

Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian Bonenberger and Andria Williams

Andria Williams: Hey there, Adrian.

Adrian Bonenberger: Hi, Andria.

Williams: So, I heard you recently saw “Joker” in the theater, as did I. It’s gotten a lot of buzz. I’ve seen various reviews call it everything from “disappointing” to “an ace turn from Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.



<https://www.abc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article>

Bonenberger: Yes, that's true; and the Gotham of the 90s Batman—Tim Burton's version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips' Gotham in *The Joker* is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

Williams: I never knew that version of New York, and I can't even claim to know the current one, so I think that's fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of "Gotham" first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who

described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it's a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

Bonenberger: That's amazing, I had no idea... how delightful! It's an excellent and appropriate comparison... in *Joker*'s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the "king" who's selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.



Photo, TIFF.
<https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/>

Williams: With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the

film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than one occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?



photo, Warner Bros.
<https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019>
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Bonenberger: If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid \$18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

Williams: His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not

having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild [Vanity Fair](#) interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like “one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they’re rinsing the tar off.” And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it’s bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can’t go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It’s fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog’s teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

Bonenberger: Is Arthur Fleck’s struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one’s time? As someone who doesn’t spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I thought Phoenix’s quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it’s worth it.

Like yourself, I’ve always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many “jump-scare” horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt

with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

Williams: I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

Bonenberger: You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That *The Joker* is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about *The Joker* inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his

entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In The Joker's world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism—nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

Williams: I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's

actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Zizek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

Bonenberger: I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no

Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

Williams: In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

Bonenberger: Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

Williams: So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

Bonenberger: If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

Williams: Who's your favorite DC villain?

Bonenberger: At this point, The Joker.

Williams: Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

Bonenberger: Yeah, you're cheating there.

Williams: I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know...do they?"

Bonenberger: That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

Williams: I guess there are worse ways to go out.

Bonenberger: My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws...he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

Williams: That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of

question to
end on.