

## Learning to Feel? An Essay on Death, Sex and Tricksterism in Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019)<sup>1</sup>

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### Kirsi Kanerva

[kirsi.kanerva\[a\]gmail.com](mailto:kirsi.kanerva@gmail.com); [kirsi.kanerva\[a\]helsinki.fi](mailto:kirsi.kanerva[a]helsinki.fi)

Postdoctoral researcher

Department of Cultures

University of Helsinki

### Brief summary:

This essay discusses from a subjective perspective some of the aesthetic and non-aesthetic responses elicited by Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) by concentrating on the following themes: emotions, sexuality and the role of the Joker as a Jungian archetypal trickster.

### Abstract:

In this essay, I will discuss some of the opportunities offered by Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) to engage in an "interpretative play," to use the term of Noël Carroll, with this particular work of art, and consider some of the emotional responses that the movie elicits. The perspective in this free-associative essay is subjective, and the aesthetic and non-aesthetic responses to the film elaborated here concentrate on the following selected themes: emotions and sexuality as part of the Joker's origin story and the Joker's role as an archetypal trickster in the Jungian sense.

### Introduction

In 2019, Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) became the highest-grossing R-rated film in history (Yang 2019). The origin story of the Joker<sup>2</sup> has elicited many discussions on issues of social concern.

Compared to many other Batman-related narratives in the DC universe, *Joker* is more realistic: the Joker figure—or Arthur Fleck (hereafter AF), as he is called in the beginning of the story, before he becomes the Joker—is not an exaggerated, mutant-like (cartoon) character or psychopathic villain in the realm of fantasy. The realistic approach and the tendency to provoke discussion on social matters are certainly key, but not the only factor that has led to audience engagement with this particular work of art. The film’s director Todd Phillips has suggested that the movie is so popular because of the deeper meanings people can discover in it, and it has also been pointed out that the film offers multiple choices for interpretation. (*Looper* 2019; Morrison 2019.)

Indeed, some things are not explicitly spelled out in *Joker*, and non-aesthetic responses elicited by the movie, such as interpretations of various scenes or symbols, are manifold. As spectators interacting with and contemplating works of art, we do enjoy engaging with “interpretive play,” as Noël Carroll has noted, and we consider it rewarding to search and discover hidden themes and meanings or latent structures (Carroll 2001, 6, 9–12, 19). In addition, the movie elicits aesthetic responses as emotional responses produced by events and situations, and the protagonist keeps us engaged with the work (Carroll 2001, 215–218, 222, 225). In this essay, I will discuss—from a fully subjective perspective—some of the opportunities offered by Todd Phillips’s *Joker* to engage in an “interpretive play” with the work and some of the emotional responses that the movie elicits.

Naturally, no matter how subjective this essay intends to be, interpreting a work of art, understanding and explaining it requires that the intentions of its makers are not disregarded. In the case of *Joker*, these intentions may include those of the screenwriter (Todd Phillips & Scott Silver) and the director, but also those of the main actor, Joaquin Phoenix, who improvised in some of the scenes, and the composer, Hildur Guðnadóttir, whose music both creates atmospheres and contributes to the interpretation of some scenes in the movie. These intentions have been further elaborated in different media, as well as in the original screenplay of the movie, which has been made available online. Even if these intentions do constrain other interpretations, they also permit the study of meanings expressed in *Joker* which were not purposefully intended by the filmmakers and which they may not be aware of (as some of our actions can be subconscious, and the degree of consciousness and intentionality in our decision-making may vary). Moreover, the meanings intended by the filmmakers are not necessarily always understood in that way by the audience; the former cannot control interpretations of their work even if they were to explicitly suggest how it should be understood, whereas the latter will inevitably interpret it in light of their knowledge, experiences, norms and value orientations, which they may not necessarily share with the creators. (See, e.g., Carroll 2001, 184–185, 187–188; Johansen 2002, 46–57, 67.)

What follows is a free-associative essay of my own interpretive play, a creative-oriented piece of writing that aims at elaborating some of the responses the movie has elicited—in one of its spectators, at least. The topics considered in this essay are not all-encompassing; the themes that will be discussed include emotions and sexuality as part of the Joker's origin story, and the Joker's role as an archetypal trickster in the movie.

## **Prologue: On Emotions**

AF is represented in the movie as a socially handicapped, isolated person who suffers from some kind of mental illness that requires medication, as he has suffered a traumatic brain injury as a child. He desperately tries to fit in, forcing a fake laugh when he hears other people tell jokes, even if he does not seem to find them funny himself, and always trying to put on a (normative, socially acceptable) happy face. At times he bursts into pathological laughter that he cannot control. At the same time he is painfully well aware that to be accepted by “normal” people, he must behave as if he had no mental illness. There is something childlike in him; he is the good little boy who will bring joy and laughter into the world. In other words, a great deal of his “abnormality” is related to his emotions, which he expresses—or *practices* (Scheer 2012)—in somewhat unconventional ways, or not at all.

**Video 1. Teaser trailer for *Joker*. <https://youtu.be/t433PEQGErc>**

In AF's case, as a consequence of the code of conduct—the happy face—his mother has expected of him, emotions that do not comply with its norms are locked inside. When his boss Hoyt shouts at AF at the beginning of the movie, accusing him of neglecting his work, he keeps smiling and holds everything inside. Shortly thereafter, he tries to release all the bottled-up anger: the camera shows him aggressively kicking heaps of garbage. (The script suggests something animate as the object of his kicks, but this is not portrayed in the movie.) The anger was there already in the office, however. Even if AF doesn't say anything, it leaks out a bit, reflecting on the surface of his body and behind his eyes, even if his face muscles are frozen in a smile. A similar betrayal of emotions—this time also through his face muscles—occurs when he discovers that his mother has concealed knowledge about his real father, and later on *Murray Franklin Show* where the talk show host makes fun of him. At times his irritation finds expression in his legs, which quiver nervously, while his frustration is represented in self-inflicted violence, such as when he hits his head against the wall of a phone booth after being told he is fired.

