in nineteenth century America when Irish elites attempted to blend in with white aristocrats and frowned upon their black brethren (Gilman, Making 91-98).
The Irish pug nose was associated with being black and needed to be remedied, a nose typified by Nicholson. The Joker embodies the anxiety surrounding racial mixing of the late-twentieth century American inner city by referring to an earlier hysteria regarding miscegenation that coalesced around the dehumanized urban black Irish. Thus, during the parade scene in which the Joker prepares to gas the hapless citizens of Gotham, he clearly pantomimes Al Jolson, crooning in "rappish rhymes": "And now it's time for: Who do you trust? Hubba hubba hubba! Money money money! Who do you trust?" but then he punctuates this by saying with Irish inflection, "Now comes the part where I relieve you, the little people, of the burden of your frail and useless lives. But as my plastic surgeon always said, if you've gotta go, go with a smile!" (Hamm, Skaaren, and Kane).

The Dark Knight (2008)

Whereas Nicholson's Joker is characterized by avarice and lust, these traits are totally out of sync with Heath Ledger's depiction of the Joker in The Dark Knight (2008). Coming nearly twenty years after Nicholson's performance, Ledger's Joker exhibited total disregard for worldly things, being driven instead by a diabolical desire to wreak havoc, death and chaos, and of course by irrational hatred for Batman. Furthermore, while Jack Nicholson's performance is undeniably a parody of minstrelsy, Ledger's quieter, creepier sociopath is more difficult to gauge as a commentary on racial tensions. The scene in The Dark Knight in which the Joker, a white man, puts a jackknife in a black gangster's mouth and asks him, "Do you wanna know how I got this smile on my face?" just before murdering him (we do not see how he actually does this) is particularly troubling (J. Nolan, C. Nolan, Goyer, and Kane). A white man performs violence on a black man, a depiction of hate crime. What makes the Joker so special that this passes for entertainment?

In The Dark Knight, the Joker has evolved into a character embodying chaotic evil that is larger than life. Hence, he is an equal opportunity hater. He hates everyone and kills indiscriminately. Furthermore, the paranoia that he embodies is no longer the innocent specter of nuclear annihilation, nor is it even the renewed eighteenth century hysteria regarding the defilement of the pure white body that plays out in the inner city, but rather, what Jean Baudrillard referred to as a metastasizing of cancerous elements within global culture, that which "retains a quality of irreducible alterity," in a word, "terror" or "anarchy." Thus the specter has become equal opportunity, too.

There are still some elements of Ledger's rendition that suggest the paranoia surrounding miscegenation and the degradation of the white race continues. For example, the Joker is still dressed in the purple jacket of a pimp and armed only with knives like a common street thug. Again, as with Nicholson, Ledger's Joker frequently reverts to inhuman grunting. (Ferguson described how nineteenth century medicine conflated the ability to speak with being human.) Furthermore, the cinematography emphasize the Joker's animalistic qualities. Multiple low angle shots make the Joker seem menacing and powerful - for example, in the street scene where he bellows, "Hit me!" as Batman bears down on him on his motorcycle (J. Nolan et al.). In an interrogation scene, the Joker is lit from the front, which casts his white face against a black background and reflects an evil gleam in his eye, making him appear like a beady-eyed animal in a cage. But Ledger's performance of the Joker in The Dark Knight no longer overtly conjures minstrelsy suggesting that evil no longer has a racial connotation. Humanity under globalization is one world and one race. The villain is an equal opportunity hater who is just as likely to kill a black man as he is an Asian man and who is himself liable to pop up in any form. This point suggests a deeper physiognomy to be assessed, not necessarily that of race, but rather of insanity.

Before moving on, however, it is important to note that the connection drawn between physiognomy and insanity in The Dark Knight does have a racial component. Thomas Holt concluded that "blackness" has been appropriated by a system of marketing as a signifier in the twenty-first century, an icon for sales (105-115). This symbolic violence is much more deeply pernicious than overt violence because we live in a post-Fordist economy of symbols, a symbolic economy so serious that black inner city kids kill one another for a pair of brand name sneakers. In the case of The Dark Knight, the very notion of racial representation and the chance to be killed with impartiality is a form of symbolic violence. As Holt noted, "Already evident in those earlier black sports figures was the tendency to turn them into texts on which the nation could work out its tensions and anxieties - much like the work of minstrel shows did in the antebellum era. The articulation of race and consumption was merely emergent.
in the Johnson-Louis era, however. In the selling of Michael Jordan it has come full circle" (108). According to Holt, racism morphs into something completely different in the twenty-first century, a quantity leveled at a new global underclass that occupies the highly stratified world-cities defined by Saskia Sassen. Racism itself becomes an equal opportunity hater directed at those who do not have the capital to participate in the world system. In Ledger’s portrayal, the physiognomies and mannerisms are not so much a parody of minstrelsy as was the case with Nicholson. Rather, Ledger’s portrayal is a portrait of mental disease, of insanity and irrationality. The figure of the new Joker does not encapsulate so much the gentrifying inner city of 1980s era neoliberal economic policy but rather the anxiety associated with the world-cities of full-blown globalization in the early twenty-first century and the paranoid specter of a seething multitude and irrational underclass.

