Article

How He Got His Scars: Exploring Madness and Mental Health in Filmic Representations of the Joker

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Abstract: In May of 1939, DC Comics introduced their popular Batman series, but it was a year later when the iconic villain, the Joker, entered the story. What began as a lighthearted pulp comic has since evolved, with Batman's enemies growing darker and more sinister. In the film, the Joker is now less "clown prince" than violent madman, determined to wreak havoc and spread his warped view of society. Through a thematic discourse analysis, this article explores how Batman films featuring the Joker routinely naturalize and reinforce sanist beliefs about mental illness and are deployed as narrative prostheses to rationalize his heinous crimes. Blending work from both disability studies and mad studies, we explore the cultural construction of madness as animated by filmic representations of the Joker and consider how these narratives inform perceptions of mental illness and subsequently rationalize the disciplining of mad people.

Keywords: mad studies; abjection; stigmatization; trauma; schizoanalysis; contagion

1. Introduction

In the late 1930s, the team at DC Comics wanted to create a new superhero that would be as successful as Superman. Under the leadership of Bob Kane and Bill Finger, DC Comics introduced the caped crusader, Batman, in the 1939 story titled *The Case of the Chemical Syndicate* [1], which eventually led to the aptly named television series *Batman* (1966–1968). Due to the success of the show, the Batman franchise would again jump mediums with *Batman: The Movie* [2], followed by various film adaptations of the story, each with a unique approach to the fictional Gotham City. While *Batman: The Movie* presents a light-hearted adventure plot, more recent films such as *The Dark Knight* [3] portray a darker universe shaded by violence and death. Much of this violent turn is tethered to the shifting narrative of Batman's arch nemesis, the Joker, who becomes increasingly sinister from one film to the next. Once portrayed as comedic criminal mastermind, the Joker is now imagined as a violent madman who is a threat to himself and others. Within the diegesis of these recent representations, the Joker's mental state serves as equal parts justification and motivator of his evil intent. As with other popular representations of mental illness, violence is presented as an inevitable consequence of a delusional and antisocial mind, twisted by past trauma, that is driven to seek revenge for perceived or actual transgressions (see [4–8]). Fusing traditional media scholarship with psychoanalysis and the fields of disability studies and mad studies, this article aims to untangle the complex representations of mental illness through DC Comic's character, the Joker, with an eye on two primary questions: (1) how is mental illness constructed through filmic representations of the Joker[1]? and (2) how might these discourses reveal how we conceptualize mental illness, specifically, and disability in general?

2. On Methodology

"Nobody panics when things go 'according to plan'." [3]

As disabled bodies represent the somatic entanglement of cultural, biological, and medical regimes of subjectivity, work within the interdisciplinary field of disability studies

seeks to not just engage in the intersections of scholarship but to revel in the transgression of epistemological boundaries. As such, this article is informed by qualitative research methods notoriously difficult to define or classify as one "thing" or another. Most notably, this article is built upon an understanding of the social model of disability, which seeks to articulate the ways external factors, such as environmental or policy barriers, can be just as disabling as a biomedical diagnosis or a physical difference [10]. In this way, disability studies research is often focused on exposing hegemonic ableism and the oft-unquestioned supremacy of the normate [11]. The social model of disability does not necessarily fit perfectly with the experiences of mental illness [12] and thus we attempt to bridge the ideas of disability studies with the emerging field of mad studies, which has "emerged as a counter-narrative and powerful discursive set of beliefs, thoughts, and actions aimed at challenging sanism" [13]. Similar to the usage of ableism in a disability studies context, sanism "is the irrational prejudice of the same quality and character as other irrational prejudices that cause (and are reflected in) prevailing social attitudes of racism, sexism, homophobia and ethnic bigotry . . . based predominantly upon stereotype, myth, superstition and deindividualization" [14] and results in individuals with mental illness diagnoses seen as "incompetent, not able to do things for themselves, constantly in need of supervision and assistance, unpredictable, violent and irrational" (cited in [15]). In this way, "Mad activists and scholars [seek] to balance the disproportionate emphasis on 'official' knowledge with that of those experiencing madness firsthand" [16]. Put another way, mad studies is interested in:

> the radical reclaiming of psychic spaces of resistance against the psychiatric domination of Mad people as a collection of chemical imbalances needing to be corrected in a capitalist system that prizes bourgeois conformity and medical model "fixes" above all. [17]

In this way, we are interested in untangling the binary construction of disability [18], with sanity (normal, good) and its insane (deviant, bad) alterity, considering how the Joker is rationalized as a "mentally ill" subject, as opposed to the desired "sane" subject, with thoughts and drives that are dangerously deviant to the normative citizens of Gotham City.

To start, this work is driven by traditional film studies methods that, as Lothar Mikos explains, focus on analyzing film texts in three specific ways,

> first with regard to the intentions, on the part of producers or institutions (e.g., television broadcasters, Hollywood studio system), which underpin the media products; second—referring to the structure of films—with regard to the functions that the individual components have in relation to the whole film; and, third, with regard to what function these components have for the audience. [19]

This study will then pay special attention to Mikos' five core foci for film analysis: content and representation, narration and dramaturgy, characters and actors, aesthetics and configuration, and contexts [19]. Rooted in the Foucauldian tradition, we also look to bring James Paul Gee's work on discourse analysis into conversation with Mikos' film analysis framework. For Gee, it is critically important for us to consider not just the "said" but to delve deeply into how we say, do, and be through language [20]. In this way, we will be concerned with the co-relational grammar [20] and intertextual utterances [20] present within these film texts and how the Joker (re)affirms hegemonic understandings of the "mad man".

To help structure our work, we turn to disability studies scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's catalytic text, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependency of Discourse* [21]. It is here that Mitchell and Snyder map out their concept of narrative prosthesis, or how disability is deployed, not unlike a prosthetic limb, to prop up narrative. As they explain,

> The narration of the disabled body allows a textual body to mean through its long-standing historical representation as an overdetermined symbolic surface; the disabled body also offers narrative the illusion of grounding abstract knowledge

within a bodily materiality. *If the body is the Other of text, then textual representation seeks access to that which it is least able to grasp.* If the nondysfunctional body proves too uninteresting to narrate, the disabled body becomes a paramount device of characterization. [21]

In this way, disability becomes a useful metaphor to evoke particular emotions or understandings rooted in deeper cultural understandings of who "the disabled" are and how physical (or, in this case, cognitive) differences manifest. In the introduction of their text, Mitchell and Snyder then identify a critical narrative schema that stories of disability commonly follow: first, identifying a character as deviant; second, explaining the origins of this deviance; third, centering the story on the deviant character; and fourth, focusing on resolving or fixing the deviance by the conclusion [21]. Looking at representations of the Joker in film, a similar schema appears, with most films directly engaging in questions of the origins of the Joker's madness and the need for Batman and the medico-legal systems of Gotham to capture, discipline, or eliminate the threat posed by a "dysregulated" Joker. As such, this article is structured to investigate each of these narrative turns individually.

