The heart of the cultural system is what I call the great storytelling process. From childhood onward, stories make the invisible forces of life visible by creating images of people representing ideas and social types, assigning some fate to each. Fictional and dramatic stories show how things work; news and documentary stories provide selected glimpses of how things are supposed to be. (1, pp 19, 20)

It has been argued that media portrayals of mental illness are grounded in lay understandings of madness and images of the mad man or woman (1–4). This hypothesis may be unfamiliar but is consistent with analyses of mass media depictions of persons with a mental illness, most of which emphasize crime and violence (5–7), unpredictability (8–10), and social incompetence (2, 11). Film is the great storytelling medium, yet few have studied how madness is depicted in film (4). Extant studies merely described aspects of the content (8, 12). To facilitate effective destigmatization, studies need to show how a portrayal was assembled (13) and placed in its institutional and cultural-historical context (3, 4).

Recent analyses of media show that depicting someone as mad positions the person as “other than human” (14–16). “Othering” is done using language and images familiar from use in previous depictions of mad men and women, creating intertextual echoes in the present image (4, 17). For example, the sheer consistency of media depictions has established mad as a “membership categorization device” (18, 19); those categorized as mad are expected to be violent, unpredictable, or antisocial. If or when they act in those ways, the categorization appears to be confirmed as valid and explanatory. Such resources are tremendously useful for media personnel and journalists.

In this column we report our analysis of the construction of a significant movie character, the Joker in The Dark Knight (20). At the time of writing, The Dark Knight was the second highest grossing movie of all time (21). Oscar winner Heath Ledger, who played the Joker, described him as a “psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy” (22). The president and publisher of DC Comics said, “I keep coming back to the way he [the Joker] physically incarnates madness” (23). We analyzed the portrayal, identifying technical, semiotic, and discursive resources that helped construct the Joker’s madness for viewers. Our primary goal in showing how the Joker’s madness was constructed is to create an understanding that could inform destigmatization efforts. For that reason we highlight processes, cultural resources, and images that need to be addressed to alter the depictions and related stigma.

Methods

To capture both the richness of the depictions and the processes of their production, we used a discourse analytic method informed by the understanding that producers aim to attract and hold viewers’ attention (24). Viewer understandings of characters depend on what they say, what they do, their appearance, and how other characters respond to them. The settings, shot selections, music, lighting, and editing shape how such information is presented to viewers (25). Viewers also interpret, or engage with,
characters, situations, and events by drawing on common discursive resources (26–28), but may fail to appreciate how those resources contribute to the character (28).

Through repeated, systematic viewings of The Dark Knight, we identified elements signifying madness or mental illness, whether positive or negative. To facilitate the analysis, we summarized the actions and relationships of the Joker in the storyline. We began with the Joker’s language and appearance and what other characters said about or to him. Earlier work by two of the authors (RN, JC) identified techniques used in a prime-time drama to enhance the construction of mental illness as dangerous (13), including appearance, music and sound effects, lighting, language, shot selection and editing, horror conventions, and intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to how meanings accumulate and depictions cross-reference other images and texts (26, 27, 29, 30), in this context, text refers to the entirety of a book, film or other portrayal. Page references are to the shooting script in Byrne (31).

We analyzed how the various devices, in context of the storyline, helped portray the Joker as mad. The assessment of those contributions presented here is the consensus of all members of the research team. Throughout, we have sought to identify intertextual echoes and show how they enriched the depiction (29). Rather than attempt to canvass the entire film, we chose to discuss two key sequences: that in which viewers first saw the Joker and the last in which he appeared.

Results

Technical, Semiotic, and Discursive Resources

Language
Throughout the film, characters, including the Joker himself, referred to the Joker in pejorative terms: “freak” (four times), “clown” (four times), “terrorist” (twice), “strange” (once), “mad man” (once), “mad dog” (once), and “a dog chasing cars” (once). There were also references to “madness” (twice), and the Joker spoke of madness as his own level to which he brought “Gotham’s white knight.” An accomplice was described as “a paranoid schizophrenic . . . the kind of mind that the Joker attracts.” Others said he “cannot be reasoned with” and that he was a “murdering psychopath” and an “agent of chaos.”

Appearance
The Joker consistently appears disheveled, with unkempt, long green hair and messy clown makeup. His mouth is outlined in red that extends to cover scars at both corners, and he makes abnormal mouth and tongue movements (fly catcher’s tongue). O’Sullivan, the movie’s prosthetics artist, described the effect as “a smile or a leer” (31, p 36). The Joker appears briefly wearing a clown mask or nurse’s uniform, but his usual apparel is outlandish; costume designer Lindy Hemming described it as “retro, sort of foppish” in “horrible vile colors” (31, p 40). As the movie progresses, his appearance becomes more unconventional; his hair seems greener and he acquires a bright purple suit. The changes in appearance mirror his increasingly unpredictable behaviors.