No wonder then, while imaging the Joker’s face, Bruce Wayne's butler Alfred recalls a tale about his military expedition through Burma and unsuccessful attempts to trade with natives that ended in robbery, but robbery with no material end in mind. He concludes that Wayne perhaps also does not understand the Joker: "Some men aren't looking for something logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn" (J. Nolan et al.). Alfred takes his leave, and Wayne is left in the Batcave alone to contemplate the Joker’s face, a low angle shot being imaged (ostensibly for facial structure, for a physiognomic finger print, through geometric segmentation). The emphasis is on identification and isolation. Furthermore, the Joker does not die at the end of this movie, but instead is left hanging upside down, laughing, guarded by heavy weaponry, after Batman assures him that he will spend the rest of his life in "a padded cell" (J. Nolan et al.). The Joker, like madness itself, cannot be annihilated, but he can be isolated, diagnosed, and compelled to enter a therapeutic discourse.

"A Freak Like Me!"

Ledger’s Joker (not Nicholson's) is accused repeatedly of being a freak and even assumes that he is one himself. A seasoned cop can tell the difference between punks who need a lesson and "freaks" like the Joker "who just enjoy it." The Joker orders his henchmen to cut a rival gangster into pieces because he called the Joker a "freak." The self-adoption of the identity of "freak" immediately assumes a division between two groups, creating a generalized category of deformed "Other," which supports the idea that Ledger's Joker is a spokesperson for a new international underclass estranged from wealth in the world system. The interrogation scene with Batman exemplifies this point, when the Joker responds to Batman's claim that he is "garbage who kills for money" by saying "you're just a freak like me!" (J. Nolan et al.).

The title "freak" also has the connotation of a medical malady that deviates from an assumed norm; thus, the Joker himself is like a malady to be identified, isolated and treated. Again, the Joker is compelled to participate in a therapeutic discourse in the sense of Foucault, and thus he does not die at the end of the film. When Batman emphatically assures the Joker that he will spend the rest of his life "in a padded cell," he is attempting to introduce the Joker into the discourse of modern psychotherapy. Furthermore, the scene in which Batman images the face of the Joker looking for some physiognomic fingerprint is an excellent example of the Victorian impulse to render the invisible visible, which Foucault suggested manifests in the modern call for psychotherapy. Batman uses surveillance technology in the attempt to identify some fundamental characteristic that defines insanity, but that defies observation. Ironically, Ledger's Joker (as did Catwoman in the 1966 Batman) also has a monomaniacal obsession with revealing Batman's true identity, seeing his true face, to the exclusion of all else (money, power, sex, etc.). The central tension of The Dark Knight is inherently one of Foucaultian compulsion to therapeutic discourse for the illumination of pathology, but updated for twenty-first century globalization. Therefore, Ledger’s Joker comes to stand for three things. First, he represents a new global underclass. Second, he embodies the idea that there is some element of this hostile underclass that can be isolated. This element is mental disorders. Unlike Nicholson's performance that parodied minstrelsy, Ledger's performance is a study in mental deterioration. It is no wonder then that, for example, the lines of his face, particularly those of the forehead, are accentuated through lighting and the rough use of makeup. This makes the tension very apparent on the character's face. Again, the Renaissance notion that the insane can be identified by their appearance derives from
the belief during the European Middle Ages in the theory of humors in the body (Gilman, Seeing 5, 226). The influence of this concept can be seen in the sketches of Girolamo Cardano, whose work includes a Renaissance portrait of the prognosticative function of the lines of the forehead in determining insanity - deep lines in the forehead characterized this disorder. The juxtaposition of Cardano's "demented individual" with Ledger's Joker reveals how age-old assumptions about the appearance of the insane are deeply ingrained even in twenty-first century popular culture conceptions. Third, because the Joker sports a "Glasgow smile," he evokes a fear of the intertwining of this insane underclass with the prevalence of organized crime and gangsters that stand as a shadow government and foil to developed nations. Mike Davis points out that over half the world's population now lives in urban areas, but not like the first world experience of the city. Rather, the majority of cities are slums where gang violence is a real threat to the authority of government. The Joker's Glasgow smile is a physiognomic reminder of the interconnection of underclass, insanity, and crime.