Even if AF occasionally appears unemotional, he has feelings; he is detached from his inner state. AF's "unemotionality" already as a child is implied when his mental image of his mother as a young Penny Fleck, whom AF sees as he reads her medical report, explains to the doctor that she never heard him crying and how AF has always been "such a happy little boy." The silence and "happiness" mentioned in connection with his abuse could refer to a response mechanism that occurs during traumatic events in which fight-or-flight responses are not possible (see, e.g., Scaer 2014, 13–19); in AF's case, these include his freezing up and being unable to react physically, or becoming dissociated from his body, which may have helped him to be mentally somewhere else, even though he was present during the torture which resulted in brain injury. A similar type of freezing response is shown in the beginning of the film, when AF is beaten up by a bunch of youths. As he lies on the ground in his clown suit and the boys are kicking him, he does not express any signs of pain—or any emotions whatsoever. The only change in his state of being appears to be his breathing; after the boys have run away and AF lies alone on the ground, it sounds slightly heavier. AF is not completely handicapped when it comes to his ability to interpret his inner state but he has difficulties in verbalizing his emotions or expressing them in conventional ways. He is aware that he only has "negative thoughts," but he does not seem to be capable of categorizing his emotions or naming them more precisely than being happy or not. In the above-mentioned scene, the only emotional "outburst" occurs after the boys have ceased to kick him and then run away: AF pushes a button in his clown suit so that a flower attached to the front makes a squirt of water. According to Todd Phillips, this act suggests that the Joker sees comedy in his pain (Phillips 2019a). However, despite the director's intended meaning, since the water does not spray on anyone as a joke, the flower that emits water can also have alternate interpretations. Water is liquid, just as tears are liquid; it is as if the flower is shedding tears on his behalf (or bleeding on his behalf, from his mental wounds) since he himself lacks the ability to communicate his inner feelings. In this case, and when he is later assaulted by three men in a subway car, he does not shed tears. After all, this would cause the blue makeup around his eyes to drip. This kind of visible "leaking" does occur after AF has put on his Joker makeup (as will be further elaborated in chapter "The Beginning of the Metamorphosis" below).

As his mother never heard him crying, tears in particular appear to be an expression that AF has learned to block or is incapable of expressing—until they later start to flow unabated, such as when he learns from his mother's medical report that he was adopted and severely maltreated as a child. When he reads about his mother's psychological diagnosis and internment in a mental hospital, he first starts to cry. This information shakes the foundation of who he thought he was, shattering his

self-identity. Eventually, however, he starts to laugh; he laughs and sobs so long and hard that snot runs down from his nose.

As a child who was always “happy,” perhaps he laughed instead of crying, as seen above. AF’s laughter, therefore, is a gesture that underlines his detachment from his social environment.

Laughing sometimes signifies his desperate attempt to be “normal,” but in general AF’s laughter is difficult to interpret in a conventional way. He appears to laugh uncontrollably when he is confused, nervous, anxious, sad or upset; when he is hurt; when he thinks he has been unjustly treated; or when he hears things he does not want to hear, like when Mr. Wayne implies that AF’s mother’s story about him being AF’s father is false. Even stage fright appears to trigger his uncontrolled laughter. Moreover, this laughter is constantly misinterpreted, being read differently by others.

**Image 1. AF’s pathological laughter. Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (*Joker* © Warner Bros. 2019)**

In the course of the movie, AF does learn new ways to express his thoughts. When the object of his infatuation, the single mother Sophie, lightly uses the finger gun gesture in the elevator, AF takes the meaning of this sign in a different way. He performs it also when he exits the elevator, placing his finger “gun” to his temple and pulling the trigger, as if to blow his head off. It is slightly uncertain what his message is; it is not intended to be threatening, but it could also indicate “yeah, my life sucks, too,” or “I want to kill myself” (based on the fact that only a little while before, he expressed to his social worker the wish to have his medication increased, because he did want to “feel so bad anymore”). He uses the finger gun gesture again when he intrudes into Sophie’s apartment after discovering the “truth” of his childhood in the official documents. As he sits on Sophie’s couch he places the finger gun to his head but does not pull the trigger. In this scene, the gesture—even if AF does not “fire” the “gun”—probably refers to his wish or intention to die. Like his other expressions of frustration and anger—after all, suicide is *violence against oneself* and thus related to anger and aggression—the gesture does not require words. His inner life finds expression in a nonverbal gesture, as in the case of the tear-shedding flower mentioned above.

Another nonverbal expression that appears to be linked to AF’s inner state but also represents a crucial part of his becoming and being the Joker in this cinematic context is his dancing.

### **Dancing, or Sex and Death**

In the beginning of the movie, AF does not defend himself when he is being attacked by the youths, like he is incapable of physically protecting himself. Instead of fighting or fleeing, he freezes. After

receiving a gun from Randall, an older clown colleague, he carries it with him when at work (even though he is not used to handling guns), perhaps because the threat of physical aggression is constantly present in his life. When he is attacked later by three white-collar types on the subway, he appears more prepared to defend himself. At first he tries to kick his aggressors, but when they start to beat him up he shoots them. Killing the first two, he appears to act spontaneously, as if in self-defense, but the third is an intentional execution. AF acts rationally. He does not leave the train immediately but gathers his things in his bag, as if to leave no identifying evidence, and only then follows the third man off the train, finishing him.

