

Joker: An unenlightening approach to serious problems

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Directed by Todd Phillips; co-written by Phillips and Scott Silver

Joker is the latest film from director Todd Phillips. It tells the “origin story” of the well-known villain from the Batman comics and films.

The film has received a great deal of attention in the press. Critical reception has been polarized, with some critics effusively praising the film while others denounce it as “dangerous,” with some even going so far as to call for its censorship (more on this later). The film’s premiere at the Venice International Film Festival was awarded the Golden Lion, the festival’s highest prize. Meanwhile, the film’s graphic depiction of antisocial violence has led to media speculation that it would inspire mass shooters. Audiences who attended a showing this past weekend were greeted with tightened security or even police presence in theaters.

To be sure, *Joker* tries very hard to distance itself from the sort of big-budget comic book films that have glutted theaters in recent years. The film’s grim atmosphere, its relative lack of cartoonish computer-generated spectacle, and its references to a number of very real and pressing social problems all point to an attempt on the part of the filmmakers to say something serious about the real world.

Nevertheless, it must be said that the filmmakers here have fallen short of a genuine examination of the social crisis in the United States. When one strips away *Joker*’s pseudo-artistic pretensions, one is ultimately left with a deeply confused work that is more a symptom of a rotten social order than a coherent commentary on it.

The year is 1981, and Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix, giving a somewhat mannered and overwrought performance) is a clown-for-hire in Gotham City, a decrepit and run-down metropolis rife with corruption and various forms of literal and metaphorical filth. Heaps of trash line the city sidewalks due to a weeks-long garbage strike. “Super rats” roam the streets. Violence, crime, and cruelty lurk around every corner.

Arthur, who suffers from a neurological disorder that causes him to laugh inappropriately during stressful situations, ekes out a meager existence in the Gotham slums for himself and his mother, Penny (Frances Conroy). He regularly visits a social worker and takes a number of psychiatric medications for his unstable mental state, neither of which seem to do much to help his mood. He is socially isolated and develops an unhealthy obsession with a woman with whom he shares a moment of polite good humor.

His one pleasure in life comes from watching a nightly talk show with host Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro, in a role that clearly references the character played by Jerry Lewis in Martin Scorsese’s 1983 *The King of Comedy*, also starring De Niro). He fantasizes one day sharing the stage with Franklin, whom he sees as a sort of father

figure. Arthur’s dream is to become a stand-up comedian, and he spends much of his free time scribbling incoherent and disturbing jokes in a notepad.

When a group of street youths attack Arthur while he is working as a sign dancer, a co-worker gives him a gun to protect himself from the “animals” in the city. Arthur develops a fixation with the weapon and, while dancing alone in his apartment, fantasizes about shooting people.

When Arthur takes the gun to a performance at a children’s hospital, he is fired from his job. Despondent and hopeless, he rides the subway home only to be attacked by a drunken trio of young investment bankers. He shoots them dead and runs off in a panic before locking himself in a bathroom and performing a bizarre expressionist dance. Violence apparently unlocks a newfound vitality within him; he enters into a relationship (of sorts) with a young woman, Sophie (Zazie Beetz), who lives in his building.

Meanwhile, the killings inspire a violent protest movement within the city, whose participants don clown masks and carry signs saying “Kill the rich.” Self-satisfied billionaire and mayoral candidate Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen) makes inflammatory comments about the protests (“Those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven’t as nothing but clowns”), which only encourages them to grow in size and intensity.

Due to public funding cuts, Arthur is unable to continue his medication and his meetings with the social worker. His life enters a tailspin. His mother’s health deteriorates and she is hospitalized. The police begin to suspect Arthur’s involvement in the subway murders. Arthur’s attempt at stand-up comedy bombs, and a video of him struggling to tell jokes is mocked by Franklin on a segment of his talk show.

Arthur is invited to appear on Franklin’s show, presumably to be ridiculed. Arthur, now totally unhinged, dresses in a clown costume and heads to the television studio. While “kill the rich” protests engulf Gotham in chaos and violence, Arthur, insisting on being called “Joker,” carries a gun onto the Murray Franklin set. Mayhem ensues.

Phillips, who until this film had mainly directed juvenile comedies like *The Hangover* (2009) and *War Dogs* (2016), obviously intended *Joker* to be a more serious and political film. The issues that are touched on here, including vast social inequality, the gutting of social services, the growth of mass unrest, the torturous sense of isolation and alienation experienced by oppressed layers of the population, and the phenomenon of random mass killings, are certainly worthy subjects for artistic investigation.

Yet, these are also highly complicated and difficult social phenomena to work through. Navigating such choppy waters would

require an artist to have a thoroughly worked out social perspective to make sense of things, first of all in his or her own mind, and then through the artistic work itself. Lacking this, he or she would inevitably become a vessel, consciously or not, for conventional or outright reactionary ideas.

