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# 'What face ... will the bogeyman of this dark century wear?' Politicizing a Contemporary Joker

By Juha Virtanen

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1

While the existing scholarship of Batman has not exhausted the debates about the character, it has nevertheless produced some overlapping analyses about his political implications. The tone of these overlaps is of course varied. For Will Brooker, although Batman's relationship to society is ambiguous, he consistently signifies "control, structure, rules and order" (273). Likewise, Terrence Wandtke notes that whilst Batman lives in a morally ambiguous world, he works within a "very definite and conservative moral code" (96). Others phrase this position quite differently. Geoff Klock suggests that Batman's "obsession with control and order" is tantamount to a "disregard for civil rights" that evinces a "flirtation with fascism" (41). For Jessica Kowalik, certain Batman narratives symbolically equate the hero with a "renegade neo-conservative [...] government" (390). In Marc Di Paolo's analysis, Batman's seemingly "unerring inner moral compass" is complicated by questions of whether Bruce Wayne's "feudal variant of benign capitalism" actually tackles the root causes of Gotham's crime rate – that is, the "inequalities built into the unacknowledged American class system and [...] its imbalanced capitalist economy" (58; 66). For Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, Batman's defence of property serves "the status quo," and – furthermore – he is, through Wayne's "inherited old money" and "savvy new investment strategies," effectively funded by the selfsame hegemony (203; 202). As Matthew Wolf-Meyer puts it, Batman's main objective is "maintaining hegemonic stability and the position of the upper class, of which Bruce is a part" (193). Even from this overview, it is not difficult to understand why critics such as Dan Hassler-Forest have concluded that Batman narratives operate on the "basic assumption [...] that there are no longer any alternatives left to capitalism" (*Capitalist Superheroes* 135).

2

Whilst some may wish to challenge these arguments, the sheer volume of such overlaps nonetheless indicates that it is not controversial to observe that Batman's politics involve a troubling degree of authoritarian conservatism: he may be a mythical 'super-cop' who guards the interests of Gotham's capitalist classes – that is, people like Bruce Wayne;

alternatively, he might be akin to an authoritarian sovereign, who declares an ‘Agambenesque’ state of exception in Gotham. <sup>[1]</sup> Yet these observations also invite a slightly different question. Given that it is commonplace to consider Batman and the Joker as mirroring counter-forces, what do the above overlaps in the arguments about the former signify for the latter? How should we interpret the Joker’s symbolism within our current moment, when eventualities such as President Trump – or the rise of far-right movements across the globe – have again made authoritarian conservatism eerily prevalent? What does the Joker mean for us today? How might we politicize a contemporary Joker? The purpose of this article is to offer some ideas that might answer such questions.

## Overlaps

3

Like the scholarship on Batman, critical examinations of the Joker have produced their own overlaps. For example, the essays in *The Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime*, edited by Robert Peaslee and Robert Weiner, consistently return to the same caveat: the Joker is mutable, multiple, and contradictory; any examination of him can only yield fragmentary accounts, and these fragments are not tantamount to a comprehensive totality. This truism could admittedly be applied to almost any fictional character that has existed across numerous iterations – written by multiple authors – over a period of approximately 80 years. Yet Eric Garneau suggests that the Joker’s mutability is distinct: he actually “*thrives* on supposedly irreconcilable characterisations,” to the extent that his personae often depend upon the blurred borderlines that ignore chronology and sequence (Peaslee and Weiner 33-4). The seemingly cacophonous ontogenies and anachronisms produced through these various iterations are thus a core component of the Joker’s subjectivity.

4

Garneau’s description seems especially fitting for Grant Morrison’s work in *Batman* between 2006 and 2008. Morrison treated Batman’s complete publication history as a single biographical timeline, thereby compressing over “70 years’ worth of [...] adventures into a frantic 15 years” of Bruce Wayne’s life (“Introduction” n.p.). It was therefore necessary for Morrison to employ a similarly palimpsestic approach to the Joker, which united his multiple iterations together in a psychological approximation of a “self-conscious performance artist who contains all his prior representations” (Singer 274). This palimpsest is most clearly captured in ‘The Clown at Midnight’, which portrays the Joker on the cusp of a dramatic self-reinvention:

“His remarkable coping mechanism, which saw him transform a personal nightmare of disfigurement into baleful comedy and criminal infamy all those years ago – [...] in the Satire Years before Camp, and the New Homicidal, and all the other Joker’s he’s been – now struggles to process the raw, expressionistic art brutal of his latest surgical makeover. [...] Maybe he is the model for 21<sup>st</sup>-century big-time multiplex man, shuffling selves like a croupier deals cards, to buffer the shocks and work some alchemy that might just turn the lead of tragedy and horror into the fierce, chaotic gold of the laughter of the damned” (*Batman and Son* n.p.).

The passage casts a comprehensive net. Morrison alludes to the Joker’s possible origins, as well as the fluctuating degrees of violence in his iterations across the Golden Age, the Silver Age, and the ‘Dark Age’ of American comics. Additionally, he is depicted as an artist, a croupier, and an alchemist; that is, as someone committed to creativity, risk, and transformation. More crucially, Morrison also identifies the Joker’s psyche as a site of trauma: he sees his criminal acts as a ‘coping mechanism’ for his own ‘personal nightmare’; likewise, his self-reinventions are portrayed as serialized attempts to ‘buffer the shocks’ of his present moment, and thus turn his ‘tragedy’ and ‘horror’ into something more forceful and defiant – specifically, the ‘chaotic gold of the laughter of the damned’.

5

I will return to further unpack the implications of these statements later in this article. At the moment, I want to focus on the structural possibilities that can be derived from Garneau and Morrison’s respective proposals. ‘The Clown at Midnight’ tacitly affirms Garneau’s argument that the Joker’s characterisations are only *supposedly* irreconcilable, and then proceeds to offer one method of reconciliation between them. That is, Morrison’s notion of coping mechanisms as a buffer to temporal shocks indicates that the numerous iterations of the Joker are all variations on a theme. In spite of their differences, they all exhibit degrees of constancy: each of them is framed by a trauma expressed via ‘baleful comedy’ and ‘criminal infamy’; each demonstrates a tendency towards artistry, risk, and transformation. While they may not divulge a unifying totality, they nevertheless indicate that the Joker evinces – in Deleuzoguattarian terms – a plane of consistency, wherein experiential phenomena such as trauma, coping mechanisms, artistry, trickery, and

criminality represent certain modes of consistency and consolidation. Concurrently, the multiple modes and personae the Joker has adopted over the years can be construed not as separate and distinct versions, but rather as a series of *continuums* and *intensities* – that is, as “continuous variations, which go beyond constants and variables” (*Thousand Plateaus* 589-590).