Finally, we look to the work of Julia Kristeva to unpack how emotional response is elicited in these texts by marking mad subjects as abject. Most fully developed in *Powers of Horror* [22], Kristeva deploys the term abject to denote "the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable object" [22]. Not quite subject, not quite object, the abject is an Other that draws into question the subject/object boundary, appearing as a threat to the narcissistic sense of self developed out of the Lacanian mirror stage. Where the self and object become recognizable through entry into the symbolic realm, the abject

... simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. [22]

Although similar to Sigmund Freud's use of the term "uncanny" [23], Kristeva argues the abject is different in that it is not a *mis*recognition but an anxiety rooted in the "failure to recognize its kin" [22]. Where subjective homogeneity allows for the jettison of the object/Other, the abject "... is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become the alter ego, drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence" [22]. Madness appears to occupy just such a space—a dangerous threat to the boundaries of neuro-normativity that at once beckons the nondisabled subject while also threatening it through the questions it asks about the legitimacy of the ideal "I".

We are, of course, not the first to note the similarities between Kristeva's definition of abjection and the cultural construction of disabled bodies, nor is it the only time Kristeva has considered the narcissistic threat disability poses to nondisabled minds [22]. Josh Dohmen similarly links disability to abjection to explore "the ambiguity of disability and nondisabled identity, the affective nature of disability exclusion, and the historical contingency of disability" [24]. Dohmen theorizes that confrontations with the abject can help explain the "rejection of disability in an attempt to stabilize the nondisabled identity" and "more important, abjection reminds us that such an identity is always unstable" [24].

Kristeva also notes the productive possibilities of abjection, particularly in artistic works that delve into the perversity of the abject. More than just something to reject or expel, the abject beckons to us as curiosity, perhaps because of its importance in primal repression [22]. Snyder and Mitchell would seem to agree, noting that in many films, the role of disability is to provide an opportunity for viewers to gaze at bodily differences without the fear of getting caught [25]. They claim that films position bodily differences as "exotic spectacles" to be gazed at for pleasure for a short period of time since traditionally

these differences are hidden [25]. For Kristeva, artistic endeavors into the abject are about both rejection and projection, stating

> The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language—style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality. [22]

A similar type of projection appears to be occurring in typical narratives of the Joker. While Batman is thought to represent virtue and strive for justice and order, the Joker is ensconced in violence and chaos. Batman is subject; the Joker is abject.

A simple example of how the Joker is abject can be found in *Batman* (1989). Before becoming the Joker, Jack is depicted as a typical gangster, shrewd and calculating, and a character with ambitions. A mind becomes mad after falling into a vat of chemicals, and the Joker emerges with a new set of unsettling or peculiar behaviors. Where one confronts a corpse, an abject example par excellence, Kristeva notes, "[m]y body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver" [22]. The Joker, on the other hand, now speaks to dead bodies [26] and notes a preference for images of death and suffering over pictures of models [26]. In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker will even pose as a corpse, arising from the pseudo-grave of the cadaver bag to kill a rival gangster [3]. We argue then that madness is thought to have collapsed the borders between subject and object, life and death—these are moments of abject recognition, resulting in repulsion.

3. Exposed to Deviance: How the Joker's Body Reflects His Mind

" . . . *as my plastic surgeon always said: if you gotta go, go with a smile.*" [26]

In Mitchell and Snyder's narrative schema, a common element in introducing a character with a disability is the disclosure or identification of the deviance, subsequently marking them as essentially different from other non-disabled characters within the text. In the case of mental illness, the distinction between disabled and nondisabled characters is often evoked through bodily difference. Whether it is Richard III or the Hunchback of Notre Dame, scholars like Paul K. Longmore have long tracked the ways external bodily difference has been deployed to signify the cognitive deviance of villainous characters, with "[d]eformity of body symboliz[ing] deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil" [27]. In the case of monstrously disabled characters, those twisted in both body and mind, Longmore notes how external bodily deformity denotes the criminality of a twisted or sinister mind,

> The physical disabilities typically involve disfigurement of the face and head and gross deformity of the body. As with the criminal characterization, these visible traits express disfigurement of personality and deformity of soul. Once again, disability may be represented as the cause of evildoing, punishment for it, or both. [27]

This is perhaps rooted in the deep history of eugenic pseudo-scientific photography of the 19th century, tracked by David Hevey, which attempted "to demonstrate that certain physical features indicated a criminal mentality, 'sought to prove that bodily difference entailed difference in the entire psychic and social behaviour and make-up" (cited in [28]). Hevey builds upon his concept of "enfreakment," or the ways disabled bodies are placed in juxtaposition to "normal" non-disabled bodies with the spectacle of this difference being the objective [29]. The enfreakment of disabled bodies is, of course, situated within the long history of carnival "freak shows" that leveraged the spectacle of different bodies, both disabled and racialized, for entertainment through the curious (and subjecting) gaze of the

normative audience (see [30]). Using this concept of enfreakment, Anna-Rebecca Nowicki considers the "freak potential" of spectacular disabled characters, or

> . . . the result of a social interaction in which a person's bodily characteristics are seen, judged, and found guilty of existing outside of what is deemed normal or acceptable. This perceived abnormality then establishes the ground on which this person is considered a freak and can be seen as entertaining or funny. [31]

Similarly, Angela Smith takes this 'freak potential' one step further, arguing in *Hideous Progeny* that disability is often tied to monstrous imagery in horror films that deploy freakish disabled bodies to capture the audience's attention [32]. Smith notes that facial deformity is a common difference used to heighten the shock value of a character's disability [32]. The connection between the physical body, especially the head and face, and the moral or ethical compass of an individual is clearly on display in most filmic representations of the Joker. Physical appearance is an important means of manifesting the cognitive dysfunction of the Joker; oscillating from freakish human to monstrous animal poses an existential threat to the non-disabled/sane people of Gotham.

