

A person wearing a white clown mask with a wide, sinister smile and dark eye sockets. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt with a logo that includes the word "Adidas". The background is a dark, green-tinted street scene at night, possibly a residential area with some debris on the ground.

THE

Trickster

INSURRECTION

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THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION, with its mythologies, narratives and symbologies, is not a separate domain from that of the political. Politics is not and cannot be a distinct and separate field from life, but is merely a different degree of intensity of one single and same field. Daily life, culture, the imaginary, once they attain a certain threshold of intensity, become politics. The movement that engenders politics is one of intensification and deepening, not of spatial separation and juxtaposition. As a result, it is not possible to delineate a political theory in all its stratification and complexity, in all its power and impetuosity, without confronting the energies and the imaginary that crystallize and become fixed in the cultural sphere, cinema included. From this point of view, even a cultural phenomenon like Todd Phillips' *Joker* can offer insight into the theory and practice of revolt, provided we learn how to decipher it correctly.

There is a thread that leads from the disappearance of the classical sovereign subject to the mask and the figure of the Trickster, and from there to the problem of what has been called ‘the Bloom’ and its potentially insurrectional expression. Whereas the law needs to attribute to our actions a will and identity—in other words, it needs us to be *subjects*—where this link is suddenly deactivated and broken, as happens to the Joker, a liberation from both juridical and personal guilt can occur. Microcosm and macrocosm, the (so-called) personal and the political no longer stand in reciprocal presupposition but are simultaneously transformed. What I propose to think here—starting from an analysis of *Joker*—is a radical politics that sidesteps subjectivity and identity. This lack, once accepted, no longer appears as a negative quality but as the sign of an excessive and even overburdened affirmation.

In my view, *Joker* should be understood as a new articulation and dramatization of the intensive mythology of the Trickster, one conducted with great philosophical and anthropological precision. At the same time, given its release in the cinema in the autumn of 2019, it successfully prefigured several of the new modalities of insurrection and protest that would hit the United States on May 26th, 2020. By stitching these two ends together, *Joker* appears both as the incorporation and embodiment of a whole series of mythologies and abstract theoretical problems, and at the same time as a contemporary actualization of energies buried in the past of culture.

J O K E R

It is 1981. Arthur Fleck is an aspiring stand-up comedian living in the city suburbs with his elderly mother, and working as a clown to get by. As a result of brain damage suffered as a child, he suffers from a condition akin to pseudo-bulbar syndrome, which causes his face to spasm during moments of heightened tension in ways that resemble laughter.

At first glance, the film might appear to be in search of psychologicistic introspection into Arthur Fleck’s consciousness, a legitimization of the character through his *Erlebnis*, i.e., his experience understood as his psychological history, his childhood and subsequent traumas, etc. None of this turns out to be the case. Arthur Fleck is not a conscience but a character, a simple person,

a word that is etymologically derived from the Latin “*persona*” and the Greek “*prosopon*” signifying a theatrical mask or character—the human face at its most superficial and expressive (it is from this same etymology that we get the verb “to impersonate”, that is, to take a face, a mask, and perform its features).

Arthur Fleck will become the Joker not by following a path of psychological introspection into his inner world, by retracing his history with the guidance of an analyst, but because he has always been the Joker. His traumas are not psychological but physical, as is the brain damage he experienced as a child. His character is based on his physiology, his “nature” as a result of this damage—he merely had to rediscover for himself who he “truly is”, as a function of events that occurred in the outside world. In his character and in the film that outlines his character traits, everything is surface and immanence. The Joker has always been merely a character mask, like Harlequin, Pulcinella, or Pantalone. As he tells his mother: “*You know, you used to tell me... that my laugh was a condition. That there was something wrong with me. There isn't. That's the real me!*” Arthur’s laughter is nothing more and nothing less than the direct expression of his character, something he cannot and will not avoid. There is nothing to overcome here: the Western divide between essence and appearance collapses into itself. Arthur Fleck is unsalvageable and, for that very reason, already redeemed.

How does the clown Arthur Fleck rediscover his true nature as the Joker? His path traces the phenomenology of a deepening moment of negativity, one that will lead to the exposition of the character that he has always been.