The Joker Within Networks
Randolf Dreyer was deeply disturbed to see the Joker don the uniform of a nurse before blowing up a hospital in The Dark Knight. He concluded that it "is almost as if in researching for the role, Heath Ledger went online and searched how to know if someone is a sociopath" (Dreyer 81). Clearly, Dreyer was disturbed because a nurse epitomizes therapeutic empathy, but the Joker, who fits the profile of a sociopath, relies on a façade of empathy and superficial charm to manipulate others. Thus, he is also branded a "terrorist" by District Attorney Harvey Dent (Two-Face), an obvious evocation of post-9/11 politics (J. Nolan et al.). However, Ledger's Joker is a shapeshifter who adopts the ordinary faces of a petty criminal, a cop, and a nurse to kill, which makes the character a metonym for institutions and their evils. In fact, it is as if the Joker in The Dark Knight has read and understood Bruno Latour by embedding himself within the discourses that he studies, as an actor within a network, only to pervert Latour's meaning by introducing chaos. In so doing, the Joker, like Batman, who uses technology to augment his human abilities, has also made himself into a cyborg, but one that draws on human networks and institutions to augment his strength. Donna J. Haraway described cyborgs as liminal creatures that exist in the interstices of society on the boundaries between identities. Joker certainly exists at the intersection between various institutional roles. Furthermore, especially in the case in which he is dressed as a (female) nurse, he draws attention to the feminization of the workforce that Haraway described as part and parcel of the "Homework Economy" (166).

As a social chameleon, Ledger's Joker is more of a creature of networks than the previous two incarnations, but also a cyborg who draws on the strength of human institutions to rival Batman. Furthermore, Heath Ledger's performance of the Joker as a villain within human networks and institutions is the natural culmination of the Joker's original background story. We have come full circle to "The Man Behind the Red Hood" (1951) in which the Joker was an estranged laboratory assistant and criminal mastermind. Recall that Alan Moore updated this backstory in "The Killing Joke" (1988), which was highly influential on Tim Burton's vision, and in which the Joker is not only a mere chemical factory worker but also the victim of a leaderless crime ring. However, in The Dark Knight, the Joker is not just a mere laboratory employee. Rather, he is any institutional actor who perpetuates malfeasance through participation in a system of evil, which is what Hannah Arendt referred to as the "banality of evil," the routinization of evil deeds through the distribution of blame within a large network, the result of the ethical myopia of specialization. Indeed, this may be a case for Ledger's Joker as representing not chaotic evil, but rather evil-for-others in his attempts to expose institutional hypocrisy.

Conclusion
We have seen how the Joker comes to embody a variety of social fears each time the character is updated in cinema. In Batman (1966), he represented the specter of nuclear annihilation. In Batman (1989), the Joker absorbs anxiety about the degradation of racial purity as a result of contact with slaves and indigenous people, particularly as a transplantation of eighteenth century colonialism into the inner cities. In The Dark Knight (2008), he embodies the paranoid fears of a new urban elite class being overwhelmed by the emergent class of poor, immigrant "service workers" in new global cities. This emphasis on identification and isolation regarding the Joker within a
Foucaultian therapeutic discourse in The Dark Knight underscored this theme of irrational underclass. Focusing on the social construction of the Joker is also particularly timely given the emerging debate surrounding racial profiling, the criminalization of black youth, and police violence in American cities such as Ferguson, Missouri. Television has a lasting impact on how Americans interpret social categories like race (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli); more than ever, it is crucial that we understand the intertextuality of racialized images in TV, news media, and Hollywood. The Joker is offered as an exemplar.