3.1. The Appearance of a Freak

In all five of the live action representations of the Joker, we are presented with subtle variations on a common theme: the Joker's costume and appearance materializes his difference from other characters in the film. The way the Joker looks, in juxtaposition to the other characters, plays an important role in enfreaking the character, marking him not just as different but situated within the long history of monstrous (disabled/insane) characters that precede him. In both the 1966 film *Batman: The Movie* and the 1989 film *Batman*, the Joker is most commonly seen wearing an outlandish purple and green suit with an elaborate string bow tie or ascot, a heavily made-up face, pure white with an exaggerated red lipstick smile, and dyed green hair or wig. Presented as a clown, the Joker is visually situated within the cultural history of vaudeville or the circus, a space synonymous with the freak show. In both of these films, the Joker's outlandish dress and appearance both separate him from the normates of Gotham, leaving the audience to surmise that only a dysfunctional mind would choose to appear in such a way.

The notion of the Joker as a harmless clown, though, is complicated in the 1990 *Batman* with the inclusion of facial reconstructive surgery—the Joker is no longer wearing white face paint, but rather his skin is pigmented porcelain white, and his mouth is now curled into a frightening pantomime smile as a result of his exposure to toxic chemicals. This violent explanation continues in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight* and the 2016 film *Suicide Squad*, as the Joker begins to present as a disheveled or grunge interpretation of the outlandish green and purple clown. These films add two new visual signifiers of difference to the Joker's persona, specifically facial scarring and tattoos. In *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker is now presented as a disheveled character with torn and dirty clothing, unwashed dyed hair, and imperfect makeup, most notably the darkened eyes and the messy red lipstick that accentuate the two angry scars constructing a perverse smile from the corners of his mouth. What was once perhaps intended as a funny or silly character in the 1960s is now portrayed as a perversion of the clown [33], more Pennywise [34] than Bozo [35], with the scars evoking the Joker's proximity to violence.

In *Suicide Squad*, the Joker is first presented wearing the iconic straitjacket, symbolic of a "mad man," and eventually sheds the skin of the asylum to reveal a gaunt man with a tattoo-covered body. Jared Leto's Joker is covered in a variety of tattoos, including a skull wearing a jester hat, a dead robin with an arrow through it and the Batman symbol with a knife through it. In most of these tattoos, there is a clear message of the Joker's proximity to violence—he is a jester of death intent on killing his nemesis. Perhaps most importantly, though, is the tattoo of the word "Damaged" written in cursive across his forehead [36]. The Joker is damaged goods, and the source of the problem resides behind the label stamped on his brow.

The most recent film, the 2019 *Joker*, presents a Joker found betwixt the past representations—an ordinary man who, when not working as a clown, wears typical clothes for a man living in poverty in Gotham. It is not until Arthur Fleck's descent into madness is complete, moments before murdering a co-worker, that he embraces the dyed green hair and disheveled make-up of Jokers past [37]. Here again, the Joker is distinguished from others within the narrative world through the use of brightly colored and mismatched clothes that are indicative of his cognitive inability to assimilate within the normative culture of Gotham *or* as symbolic of his embracing a subaltern "freak" identity in visual opposition to the majority of "sane" Gothamites.

3.2. The Joker as a Wild Animal

In addition to dressing abnormally and having visible markers of madness, many Batman films also juxtapose the Joker's character by giving him animalistic traits. *The Dark Knight's* Joker madness as more akin to an animal than man, most notably a dog. The Joker refers to his impulses as being like a dog chasing a car; he too is driven by a primal desire to pursue without consideration of consequence or outcome (Nolan [3]). The Joker is also seen escaping in a police car with his head out the driver's side window, happily enjoying the passing breeze, not unlike a dog (Nolan [3]). Likewise, *Suicide Squad* (2016) uses animalistic imagery to emphasize the Joker's madness, be it when he snarls at Officer Griggs to coerce them into helping save Harley Quinn [36] or by the scene's background, with the Joker and his men surrounded by frozen meat—the Joker is a predator, an alpha that demands submission. In *Joker* (2019), we are presented with images of Arthur's contorted and not quite human body, with bulging vertebrae and angular arachnid arms fixated on stretching his clown shoes [37].

While this animal imagery might be related to Camp et al.'s suggestion that films featuring characters with mental illnesses are labeled as mad and thus are seen as "unhuman" [38], we suggest that this tethering of the Joker to animalism is rooted in his status as abject. As Kristeva explains,

> The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder. [22]

The Joker's connection to animals, predominantly exhibited by his actions or behaviors, appears intimately tied to his mental state. The Joker's mind is no longer bound to societal expectations or norms. He is thought to be driven by primal desire, and it is this risk and his proximity to normality that make him unsettling. But as Kristeva notes, the world of the animal is not just thought to be one of violence but also one of unrestrained sex, as we explore later.

In these representations, the Joker's appearance is used to both distinguish him from the rest of the cast while also questioning his mental state. The deployment of clowning conventions such as bright colors and extravagant make-up, when taken outside of the context of the circus, are used to represent a character that is not in his "right" mind. The Joker does not just dress differently but is seen through the prism of enfreakment— a character who either cannot or does not comply with conventional dress because of cognitive corruption that leaves him outside typical social orders. As the audience, we are thus invited to stare at the Joker's enfreakment while, at the same time, affirming the many ways that he is not *us*. He does not look like, dress like, or act like us, and, therefore, he is an Other [32] whose difference stands in threatening opposition to hegemonic sanism.

4. On Origins: The Root of the Joker's Madness

"Do you wanna know how I got these scars?" [3]

After identifying a character's deviance, texts following Mitchell and Snyder's narrative schema then focus on excavating the origins or cause of the disabled character's

deviance. While the origin story of the Joker shifts from one film to the next, all but two of the studied films engage directly with not just the moment the Joker persona is adopted but also propose that past experiences led an otherwise "normal" man to devolve into madness. This is seen most clearly in *Batman* (1989), in which Jack's physical appearance and personality shift into something monstrous after Batman drops him into a vat of chemicals. Jack, introduced as a narcissist who cares deeply about his appearance, emerges from the traumatic violence to be found sitting in the surgeon's chair, demanding a mirror to see the doctor's work, and laughing hysterically at the sight [26]. Here, the Joker revels in his now monstrous face, with the unexpected reaction indicative of a mind that now sees the world differently. In the films examined, *Batman* (1989) is the only film to show the traumatic-induced madness in real-time. The other films, still rooted in violence as the inciting incident, look to past traumas to explain a mind that becomes irreparably twisted.