After the incident, AF is shocked at first. He runs away from the crime scene in panic, as if he is expecting to be pursued or caught. He hides in an empty public bathroom, out of breath and agitated. But then, in solitude, he starts to dance. The director of the film has pointed out that AF “has music in him,” and it is this music that is fighting to get out and moving his body in the bathroom scene (*Flicks and the City* 2019). AF’s performance here could be construed as a kind of victory dance or “somatic therapy” that helps him to calm down. His movements are slow and relaxed, and he is no longer agitated. The scene differs drastically from the scene in the original screenplay; although it is likewise situated in the bathroom, AF intends to shoot himself but cannot because he has no bullets left. Thus, the music fights its way out of AF only in the improvised scene of the movie (Giroux 2019). As AF dances, his body is no longer a passive object of violence but an active subject that expresses the music in him. The music—which C. G. Jung did not place in the same category as sex but which “originally belonged to the reproductive sphere” (Jung 1967, 136)—is also linked to AF’s sexuality.

#### **Image 2. The Bathroom dance. Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (*Joker* © Warner Bros. 2019)**

After the subway killings, it is as if he has sexually awakened. AF is not an asexual person per se; in the movie, his sexuality prior to the subway killings appears to involve pornographic images, but his sexuality is not expressed in his body language. According to the original script, he is sexually inexperienced. After his dance in the public bathroom, however, it seems that he has become sexually aroused. Immediately thereafter, the camera follows him down the corridor of the apartment building where he lives; he heads determinedly, in a straight line, toward Sophie’s door. When she opens it, he immediately kisses and embraces her, and the slow motion suggests that they are about to have a sexual encounter. As revealed by the filmmakers (*Flicks and the City* 2019), AF’s relationship with Sophie is just a dream,<sup>3</sup> but Arthur the clown is nonetheless eroticized for the first time: he expresses sexual desire (even if in his own mind), and his sexuality is now

expressed in his body and in his movements. It is no longer made manifest merely in the pornographic images of his journal, which suggest a boyish and inexperienced type of sexuality.

At this point, the Jungian approach to personality appears well suited to explain AF's experience: the film appears to make visible the process in which the various parts of AF's human self, both conscious and unconscious, start to become integrated. Until the subway incident, his personality has consisted only of the slightly childlike and compliant side that he shows to others; the good little boy is his persona/ego or, in Jungian terms, the mask that hides his true self. At this point in the film, it is as if he is lacking life power and energy; all he has are negative thoughts, and his lack of power can be seen in his posture, in the way he walks (somewhat downcast, hanging his head to the right), and in his incapability to defend himself. After the killings, however, his sexual desire is aroused. The animal side of his personality now appears integrated in his self, representing the source of both creative and destructive energy; this is where Eros belongs. This side also includes the shadow, which everyone carries but which has been isolated from his consciousness. It is the repressed "other in him," including things that are unacceptable in terms of one's own morals as well as social standards. The shadow, which also encompasses the past, is not purely evil, but primitive, disobedient and non-conforming to the norms and regulations of society; Jung also characterized it as inferior. (Jung 1969a, 76–79; Jung 1969b, 197–198; Jung 1966a, 53; Jung 1966b, 28.) From a Jungian perspective, the shadow is AF's "companion and friend," his "potential ally" and "dark brother." As soon as it starts to become incorporated in his personality, it enables him to defend himself, since defense and the capability to attack require evil (Neumann 1962, 352–353). Being an opposite "to the attitude of the conscious mind" (Jung 1966a, 53), the repressed shadow creates tension when it is made conscious, which is the prerequisite for movement (Jung 2011, 30; Jung 1966a, 53–54). As Jung explains, "Life, being an energetic process, needs the opposites, for without opposition there is [...] no energy" (Jung 1969b, 197). He continues, "Life is born only of the spark of opposites" (Jung 1966a, 54).

As a consequence of the incident in the subway, AF's libido (which in Jungian thought does not have the predominantly sexual meaning that the term has for Freud) now has a gradient. As a consequence, his libido—that is, his psychic energy as a desire and appetite unchecked by any authority, which is linked not only to sexual procreation but also emotions and affects, as well as general life instincts of survival and bodily needs, such as hunger, thirst, sleep, sex and avoiding pain—has started to flow (Jung 1966a, 50–54, 62–63; Jung 1967, 135–139). He was a victim for so long, but now he has defended himself. The subway killings give rise, in William James's terms (1929), to a conversion experience; AF's life is radically transformed from the old to the new.

Earlier he did not have control over his own life; his agency was restricted, and he had no chance to counteract or limit the violence directed at him. But now, with the help of his “dark brother,” the shadow, he gains agency. It is he himself who uses violence now. He has become the one who decides who will feel pain and die.

AF’s dance movements may also reflect his attempt to make himself look bigger (Sapir 2019). He has conquered those who tormented him—he has gained power over them—and thus, in a sense, he has become “bigger.” A reflection of this psychological consequence can later be seen in his straighter posture.

**Image 3. The Bathroom dance. Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (*Joker* © Warner Bros. 2019)**

The same piece of music (composed by Hildur Guðnadóttir) that plays in the background in the public bathroom scene is heard again in the movie when the Joker is waiting behind the curtains, about to walk on stage on the *Murray Franklin Show*. His hands move as if he were dancing again to the rhythm of his inner music, and his movements are as calm and relaxed as they were when he danced after the subway killings. This time his dance does not prepare him for procreative action (in his dream world), but appears to set up his last scene. His intention there is to commit suicide. By then, in Freudian terms, his death drive Thanatos (the opposite of Eros as his life force and will to live) has been activated, and he is prepared to die. This time we can clearly hear the voice of women singing. This music by Hildur Guðnadóttir may not be the singing of angels but—bearing in mind her cultural background and the Scandinavian mythological tradition—valkyries (*valkyrjur*); thus, these are the voices of supernatural women who escorted ancient warriors into battle and chose those who would be slain, taking them to the afterlife and joining them in Valhalla (a notion which presumably had sexual connotations as well; see e.g. Egeler 2010, 84–104). When AF enters the stage of the *Murray Franklin Show*, his behavior is in line with the elements created by the music: being sexually charged, he intensely kisses the previous guest, an elderly female therapist. It is as if death (his or others) and sex are inseparable opposites that take place together, with (actual or impending) death being the impetus that stirs up AF’s sexual urges.