In each case, we saw how the physiognomic attributes of the actors reflected reigning social tensions. Ledger’s Joker was also an example of networked evil, a chameleon that adopts the persona of everyday institutional identities drawing attention to the ways in which Arendt’s “banality of evil” arises in modern institutions. Indeed, the Joker as a symbol of urban anxieties in the late 1980s, and later anxieties related to the crises of global cities in the 2000s recalls the relationship between the Joker and “anomie” in a postmodern age. Darren Marks states: As Grant Morrison’s Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (1989) asserts, the Joker stands like the character in Larkin’s poem, ”Church Going,” from which the title takes its subtitle. In Larkin’s poem, the narrator stands in confusion, seeking order as found in religion, while understanding that such things “our compulsions meet” and are, as such, chimera but comforting nonetheless (34). At the end of the poem, the only certainty is death and our desire to find wisdom in this serious house is made pallid by the reality of anomie. For Morrison, the Joker is the poor unfortunate whose hyper-sanity prevents him for seeing the cosmic joke for what it is...The Joker is so sane that the usual polarities or Larkin’s “separations of difference” fail at every point. The Joker is non-duality in essence, all and no-thing. The Joker is anomie.

Or, as Arris Quinones put it in his thorough overview of the comic book origins of the Joker, "It’s one of two rules in the Batman universe: Batman can never kill, and Joker’s full origin must always stay a mystery. The instant Batman kills is the instant our hero falls, and the second we truly understand the Joker, that’s the second he becomes less scary because we always fear what we don’t understand.” Quinones adds “that over the years in multiple comics the Joker hints that his origin is hazy, even to himself” and here he cites The Killing Joke. In the recent updates, the Joker always gets the last laugh, which is because, according to Sean Treat, "Joker/Batman are two faces of the same cynically intersubjective lawlessness." Treat interprets the "Post-9/11 Superhero Zeitgeist" in terms of Zizek’s observation that in Late Capitalism we deny the commonly held cynicism that works against belief in ideology. We instead continue to pantomime belief for the sake of others. As a result, "contemporary superhero-worship favors more violent, morally ambiguous Super-Antiheroes who are flawed or conflicted dystopian cyborgs” that includes "the all-too-human Nietzschean Batman [who] uses intimidation and technology to compensate for mortal frailties” (Treat 105). Essentially, as Terrill earlier observed, we are apathetic and in need of the schizoid Batman to make hard choices, thus rendering Batman and Joker two sides of the same coin. The jouissance we claim is a freedom to passivity, but we "should have sympathy for the devil, since the Joker’s grotesqueries expose our indifferent dependency upon systemic banalities of capitalistic evil” (Terrill 107), which recalls Dreyer’s final thought that we applaud as much for the Joker as for Batman.

The answer to the question of whether or not Batman and his nemesis, the Joker, could have been the same person lies as much in the fact that they are both "dystopian cyborgs" - Batman in the sense that he utilizes technology as a means to augment his strength and the Joker as a networked being who relies on chaotic crescendos and flashmobs to do his dirty work - as in the fact that they both exhibit human agency - choice. They simply make opposite choices. The visage of the Joker is cause for reflection on what we consider to be degraded or subhuman - a “freak” - and how we interpret what is insane and Other in the twenty-first century. If making a choice determines humanity, then the Joker has the last laugh after all.

Works Cited


Dreyer, Randolf. "Clap If You Believe in Batman The Dark Knight Christopher Nolan (Director)." Perspectives in Psychiatric Care, 45.1 (2009): 80-81.


—. Seeing the Insane. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.


Ross, Andrew. "Ballots, Bullets, or Batmen: can cultural studies do the right thing?" Screen, 31.1 (1990): 26-44.


The Story Behind "The Man Who Laughs." Produced by Bret Wood. Written by John Soister and Bret Wood. Kino
Video, 2003. DVD.

**DETAILS**

**Subject:** Actors; Books; Cybernetics; Capital punishment; Graphic novels; Motion picture directors & producers

**Location:** United States--US

**People:** Latour, Bruno

**Publication title:** Americana : The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present; Hollywood

**Volume:** 13

**Issue:** 2

**Publication year:** 2014

**Publication date:** Fall 2014

**Publisher:** Americana: The Institute for the Study of American Popular Culture

**Place of publication:** Hollywood

**Country of publication:** United States, Hollywood

**Publication subject:** Sociology

**Source type:** Scholarly Journals

**Language of publication:** English

**Document type:** Journal Article

**ProQuest document ID:** 1700502149

**Document URL:** https://search.proquest.com/docview/1700502149?accountid=14166

**Copyright:** Copyright Americana: The Institute for the Study of American Popular Culture Fall 2014

**Last updated:** 2015-08-02

**Database:** Social Science Premium Collection