4.1. The Joker and Childhood Trauma

A focus on how childhood trauma is intimately tied to mad futures is present in all but one of the films examined here, beginning with *Batman* (1989). While the inciting moment of Jack's transformation into the Joker is tied to the trauma of the chemical burns and botched medical procedures, Jack also appears to have endured trauma earlier on in his life. In particular, there is one scene where Batman is shown reviewing Jack's forensic file, which outlines that as a child Jack was "emotionally unstable," leading to his arrest for assault with a deadly weapon at fifteen years old [26]. We are led to understand that Jack struggled with his mental health from a young age, indicating that while the chemical burns may have affected his external appearance, the corruption of his mind began before he first encountered Batman. This positioning of childhood trauma as a future determinant is perhaps best critiqued by Andrew Nierenberg, who argues that these representations of the Joker perpetuate the idea that childhood trauma can make someone violent and evil [39].

The Dark Knight also relies on the stereotype that past trauma will result in future evil action, but the audience is never given a definitive story of how the Joker becomes a villain. Instead, multiple versions of his story are given over the course of the film, framing those who experience traumatic events as not just deterministically violent but also unreliable narrators, which is another common stereotype of mental illness. One version is that his father was an abusive alcoholic who, after assaulting his wife in the presence of their child, carved a smile into the Joker's cheeks to put a "smile on his face" (Nolan [3]). Contrary to actual experiences of childhood trauma, this story leaves no room for individual agency— an individual is presented as determined to repeat that which has been done to them. Objectifying the narrative of childhood trauma In the Joker's story is problematic as it reinforces the belief that people with mental illnesses are prone to violence, rationalizing the need for discipline in order to protect the broader public and further contributing to the stigmatization of significant psychiatric conditions [39].

In the *Joker* (2019), Arthur is also represented as having suffered from childhood trauma. At a young age, he was neglected by his mother and violently abused by his mother's partner. To determine his biological father, Arthur in one scene in the film asks a clerk at the hospital if everyone in the asylum had committed crimes, suggesting madness leads to criminality, with the clerk responding, "Well, yeah, some have. You know, some are just crazy. Pose dangers to themselves and others. Some just got nowhere else to go." [37]. Arthur responds with concern, noting that recently he "fucked up and did some bad shit" [37]. In reviewing his mother's chart, we learn that Arthur's mother was "suffer[ing] from delusional psychosis and narcissistic personality disorder." [37]. Just like the clerk, the viewer is encouraged to connect these two disclosures: the disordered relationship between Arthur and his mother and the lack of relationship with his unknown biological father become intimately connected to the mercurial rage that has begun to bubble over. Arthur does not simply lack somewhere else to go but instead fits better in the first category of asylum residents.

4.2. The Oedipus Complex and the Joker's Childhood Trauma

While childhood trauma is regularly deployed as the cause of the Joker's madness, the trauma experienced is not general or arbitrary—it is often connected to relationships with father figures and, thus, is perhaps a manifestation of Freud's concept of the oedipus complex. In the most general of terms, Freud's oedipus complex refers to the important developmental milestone during the phallic stage when young men relinquish incestual desire for the mother under the threat of castration from the father [40]. Freud and psycho-analysts who followed in his footsteps would then trace back psychosis in adulthood as caused by irregular exits from the oedipus complex. Put another way, an underdeveloped superego results in dysregulated behavior, not unlike the "Wolfman" and his primal scene dream memories inspired by witnessing his parents having intercourse [41].

The Joker is regularly cast as the dysfunctional son in need of discipline from an appropriate father figure. Romero's Joker, in *Batman: The Movie* (1966), is described as the "Clown prince", a lineage without an apparent king. In *Batman* (1989), this threat plays out in the relationship between Jack and Carl Grissom, Gotham City's famous crime lord. Grissom appears as father-figure, not only due to their age difference but also because Jack is seen as a second-in-command and heir apparent. When Grissom discovers Jack is having an affair with his wife, he arranges for Jack to be arrested [26]. So is Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008), which is based on an abusive father's actions, which are said to have resulted in his iconic facial deformity. In symmetry with the castration anxiety, both Jokers pay a corporeal price for their transgression. Like the stereotype rooted in childhood trauma as inevitably leading to violent future acts, these moments of castration are suggested to result in a man being reborn as a disfigured, murderous monster who desires revenge not just against those responsible but against the society that does not reciprocate his love [42].

In the *Joker* (2019), Arthur's madness is triggered by interactions with three separate father figures. For much of the film, Arthur is desperate to contact millionaire Thomas Wayne, whom his mother claims to be his biological father but who was forced to abandon his son born of affair. Arthur eventually tracks Thomas into the men's washroom of a theater, begging Thomas to tell him the truth. When Thomas Wayne is ruled out as his father by the seized documents from the asylum, we learn of the violent and abusive relationship with both mother and father, aligning closely with the narrative of *The Dark Knight*. But Thomas Wayne and the abusive unnamed father are not the only father figures in Arthur's life; he also fantasizes that his favorite late-night talk-show host, Murray Franklin, both accepts him as a comedian and dotes upon him as a son [37]. This fantasy is ruptured at the end of the film, when Arthur, now completely ensconced in the Joker identity, comes to terms with the fact that Franklin has been openly mocking him on television, resulting in the violent conclusion of the film [37]. Whether the viewer agrees or disagrees with Arthur's actions, the film suggests the violent conclusion as inevitable, both because it is the origin story of a supervillain and also because of the deeply rooted misperception that those with mental illnesses are inevitably dangerous.

All three of these failed father-son relationships are pointed to as the inciting incidents of the Joker's madness. In all but one of the films, the audience is left with the perception that the Joker's madness is linked to failed or traumatic interactions with father figures. Madness is then figured to be the result of past familial trauma or of an individual's inability to cope with or resolve these crises as they get older. This situates mental illness firmly within either a biomedical or moral model of disability, assigning causation or blame to the individual or their heredity for dysfunctional behavior [43].