6

To consider the Joker’s subjectivity as a plane of consistency inscribed with different haecceities and variations is potentially useful. This would allow us to survey various conjunctures throughout the character’s long ‘biography’ in order to determine possible correlations with the constancies I described above. These overlaps could subsequently be contrasted with the aforementioned imbrications of Batman, which I summarized at the start of this article.

7

One possible summary of these conjunctures could be outlined as follows. The early Joker – as seen in ‘Batman Versus the Joker’, originally published in 1940 – often threatened the lives and possessions of Gotham’s wealthy elite. His crimes elicited the ire of both Batman and the city’s gangster families; his smile was “without mirth” and his eyes were “burning” and “hate-filled” (DiDio 6). He appeared less murderous in the following decade, in which stories such as ‘Crime of the Month Club’ – originally published in 1957 – saw the Joker devise monthly plans for a perfect crime, which were then sold to the highest bidder from the titular club; the Joker’s scheme thus turned criminality itself into a tradable commodity (DiDio 45). In 1964, ‘The Joker’s Last Laugh’ centred on a powder from a “particularly virulent form of the plant known as loco weed,” which caused Batman and Robin to laugh so hysterically that they were unable to stop the Joker as he committed a series of thefts (DiDio 55). A comparatively more menacing Joker re-emerged a decade later, when stories such as 1978’s ‘The Laughing Fish’ turned the villain’s attention to property laws (DiDio 65-98). As Richard D. Heldenfels notes, the Joker infected “fish around America with a chemical giving them his laughing expression,” and then claimed he should “receive a percentage for each fish sale,” which gestured towards “the absurdity underlying any claim of private possession” (Peaslee and Weiner 99).

8

Over the following decades, the examples became increasingly divergent. In Nathan Tipton’s words, 1986’s *The Dark Knight Returns* seemingly portrays the Joker as an “openly queer” character, insofar as he wears make up and refers to Batman as ‘darling’ (335). As Frank Miller claimed in an interview with Christopher Sharrett, this iteration was based on his perception of a longstanding “homophobic nightmare” within the broader “Batman/Joker mythos” (Pearson and Uricchio 37).<sup>[2]</sup> Whilst *A Death in the Family* is mostly known for the murder of Jason Todd, in latter stages of the story the Joker also becomes the ambassador for Iran – a position he abuses through an attempted terrorist attack on the UN (Starlin et al 131-135). Early in 1993’s *Knightfall* saga, the Joker collaborates with Scarecrow in order to terrorize both Gotham and its mayor (Moench et al 196-202). Beyond comics, Andrew Klavan considered Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker in 2008’s *The Dark Knight* as an allegory for 21<sup>st</sup>-century terrorism, with Batman assuming the role of George W. Bush.<sup>[3]</sup> In 2009, Tea Party activists instead compared the Joker to Barack Obama (Peaslee and Weiner 65-81). More recently, stories such as *Death of the Family* have depicted the character as a psychopath with a penchant for spectacle, and who continues to harbour an obsessive fascination with Batman (Snyder and Capullo n.p.).

9

Whilst these examples may seem irreconcilable on a *prima facie* reading, they also share constancies. Notably, the Joker consistently contravenes the hegemonic ‘status quo’. This can manifest as an attack against the ruling classes (as in ‘Batman Versus the Joker’) and political leaders (as in *Knightfall* or *A Death in the Family*); as a détournement of systemic structures such as the law (as in ‘The Laughing Fish’) or commodity exchange (as in ‘Crime of the Month Club’); or as an assault on social order itself (as in *The Dark Knight*). This pattern might be unsurprising: if Batman is obsessed with authoritarian control and order, then the Joker – as his mirroring opposite – would naturally favour actions that seem like chaos and disorder. But while his actions are violent and destructive, Vyshali Manivannan also notes that they amass gravitas most effectively when “systems or ideologies become too rigid to sustain cultural renewal” (Peaslee and Weiner 111). The Joker’s actions – as ‘The Clown at Midnight’ intimates – could therefore signify a link between violence and transformation,

10

Such quasi-revolutionary gestures have led to interpretations that align the Joker’s ideologies with either anarchism or

Marxism. The former is perhaps most explicitly expressed in Nolan’s film, where – when visiting the disfigured Harvey Dent in hospital – Ledger’s Joker advises Dent to “introduce a little anarchy” to the system (*The Dark Knight*). The latter is key to Heldenfels’ analyses, which argue that the Joker’s actions often highlight the “pointlessness of the pursuit of capital and its underlying powers,” a rejection of bourgeois property, and a desire to centralize his opposition to the system Batman protects (Peaslee and Weiner 95; 102). However, these interpretations are not entirely satisfying, because the Joker’s schemes – despite their transformative potential – rarely reveal an explicit political program. His actions do not consistently refer to anarchist ideology – at least not in comparison to characters such as Alan Grant’s Anarky (see Grant et al.). Likewise, we do not commonly see him express unequivocal concerns for the material conditions of the proletariat, as one might expect from a more transparently Marxist character. Therefore, while the Joker’s history reveals a recurring trajectory of violence against the upper classes, it is difficult to regard these as straightforward means towards coherent political ends. Despite the Joker’s plane of consistency, his continuous variations do not necessarily allow for this kind of coherence to emerge.