The film begins with a scene in which he is robbed and beaten up by some street thugs. As a result of this incident, his clown colleague Randall gives him a gun to protect himself. Subsequently, during one of his performances in a hospital, the same gun falls out of his pocket, causing him to lose his job. On his way home to look after his mother, still dressed as a clown Arthur Fleck sees three yuppies in the subway who are bothering a girl. In the tension of the situation, he starts involuntarily laughing on account of his illness. The men begin to beat him until, with the same gun that cost him his job, he opens fire on them, killing all three. This act of killing will prove to be tremendously impactful. The fallout of its consequences will lead working class people to begin rioting against the rich all over Gotham City, a revolt taking the image of the

clown as its symbol, mask, and persona. At this point, the real flesh and blood characters of the story are transformed into the magical surfaces and objects of the sort evoked by Benjamin in his account of German tragic drama, and of the same sort we find in every world in which history becomes nature, where we find no psychology, will or responsibility, and where everything is moved by magnetic forces and objects.

THE TRICKSTER

“I haven’t been happy one minute of my entire fucking life. You know what’s funny? You know what really makes me laugh? I used to think that my life was a tragedy... but now I realize: it’s a fucking comedy.” Arthur Fleck has just discovered his mother has lied to him his entire life, and is preparing to suffocate her. In fact, she is not his birth mother; he was adopted, abused by her former partner, leaving him with brain damage. This is the source of his pseudo-bulbar syndrome, which, at the end of the day, on an expressive level, is nothing more than a laugh. The disease that has haunted him since he was a child, that condemned him to guilt and sin, responsibility and debt, finally reveals itself to be intimately and lovingly, a cathartic laugh. At this moment, at the height of the negative moment of his life—after losing his job, after having discovered that the relationship he had with his neighbor was a mental hallucination, after becoming a serial killer, having learned of the lies told by his mother and killing her in turn—it is at just this very moment that Arthur discovers that his life was not a tragedy but a farce. And, not by chance, upon making this discovery he begins to dance. In every tragic moment of his life, in every moment of visibility by which he will be led to rediscover himself as the Joker, Arthur Fleck dances. This propensity to dance includes the moment when he experiences a complete transformation during the now famous scene on the outdoors staircase involving the glam notes of Gary Glitter. At this moment, Arthur, now fully manifest as the Joker, hurls himself into a ferociously Dionysian dance, revealing the pain and irreparability of existence and reappropriating the real, even resonating with it. It is precisely at the moment he clashes with the irreparability of the world, that his world is radically transfigured. As Agamben has observed, when it comes to confronting the irreparable, although it may have

two quite inverse forms (confidence or safety, and despair), the two are in certain respects identical: “What is essential is only that every cause of doubt has been removed, that things are certainly and definitively thus; it does not matter whether this brings joy or sadness.” At the moment Artur Fleck discovers that his life is irredeemable, he realizes that he is already saved, already redeemed. At the moment he rediscovers himself as the Joker, at the height of his despair and negativity, the moment of his most extreme exposure, the negative itself is deactivated, interrupted.

Arthur is a child of Limbo: someone who was never able to enjoy a vision of God but, precisely because of this, cannot suffer on account of such a vision either. His punishment is not afflictive, but a punishment of privation. For such a character, “The greatest punishment—the lack of the vision of God—thus turns into a natural joy: irremediably lost, [he persists] without pain in divine abandon... Neither blessed like the elected, nor hopeless like the damned”, Arthur is infused with a joy without destination or recourse.

What suddenly changes in Arthur Fleck’s life is not on the order of a “what”, but a “how”. The state of the world remains structurally and intimately the same—what changes radically is the fact that the world is now exposed and, in its exposure—without any further removal and presupposition—one can finally play with it, profane it, return it to the use of human beings. Arthur’s life had until then been a life in debt, marked by guilt for what it was; now, in the transformation that he experiences, life stops being a tragic destiny and returns to being an indivisible life, that is, the life of a character, and as such is already redeemed. As Walter Benjamin outlined in “Fate and Character”, Arthur’s transfiguration is a passage from tragic destiny to comic character: “The sublimity of character comedy rests on this anonymity of man and his morality, alongside the utmost development of individuality through its exclusive character trait. [...] To the dogma of the natural guilt of human life, of original guilt [...] genius opposes a vision of the natural innocence of man.”¹ The