5. From Peripheral to Central: The Joker and Contamination

"I am not someone who is loved. I'm an idea. A state of mind." [36]

Central to Mitchell and Snyder's argument of narrative prosthesis is the notion that disability operates not just as a simple metaphor but as an important channel through which narrative is animated. The disabled body becomes an important text to be written

through, not just about or on, and in the process is brought to the center of the story itself. As Lennard Davis quips, once disability is introduced in a film, "every part of the story has to do with disability" or "the audience will be distracted from the narrative arc by the disability" [44]. In a different way, once disability is introduced into a story, the bodily or cognitive deviance takes over, becoming both the central focus and a problem in need of resolution. This centering of madness is clearly present in almost all the texts studied here—despite the films almost exclusively being named after and presented from the perspective of the protagonist, the films are principally concerned with how Batman will solve a problem like the Joker.

Within almost all the films, the Joker is presented as an obstacle to be resolved, an animating threat to both bodies and systems because of the ways he exists outside the normative order. More than just a violent threat, the Joker is portrayed as a dangerous object of sexual desire for women and, by extension, a contamination risk in urgent need of discipline, not dissimilar to Angela Smith's [32] investigation of the hideous progeny of classic film. At the same time, he is also positioned as a revolutionary force, recognizing the limits of and therefore posing a direct threat to the capitalist hegemony, threatening to not just spread his madness but to awaken a revolt against capitalism itself. It is the very nature of the Joker inhabiting a space between subject and object, always threatening to contaminate or corrupt, that makes him particularly terrifying and makes Batman's interventions more urgent.

5.1. The Joker's Obsession with Women

One of the core ways the Joker becomes centered within the text of the film is the threat he poses to women. Although not driven by romantic desire, *The Dark Knight*'s Joker poses a direct threat to and eventually kills Bruce Wayne's love interest, Rachel Dawes. In other films, the Joker's affections are presented as both excessive and insufficient [45], a hyper emotion that leads to inevitable violence when not appropriately reciprocated by the object of his affection. Although reinforcing gender norms in film is problematic in general, it can be dangerous when they are reinforced in films featuring disabled characters. Smith explains that it is common for disabled characters in horror films to target women because of their violent tendencies [32].

But the Joker does not just use women as strategic objects, but rather is represented as becoming detached from traditional definitions of romance, leaving a madman who obsesses over possessing objectified women. In *Batman* (1989), the Joker is represented as a womanizer whose obsessions only grow stronger upon transformation. The first woman that the Joker becomes obsessed with, Alicia, is scarred with chemicals to align her appearance with his own and forced to wear a porcelain mask [26]. Joker eventually kills Alicia, noting "you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs", implying destruction is a necessary part of (re)creation [26]. Joker moves on from Alicia and takes up a new obsession, Bruce Wayne's love interest Vicki Vale and becomes determined to make her fall in love with him [26]. After failing, the Joker captures Vale and tries forcing her to marry him, requiring Batman to come to her rescue [26]. In *Batman* (1989), the Joker's persistence implies a level of obsession that transcends control, with the madman's desire overriding concerns for others' wants or needs. It is this intense and fixating threat that rationalize urgent need to contain or eliminate those with mental illness, whether or not it is reflective of lived experience.

In *Suicide Squad* (2016), the Joker similarly becomes obsessed with psychologist Dr. Harleen Quinzel, his psychologist in Arkham Asylum. At first, his obsession with Quinzel is driven by a desire for her to help break him out of the asylum. Simulating a romantic interest, the Joker quips that he "lives for these moments" when talking to Quinzel, followed by a request for her to assist in his escape [36]. Here the Joker appears uncaring of Quinzel's feelings, manipulating her for his own gain. The mad person is framed here as a dangerous narcissist, uncaring or unaware of the needs and wants of others in the pursuit of their love

object. Unlike the other films, this Joker's seduction succeeds, transforming Quinzel into his villainous sidekick, Harley Quinn.

Although not quite an obsession, *Joker*'s Arthur fantasizes about his neighbor Sophie Dumond and hallucinates a relationship forming between them. Confronted with the reality that he and Dumond have not been forming a romantic relationship, Arthur grows angry and (potentially) turns violent. It is unclear what occurs in this moment, as unlike the other attacks in the film, this violence is not shown—we are only privy to Arthur walking down the hallway after a cut to black. If read as corollary to the final scene of the movie, with Arthur dancing down a hallway after killing a psychologist, it could be interpreted that Dumond was killed. Regardless, as in *Batman* and *Suicide Squad*, Arthur's unrequited desire becomes pathologized, eliciting anxiety in how his passions both contravene conventional romantic relationships, an intense fixation evoking anxiety that the ruptured fantasy could result in violence. Again, his sexual desire is marked as toxic in nature, excessive, and out of control, and it poses an enormous risk to those who become the object of his desire.

5.2. Mental Illness and (Sexual) Contamination

Tethered to the anxieties of the Joker's obsession with women is a parallel, abject fear of contamination. An animated drama for most of the films is whether we, the audience, are to agree with the Joker. Is the Joker crazy, or does he hold important outsider knowledge? Other characters similarly oscillate between acceptance and denial of the Joker's world view, and, in more than one text, the central focus of the Joker appears to be his desire to spread his mad perspective. In relation to the anxieties generated by the Joker's sexual desires, mental illness is constructed as abject *because* of the ways it is feared to be contagious—any mind could be susceptible. Just as the abject threatens the contained nature of our subjectivity, so too does mental illness become imagined as a threat to our (constructed) sanity. Mental illness becomes subsumed in discourses of virality or infection, a disease that can be spread, akin to Goffman's "ritualistically polluted" or spoiled stigmatized identity [46]. Contamination, or the virality of madness, becomes a gravitational center of the narrative, in which the Joker's violent acts become the method of a more sinister plan: for the whole world to go a little crazy.

Although not a perfect example of contamination or infection, in *Batman: The Movie* (1966), the central scheme launched by the "United Underworld," a collective organized by the Joker, the Penguin, the Riddler, and the Catwoman, centers around the use of "dehydrators" that will turn people into dust (Martinson [2]). The threat posed by the Joker and his allies is purely corporeal, with exposure to this weapon vaporizing one's "precious bodily fluids"[2]. Despite this hope for a cure to rehydrate those who have been dehydrated, an attempt to reconstitute several henchmen proves tragic with the use of radioactive "heavy water" results in calamity. Produced in the 1960s, with the Cold War looming large, the film clearly points to anxieties of the nuclear age and the threat of radioactive fallout—a bodily contamination instigated at the behest of the Joker. While the Joker may not be attempting to infect others with his mental illness, his plans have undeniable corporeal consequences.