11

I would therefore propose an alternative model. While it may be difficult to define the Joker as an explicitly anarchist or an explicitly Marxist character, he nevertheless inhabits a world that is defined by Batman, who – as I indicated above – seeks to preserve its “hegemonic order [...] based upon class hierarchies and the privilege of power” (Wolf-Mayer 193). Batman vigilantism is in other words supportive of a hetero-patriarchal system that favours American imperialism and global capitalism, and his heroics thus seem less concerned with systemic brutalities such as poverty, inequality, racism, or homophobia (Di Paolo 68; 67). Moreover, because Batman traditionally represents a morally sound hero, his methods and motives are ultimately sanctioned. In Isaac Cates’ terms, the crime-ridden world of Gotham is presented as one that is already broken, and Batman simply “does what he can to create justice within it” (834).<sup>[4]</sup> The basic philosophical implication of Batman narratives consequently hinges on a superficial quasi-Hegelian formulation: Gotham’s imperfect world contains, in Batman, its own opposite – “i.e. what is commonly called perfection, as a germ or impulse” – which promises that this imperfect world can be resolved or overcome; ergo, it can progress to a more perfect state (Hegel 131). But this formulation is also flawed. Firstly, Batman’s serial narratives often render genuine resolutions and progress impossible.<sup>[5]</sup> Secondly, since these narratives rely on Batman’s authoritarian conservatism, they envisage ‘progress’ as a preservation of a hetero-patriarchal, capitalist hegemony – a situation that many would hardly describe as perfection.

12

In this context, the Joker’s role becomes increasingly clear. Just as the Dark Knight symbolises an opposite to the condition of Gotham, the Joker – in accordance with the well-established ‘Batman/Joker mythos’ – offers an opposite of Batman. But since Batman seeks to preserve a hetero-patriarchal capitalist hegemony, it seems inaccurate to describe this pairing as opposing abstractions of ‘order vs. chaos’ or ‘good vs. evil’. The Joker is more accurately an amalgamated representation of *everything* that Batman’s brand of authoritarian conservatism does not permit. Like Ahab’s assessment of Moby-Dick, Batman’s reactionary worldview sees the Joker as a visible and practically assailable personification of “all the subtle demonisms of life and thought” (Melville 283).<sup>[6]</sup> The multiple trajectories within the Joker’s long history could therefore be viewed as overlapping manifestations of conservative antipathies and animosities. That is, the Joker is often encoded with signifiers that gesture towards identities and activities that reactionary politics regard with suspicion and antagonism.

13

This configuration can help to explain the Joker’s aforementioned trajectories of violence against the upper classes and the systemic structures of capitalism: his actions in ‘Batman Versus the Joker’, *Knightfall*, ‘Crime of the Month Club’, ‘The Laughing Fish’, and so on all express an antagonism towards the hetero-patriarchal capitalist hegemony that Batman protects. An analogous gesture could also be associated with the character’s attacks on members of Batman’s crime-fighting ‘family’ in *Death in the Family* and *Death of the Family*; as Shulamith Firestone has observed, the family unit serves as an embryonic model for the social organisation of exploitative class systems (37). Moreover, examining the Joker’s history as overlapping manifestations of conservative antipathies and animosities also explains many of the character’s additional variations in my above summaries.

14

On this reading, the so-called ‘openly queer’ villain in *The Dark Knight Returns* could be regarded as a misrepresentation of queerness that is informed by right-wing homophobia (Kowalik 392). Similarly, the Joker’s costume at the UN in *A Death in the Family* gestures towards an Islamophobic register that is not entirely dissimilar

from, say, Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.<sup>[7]</sup> When the Joker enters the General Assembly Chamber dressed in a thobe, ghutra and bisht, Batman describes him as “magnificent [...] fascinating” and “death personified” (132). The combined visual and textual signifiers suggest an Orientalist fascination with the Middle East, as well as a problematic association between Islamic garments and terrorism. Nolan’s film, where the character is depicted as an evil with whom one cannot reason or negotiate, can similarly be understood as a regurgitation of Bush’s ‘War On Terror’ rhetoric (Klavan). Elsewhere, the loco weed in ‘The Joker’s Last Laugh’ draws a connection between criminality and cannabis-induced hysterics, thereby acting as an oblique precursor to Nixon’s War on Drugs during the early 1970s. Even when the Joker is associated with figures of the political establishment – such as the ‘Obama-Joker’ of 2009 – he is portrayed through a reactionary lens: it is no coincidence that the Photoshopped image first emerged during the Tea Party’s protests against Obama’s proposed healthcare reforms (Peaslee and Weiner 65).

15

These summaries may not be conclusive, but they nevertheless indicate that the Joker’s multiple iterations seem more coherent and overlapping if we acknowledge that Batman narratives often latently endorse an immoderately conservative view of the world. In this context – as I stated previously – the Joker occupies the role of a shifting personification of identities and actions that reactionaries might regard with fear and hostility. His villainy can therefore be adapted according to the *perceived* societal ‘ills’ that the right-wing perspectives of Batman stories wish to highlight at a given juncture. Even when he is presented simply as a criminally insane murderer, Batman narratives seemingly regurgitate certain societal attitudes that were popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Foucault observes, this period regarded madness as an injustice *for others*:

“Madness was individualized, strangely twinned with crime, at least linked with it by a proximity which had not yet been called into question [...] these two figures – madness, crime – [...] are what henceforth deserves to be confined” (228).

To extrapolate, when the Joker’s criminal insanity is left without further explanation, his actions are individualized and thus divorced from socially determined causes or factors. Whilst this undoubtedly adds to the character’s enduring mystique, it also requires some further thought. A viable counter-point to this outdated link between madness and criminality could for example be derived from W.A. Bonger’s work in Marxist criminology, which saw crime not as an individualized act, but rather as a response to the prevailing social and cultural conditions of its time. But to pursue such arguments further in relation to the Joker’s specific iterations, we must first return to his internal monologue in ‘The Clown at Midnight’.