¹ As Benjamin continues, “Comedy shows the true sphere to which these pseudo-moral character descriptions are to be consigned. At its center, as the main protagonist in a comedy of character, stands often enough an individual whom, if we were confronted by his actions in life instead of by his person on the stage, we would call a scoundrel. On the comic stage, however, his actions take on only the interest shed with the light of character, and the latter is, in classical examples, the subject not of moral condemnation but of high amusement. It is never in themselves, never

passage from tragedy to comedy marks the passage from guilt and psychological complication to a new state of in-

morally, that the actions of the comic hero affect his public; his deeds are interesting only insofar as they reflect the light of character."

innocence. Just as with the scene of the dance on the staircase, in the scene of Arthur's rediscovery of his natural innocence, the representatives of the law, the investigators, return to remind him of his legal guilt. Arthur Fleck has discovered that he is not a tragic and legal subject, but a parody—he "sings alongside" himself, as the etymology of the word suggests (from the ancient Greek, "*para-oudein*").

What was Arthur alienated from? What separated and divided him? Originally, he considered himself not only as a sovereign subject, but also as a subject of guilt, responsible for his own tragic life as well as that of his elderly mother. He now discovers that the place he had considered to be the source of his own subjectivity is empty. Since this isolated and guilty self never existed, since it was only a fiction and a farce, his life can only be parody, he can only sing next to himself. In freeing himself from the fiction of the subject, he frees himself from the subject's guilt as well. As Agamben has noted, "parody" is the practice "of that in language and in being which is beside itself"; it is, in other words, the "being-beside-itself of every being and every discourse."

In his parodic rediscovery of himself as the Joker, it is possible to recognize the typical features of the Trickster, that the archetypal divine rascal found throughout the Western tradition, as well as beyond it. In the various cultures that depict it, the Trickster has a number of typical traits: a marked intelligence, madness, structural amorality, and the negation of the boundaries between good and evil. To be precise, we should speak not of a denial of moral boundaries, but of their deactivation: the practice of the Trickster is precisely to transform these boundaries into thresholds, to bring good and evil into indistinction, to mutually deactivate them. In his *Trickster Makes this World*, Lewis Hyde describes the trickster as a "boundary-crosser": "Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and the trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce." The trickster waits at the "internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life... right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead—in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse

the distinction.”²

It is the structural role of the Trickster to confuse what is divided and separated. Through this figure, the realms previously subject to division and separation are understood not to be “natural” data, but always and constantly appear as a performance of powers and discursive regimes. The first and paradigmatic area of separation that the Trickster undermines is that between the religious and the sacred.

If it is correct to define religion as a practice that “removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere”, then the trickster must be aligned with the practice of profanation. By contrast with consecration (*sacrare*), which “indicates the removal of things from the sphere of human law, profanation signals their return to the free use of men. In this way, the operation of the Trickster lies in confusing the normal separations between the included and the excluded, by profaning regions that were previously expropriated. In this, its chief characteristic lies in the unification of opposites: what has been separated from human society is reconfigured and profaned by the divine rascal.”³

The fascination that the mythology of the Trickster—and therefore also of his revisitation as the Joker—rekindles in us is precisely linked to this suppression of limits, this overturning of values. At issue is something more than a carnival, for the effect is a real deactivation of the values themselves. In this, it invites the overcoming of the logic of guilt, reward and punishment, and thereby contributes to the forms of chaos that interrupt every authoritarian teleology. As Annalisa Di Nuzzo writes, “The perverse and playful joker sets in motion a macabre Dionysian game that perhaps fascinates us deeply, because it allows us to believe that we are part of a justice that does not contemplate prizes and punishments.”

As a contemporary iteration of the Trickster mythology, *Joker* exhibits the overcoming and deactivation of the boundaries dictated by society: the

2 As Hyde continues, “Trickster is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities. Where someone’s sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.”

3 On this point, see Radin, Jung and Kerényi, “The Divine Rascal” (1965).

overcoming of guilt and tragic responsibility, the collapse of the teleological connections of means and ends all constitute speculative instances translated directly into the dynamic of insurrection.