Insinuations of the inseparable link between sex and death can also be found in the scene where AF kills Randall. After his deed he sits down, leaning against the wall beside Randall’s corpse, and breathes heavily as a consequence of the physical effort. Randall’s bodily fluids (blood) are splattered over his face and breast, and a relaxed smile plays on his face, as if to imply his satisfied participation in a sexual act. Soon after the killing, AF heads to the TV studio in his Joker outfit. As he dances down the stairs, he is clearly feeling good. He appears joyful, relaxed and self-confident;



he is surrounded by an aura of eroticism and his *habitus* (in Bourdieu's terms)—including how he uses his body while dancing and how he walks—resembles that of other cinematic male figures with sex appeal. A cigarette hanging between his lips complements his erotic image.

**Image 4. Joker dances down the stairs. Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (*Joker* © Warner Bros. 2019)**

Occupying himself with (male) death—either his or that of others—appears to awaken his sexual desire, even if the impulses that have been released prior to his lust are not culturally acceptable but belong to the domain of chaos: killing, destroying and raping. (Indeed, while from his own perspective he fulfills his wish for love in his dream, from Sophie's perspective this desire perhaps leads to rape.) The existent (although not actually fulfilled) desire suggests that as a consequence of the lethal violence he exercises and which makes him a kind of “warrior,” he yearns for reunion with the feminine, and he longs for a woman's affection and gentleness. In line with the Ancient Greek mythic tradition where the god of war (Ares) was united with the god of love (Aphrodite), what is produced as a result (as the offspring of the deities) are Eros and Anteros, symbolizing “passion” (see also Stevens 2004, 123–126).

Death thus releases AF's inner music. As has been mentioned above, Jung linked music to the sphere of reproductive activity. Perhaps in line with this (departing from the Oedipal motif), it should be noted that when AF kills his mother, he does not dance; after the matricide scene, he rehearses for the *Murray Franklin Show*. Interestingly, after killing another *female* figure (the doctor in the mental hospital at the end of the movie), he first walks out of her room in a somewhat bowed posture, but by the end of the corridor he has already started to dance. His death-elicited dancing thus appears to be connected to patricide, killing one's “father,” who represents *authority*, a figure of dominion, that is, someone who has the legitimate right to exercise power over others. This authority is not tied to a particular gender. The doctor, although a woman, is a person who exerts power over AF when she chooses to listen to him or not—or prescribe his medication or not. AF is suspicious about authorities in general; this shows in his behavior when he interacts with his social worker, the doctor and two detectives. Thus, all the men he kills are like “fathers,” or creators of the Joker, and authorities in that sense. Randall gives him the gun without which the Joker would never have been born, the three young men in the subway are the ultimate trigger that catalyzes his transformation, and Murray not only contributes to the emergence of the Joker when he plays AF's video on his show and ridicules him, but he also acts as Murray the Baptist by giving him his villain name. In addition, AF's actions also contribute to the death of his putative father, Mr. Wayne. After the downfall of his fathers and creators, or the other authority figures in AF's life, it is the clown who survives and takes power.

In Freudian terms, by killing his “fathers” AF avoids castration, but the objects he uses to kill the men (not the doctor or his mother)—namely, a gun (and bullets) and scissors—are also phallic objects in that they penetrate the bodily boundaries of their targets. Therefore, AF’s lethal violence against other men is in some sense also sexual and connected to power, a symbolic male rape that allows him to subjugate his victims and eliminate his rivals, who have forced him into an inferior position and, from an evolutionary perspective, prevented him from being the fittest in the reproductive sense. The first time AF fires his gun, by accident in an improvised moment (Giroux 2019) in his own living room, refers to this competitive position between males that AF appears to experience: in his imaginary discussion, a woman praises him for being “a good dancer,” after which he fires his gun at an invisible male rival (who, according to him, is not a good dancer), as if to eliminate his imagined competitor. The elimination of his “fathers” and sexual rivals (with the help of his ally and brother, the shadow) is an act of violence, but the act is also related to sex and power, for it is the death of those he sees as authority figures that in particular releases his inner music, embodied in his dancing, and thus enables his libido to flow.

### **The Beginning of the Metamorphosis, or the Trickster in Him**

After discovering that Mr. Wayne is his father, AF goes to see him. At first he meets his half-brother Bruce Wayne (meeting him brings a smile to his face), and later Mr. Wayne himself. However, the arrogant Mr. Wayne, whose version of AF’s origin differs from his mother’s, rejects AF and eventually punches him in the face, irritated by his uncontrolled laughter. The following night, AF stands in his apartment, alone after his mother has been hospitalized. He is now separated from his putative male kin: his father who claims not to be his father (though the butler Alfred Pennyworth’s surprise as he sees “Penny’s son” is telling) and his little half-brother. He leans toward the kitchen countertop, his back in a curved posture, hanging his head, uttering some short and feeble bursts of laughter. He starts to empty the fridge, and then he packs himself inside it.

If interpreted in Freudian terms, this scene improvised by Joaquin Phoenix (Giroux 2019) could suggest that AF’s death drive has strengthened: AF’s sense of connection with other beings has begun to completely dissolve now. According to Mr. Wayne’s claims, he is not genetically connected even to his mother, but an adopted son without a past (even if we cannot be sure if the adoption papers he discovers the next day are false, made because Mr. Wayne wanted to deny all connection to his son he had conceived with a servant woman), and his putative link to the Wayne family is erased right at the beginning. As he climbs in the fridge and closes the door, it is as if AF

wishes to enter an enclosed space, the womb, and thus eventually dissolve and return to the inorganic state where he no longer exists (Freud 1930, 4509–4510; Freud 1920). Interpreted from the Freudian perspective, his act could be related to his suicidal tendencies. However, in light of the process where AF becomes the Joker, his withdrawal may not refer to an irreversible demise per se, but to a momentary disappearance, which results in a symbolic reassemblage of the dissolved inorganic parts (like Frankenstein's monster) or a metamorphosis during which he changes his shape.

