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CULTURE

Inside Todd Phillips' Joker and the Rise of the 'Clowncel'

BY CAROLINE CABE ON OCTOBER 22, 2019 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



In mid-August, less than a month away from the release of Todd Phillips' new film *Joker*, Warner Brothers receives a letter in the mail. It is an open letter composed by family members of the twelve people shot dead in Aurora, Colorado on July 20th, 2012. They are writing on behalf of their loved ones taken from them by James Holmes, a young man who opened fire in a movie theater screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Holmes injured 70 people and murdered 12. The open letter details the family members' concern with

Warner Brothers' new *Joker* film, which is said to be twice as gruesome and warped as the depiction of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. They are not concerned with the violence. All action films have violence. What they are concerned with stems from a string of words uttered by Holmes after his violent killing spree. When questioned by authorities in regards to the motivation behind his actions, Holmes simply stated "I am the Joker."

I enjoy supervillain movies. They are a breath of fresh air in which the audience is given greater historical context to the wicked characters that torment their favorite superheroes. They elicit a less immediate gratification when the villain is defeated, forcing the audience to wonder 'why am I not satisfied? Do I... miss them?' It is this uncertainty that keeps the audience strapped in, trapped in the embrace of the company's relentless release of sequel after sequel, unable to deny the intake of more action.

Todd Phillips' *Joker* is not a supervillain movie. It merely disguises itself as one by resolving the past and informing the future. But unlike most supervillain movies, it also preys on the present.

The story follows lower-class aspiring comedian Arthur Fleck as he is bullied and ostracized for his teetering mental state. Fleck is pulled deeper and deeper into the pit of poverty and alienation until he hits the bottom of the social well. He goes mad and takes a deep dive into the world of crime and social unrest. Through a string of murders and publicity stunts, we watch Fleck rise to fame as a symbol of anarchy and rebellion, finally embracing the vile persona recognized by virtually every human being on earth: the Joker. At first glance, this film is not incredibly different from many other supervillain spinoffs. Its narrative follows the same basic formula: normal human being experiences a damaging event, the damaging event gives the human a paradigm shift, the paradigm shift metamorphoses the human into something larger and more extreme that eventually becomes a supervillain and terrorizes society. Upon first watch, *Joker* seems like a cookie-cutter supervillain film; shot perfectly, acted splendidly, and garnished with cutting-edge special effects. So why does it make people want to kill one another?

What separates *Joker* from the rest of the supervillain film community is its shocking ability to strike a chord in certain audience members. Todd Phillips employs a technique that creates empathy for Arthur Fleck. The film clearly intends to lift the blame from the Joker himself and to place it instead on the society he lives in, creating a burning empathy and shared identity with Arthur Fleck that carries over into the villain he becomes. This is dangerous. Of all the supervillains in the DC universe, the Joker is quite possibly the most pernicious to identify with because he does not stand for anything greater than himself. He is a lower-class man hardened and bitter towards his placement on the economic spectrum. He is not motivated by justice, but instead by anger and insanity, making his violence virtually empty. When young people sit back in their reclining movie theater seats and delight in the overwhelming charisma

of Joaquin Phoenix's Joker, they are sucked into a black hole in which they believe that the Joker represents them when he actually represents nothing.

As artistically irresponsible as it seems, showcasing sympathy for cruel characters is not new in film. Such movies as *A Clockwork Orange* and *American Psycho* have very morally corrupt protagonists and yet show shreds of redeemability for these characters throughout their films. *Joker* is dangerous because of the political and social climate that Warner Brothers has decided to release it into. It takes no more than a quick peruse through any media outlet to understand that the United States is currently beset by violent white men, with over half of the mass shootings in the U.S. being attributed to white males. Each week we wake up to find a new story detailing the latest mass shooting conducted by a mentally unstable white male with a loaded gun in his duffle bag. What strikes me as interesting is the fact that the rise of socially isolated white males cathartically turning to violence seems to directly correlate with the rise in popularity of this new film that happens to depict a socially disconnected white male who turns to violence as a release of personal frustration. It is as if Todd Phillips has accidentally molded the Joker into a sort of Guy Fawkes, a martyr and champion for the socially dissociated white males of America who feel that being Joker-esque is a type of justified rebellion.

I like to believe that I have become desensitized to the shock created by the content I absorb on the internet. The cybercity of Twitter has made a hallmark for itself through its tendency to shock. However, I was not ready for the introduction of the word "clowncel" on my Twitter feed. It came through a Gulf News blurb which sent me to the dark abyss of Reddit. A brief Reddit conversation thread informed me that the tragic hoard of socially ostracized and sexually frustrated white males — termed "incels," an abbreviation of the term "involuntary celibates" — had evolved into a sub-group known as clowncels. One could loosely define a clowncel as an incel who blames their involuntary celibacy on the flaws of society, thus identifying with the Joker. These clowncels differ from their incel predecessors because they are inherently violent. Where an incel might take to an internet forum to unload their frustration, a clowncel might take to a movie theater with a loaded gun for the same reason. The thing about *Joker* that specifically appeals to clowncels is the heroic mirage imparted on the Joker. He is the protagonist of his story, which allows a clowncel to paint a picture in which they are the hero in their own story as well. Thus, a delusion is created in which massacring movie-going crowds becomes an act of justice against a system that has robbed these clowncels of their happiness. This call to harmful action plunges these dissociated individuals into an alternate sense of morality in which their violence contributes to the world on the same societal level as the Joker's violence, a reality in which they themselves are the Joker. So, whose idea was this? Was this Phillips' attempt to immortalize himself in film history by creating a small bump in America's rocky history? Or was this a subconscious reach for validation on the part of the director? Todd Phillips is a brilliant man, a director able to create masterpieces across genres including comedy, drama,

psychological thriller, and action. But he is also getting old, and becoming aware of that. Across multiple interviews, Phillips has voiced his frustration about our changing world, telling *Vanity Fair* in 2019, "Go try to be funny nowadays with this woke culture." It seems that Phillips is vexed with the same fear faced by many white men today: the feeling that their reign is coming to an end due to the shifting views on social equality. Phillips claims that this film is making a socially aware comment on the death of comedy. However, it is difficult to employ a sense of social awareness when you are actively trying to shun than social awareness as the death of your art form. This is how Phillips swings and misses. Instead of a reflection of society, I choose to view *Joker* as a reflection of Phillips himself. *Joker* follows a man who feels that he has been disenfranchised, as if the world collectively decided that he did not matter anymore. I could only imagine that the gradual lessening of the patriarchal society Phillips is so used to existing in would make him feel similarly disenfranchised. Perhaps creating a sense of empathy for a lawless character such as the Joker is a subconscious attempt at cultivating empathy for a group of individuals who feel wronged by a society that is no longer tailored to their comfort. Perhaps the Joker does stand for something greater than himself after all.



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Hi there. My name is Caroline Cabe, and I am a rhetoric and writing student at the University of Texas at Austin. I currently write for the Texas Orator and have worked with literary magazines nationwide such as Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts' "Eleven and a Half". I enjoy journalism and research-oriented writing as well as fiction and play-writing. **View all posts by Caroline Cabe** (<https://thetexasorator.com/author/carolinecabe/>)