Behavior
The Joker’s behavior is characterized by apparently anomic violence and destructiveness: shooting, setting fires, and creating lethal explosions. Although he appears to lose self-control only toward the end, his opponents find his behavior totally unpredictable. The head of the makeup department, Robb-King, described the Joker as “very powerful because he had so many people under his control” (31, p 36). The Joker enacts the mad-dog epithet by shaking his head out the window of a car after blowing up the Major Crimes Unit (MCU) and by snarling as he joins his pack of dogs attacking Batman. There are flashes of apparently suicidal behavior, such as when he provokes Batman in the cell at the MCU and when he holds a gun to his head while Harvey Dent’s hand is on the trigger. At times he displays self-talk and perseverates, repeating “hit me” while Batman races toward him on the Bat-pod (31, p 167). The Joker displays a labile, unpredictable affect often inconsistent with his circumstances (e.g., laughing when threatened with death), although his affect is consistently elevated in the presence of fires and destruction.

Music
In creating the music for the Joker, composer Hans Zimmer used “two notes that clash beautifully with each other” when played on the cello (20). It was intended to be “provocative, something that people could truly hate” and arose from experiments with razorblades and wires (20). The director, Nolan, called them “recordings of really complete insanity” (20).

Technical Devices (Table 1)
Jump-cutting was used throughout, adding to the sense of uncertainty or instability by distorting and disrupting the scenes. In the bank heist sequence, the brief disjointed shots of the different clowns add a sense of unpredictability, disguising who is
the Joker. A compelling example of intercutting is the rapid shifting between the boatloads of hostages who are threatened with death and the intimacy of the Joker’s alteration with Batman. Tension is added because viewers know that the Joker plans to destroy the two boats. As illustrated in the analysis of sequences in the following section, certain shot selections evoke a sense of menace, strangeness, and power.

**Intertextuality** The clearest example of intertextuality (26, 27, 29, 30) is provided by the “mad dog” theme, which is supported by language, appearance, and behavior. A less obvious example is the Joker’s face paint, which, according to costume designer Lindy Hemming, came together after she had seen the “strangely menacing image” of Francis Bacon’s painting “The Screaming Pope” (31, p 40).

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**Table 1. Definition of Technical Terms (13)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edits</th>
<th>Intercutting</th>
<th>Repeated cuts between concurrent actions or storylines within a narrative; increases the pace, provides information from one situation important in understanding another, builds suspense and climaxes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jump-cutting</td>
<td>A shot does not match the preceding one; experienced as a disruption of space and/or time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shots</td>
<td>Point of view</td>
<td>The camera is situated very close to a character’s position; the resulting shot approximates what the character would see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long shot</td>
<td>A framing that presents an entire object or person, placing it or the person in a physical setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close-up</td>
<td>A framing, conventionally from the shoulders/neck up, a close view of an object/person, filling the frame and separating the object/person from the surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium close-up</td>
<td>A framing in which the head and lower chest is visible; includes close surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low-angle</td>
<td>The camera is lower than the filmed object/person and increases perceived strength and power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High-angle</td>
<td>The camera is higher than the filmed object/person and increases perceived vulnerability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Analysis of Sequences**

A bank heist is the opening sequence of the film. Five men, two on the roof and three coming through the front door, all wearing clown masks, rob a “mob bank” (31, p 70). They introduce the Joker through dialogue: “Why do they call him the Joker?” “I heard he wears makeup.” “Makeup?” “To scare people. War paint.” “. . . guess the Joker’s as crazy as they say.” Though not “introduced,” the Joker is first seen from behind, unidentified, standing on a street corner, dressed quite conventionally in a dark wrinkled suit, with shoulders slumped, and holding a clown mask facing the camera. He is not recognized by the two “clowns” he joins in an SUV before they cock their weapons and march into the bank.

During the sequence it is clear that the Joker had instructed that the clowns be killed during or after the heist, which suggests a puppet master behind the robbery and adds confusion because viewers do not know which, if any, of the clowns might be the Joker. There is a sense of chaos and threat that is intensified by jump-cutting between the roof, the street, the bank interior, and the vault.