In his curved position, AF appears like some type of malformed monster. Later, when Gary and Randall pay him a visit after his mother's death, he bends his back similarly, as if he were an animal. After drawing a smiley face on the wall by stamping out his cigarette and laughing his fake laughter at Randall's joke, he places himself in the doorway, his back in a curved position, his face turned down. From this posture, he lifts his face to observe the two men, as if on the prowl, resembling an animal that is about to attack. He then calmly straightens his back, approaches Randall and kills him with scissors and his bare hands.

The process of AF's metamorphosis is also visible in his facial appearance: when he kills Randall his face is painted white (without any other makeup yet). The white mask does not leak; it hides his intentions and makes his face unrecognizable. Before putting on his final clown makeup, after which he has become the Joker and his metamorphosis is complete, he tries on different identities, even speaking to Gary in an English accent. But it should be noted that even before this scene, AF has been an amorphous figure, whose facial appearance and miens (when he is without his clown mask) have differed from scene to scene, so that during the whole film it is difficult to say what AF actually looks like, and whether he is in fact changing his faces or shifting his shape.

**Image 5. The white mask. Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (*Joker* © Warner Bros. 2019)**

Shapeshifting is one of the characteristics associated with archetypal tricksters (Hynes 1993, 36–37). The earlier cinematic representations of the Joker have highlighted his role as a trickster figure who plays jokes on people (Mattes 2019; Polo 2019; *Corse Present* 2019), and after becoming the Joker in this film, AF also becomes someone for whom, similar to other tricksters, causing mischief gives pleasure (Doueihy 1984, 287; Makarius 1993, 79; Hynes 1993, 35–36). This is seen when he stirs unrest and wreaks havoc, for example, in the train snatching a clown mask from one of the passengers, which eventually results in a group fight: he laughs at seeing the unrest. Compared to earlier representations of the character, Joaquin Phoenix's Joker is a far subtler portrayal of a

trickster, sharing more characteristics with trickster archetypes in world mythologies than the mere tendency to play pranks or shift his shape.

As the supposed illegitimate son of Mr. Wayne, AF is—similar to many other tricksters—of impure birth (Makarius 1993, 73–74), reflecting “a sort of predestination to a career of being a violator” of social norms (Makarius 1993, 74). When his father rejects him, he is also “[a]bandoned by his own kind” (Makarius 1993, 77). His alternate origin in the adoption papers, whether they are fake or not, abolish his past and make him a foundling with uncertain origin. He could be the son of elves, or even Oedipus, who got the name “swollen foot” because of the scars made when he was bound and abandoned by his parents; in like manner, AF got his “scar,” his brain injury, when he was bound to a radiator, abandoned by his real father.

The Joker’s role as a trickster is further suggested by his unconventional behavior, including his laughter and view of what is funny. “Comedy is subjective,” he declares in the studio. Before becoming the Joker, who laughs at seeing unrest or violence exercised on others, he laughed when upset, afraid, nervous, sad or confused. He has learned that laughter is about happiness, but in his case it is linked to emotional states that are unpleasant to him. Just before he kills his mother, however, he appears to invert his view of his own life and the meaning of his laughter. He denies that he has a condition, even if she has always told him so; instead he argues that his laughing self is his “real me” (which in a way is true, because his brain injury is apparently permanent). Before he considered his life a tragedy, but now he regards it as a comedy; thus, he chooses to interpret his laughter in the conventional way—that is, the way “normal” people understand it—as an expression of happiness and joy. However, accepting the “normal” interpretation of laughter also makes his choice a sign of his submission to the prevailing circumstances. By that time, even his own death has become a source of laughter to him: after killing his mother, he rehearses his joke for the *Murray Franklin Show* at home. When he acts as if he is blowing his head off with his gun, and as he pretends to lie dead on the sofa in his own living room, there is a happy smile on his face, and his imaginary audience is cheering and laughing. In terms of the Joker’s role in the cinematic universe, when he chooses to view his tragedy as a comedy, he again displays one of the characteristics of a trickster: the ability to invert situations so that bad becomes good, grief becomes joy, and sadness becomes laughter (Hynes 1993, 37).

Video 2. AF rehearses his joke for the *Murray Franklin Show*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T0DuKpjDMY>

Even the worst and most immoral killings the Joker commits are now a source of amusement for him, part of his comedy. It is the “real him” that sits in the police car at the end of the movie and is overjoyed at the chaos he observes and of which he himself is the seed. The tendency to invert situations is also apparent in his clown name, Carnival. The name and the phenomenon known as Carnival make another direct reference to a state where the world is turned upside down to question prevailing norms, to break boundaries and to make the sacred profane; it is a state that eventually leads to ritual purification.<sup>4</sup>