## Trauma, Multiplicity, Precarity

16

To recapitulate, the passage in ‘The Clown at Midnight’ sees the Joker associate his multiple selves with a ‘coping mechanism’ that seeks to ‘buffer the shocks’ of his contemporary moment. Together with Morrison’s reference to a ‘personal nightmare of disfigurement’, this implies that the Joker’s psyche is conditioned by trauma. Whilst the specific nature of that trauma is not specified, we do know it is rooted in a personal experience that occurred many years ago. Given that Morrison sees the character as a palimpsest that contains his entire publication history, the disfigurement most likely refers to the origin story offered in 1951’s ‘The Man Behind the Red Hood’. Here, the Joker was previously a criminal working under the alias of Red Hood, until he fell into a vat of chemicals when Batman foiled one of his robberies. The effects of the toxic chemicals transformed the Joker’s appearance to his iconic face, and he was driven insane at the first sight of his own reflection.<sup>[8]</sup> But Morrison’s palimpsest might not be so exclusive in its intertextual allusions. The ‘personal nightmare of disfigurement’ could equally be understood as a gesture towards the origin story Alan Moore and Brian Bolland proposed in *The Killing Joke*. This graphic novel also matches the description in Morrison’s passage: Moore’s story retains many of the key elements in ‘The Man Behind the Red Hood’, including the Red Hood’s costume, the chemical accident, and Batman’s role in the Joker’s transformation. Yet Moore complicates the narrative with additions that increase the psychological depth of the Joker’s apparent radix.

17

As *The Killing Joke* would have it, before the Joker became the ‘clown prince of crime’, he was an unemployed stand-up comedian who lived in poverty with his pregnant wife. A series of flashbacks depict the young family’s abject conditions: they are behind with their rent, their landlord treats them with both pity and hatred, and the building where they reside “stinks of cat litter and old people”; the comedian wants to earn “enough money to get set up in a decent

neighbourhood” before the baby arrives, but he has no means to accomplish this level of social mobility (Moore and Bolland np). He therefore reluctantly agrees to assist a criminal gang – who use the Red Hood costume – to conduct a heist on a playing card company located next to a chemical plant where he was previously employed. Before the heist takes place, however, he finds out that his wife has died. In what is described as a rare accident, she was testing a baby-bottle heater, which caused an “electrical short” that resulted in her death (Moore and Bolland np). Distraught, he is still coerced to assist the gang, but when Batman intervenes with the heist, the comedian falls into a chemical vat and becomes the Joker.

18

These are significant changes to the story in ‘The Man Behind the Red Hood’. The Joker is no longer rendered insane by his own reflection, but rather because of the grief over his dead wife and unborn child. Moore’s version of events also firmly identifies the Joker’s origins in the life of an “abused member of the underclass” (Peaslee and Weiner 96). In this context, his collusion with the Red Hood gang is not an instance of individualized criminality. Rather, it is a crime committed from poverty in order to ensure his family’s survival, which Bonger would describe as an “egoistic and altruistic” negotiation between the “conflicts of duty” that one encounters in a capitalist society (564). Moreover, these circumstances emphasize Batman’s accountability in the Joker’s creation. While the Dark Knight prevents the heist itself – thereby affirming Uricchio and Pearson’s views about his desire to protect property – he is absent during the crimes that preceded this event. As the above summary indicates, the comedian’s family died as a result of poor housing standards maintained by slum landlords (the electrical short), as well as lax safety standards for consumer goods (the baby-bottle heater). Given the crucial role this loss played in the comedian’s breakdown – which then led to his metamorphosis into the Joker – *The Killing Joke* highlights an aporia within Batman’s jurisprudence. His fluctuating absence and presence across the crimes at the heart of the Joker’s genesis are a metonym for a system where burglary is punished by law – with Batman as its ultimate enforcer – but those responsible for the abjection of poor-quality housing and companies behind faulty consumer goods are left unpenalized. The ‘personal nightmare’ presented in *The Killing Joke* therefore locates the Joker’s psychological origins within the logical disjunctions of a law that is practiced unequally. In other words, the ‘shocks’ that the Joker’s ‘coping mechanism’ seeks to buffer are produced by the internal contradictions of the hegemonic order that Batman fights to preserve.

19

This thread can be pursued even further via J.M. DeMatteis et al.’s *Batman: Going Sane*. In this story – upon believing that he has killed Batman – the Joker’s sanity is ‘restored’. He undergoes plastic surgery on his face, assumes a new life as Joseph Kerr, and falls in love with a woman named Rebecca. However, Kerr cannot completely avoid the traumas that characterise the Joker’s psyche. He experiences frequent anxiety dreams where the face of a bat transforms into the face of the Joker, which startle him out of his sleep. When Kerr hears about Batman’s return, these subconscious fears and anxieties are again brought to the surface, and he re-transforms into the Joker. As the panels depicting this reverse conversion state, “once [Batman] came back, [the Joker] had to come back too” (DeMatteis et al np).

20

On the surface, *Going Sane* rehearses the trope of Batman and the Joker as mirror images that produce one another. But Kerr’s anxiety dreams also suggest a more nuanced relationship. His nightmarish bats are described as monsters with “black wings” and “dead eyes” similar to the white slits on Batman’s cowl; in the subsequent panels, the semi-anthropomorphic bat-faces possess sharp vampiric fangs; finally, the bats adopt the Joker’s smile, before completing their transformation to his whole visage (DeMatteis et al np). These nightmares, in other words, suggest that Batman is – for Kerr’s subconscious – part vampire, and his fear of this vampiric apparition is ‘buffered’ by the resurgence of Joker.

21

Although this fits within the gothic quality of Batman narratives, there is also a deeper significance to the sequence. Vampirism is a recurring metaphor in Marx’s work: the first volume of *Capital* describes capitalism as “dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour”; as having a “vampire thirst for the living blood of labour”; as a “vampire that will not let go” until the very last drop of blood has been exploited; as a “blood-sucking” institution; as a process that “sucks up the worker’s value-creating power”; and so on (342; 367; 416; 598; 716). The *Grundrisse* likewise depicts capital as vampirically “sucking living labour” (646). Marx thus evokes vampires both as a rhetorical device and as a way of delineating between the dynamics of living and dead labour within capitalist production; in other words, vampirism is Marx’s shorthand for capital’s affinity with death.<sup>[9]</sup> Kerr’s dreams likewise show a certain

shift between Batman, capital, and the Joker, which implies some causal link between the three. This is potentially significant. Rather than his mastery of detection or the martial arts, Batman’s principal superpower is Wayne’s wealth: without these financial resources, Batman would not exist; he is Marx’s vampire incarnate. The aporia within the flashbacks of *The Killing Joke* – where Batman prevents burglaries, but not poverty or corporate crime – exists not because he merely defends hegemonic order, but more precisely because his vigilantism has a “great stake in the maintenance of the status quo,” insofar as that status quo enables his entire existence (Uricchio and Pearson). In this context, the central premise of *Going Sane* – that is, ‘the Joker exists because of Batman’ – equally suggests that the Joker exists because of capital.