Phillips falls quite firmly into the second camp. Rather than attempting to make sense of the social questions he raises, he is content to wallow in a muck of violence, misanthropy, armchair psychology, and contrived “darkness.”

A number of critics have noted the debt that *Joker* owes to the films of director Martin Scorsese, chiefly *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), and the aforementioned *The King of Comedy*, which all clearly had an influence on the style and structure of Phillips’s film. But while Phillips may have turned to Scorsese’s works for their genuinely disturbing qualities or the (muddled and limited) social criticism they contain, he has ended up importing many of Scorsese’s weaknesses into his own film, especially with regards to *Joker*’s unfocused and meandering narrative, its dramatic implausibility, and its unconcealed disgust with all of humanity.

Phillips’s Gotham, like Scorsese’s New York, is a cesspit of vice and corruption. Rich and poor alike are cruel, violent, and predatory. The suffocating bleakness of the city—the mountains of trash and filthy, graffitied walls, its ugliness and coldness—all seem to emanate from the rotten population itself. As Arthur states during the film’s denouement, “Everybody is awful these days. It’s enough to make anyone crazy. ... Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody’s civil anymore. Nobody thinks what it’s like to be the other guy.” The explosion of mass violence at the film’s conclusion seems less an expression of unbearable social tensions and contradictions and more like a preordained fate for this urban hellscape.

No doubt there are some who will respond to the film due to its attempt to depict, in a limited fashion, the intolerable conditions in which so many are forced to live. Elements of social reality find their way into the film, more so than in other works made from comic book material.

However, it is not enough merely to point out that inhumanity and injustice exist in the world or to rub the audience’s nose in the gruesomeness of it all. A serious artist must make some effort at understanding and communicating *why* such conditions exist, how they came into being, what layers of society benefit from their continuance, etc. Such an effort would not content itself with merely subjective psychological explanations for the characters’ antisocial behaviors nor shopworn clichés about “human nature,” but would strive to identify and bring to dramatic life the objective forces that produce such social sicknesses.

Phillips’s approach (and he shares this with Scorsese) is one that gives the appearance of social criticism without saying much of substance. “Everything is awful” is the sibling of “everything is fine”; both lead to the same conclusion that any attempt to change the social order is out of the question. While “left” posers like Michael Moore have been taken in by the film’s “kill the rich” demagoguery (Moore: “When the Joker decides he can no longer take it—yes, you will feel awful. Not because of the minimal blood on the screen, but because deep down, you were cheering him on. ...”), the fact is that the outlook expressed here encourages apathy, rather than outrage, and contributes to the overall deadened feeling one has by the film’s conclusion.

Phillips is, of course, under no obligation to make any particular political statement with his work. But his inability to seriously wrestle with the issues he raises opens the door to a whole host of deeply

reactionary conceptions. The depiction of Gotham brings to mind Donald Trump’s racist diatribe against Baltimore, in which he derided the city as a “disgusting and filthy place” and a “rat and rodent infested mess.” It is taken as a given that masses of protesters will degenerate into a violent and unruly mob at the slightest provocation. Even the denunciations of the wealthy Thomas Wayne resemble more closely the right-wing invective against “the elites” than anything else.

As for Arthur, while the filmmakers have insisted their intention was not to endorse his violent behavior, there is something romanticized about him, a meek “nobody” who becomes a figure of mass admiration through the shedding of blood. The petty bourgeois fascination with criminals and killers has here mutated into something truly diseased.

The film has clearly touched a nerve in the liberal press. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* called the film a “story about nothing” that lacks “contact with the world as we know it.” Peter Bradshaw of the *Guardian* called it “the most disappointing film of the year.” Leah Greenblatt of *Entertainment Weekly*, which broke with custom by releasing the review without a number score, called the film “too volatile” and “too scary,” and essentially argued for its censorship.

One need not be an admirer of the film to be skeptical of such vitriolic criticism from these layers. After all, these very same writers have, in the recent past, heaped gushing praise on comic book films such as *Avengers: Endgame*, *Captain Marvel*, *Black Panther*, and other such exercises in empty-headed corporate mediocrity.

One senses a nervousness among sections of the upper middle class at the prospect of a film reaching wide audiences with the message, however confused, that all is not right in America. Calls for the suppression of artistic works from these layers will become ever more strident in the face of films that present not only the horrors of modern life, but a revolutionary alternative to the existing order.

In any case, whatever Phillips’s intentions, he has failed to make an artistically satisfying or cohesive work. Audiences are in serious need of films that reflect their real conditions of life, that provide a dramatically compelling examination of complex social developments, and that point to ways through which the current social crisis can be resolved. They will find traces of this in *Joker*, but not nearly enough.



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