Tricksters are also (excessively) erotic figures whose sexual self-control may be underdeveloped (Doueihi 1984, 287; Greenfield 1985, 38–41; Makarius 1993, 79–80; Stevens 2004, 124–125). AF’s tendency to associate death with sex is but one symptom of this over-eroticizing. A reference to excessive sexuality is also made, for instance, when AF is phoned by a scheduling person for the *Murray Franklin Show* and invited to appear. As the phone rings, the camera briefly shows AF lying on his bed, his hand in his underpants, before the view is blurred. As he gets out of bed to answer the phone, the camera focuses again on his hand, which he is pulling out of his underpants, as if to suggest that he has been masturbating. The abundance of pornographic images in his journal may likewise be interpreted as representations of his excessive interest in sex, even if he sometimes appears asexual, especially in the company of his mother. Yet, his interaction with her appears slightly disturbing, such as, for instance when he bathes her or dances with her. Later, when she has been hospitalized and he is downcast at how his father figure Murray ridiculed him on his show, he lies on her bed—a double bed which is apparently also his own bed—smelling her pillow, as if to comfort himself. Not only is there a strong emotional bond between the mother and son, but also there is a kind of incestuous aspect of their relationship, and incestuous relationships (which are thought to have magical value) are typical of tricksters in general (Makarius 1993, 67, 70–72). This stands even if his mother acts as a kind of repressive force: she expects him to be a good little boy whose sexuality is somewhat infantile and hidden, as is suggested by the pornographic images and drawings in his journal, which are apparently meant for his eyes only (he is unwilling to show his journal to his social worker, for example, both in the film and according to the original screenplay).

**Image 6. Joaquin Phoenix and Frances Conroy in *Joker* (*Joker* © Warner Bros. 2019)**

What is also interesting concerning his role as a trickster is that the Joker (i.e., not AF) sheds tears *only with his left eye*. The first time is when he is on his way to the studio to perform on the *Murray Franklin Show*, and he is being chased by the two detectives. The second time is just before expressing happiness at how the streets of Gotham City are burning, when he sits in the police car after killing Murray Franklin. In both scenes, the blue color under his left eye has become quite

smudged, betraying the tears that he has been shedding. In mythology, one-eyed gods, such as Óðinn in Old Norse and Horus in Egyptian mythology, can see all and possess great wisdom. In Jungian thought, then, the single eye signifies self-awareness (Grabenhorst-Randall 1990, 193). Thus, a single eye shedding tears could suggest that the Joker is now more conscious of his feelings, desires and motives than AF ever was; this appears to be true, since emotions start to leak to the surface of the Joker's body to an increasing degree, as if he had learned to feel now, whereas AF appeared "emotionless." It also symbolizes possession of knowledge that he did not previously have. Before further considering the issue of the *left side*, which I will return to in the next section, it is worth noting that the idea of possessing knowledge points to the fact that, even if most of the traits mentioned above emphasize the trickster's abnormality and dangerous aspect, tricksters are in fact positive figures as well. This favorable side of the trickster and his connection to knowledge is manifested also in AF-Joker, even if becoming a benefactor requires that he violate a taboo.

### **The Modern Prometheus**

In the scene where AF commits matricide,<sup>5</sup> the camera is directed at his face to show how after suffocating her with a pillow he takes a deep breath, as if it were his first ever. He inhales like a newly born child. The camera then shows him calmly standing by the window (he is calm during the whole scene, but this suggests that he has now decided to commit suicide, as sudden and total calmness are one of the signs presumed to indicate imminent suicide when one has made a determined decision to end their life). As he looks out the window, sunlight shines through the glass and Venetian blinds refract the rays. He sees the light, and it illuminates his face. The hospital room appears dim, like a kind of cave, from which he sees the brightness outside. As in the allegory of the cave presented by Plato in the *Republic* (Book 7), once freed from the prison of rules that have required him to always put on a happy face, even though he is still down in the cave, he sees the light. What AF saw before was but an illusion, the false world of a good little boy who was always happy. Now his vision is clearer. Whereas previously he saw silhouettes reflected on the wall, now he sees reality, and he can perceive its true form. He has become a philosopher, whose role in society, according to Plato, is to enlighten those who are still "prisoners," that is, those who spend their lives in the cave watching silhouettes on a wall rather than the true form of real objects.

After killing his mother, AF can look at the light without squinting. It does not blind him, because he has been heading toward it ever since he was fired from his job at Haha's: he walked out after picking up his things, down the stairs, kicked the door open and stepped into the bright sunlight.

(Right after this scene, we see empty medicine boxes; AF is running out of his pills, so going toward the light is also related to his missing his scheduled dosage.) As the cave allegory suggests, matricide provides him with knowledge—the wisdom that the light outside the cave represents. Murdering a blood relative is a violation of one of the most fundamental societal taboos, but in the reality of the trickster, the magic power—wisdom—that the trickster can gain access to is derived from the breaking of such taboos (Makarius 1993, 71–73; Doueih 1984, 294). Like a trickster, the Joker gains wisdom by committing matricide.

In the cinematic reality where he dwells, the Joker can be viewed differently from different perspectives—after all, tricksters are full of ambivalence and contradictions. They are simultaneously demiurgic creators, ingenious inventors or ridiculous clowns or idiots; furthermore, they are good or evil, or benevolent or malefic (see, e.g., Doueih 1984, 283; Makarius 1993, 67–68, 86). For the authorities that define the norms and maintain order, he is a monster—even if they do not necessarily realize that the monster is their own child, created by them (Cohen 1996, 20). But for the masses—the “clowns” ridiculed by Mr. Wayne—he is a source of inspiration and admiration, and his effect on them is profound. From their perspective, he has not followed norms that require subservience and obedience to laws; rather, he has killed the rich and arrogant. Through his actions he has given a voice to the silent but ever-increasing anger of the crowds, which has been inflamed by social injustice (even if some of the protesters may have asocial or criminal motives as well). He has given them keys to their agency. His actions have promoted their actions, and his violence has encouraged them to join the uprising and create chaos (in a city that is already in chaos, covered in its own filth). As the violator of taboos “who separates himself from the society and transcends its law through devotion to the cause of humankind” (Makarius 1993, 72)—although not consciously since he has his own personal motives—the Joker provides the crowd with tools and information that enable them to satisfy their secret desires. For the masses, he is the (asocial) hero who disobeys the rules, challenges established orders, plays tricks on the authorities and the powerful, and transgresses boundaries, as well as desecrates the sacred on their behalf. He is also the scapegoat who in the end is punished for his transgressions. (Makarius 72–73, 78–79, 83–84.)