22

*The Killing Joke* and *Going Sane* therefore tell a similar story. Both reject the view of the Joker’s ‘criminal insanity’ as a condition that is intelligible through the atomistic individualization that Foucault critiques in *Madness and Civilization*. Both indicate that such interpretations depoliticize the Joker to the extent that any questions of systemic social causations for his subjectivity are ruled out. Because both stories identify the Joker as a response to trauma, they suggest that his characteristics cannot be separated from the social fabric that produces them: the foundations of his criminal ‘coping mechanism’ are inextricably connected to the aporia of a legal framework that preserves the inequalities of a capitalist system. These subtexts, in turn, overlap with my earlier proposals regarding the Joker’s history as a mutable metonym for identities and acts that the hegemonic order view with suspicion or hostility. If the Joker’s role across the Batman mythos is to operate as a personification of societal ‘ills’ – as seen from a conservative, reactionary position – it is logical that he would originate from a traumatized member of the underclass: this social stratum is after all the quintessential ‘Other’ to the world of wealth and privilege that Bruce Wayne and Batman represent. The persistent designation of the Joker – in his multiple iterations – as an archvillain feeds into a social paranoia that these traits are somehow evil in themselves, rather than a reflection of a reactionary hegemony that judges them as a threat. The Joker’s long-standing conflict with Batman could therefore be generalized as recurring instances of intersectional struggle against a conservative-capitalist value system.

23

Of course, one could argue that this analysis relies on a selective reading of the Joker’s origins. As Daniel Wallace points out, sympathetic depictions of the character “are outnumbered by stories in which he remains an unrepentant crook” (131). This notion is even acknowledged in a panel from *The Killing Joke*, where the Joker declares that if he is “going to have a past, [he would] prefer it to be multiple choice” (n.p), which could suggest a degree of unreliability for the flashbacks we encounter in the graphic novel.<sup>[10]</sup> But perhaps this apparent ‘unreliability’ can also be understood differently. Whilst this may not be explicitly present in the Joker’s utterance, it is nevertheless worth noting that the implications of ‘multiple choice’ are not light-years away from the psychological conditions produced by decentralized networks of labor within a post-Fordist economy, where one must be “flexible because workers have to adapt to different tasks, mobile because workers have to move frequently between jobs, and precarious because no contracts guarantee stable, long-term employment” (Hardt and Negri 112). On this reading the Joker’s quip could also be understood as an oblique gesture towards these conditions of flexibility, mobility, and precarity, in which post-Fordist workers live fragmentary lives in conditions of utter instability. In other words: although the reference to ‘multiple choice’ predominantly serves the purposes of narrative ambiguity, it nonetheless conveys an inexplicit understanding of the uncertain and constantly shifting economic order that the Joker inhabits.<sup>[11]</sup>

24

In this context, the Joker’s actions could ultimately be understood as a violent reaction against the precarity that the less privileged – i.e., figures like the comedian, his family, and Joseph Kerr – experience within the hegemony that Batman both embodies and protects. As Judith Butler writes:

“‘precarity’ designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become [...] exposed to injury, violence, and death. [...] Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability [...] for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression [...] against which states do not offer adequate protection” (ii).

Reading the Joker via ‘The Clown at Midnight’, *The Killing Joke*, and *Going Sane*, we find examples of several characteristics within Butler’s description. In Morrison, for example, the ‘coping mechanism’ that buffers the shocks of the Joker’s contemporary moment indicates a violent substitute for the protection that the state does not offer. In Moore and Bolland the conditions in which the comedian and his family live encapsulate the populations that suffer



from the failures of social and economic networks of support. In Dematteis et al. Joseph Kerr experiences the subconscious memories of Batman as a form of aggression against which – since the Caped Crusader is a part of the ruling classes – the state does not offer adequate protection. If, as I noted earlier, the Joker’s clashes with Batman depict recurring struggles against conservative capitalism, the more sympathetic accounts of the character we find in *The Killing Joke* and *Going Sane* indicate that conditions of precarity are a key motivation behind these conflicts. In these narratives, the Joker is a violent reaction borne from precarious life.

## Riots

25

What are the implications of interpreting the Joker as a violent reaction borne from precarious life, especially when – as I stated earlier – his actions are rarely articulated with reference to an explicit political program? Would such an understanding allow us to uncover a degree of radical politicization within the character’s various appearances? One answer to such questions can be glimpsed through Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo’s *The Joker*. Originally published in 2009, this standalone graphic novel metaphorises the character as a disease with no cure, other than the remediating effects of Batman (Azzarello and Bermejo n.p.). Michael Goodrum’s research however offers an alternative take: *The Joker* presents the character not as a disease, but rather as a Zizekian symptom that is a necessary product of the hegemonic system itself – i.e. a point at which the “antagonistic character of the system” erupts (Zizek 128). [\[12\]](#) Although Goodrum does not elaborate on this idea, one example of such eruptions opens up the possibility of extending the significations of *The Joker* beyond these Zizekian formulations.



Fig 1: The Joker amid Molotov flames ((Azzarello & Bermejo n.p.). © DC Comics

26

Running away from Batman in the climax of the text, the Joker proceeds through the streets and sets his surroundings on fire with Molotov cocktails. One panel shows him standing amid the flames with his arms spread, declaring ‘this belongs to me’ (Figure 1). The illustration is iconic, but it initially conveys rather little. What is the ‘this’ that the Joker claims as belonging to him, for example? His upward gaze suggests that the exclamation is directed at Batman, who is pursuing him from above. In this respect, the utterance could be regarded as a performative reclamation of something that would typically belong to the Dark Knight. Scott McCloud’s discussion of closure can deepen this reading:

“All of us perceive the world as a *whole* [...] yet our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete [...] This phenomenon of *observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole* [...] [is] called *closure* [...], mentally completing that which is *incomplete* based on *past experience*” (62-63).