The theme of contamination, specifically the boundary-breaking effects of mental illness, appears more clearly in *Batman* (1989). It can be argued that Jack was "contaminated" at a young age, as Jay Ewald notes that many supervillains are seen as "products of their environment" and thus are destined to live a life of crime [48]. Ewald goes on to note that Jack falls into a chemical vat and is transformed into a creature that is a human-made toxicity [48]. As a toxic being, he is destined to contaminate others with his toxicity. The Joker does so in one scene where he lures onlookers by handing out money with bright and colourful floats and clown balloons floating above. After playing the song "Trust" by Prince, the Joker goes on releasing poisonous gas on the revellers, claiming he is relieving them of "the burden of their useless lives" [26]. In this scene, the Joker poisons Gotham City to punish their vanity, just as he was "cured" of his when he fell into the vat of chemicals. The

Joker becomes a toxic vessel, an embodiment of the literal and figurative toxicity polluting Gotham and destined to wreak havoc on the bodies and minds of citizens.

In *The Dark Knight*, the theme of contamination is present primarily through the Joker's interactions with Harvey Dent, although at the end of the film, the Joker does quip that Gotham will need to expand the prison at the rate that its inhabitants are "losing their minds" (Nolan [3]). Dent, a highly praised district attorney, and his girlfriend, Rachel Dawes, are captured by the Joker and placed into separate warehouses that are full of explosives, a moral trap devised to force Batman to choose between someone he loves and someone he needs. Although Batman manages to save Dent, sacrificing Dawes for the greater good, half of Dent's face becomes disfigured when engulfed in flames. While Dent is recovering in the hospital, the Joker visits and explains that Dent "could use a little anarchy. [When you] upset the established order, everything becomes chaos" [3]. Core to the Joker's plan is to destroy any spirit of humanity or community that may exist in Gotham, incited by the public's fall from grace under Dent. To make the rest of the city mad, the Joker must first infect Dent, explaining that "madness, as you know, is like gravity: all it takes is a little push" [3]. Enraged by the loss of his love, Dent morphs into the villain Two-Face, taking Commissioner Gordon's family hostage in an act of revenge. Dent was infected by the Joker's madness, going against the established order, where Dent had previously been an evocative symbol of the maintenance of such an order (Nolan [3]). As an agent of chaos, the Joker's duty is to infect others, like Dent, with his chaotic designs.

In *Suicide Squad* (2016), the theme of contamination can be seen through the relationship between Joker and his therapist. Before leaving the asylum, as a reward for assisting in his escape, the Joker straps Quinzel to a gurney and conducts electroshock therapy on her. As the Joker is preparing to shock Quinzel, he places a strap in-between her teeth and claims, "I wouldn't want to wreck those perfect porcelain teeth when the juice hits your brain" [36]. An object of beauty, the Joker uses electric current to transform Quinzel into Harley Quinn, a crazed sidekick and lover who now claims to hear voices and is similarly drawn to (random) acts of violence. Quinn gives up her past life as a psychologist to instead be "Daddy's Li'l Monster", a violence and sex obsessed femme fatale who will "sleep where I want, when I want, with who I want" [36]. The Joker corrupts Quinzel's mind, converting her into a villain like him, who becomes so dangerous that she must be quarantined in a "black site" prison for super villain "metahumans" with her only discernible superpower being that she is mad.

Finally, the theme of contamination can also be found in the *Joker* (2019). In past films, the Joker was seen as a poisonous root; however, in *Joker* (2019), it can be argued that Gotham City contaminated him first. Although it is evident that Arthur suffers from childhood trauma, the film seems to imply that it is the degradation of Gotham's social order that provokes his descent. Arthur is routinely rejected in social situations, mocked by his colleagues at work, rejected by love interest Sophie Dumond, and rejected by father figures Thomas Wayne and Murray Franklin. The film appears to suggest that if Gotham City has been more welcoming, Arthur's story may have played out differently. After fighting off the mocking jeers of several young men on the subway [37], Arthur shoots and kills his assailants, an event that resonates with the people of Gotham. People begin to wear clown masks and see the gunman as a hero, not a villain, leading to Arthur happily dancing in a public washroom because "people are starting to notice" [37]. It can be interpreted that Arthur thinks people are starting to notice him; however, we read this scene to mean that people are starting to see the problems that were readily apparent to Arthur all along. Arthur's actions eventually do culminate in a city riot after he murders Franklin on live television, successfully spreading his view that the city must be torn down and rebuilt.

While the films deploy mental illness and past trauma to justify or explain the violent actions of the Joker, it is the ways the films suggest a flimsy boundary between sanity and insanity that are in need of critical reflection. By constructing the Joker into a toxic creature eager to infect those around him, these films perpetuate the belief that mentally ill people are contagious and dangerous, rationalizing the belief that those with mental illnesses

must be locked up or we risk the madness spreading. This narrative threat of the Joker "spreading" his madness has resonated off screen, seen most clearly in the widely reported connection between the character and mass shooter James Holmes [49], the viral Internet rumour that Heath Ledger's death was because of playing the character [50], and calls to ban screenings of *Joker* for fear that it too would result in copy-cat killings [51]. To even simulate mental illness is to risk catastrophic contamination. The barrier between sanity and insanity is just that porous. The Joker's character overall appears not as subject or object but as a manifestation of abjection, a character that becomes disturbing in the ways he obliterates the binary oppositions of subject and object, sanity and insanity, normal, and abnormality. The Joker then becomes a vehicle for representing a deeper emotional response to mental illness, the risk it poses to our sane sense of self, and the urgent need to reaffirm the boundaries between in/sanity. But the Joker is not seen as just a threat to individuals but to the system in general, becoming an embodiment of Deleuze and Guatarri's schizoanalysis.