He who has seen the light brings people knowledge. As suggested by the analysis of his ascent from the darkness of the cave into the light, the Joker brings the people light; it is reflected in fire, which eventually spreads in the streets of Gotham, triggering riots and literally engulfing the whole city. From the perspective of Christian ethics, the Joker as light-bringer could naturally be seen as Lucifer. From this perspective also, AF’s use of his *left* hand appears intriguing. For example, AF puts on his clown makeup and writes with his right hand, except when he notes in his journal with

his left hand that “the worst part about having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you dont [*sic*].” He giggles as he writes, as if he finds the sentence “funny” (even if we know that his laughter usually does not signal joy). In addition, during his first killing in the subway car he first holds the gun with both hands but later always shoots with his left hand. Left-handedness suffers from a history of stigmatizing beliefs and superstitions; the left-handed have been considered more prone to committing crimes, and in the history of Christianity, the Devil—“the aping shadow of God” (Jung 1969b, 177)—has been regarded “as the left hand of God” (Jung 1969c, 313). The connection between left-handedness and criminality is further emphasized at the end of the movie, for the man who eventually shoots Bruce Wayne’s parents holds the gun in his left hand. Interestingly, however, when the Joker kills Randall he holds the scissors in his right hand. (This could be intentional or unintended, or even another sign of the trickster defying expectations.) However, interpreting AF-Joker as a left-handed demonic figure (in the Christian sense), who is inherently bad, would immediately label him as a negative character pure and simple, an interpretation resisted by the movie itself. It also contradicts the trickster figure, who as the collective Shadow is an ambivalent archetype, a symbol of the archaic past where divine and non-divine were not yet distinguished (Radin 1972, 168), and where there existed no pure good or pure evil, but “[g]ood and evil, creation and destruction” were fused (Diamond 1972, xxi).

From the Jungian perspective, the left hand, which is clearly the weaker hand of AF (and Joaquin Phoenix?), is also considered to be *inferior*. Thus, the left hand could also refer to AF’s shadow (see also Jung 1969a, 78–79), which, as has been elaborated above, is not purely evil but primitive, unadapted and disobedient, and which is his ally when he defends himself. That said, the atmosphere is definitely creepy when the Joker draws a smiley face on the wall with his cigarette *with his left hand* shortly before he kills Randall. Also, at the end of the movie, as he is being taken to jail and the policeman who is driving the car blames him for bringing the fire on the streets of Gotham, the Joker, who has watched the rioting people and laughed happily at the unrest, presses the left side of his face—indeed *his left eye*—against the wire mesh that separates the two men and answers: “I know. Isn’t it beautiful?” This could be interpreted as a sign that the shadow side of his self is talking.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 7. Joker sheds tears with his left eye (a screenshot from the final trailer). Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (Joker © Warner Bros. 2019)**

It is more difficult to understand why the Joker uses his right hand to kill Randall. It could be suggested that this deed is more conscious and intentional, and less instinctive, than the killings he carries out with his (shadow-linked) left hand. The consequences of the actions he commits with his



left hand are much more significant, as for the masses the Joker is the bringer of light, Prometheus, the philosopher of ancient myths (see also Kofman 1986, 27), who steals fire (power) from the gods (authorities, the rich) and gives it to civilization—the subjugated masses who live in misery and poverty—thus providing them with the means to improve their existence: this time not literally fire to cook food or forge swords but the strength to rise up and demand change. It is the Joker’s actions that spark the inferno on the streets of Gotham. Truly, the Joker is the bringer of fire, the modern Prometheus, even if the consequences of his actions leading to the uprising of the masses were unintended by him. Many of the earlier discussions on the film have centered on the individual and the issue of whether the movie itself could elicit violence (Newland 2019). However, although the movie concentrates on the Joker, the film is also a story about the birth of the power of the masses, and how the socially isolated and neglected come together and create groups. It is precisely this story that has inspired the use of Joker masks around the world in various protests and demonstrations (Mounier 2019).

Regarding the aesthetic experiences elicited by the movie (Carroll 2001, 215–218, 222, 225), the last outdoor scene, which underlines the Joker’s role as a modern-day Prometheus, exemplifies an emotional response—which can be determined by asking ourselves what emotions it elicits in us, as Carroll (2001, 232) suggests—which is the opposite of isolation: namely, a sense of unity, empowerment and undividedness. In this scene, some of the rioters have lifted the Joker onto the hood of the police car. A huge crowd of people gathers round, cheering and yelling, inciting him to stand up. He rises, and he dances. The perspective here is interesting: first the Joker is shown from the point of view of the crowd, but then the camera zooms to his face. Behind him are the masses, clown-masked and non-recognizable. The Joker paints his own blood, which is dripping from his mouth, into bright red clown lips on his face. When he turns around again, the viewer is now behind him. We see what he sees (even if we cannot feel what he feels). People around the police car are cheering and roaring. The noise is immense. The power of the scene is overwhelming. In the movie theater, the noise and the music generate a bodily effect; they are not only heard by the ears but felt by the body. The music and the noise of the crowd well over the viewer, going through them, being absorbed in them. As a visual and aural entirety, the last scene encloses the observer. It is not about being possessed, but becoming part of. The sense of unity nearly makes one burst. It brings tears to one’s eyes, producing exaltation and euphoria. The observer merges with the surging, faceless, clown-masked mass. They are undivided; there is an overwhelming feeling of togetherness. The experience is empowering; at the climax of the scene, just before the lights go out and we can hear AF’s laughter, everything is possible. The masses are united, powerful in their collectivity.<sup>7</sup> (But the

violins in the score are sad, and somewhere in the background one might hear the sound of apocalyptic trumpets and the metallic voice of some cyborg beast, roaring. *Gæti það verið Fenrisúlfr?*)