Thus, the Joker’s arms and utterance are not simply directed at the flames around him. Given that previous panels have shown him setting the streets on fire, the utterance also incorporates the streets around him; indeed, the reclamation

could extend to Gotham as a whole. Amid the flames, he rejects Batman’s supremacy over the city, and claims it as his own. But McCloud’s argument that closure allows us to ‘complete’ the significations of an image based on ‘past experience’ also enables a further analysis of these iconographies. While the ‘mine’ – in the context of the image – refers strictly to the Joker’s body, it also spreads further. His tendency towards ‘shuffling selves like a croupier deals cards’; his role as a mutable metonym within Batman’s world; and his inexplicit cognizance of multiplicity, flexibility, mobility, and precarity all indicate that the body depicted in the panel is not one, but many. In this respect, ‘this belongs to me’ also declares ‘this belongs to us’. The intent behind the Joker’s utterance is thus effectively tantamount to ‘whose streets? Our streets?’ – a call-and-response chant frequently heard at protest marches. Coupled with the flames of Molotov cocktails, the panel depicts – through McCloud’s closure – an image that recalls a scene of rioting.

27

Of course, riots and protests are not seamless equivalents, but this subtle ‘riot iconography’ is nonetheless a significant gesture. In his recent study of riots, Joshua Clover maps out the spatialisation of these struggles:

“Riots [...] are “struggles to control space” and the passage through it; there is a slant rhyme between the paradigmatic export riot at King’s Lynn in 1347 and the massive blockade at the Port of Oakland in 2011. The control over spaces takes many forms, often involving efforts to drive police from the commercial districts they defend. Riots are obsessed with buildings, with plazas and passages, with massing in the square and the street” (138).

To extrapolate, Clover sees urban spaces as central to uprisings such as these. If the place of “riot is the street,” it is because the street enables rioters to block traffic, and thus interrupt “the built landscape of [capitalist] circulation” in order to register a desire to cease “the antihuman totalization and thingification of the world” (Clover 182). Although Clover’s latter arguments are made in reference to riots from 2014, the above passage suggests that there is a ‘slant rhyme’ –i.e. an oblique and imperfect but nevertheless tangible connection – between these contemporary events and older examples. The panel in *The Joker* could likewise be characterised as a similar slant rhyme. While the image does not present an explicit riot, it still exhibits several concepts from Clover’s analysis. The Joker’s Molotov cocktails and his declaration that the streets belong to him indicate a struggle to control this particular stratum of space. Likewise, although the image may not convey an unequivocal desire to interrupt the circulation of capital, its flames are expressly lit in an effort to stall and deter Batman. That is, the Molotov cocktails form a makeshift barricade against Gotham’s extra-judicial super-cop, whose powers derive from capitalist wealth. Riots, however obliquely or imperfectly, inform many of the panel’s most distinctive characteristics.

28

Clover’s work allows us to tease out some further ‘slant rhymes’ between the Joker and riots. Describing the socio-political context of recent uprisings, Clover argues that they arise from circumstances where the “state is near and the economy is far”: while commodities are produced and traded across global logistics chains, the police represent a progressively militarized “domestic army of the state”, and riots therefore cannot “help but heave” themselves against these local manifestations of authority (29). Clover thus posits that for modern rioters, the police “now stand in the place of the economy” as the “violence of the commodity made flesh” (125). The police are in other words the antagonist, necessity, and limit through which a riot comes to know itself (Clover 47).

29

These tensions can equally be applied to the conflict between the Joker and Batman. As I pointed out above, Azzarello and Bermejo’s panel directs the Joker’s reclaiming utterance to Batman: although he is absent from the image, the Dark Knight is the chief antagonist of the scene. But the scene also conveys more than a simplistic confrontation between supervillain and superhero, as its broader ‘slant rhymes’ reveal a more complex set of conflicts. Just as Batman narratives often configure the Joker as a visible and practically-assailable personification of various *perceived* societal ‘ills’, Batman himself can conversely be interpreted as a fantastical parallel for Clover’s analysis regarding the relative proximities of the state and the economy. While Gotham is frequently depicted as a space of urban decay, the city is also somewhat removed from explicit socio-economic contexts. Even when particular stories involve transgressions of the underclasses, the conditions that give rise to these transgressions are likely to go unmentioned (Pearson and Urrichio 206). Gotham is in other words a space where the economy is – to a certain extent – far; Batman stories that concentrate on the logistics chains through which commodities are produced and circulated remain rare. But crucially, both the economy and the state are also – in varying degrees – rendered more visible and practically assailable through Batman and Bruce Wayne. Whilst Wayne’s various charitable ventures serve as a simulacrum of “the social wage of a Keynesian compromise,” Batman’s policing of the deprived areas of Gotham simultaneously

signals the withdrawal of that compromise in favour of an authoritarian and coercive “occupation of excluded communities” that are deemed surplus to the economy (Clover 47). An attack against Batman therefore antagonises both the economy and the state.

30

In this context, the distinctive features of the above image – i.e., the Molotov flames and the reclaiming utterance – form a complementary duality. The former serves as a metonymic depiction of the direct economic form that Clover associates with riots: economic destruction and looting (29). As I indicated earlier, the flames – in creating a barricade against Batman – denote a degree of destruction, which seeks to stall both the economy and the state. Moreover, the earlier passages reveal that the alcohol for the Molotov cocktails was sourced from a convenience store robbery. During this heist, the Joker advises his protégé Jonny Frost that he should “name” and “take” anything he wants from the store as well (Azzarello and Bermejo n.p.). The scene thus elicits certain aspects of looting, which – in Clover’s terms – is a riot-oriented “version of price-setting in the marketplace, albeit at price zero” (29). Meanwhile, the utterance connects with the socio-political content of riots. Whether the declaration’s possessive pronoun is seen as singular or plural, it still designates the Joker as an active participant in the discourse of the scene. The defiant tones of the utterance are produced through its efforts to reclaim ‘ownership’ of the street, as well as its insistence upon registering the Joker’s agency as a subject. This cognizance of subjectivity again forms a ‘slant rhyme’ to certain aspects of riots. As Clover notes, some commentators have argued that the “coherent struggle” of riots often involves demands for the “recognition of a subject where daily grind sees only an abject” (qtd. in Clover 47). In this context, the panel’s ‘riot iconography’ assumes a deeper meaning. While still oblique and imperfect in their connection to actual riots, the Joker’s destruction, looting, and reclaiming of space and subjectivity can all be understood as antagonisms hurled against Batman and all that he represents. Moreover, these antagonisms begin to exhibit degrees of a coherent struggle; a struggle that – like riots – emerges as a violent reaction borne from precarious life.