5.3. *Anti-Oedipus and the Joker*

In most Batman films, it can be argued that it is the Joker's madness that leads him to become a villain, but perhaps this is an appropriate response to a "mad" society. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the application of the triangular model of Oedipus to broader societal structures is fundamentally flawed [52], arguing instead that familial structures are representative of fascistic capitalist production hierarchies and not the other way around [52]. It is from this position of the psychotic as one who lives outside the oppressive system of the oedipalized society that Deleuze and Guattari propose a new form of analysis: schizoanalysis. Although not quite an example of Foucauldian erudite knowledge disrupting the discourse of power, Deleuze and Guttari turn to the "schizorevolutionary" who "follows the *lines of escape* of desire; breaches the wall and causes flows to move; assembles its machines and its groups-in-fusion in the enclaves or at the periphery" [52]. Not unlike the ways Deleuze and Guattari prostheticize schizophrenia to imagine a perspective outside the deterritorializing systems of capitalism, the Joker's madness is thought to provide him with a unique perspective on the problems of society because he is thought to exist outside society.

For example, in *Batman*, the Joker is seen to exist not just outside the social structures of Gotham but as being the best equipped to exploit capital's corrupting nature—he targets those bound up in oppressive systems of beauty and wealth *because* of his newfound external position. Like Deleuze and Guattarian schizorevolutionaries, the Joker uses the very obsession with beauty and wealth to exact his revenge on the people of Gotham, either through his poisoning of the city's beauty care products or by using money to lure people to his poisonous parade. From this perspective, the Joker's madness is thought to offer the clarity of thought necessary to critique that which ails the citizenry of Gotham and mount a counter-offensive on these neoliberal technologies of the self.

In *The Dark Knight*, the Joker's relationship to wealth and his subsequent status as a schizorevolutionary continue to evolve. In Gotham, many criminals are motivated by greed; instead, the Joker wishes to reveal human hypocrisy and corruption. This desire is also what makes him abnormal and thus terrifying. To illustrate, there is a scene in which the Joker receives payment from the mob in order to kill Batman. As the mobster accuses the Joker of being no different than them, motivated principally by capital, the Joker responds, "All you care about is money. This town deserves a better classic criminal" and set fire to the pile of money (Nolan [3]). This radical gesture underpins a powerful ideological moment in which the Joker asserts he is not, in fact, entangled in the capitalist pursuit of money but is instead animated by a desire to make visible the inherently broken system of Gotham. Burning the money marks the Joker as crazy, to forfeit such wealth for no clear reason other than to make a point, while also providing a schizoanalytic critique of the actual versus symbolic value of the paper he has burned.

For the *Joker*'s Arthur, the film deploys the Joker's character to make visible the problems that exist within Gotham. For instance, Arthur asks his social worker, "is it me or is it just getting crazier out there?" only to be ignored [37]. When the clerk at the psychiatric hospital suggests Arthur investigate social programs offered by the city, Arthur replies with a hand puppet in singsong "They cut all of those!" [37]. Throughout the film, Arthur is presented as seeing clearly that which others cannot: the slow collapse of Gotham City. Unlike the previous films, though, Arthur's madness evokes a genuine awakening by the end of the film—the schizorevolutionary becomes the spark that lights the fuse of a civil uprising.

In all of the representations of the Joker studied here, poverty and mental illness are presumed to be the natural or expected experiences, with mad individuals only capable of gaining access to material wealth through illicit means. This appears rooted in the deeper belief that those with mental illness are inherently unproductive as they cognitively do not fit within typical capitalist systems. More concerning, though, is that madness becomes reinscribed in these texts as an anti-oedipal object, with mental illness made productive again through the imagined "insights" their exteriority provides into systemic societal issues. Mad people, when confronting capital, have the potential to be productive in their supposed ability to point out or make visible the flaws within the system. Where physically disabled people exit the symbolic realm as objects of inspiration, madness becomes sanitized as a revolutionary tool to see outside the hyper-reality of postmodern neoliberalism. The revolutionary potential of madness is then seen as inherently threatening to the current capitalist system and in urgent need of being contained. Madness is thought to not just point out the problems within the system but pose an existential threat to the general public and the capitalist system itself.

6. The Asylum or Death: Resolving the Joker's "Madness"

"I just hope my death make more cents than my life." [37]

Finally, Mitchell and Snyder point out the ways that narratives about disability can only conclude with the resolution of the disability brought to the center of the text. Mitchell and Snyder refer to this resolution as following traditional medical model ideology, with the disability being targeted for treatment or cure [21]. In the case of the Joker, a desired end is typically found, with the Joker presumed to need urgent psychiatric care from the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane. Longmore notes, however, that in the case of villainous or criminally disabled characters, if they cannot be cured, then they must die [27]. A regular sentiment throughout the Batman oeuvre is that the Joker's mental illness is not just dangerous but uncurable. The only way to stop him is for Batman to cross an uncrossable line—to kill the Joker. While Batman regularly resists this urge, adhering to his presumed humane values, the audience is left wondering if this is the right choice, as no amount of discipline appears capable of recovering the Joker's twisted mind.

In *Batman: The Movie* (1966), rather than dying, the film concludes with the Joker being arrested. It can be argued that the Joker in this film is viewed as less threatening because there is less indication that he suffers from a serious mental illness. In this text, the Joker does not speak to himself, wrap himself in death, or perpetually commit heinous acts of violence—he is a sanitized character, more criminal than monster. Further, the Joker in this film is not the sole leader or progenitor of the criminal act, but instead one of four criminals who form the "United Underworld," perhaps making him a sympathetic accomplice as opposed to a relentless threat. Perhaps because the Joker in *Batman: The Movie* appears to be more able-bodied than other representations, lacking the facial scarring or hysterical laughter of other incarnations, his punishment for crime is more humane. In this instance, there is hope for recovery or cure, and the threat he poses is not as great.

In the finale of *Batman*, the Joker will lose his grip when dangling precariously from a helicopter and fall to his death [26]. Here, the Joker is presented as both a criminal and a monstrous figure: he must die because he poses double the threat. When the police discover his dead body, the camera zooms in on the Joker's face, revealing an unsettling smile with

his eyes wide open [26]—a disturbing moment of abjection animated by the motionless cadaver and the notion of responding to experiences of profound violence with a smile. To accentuate the eeriness of this shot, the audience can hear the Joker's laughter being played continuously into the next scene, haunting us even in death. Perhaps the Joker's death was inevitable because he was insane, with hairbrained schemes and dangerous risks doomed to eventually get the better of him. However, it is important to note that Batman does not save the Joker because he is instead busy saving Vicki Vale. Not only can the Joker not be saved, but his life is willingly forfeited in the service of literally preserving Vale and figuratively protecting the residents of Gotham.