After the other clowns have been killed, the last clown menacingly approaches the wounded bank manager, who is seen against high-contrast reflections lying prone and defenseless on the floor. The long shot starts from a high-angle, giving the frowning clown’s point of view (POV). The bank manager defiantly asks, “What do you believe, huh?” before the clown places a grenade in his mouth. The gratuitous sadism of the gesture is quickly followed by a switch to the manager’s POV, a low-angle, close-up shot of the attacker. With a crescendo of the Joker’s signature music, he removes his mask, revealing worn, sweated, roughly applied, and flaky face paint, including red lipstick (31, p 40). He has unevenly black-rimmed eyes and prominent scars at the corners of his mouth, which further distort an exaggerated smile. The face is shadowed and backlit, and as he responds to the bank manager while removing the mask, his voice deepens considerably: “Whatever does not kill you only makes you . . . stranger.”

The Joker’s final scene begins from Batman’s POV, a long shot of the Joker standing before a darkened window surrounded by a pack of Rottweilers. As the dogs are unleashed to attack Batman, the music increases in intensity, and soon the Joker also attacks, joining the dogs with unrestrained fury. As he leaps at his prey, he snarls and barks, indistinguishable from the Rottweilers in a frenzy of violence. He appears less sharply defined (more grainy) with his mouth agape as he rushes to attack. Tension and
confusion are heightened by intercutting, low intensity lighting, and discordant music.

The fight ends with the Joker on all fours restraining Batman. When Batman throws the Joker from the building, the Joker giggles wildly. Using his grapple, Batman catches the Joker’s leg and gradually pulls him up until they are nose to nose. The camera shot slowly rights the hanging Joker, who then appears to be defying gravity. Clearly he remains inverted as his hair, clothes, and arms fall upward from the viewer’s perspective. High-contrast lighting intensifies the purple of his suit and the green of his hair. The audience hears high-pitched and wild laughter as the scene climaxes after the Joker says, “Madness is like gravity. All it takes is a little push” (31, p 230).

Discussion

The perceptually seamless interplay of the six main production devices that were deployed to portray the Joker as mad vitalized the constructed madness. Mental health professionals should be alert to how that interplay accentuates the construction of madness.

The depiction of the Joker as a mad dog is a particular example of the interplay between the elements that contributed to this strong portrayal of madness. Comments by both the Joker and others identified him as a mad dog and were reinforced by visual cues. “Mad dog” is primarily an intertextual concept in that, for example, it references an actual gangster, Mad Dog Coll (1930s), countless other senselessly violent men, and the eponymous rabid dogs, thus adding layers to the construction of the Joker as wild, an animal, and devoid of empathy.

The Joker’s depiction as not normal or human further enhances this constructed madness by synergies between the use of language, appearance, behavior, and intertextual elements including mad dogs and “The Screaming Pope.” Examples of language include “freak,” “strange,” and “he cannot be reasoned with.” Appearance includes his clown face, makeup, “war paint,” unkempt green hair, abnormal mouth and tongue movements, and “retro-foppish” clothes in “horribly vile” colors that set him apart. Suggestive behavior includes laughing when threatened with death, being unconstrained by social rules and expectations, cavalierly disregarding the consequences of his behavior, absence of fear, and destructive, animalistic actions. His actions show him as beyond social controls in seeking his own malignant ends. Apart from his identification as a mad dog and the effect of Bacon’s “Screaming Pope” on his look, there are hints of earlier incarnations of the Joker as a hugely damaged being from DC Comics and the earlier film Batman (32).

Taken together, the “mad dog” and “not normal” aspects of the portrayal strongly imply that the Joker is mad. Hints of a mental illness, such as talking to himself, setting fires (pyromania), and suicidal behaviors, are less prominent, though consistent with the constructed madness. Disturbingly, those elements are also strongly linked to the Joker’s portrayal as dangerous. His dangerousness is enhanced by discordant and edgy music, intercutting, and POV shots that underline his threatening power, which is confirmed every time others react to him with surprise or terror. Dangerousness also draws heavily on earlier depictions of lethal madmen (8, 33), especially those like Hannibal Lecter (34), who are feared and controlling and always outwit those seeking to restrain them. That last characteristic extends the animal cunning that has long been part of depictions of madness that utilize animal qualities (35). The Joker’s depiction as a fearless predator, unconstrained by social rules and expectations, draws on the same depiction history.

We have shown that the portrayal of the Joker as mad was overdetermined by the six main devices described here. The findings should be understood in light of the following limitations. First, other viewers may not share our interpretation of the components of the character. Second, we did not approach the producers directly for information on their production aims and techniques. Third, because we are using words alone, our work only hints at the rich synergy of the technical and discursive elements described here. Our findings demonstrate, nevertheless, how the Joker was created within this particular instance of “the great storytelling process” (1). Mental health professionals should recognize that, having been constructed this way, the Joker now serves as an intertextual resource for other stigmatizing portrayals. Mental health professionals, therefore, should aim to prevent such stigmatizing portrayals, the first step of which is to understand how these are constructed, and to confront those that rearise.

At the time of submission, the authors reported no competing interests.

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