31

But does this reading of the image contradict my earlier argument that the Joker’s acts seldom articulate an explicit political program? If the character cannot be seamlessly associated with positions such as anarchism or Marxism, can the iconography of the panel truly be understood as exhibiting the coherent struggle of riots? One of the defining characteristics of riots – in Clover’s view – is that their participants have “no necessary kinship but their dispossession” (16). To elaborate, Clover reasons that the populations involved in riots – especially those that have occurred during the 21<sup>st</sup> century – are not necessarily organised around the basis of a shared program; they instead correspond to an “underlying political-economic unity [...], which provides them a shared set of problems and a shared arena in which to confront them” (177). In other words, “[the] riot seeks to preserve nothing, to affirm nothing but perhaps a shared antagonist, a shared misery, a shared negation. It lacks a program” (Clover 150).

32

To be clear, Clover does not condemn or stigmatize riots. Rather, he argues against the view that such uprisings are concerned with conveying some initially undeciphered meaning, which can subsequently be decoded into a message that the ruling hegemony may seek to address and satisfy. In sum, analyses of this nature situate the ‘truth’ of the riot somewhere outside of the event itself. But when riots do not communicate such decipherable messages, Clover suggests, it is because their specific struggles are centred on practicalities, not polity. These practicalities can involve actions such as looting, controlling space, eroding the power of the police, and the destruction of “property understood to constitute the rioter’s exclusion from the world they always see before them and which they may not enter” (185).

33

This understanding of riots as a struggle where the participants’ kinship is mostly defined through their shared dispossession; as an event that does not always communicate a decipherable program outside of itself; and as a struggle focused on practicalities instead of polity can all be traced back to the panel in *The Joker* – as well as its reverberations in relation to my previous analyses of ‘The Clown at Midnight’, *The Killing Joke*, and *Going Sane*. In the case of the image, Clover’s analyses allow us to read it as a ‘slant rhyme’ to rioting without associating the scene with a determinate message that would furnish its ‘riot iconography’ with a degree of ‘legitimacy’. That legitimacy is instead derived from the practicalities of the image itself. As the above analyses have demonstrated, the panel is in equal parts imbued with looting (the Molotov liquor), controlling space (the reclaiming utterance), and an attempt to stall and erode the power of the police (in this case, Batman). Since riots do not, perforce, organise around a shared idea, it is not imperative to coalesce the Joker with an anarchist or Marxist position; what matters is that the ‘slant rhymes’ of the panel correspond with a political-economic unity that parallels the situation of a riot. That alone

suffices for understanding the coherent struggles that form the subtext of the image.

34

The reverberations of this subtext within the image can further elucidate certain facets in ‘The Clown at Midnight’. Earlier, I observed that Morrison’s passage highlights a particular plane of consistency across the Joker’s various iterations; a plane that is characterised by artistry, risk, and transformation. The latter of these especially resonates with *The Joker*’s gestures towards riots. Clover notes that riots appear most prominent in interregnums, such as the current period of sustained, if uneven, crisis in late-capitalist nations (3). Earlier I mentioned that the Joker’s violent and destructive acts are similarly connected to his transformative ethos, especially when – in Manivannan’s terms – systemic structures become too rigid to sustain renewal (Peaslee and Weiner 111). In this sense, when ‘The Clown at Midnight’ describes the Joker’s wish to transform his ‘horror’ to the ‘laughter of the damned’, his desires share a certain tonality with the time of riots, insofar as both descry a feeling that something has, or should have, ended (Clover 31). Like the above image, the transformative acts alluded to in Morrison may not reveal an undeciphered program that exists outside these acts themselves. However, if the Joker’s ‘coping mechanism’ denotes a violent substitute for the protection that the state refuses to offer, perhaps it too serves as an echo of the political-economic unity – such as a shared set of problems and antagonisms – that corresponds with the eruption of riots. In this context, Morrison’s ‘damned’ signify those precarious populations that cannot liberate themselves without destroying the entirety of the hegemonic order.

35

Similar resonances become notably stronger in *The Killing Joke* and *Going Sane*. This may be unsurprising, since my previous analyses identified these texts as examinations of possible traumas that indicate a systemic social causation for the Joker’s subjectivity. In the latter, Kerr’s dreams imply that the Joker emerges as a ‘buffer’ to capitalism, whilst the former associates the Joker’s genesis in the abjection of the impoverished and the aporia of legal frameworks that preserve the inequalities of capitalist systems. Both iterations of the character therefore share the qualities of dispossession that Clover identifies as a unity shared by the participants of riots. This shared tonality between riots and *The Killing Joke* and *Going Sane* reveals additional subtexts to my earlier discussions of both texts. When the comedian worries that he is a ‘loser’, he displays a subtle awareness of the fact that he exists as a negation of the society in which he lives; that the social hierarchies of Gotham – which Batman preserves – designate him as a nonentity without prospects and reserves. He in other words acknowledges that his family is deemed as abject, as surplus to the economy. Thus, when the Joker later insists that only ‘one bad day’ separates him from characters like Gordon, his position is underscored by a demand to be recognised as a subject. Similarly, when *Going Sane* posits that the re-emergence of Batman in turn necessitates the Joker’s return, the Dark Knight – and his coercive occupation of Gotham’s excluded communities – is effectively characterised as the imbrication through which the Joker comes to know himself. Like the above panel, *Going Sane* casts Batman as a militarized manifestation of authority, who appears to the Joker as antagonist, necessity, and limit.