The Joker in *The Dark Knight* is also eventually captured by Batman, but his arrest does not result in a cure. Instead, it is revealed that his capture is what he wanted all along—a suggestion that the justice system is woefully unprepared to handle someone like him. Again hanging precariously at the end of the film, the Joker quips that Batman cannot kill him, and he cannot kill Batman (because he's "so much fun"), and thus they are destined to "do this forever" (Nolan [3]). However, unlike the early 90s Joker, *The Dark Knight*'s Joker will not fall to his death and is instead taken into custody by the police. The film does not explain what happens to the Joker after this, be it prison or asylum, nor does the final film of the trilogy address the character. Although not specific to the Joker, the other mad character in this text, Harvey Dent, does die at the end of the film, this time with Batman saving Gordon's innocent son while allowing the corrupted Dent to fall to his death (Nolan [3]). Dent's death is ultimately sanitized; we are told that he died a hero, killed by Batman, and not as a madman who had to be stopped. The only way to protect the fragile psyche of Gotham was to sanitize the contamination of madness and ensure the Joker's infection did not spread further.

Interestingly, there are some depictions of the Joker's character in the history of Batman films that resist Longmore's (2003) cure or death resolution of villainous disabled characters. For instance, in *Suicide Squad* the Joker ends up surviving a plane crash and helps Quinn escape from prison. The ending is ambiguous because we do not know what happens after he saves Quinn, although a sequel confirms that Joker and Quinn experienced a messy breakup sometime between the films [53]. Likewise, the resolution of his character in the *Joker* is also ambiguous. The film ends with the Joker interned at Arkham Asylum, sitting across a psychiatrist, talking to her while smoking a cigarette and laughing. The psychiatrist asks him why he is laughing with the Joker, who explains he was just thinking of a joke, followed by a quick cut to a young Bruce Wayne standing over his dead parents in an alleyway: another madness inaugurated by horrendous violence. The Joker begins to sing "That's Life" by Frank Sinatra, and, with the song continuing to play, the scene cuts to the Joker dancing down a hallway with bloody footprints following behind him [37]. Presumably, the Joker has killed the psychiatrist and is about to mount an escape from the hospital. The film ends on an intentionally eerie note, with the lack of resolution intended to make us uncomfortable. The Joker and the animating madness that drives him have not been contained, and the threat of encroaching abjection remains.

7. Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, we conducted a discourse analysis through a disability studies and madness studies lens to interrogate how Batman films featuring the Joker's character naturalize and reinforce harmful anxieties about mental illness. The overall goal of this paper was to highlight how discourses of mental illness are used to rationalize various depictions of the Joker's character. We began the paper by considering the ways the Joker's body reflects his state of mind, noting how films utilize disturbing imagery to dehumanize the Joker's character. When entering the world of film, the nonapparent disability must become visible, be it through the way the character behaves or the way the character looks. We then proceeded to explore the origins or roots of the Joker's madness, which predominantly represented mental illness as resulting from trauma, be it childhood or corporeal in nature. The mere presence of the Joker in these texts then brought disability

to the center of the film, with his dangerous madness in urgent need of resolution. We considered the ways the Joker presents himself as abject, an apparition existing between the status of object and subject that challenges the presumed certainty of our idealized sense of sanity. The Joker's obsession with women proves pivotal in accentuating his madness, and, worse still, it was found that throughout the history of Batman films, the Joker's character is seen as a toxic creature that infects others with his madness. To understand the theme of contagion, which reconfigures madness as an infectious virus that can spread from person to person; abject madness may be impossible to fully repel and, therefore, we must contain mad people to protect the rest of society. This is a dangerous discourse, as it stems from the continuing history of institutionalization.

Conducting a discourse analysis on the Joker's character provides insight into the harmful beliefs about mental illness that continue to circulate in popular culture. Ultimately, these films do not present a "reality" of mental illness but, instead, depict a fantasy rooted in the in/sane binary and born out of a confrontation with the abject. Many of the discourses on madness found in these texts are rooted in a dark history of mental illness. Although some claim that this history is behind us, it continues to reverberate in popular culture. Eugenic discourses, rooted in the desire to perfect the human and eliminate that which corrupts our genetic future, are woven into our discourses, and as a result, people with mental illnesses are stigmatized. Portrayals of madness, such as the Joker's, further contribute to the stigmatization that many people face. They perpetuate harmful beliefs and stereotypes about the behavior of people with mental illnesses, which leads society into repeating the past. People with mental illnesses are not only stigmatized, but they continue to be institutionalized, abused, and mistreated within our society. It is important for us to consider the ways fictional characters like the Joker contribute to the justification, normalization, and expansion of this immoral treatment.

Discourses of mental illness are evolving, though, and while much of the negativity of the past remains, online communities and mad-identifying content creators are presenting new imaginations of madness that upend traditional sanist discourses. Recent representations of the Joker are perhaps evidence of this evolving discourse, as the character shifts from being an abject villain into something of an anti-hero schizorevolutionary in Phillips' *Joker*. While we have considered many of the negative stereotypes of mental illness deployed in these texts, there are moments where the Joker poses important critiques of late-stage capitalism, whether it is Nicholson's lampooning of the beauty industries, Ledger's unmasking of corruption and immorality, or Phoenix's critique of eroding social systems. From this perspective, another way to read these texts is as an evolving invitation to question the oft individualizing nature of biomedical approaches to mental illness and interrogate the role neoliberal systems play in disabling people. Shifting the focus to disabling systems and environments as playing a contributing role in disabling people would seem a minor victory for the social model of disability, even if the result remains an urgent need to entangle mad people in legal and medical systems. The continued popularity of the character could present a radical opportunity for the Joker to be reclaimed, complicating abject subjectivities and reimagining mad people as trapped in inhumane neoliberal systems, like many of us, as opposed to just dangerous objects.

Notes

1. While the Joker appears in one scene at the end of *The Batman* [9], the scene was deemed too brief to be formally included in this study. We should note, though, that the Joker's appearance in this film features him applauding the violent and disruptive work of the Riddler and is set within a secure jail or institution

2. *Dr. Strangelove* [47], another acclaimed film featuring a disabled antagonist, was released two years before this film and featured similar concerns about the contamination of American bodily fluids by the Soviet Union.

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