This scene could suggest that for the first time the Joker is truly connecting with people in his social environment. He is the object of their awe and acclaim. People have noticed him, and because of his confession on the *Murray Franklin Show* they know that he is their Hero (another Jungian archetype), the clown who brought fire. It could be argued that his narcissistic wishes have now become fulfilled. In addition to that (in a Freudian sense), as an organism he has become the object of these other organisms and, for a moment at least, is incorporated into a higher unity with them. He is touched and utterly overjoyed; like in the studio, both of his eyes are full of tears. He appears to laugh—it is not an uncontrolled, pathological laughter this time, and his tears are not tears of anger or agony. His expression suggests that he is deeply moved, overwhelmed by feelings that flood out of him, uncontained.

## Epilogue

In the last scene of the movie, the Joker walks down a white corridor, hands cuffed, with bloody shoe soles. He has apparently killed the doctor he was just speaking with. He is in a mental hospital, but here, too, he can see the light: at the end of the corridor there is a window—he is heading toward it—through which daylight illuminates the white aisle. Everything is bright, and he must be seeing everything clearly now. His shadow follows behind him, bound to him, without losing its grip on his body. Frank Sinatra's *That's Life* plays in the background, creating a jocular impression and framing his last trick—his killing of the doctor—as somewhat “funny.”

The Joker's being in a mental institution suggests that—despite men crashing into the police car, in order to free him—he was still taken into custody. The riots that his actions elicited must have also been suppressed by the authorities. Even were he to become the real Joker, would he ever be anything but a sad figure in the reality of Gotham City? Like Frankenstein's monster, he might have to admit that “no sympathy may I ever find” (Shelley 1818, “September 12th”). Even if others might use him to promote their own aims, he would not gain anything from it in the end. Tricksters never do.

Who knows. Maybe he will be back. As the song goes, maybe he is just finding himself “flat on [...] [his] face,” and he will later “pick [...] [himself] up and get back in the race.” How would AF,

if he were able with proper medication to rid himself of the Joker within him, handle his relationship with his putative little brother in the fairly realistic Gotham City portrayed in *Joker*? In the scene where the two offspring of Mr. Wayne meet, he is both interested and thrilled about the boy. His smile is genuine. Even though he may laugh at the mental picture of Bruce Wayne standing by his dead parents, he is still the trickster, who may deceive us and whose world may be inverted. Or, perhaps the Trickster (the former Boy who also became the Hero in this life story of his) is just happy because he is now his little brother's closest kin. Brothers, undetachable from each other, they are like shadows.

But what about Bruce Wayne? Does the Joker become his enemy because he is bad or because Bruce knows about their mutual origin? Why does Bruce become Batman in the first place? Is losing his parents the only reason for becoming a hero? (Does it make him a loner, too?) Or, did he break a taboo or commit such a grave "sin" that it needs to be atoned for? Is helping people part of his penitence, or a way to connect with people? After all, no man is an angel, and flawless saints only inhabit fantasy (being a rich orphan and seeing your parents to be killed is hardly enough to make you a saint). Does Batman really help people, or does he just pretend to be doing it, to emphasize his own status? With his earlier male role models, his father and Alfred Pennyworth, hypocrisy and double standards were probably practiced in his upbringing more ardently than high moral standards. Is Bruce Wayne himself a reliable narrator? Is everything we have learned about Batman by far just his dream? Can we trust his testimony? Did he really see a clown in the alley where his parents were shot? What if he has false memories, or if he just lied?

If the Joker is an unreliable narrator, as has been suggested (Morrison 2019), and the story is just his imagination, *Joker* would merely confirm general expectations concerning Gotham City (or everyday reality?), that bad people are bad because of the inherent badness that resides within them, whereas good people are good, pure and simple. Flawless and perfect, Saint Batman is thus a member of this breed, a modern savior who has never sinned but had to suffer because of the deeds done by others, who deprived him of his mother and father, Mr. Wayne the Martyr (who is not a bad person after all, even if that is suggested in *Joker*).

Sometimes we just grow tired of hearing stories about these modern fairytale saints and superheroes that wear funny costumes, some of whom occupy themselves with industrialized manslaughter and whose explanation that "they couldn't carry a tune to save their lives" as a reason for killing somebody would be a hilarious joke instead of a morally contemptible utterance. They do not move us or let us be surprised; they do not enable us to ask, ponder or answer ultimate questions about life and the human condition, to become wiser and more understanding. They do not make us think

(quite the opposite), and they do not inflame us with enthusiasm to contemplate veiled meanings or allow us to explore the shadows hidden from our view. Our defenders, our allies, our friends—our selves. “How about another *Joke[r]*, Murray?”

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All links verified January 7, 2020

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to use the article (i.e. *the Joker*) since the character is commonly referred to in the comics as “the Joker”. However, I do not suggest that Arthur Fleck *is* the Joker.

<sup>3</sup> Here I will not consider further which scenes in the movie could be just AF’s dream.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, who considered the clown a trickster as well, has regarded the old carnival customs as “remnants of a collective shadow figure” (Jung 2011, 135–142, 144).

<sup>5</sup> That is, matricide, if Penny Fleck is indeed AF’s mother.

<sup>6</sup> In the first scene of the movie, AF sheds a tear with his right eye, as if to suggest that the shadow is still isolated from his consciousness (even if the actor’s tear is spontaneous; Phillips 2019). After putting on the Joker makeup, AF’s self-awareness and wisdom has increased; he sheds tears with his left eye, which can be linked to the shadow.

<sup>7</sup> According to Jung (2011, 147): “As soon as people get together in masses and submerge the individual, the shadow is mobilized.”