36

In addition to these subtexts, reading *The Killing Joke* and *Going Sane* via *The Joker* and Clover’s arguments also uncovers a further set of similitudes. In one of the previously discussed flashbacks, the comedian expresses a desire to earn sufficient funds to move his family into a ‘decent neighbourhood’. As though it were an instance of foreshadowing, this statement is made while the comedian rests his head against the window, observing his present environment with a mixture of anger and resignation (Moore and Bolland n.p.). Indeed, as this account of the Joker’s origins continues, the comedian’s dreams of social mobility are of course rendered unattainable. Correspondingly, *Going Sane* opens with the Joker’s attack on Park Ridge, the “safest and sweetest neighbourhood in Gotham” that serves testament to the gentrifying “power of urban renewal” (n.p.). As such, Park Ridge also represents the type of neighbourhood that was ultimately denied from the comedian’s family in *The Killing Joke*. Reading the two scenes in parallel therefore recalls Clover’s ratiocination that riots often seek to destroy property that signifies the rioter’s exclusion from the world they always see before them, but which they may never enter. The fires at Park Ridge in *Going Sane* can in this way be paired with the flaming streets in *The Joker*. The individual attacks admittedly evince some differences: in the latter the Molotov flames are barricades against Batman, whilst the fires at Park Ridge indicate an attempt to depress property values by undermining the habitability of bourgeois communities (Clover 179). Yet these are only differences of degree, as opposed to essence or kind; both instances still frame the Joker’s violence as a ‘slant rhyme’ to rioting.

37

Therefore, if the Joker’s personae evince – in Deleuzoguattarian terms – a plane of consistency, where his numerous mutable iterations are a series of continuous variations, the overlaps of ‘The Clown at Midnight’, *The Killing Joke*, *Going Sane*, and *The Joker* can be summarized as follows. The first two provide us with a shared set of problems – namely dispossession, precarity, and abjection. The desire for transformation in Morrison’s passage, as well as the abject desperation that unfolds across the flashbacks in Moore and Bolland, both gesture towards such sentiments. The second two provide us with a reaction: antagonism towards the state and the economy, the destruction of property, and the struggles to control space. When read as a complex nexus of parallel texts, the four works are ultimately aligned as slant rhymes to riots; moreover, each of these oblique rhymes hinges on the grinning visage of the Joker.

## Coda

38

This article began by noting that the existing scholarship on Batman has often positioned the Dark Knight’s politics as being informed by a troubling degree of authoritarian conservatism. On this basis, I set out to consider what this political position might imply for the Joker, since the two characters are often presented as mirroring counter-forces. To phrase it differently, I wanted to find out what a political Joker could possibly mean for us today.

39

Having observed a series of overlaps within the different iterations of the Joker across his publication history, I proposed that his mutable identities evince a certain plane of consistency when they are examined via perspectives that acknowledge Batman’s worldview as being – however latently – reactionary, immoderately conservative, and authoritarian. In this context, the Joker occupies the role of a narrative wild card whose ‘villainous identity’ can be tailored to suit the *perceived* societal ‘ills’ that the right-wing perspectives of Batman stories wish to highlight at a given juncture in time. Consequently, the vilification of the Joker can sometimes assume problematic registers that, in supporting Batman’s heroism, affirm the preservation of a hetero-patriarchal capitalist hegemony. Indeed, the slightly more sympathetic accounts we find in works such as *The Killing Joke* and *Going Sane* imply that positioning the Joker as an ‘insane’ archvillain is to some degree a fantasy of depoliticization; that the social causes behind the character reveal conditions of trauma, abjection, and precarity; and that the Joker’s battles with Batman might at times depict instances of struggle against a conservative-capitalist value system. Concurrently, my close analysis of one particular panel in *The Joker* named a specific form in which such struggles might take shape. Just as Batman embodies capitalist wealth and authority, the Joker – obliquely and imperfectly, but nevertheless tangibly – manifests as an instance of rioting.

40

Does this mean that the Joker is always a riot? No, it does not. While the Joker’s history does indicate a certain plane of consistency, the continuous variations that are enacted on that plane also go beyond constants and variables. The plural trajectories of the character in other words produce a reflexive entity that undermines such monolithic pronouncements. My analysis of the Joker is thus not tantamount to unreservedly sanctioning *all* of his actions as struggles against a conservative-capitalist value system. There is plenty in the character’s actions that is impossible to endorse, of which his paralyzing of Barbara Gordon and his abuse of Harley Quinn are just two notable examples. Nor do I wish to suggest that the Joker is wholly seamless or unproblematic as a representation of riots, especially since many of these struggles have – in a contemporary context – taken place in a racialized context that we cannot associate with the extremely white face of the Clown Prince of Crime. More precisely, I have proposed the above arguments in an effort to tease out some degree of radical potential within the character. In a world of monstrous inequality that is increasingly enforced in aggressive and coercive ways, is there not something to be said of facing all the spoils of the super-rich (and their super-cops) and declaring ‘this belongs to us’?

## Notes

[1] For a more detailed discussion of Batman’s relationship with the state of exception, see Comerford 183-200.

[2] It should be noted that Miller’s depiction of a gay Joker – whose apparent queerness is mainly limited to the aforementioned examples of wearing make up and referring to Batman as ‘darling’ – may amount to a problematic, potentially even homophobic, characterisation. When pressed on this question by Sharrett, Miller responded that he felt his portrayal was “sensible and interesting” to him; he also noted that he frequently receives “flak from almost every group” (Pearson and Uricchio 37). A more comprehensive discussion about the problematic aspects of Miller’s ‘gay Joker’ can be found, for example, in Kowalik 390-392.

- [3] A similar argument appears in Di Paolo 60. However, Canavan has warned against reading the film as an uncomplicated mapping of the War on Terror in comic-book terms (4).
- [4] Similar arguments are also made in Skoble 33 and in Di Paolo 58.
- [5] My arguments about Batman, here and elsewhere in this article, are similar to Eco's famous critique of Superman. See Eco 14-22.
- [6] See, for example, Tomasi et al, where Bruce Wayne's dream depicts the Joker as a white whale (n.p.).
- [7] As Edward Said has argued, Huntington's arguments are "the purest invidious racism, a sort of parody of Hitlerian science directed today against Arabs and Muslims" (293).
- [8] After its first appearance in *Detective Comics* #168, the story has been re-printed several times. See, for example, Ellsworth and Sciff.
- [9] For a fuller analysis of Marx's references to vampires, see Neocleous 667-84.
- [10] See Miettinen 10-12.
- [11] My thinking here is somewhat indebted to Hassler-Forest's recent work on *Game of Thrones*. See *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics* 75-92.
- [12] For Goodrum's discussion of *The Joker* and Zizek, see Peaslee and Weiner 240-241.

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