BLOOM & INSURRECTION

In a manner perfectly befitting his character, the Joker does not intentionally set off a generalized revolt in Gotham City. Here too, the fuse is random. Fleeing two investigators who pursue him, the Joker enters a subway car full of demonstrators wearing clown masks. A policeman accidentally shoots one of them, catalyzing a contagious revolt against the rich of the city. Here too, the Joker has neither will, nor responsibility, nor guilt, but resides perfectly in his character. In this, he is quite unlike the Joker of Nolan's *Dark Knight* (2008) who was quite a bit more aware of his actions. In spite of this difference, we nonetheless rediscover that pivotal link between chaos and equity: "*Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It's fair.*"

Order is hierarchical and authoritarian; chaos is horizontal and fair. Order is unique and omnipotent; chaos is fragmented and shared. Order separates and consecrates; chaos unsettles and profanes, returning the world to human use. The insurrections that erupt in Gotham City have nothing revolutionary about them—here are no programs other than eliminating the rich, nor are there political subjectivities, unions, parties, or individual identities. The insurgents finally regain possession of what they have always been: a void, a nothing, a mask. The revolt simply and lovingly constitutes "persons", that is, surfaces and faces. Thanks to the spark ignited by the Joker, the insurgents rediscover themselves as parodies of themselves: they have always believed themselves to be sovereign subjects, substances, identities. In reality, these are revealed to be "empty thrones", and thus, they start to "para-oudein", to parody, to sing next to themselves. This is why they put on the clown mask, the mask they have always had, and have always been, but never realized. Arthur Fleck, the Joker, allows everyone to rediscover themselves as the "Bloom". This concept, developed by Tiqqun, names that "principle of incompleteness", that "radical inadequacy" at the basis of human existence", that weakness that can, if it pleases, "choose for

itself the mask of the subject.” To rediscover oneself as Bloom is to “recover the originary difference, that of knowing we are not what we are, that no predicate can exhaust our potentiality. Incompleteness is the mode of being of everything that remains in contact with this potentiality, the form of existence of everything that’s destined for becoming.”

Bloom is the atmosphere that envelops average human existence: human beings of the crowd, so deeply alienated from the lived world and its economy that we finally turn out to have never been a subject to begin with, but merely a lack. What looks like our imprisonment in a mask turns out to be our salvation: we can wear the mask of the subject, betraying our intimate character of incompleteness, our lacuna. Only by starting from the awareness and exposure of this negative, can we reappropriate and realize that our lack of subjectivity, our paradoxical being is not a loss (as the political traditions of the twentieth century continue to complain) but a structurally insurrectional principle. This loss preserves our contact with potency and becoming, with a potency that need not necessarily pass into actuality. And it is precisely this break in the potency-actuality nexus that will lead to the insurrection of the Blooms of Gotham City, an uprising that claims its own trickster-like and clownish nature. A banner held by a demonstrator reads, “We are all clowns”, making visible the awareness of the insurgents of the film at regaining possession of their own incompleteness: the recovery of our ownmost being is the recovery of our being masks, parodies, clowns. The only way to get out of this Bloomian state—the human being that has eradicated all substantiality and identity—is to reappropriate this situation, not by considering it as a lack, but by turning it into something intensely palingenetic. The way out of the Bloom lies in the *assumption* of Bloom: “One truly frees oneself from something only by reappropriating that from which one is breaking free. What is the assumption of Bloom? A use of the metaphysical situation we’ve defined, a practice of the self as trickster.”

Revolt today depends not on the possession of substantial characteristics, not on the identity of the sovereign subject, but on another use of the tragic situation in which we are thrown, that is, a way of practicing ourselves as Tricksters—border dissolvers, desecrators, parodies, masks without a nucleus. This is what makes the life of Arthur Fleck and all the poor people of Gotham City available to be rediscovered as a great comedy. Even in the final frames of the

film, where it is insinuated that the whole narrative is just one big hallucination of Arthur Fleck from inside a psychiatric hospital, even in this alternative ending (which claims to be real, as opposed to the dream of insurrection), we see the possibility of this same outcome. Leaving bloody footprints—thus suggesting that he murdered his doctor—Arthur Fleck is chased by hospital guards and starts running in the comic manner of a Charlie Chaplin, as if he were a mime, a gesture, a comic character mask. And where there is comedy and dance, there is no classic subject bearer of responsibility and guilt, no legal subject, and the space of insurrection opens up all over again.

Trickster, Bloom, Insurrection.

Emanuele Edilio Pelilli argues that revolt today depends not on the substantial identities once attributed to sovereign subjects but on acts of profanation, ways of “practicing ourselves as Tricksters—border dissolvers, desecrators, parodies, masks without a nucleus.” Taking Todd Phillips’ *Joker* as a case study, Pelilli reads contemporary insurrection as an event that collapses the Western divide between essence and appearance. In these moments, we see the resurgence of an age-old mythological figure: the Trickster.