



Amala Poli // *Joker* (2019), a film directed by Todd Phillips, and co-produced by Todd Phillips, Bradley Cooper, and Emma Tillinger Koskoff, represents mental illness in a way that is neither easily acceptable or dismissible. Some critics have viewed the film as a troubling representation of mental illness due to its construction of the troubled supervillain (Driscoll and Husain),^[1] whereas other voices include famous neurocriminologist Adrian Raine, who found the film to be a “great educational tool” (Miller).^[2] In the ongoing debate about good and bad representations of mental illness, *Joker* provides a unique picture that is smattered with multiple objectives ranging from the construction of a backstory to the exploration of Arthur Fleck’s psyche. Though the movie does provide a history to the supervillain Joker, I wish to argue instead that it does so through a careful construction of a narrative of deteriorating mental health as a response to highly stressful and damaging incidents and people, combined with childhood trauma.

The movie’s portrayal of strength in relation to mental illness is different from superhuman constructions of the same that are severely problematic, as in the instance of *Split* (2016) directed by M. Night Shyamalan, where the protagonist is ‘Beast-like.’ The protagonist in *Joker*, Arthur Fleck, is beaten in a dirty alleyway by a bunch of street urchins in the opening scene. We are not presented with a supervillain who has superior strength that is both inexplicable and scientifically impossible. Rather, we have a series of circumstances and instances of unkindness that appear to present something akin to a rationale for the violent acts committed by Arthur Fleck. It appears that these instances serve to situate the violence that follows, at the very least. In the first instance, when he shoots the young men in the subway train, it begins as an act of self-defense. The reveling that follows is more along the lines of a performative madness, some acceptance of the capacity for violence without guilt, which speaks more to the stock character of the supervillain.

To state that the film is a good representation of mental illness would be problematic, because it mixes the neurological and the psychiatric aspects of Pseudobulbar Affect and some generalized symptoms of violent propensities in mood and thought disorders without any clear distinctions. The confusing delusions and grandiosity of the protagonist after he stops taking his medication indicate a medley of symptoms, rather than a clear diagnostic category. However, the film does

something unique in its portrayal of emotional dysregulation. When Fleck asks Wayne about why people must be so unkind, and why everybody is so mean all the time, it is apparent that this comes from Fleck's hypersensitivity to unkindness and his need for someone else to feel the extent of emotional dysregulation that is experienced by him. We also sense this need for validation and love in his earlier fantasy with Murray, the comedy show-host who sees Fleck for the loving son and good person that he is and accepts him for it (Phillips, *Joker*).

The questions raised by *Joker* are not new, but they are still relevant in terms of public health policy. The film contains an embedded critique of the current state of welfare policies on healthcare. It emphasizes not only the importance of free and accessible medication for people with mental illness but also the problems with naturalizing the "Get Help" rhetoric. It asks the question of who can get help in a sustained way and also puts the onus of ill-treatment on society. The film pushes the social axis so much that it almost appears as though Arthur Fleck has no choice but to succumb to violence for self-defense in a milieu that mocks him and kicks him when he is down. We also see an increase in his delusions and sexual drive after he stops taking his medication, the latter aspect being consistent with descriptions of a loss of libido, which is a common side-effect of many anti-depressants.

Where the film really breaks its own narrative construction is in the last frame, where we see Fleck in session with a psychiatrist, to whom we have no prior introduction. He walks out of that session dressed in white, trailing bloody footprints behind, the music score drawing attention to elation, revelry, and performativity. In this frame, the narrative that had consistently shown rationale for acts of violence (as a reactive mechanism for the protagonist) breaks from that logic. Fleck, in this frame, attacks someone the viewers are unfamiliar with, for reasons unknown, thereby collapsing mental illness with random violence.

In conclusion, the narrative challenges the viewer to find ways to blame the protagonist and sets up the rationale for his violence in a way that complicates the question of responsibility. Though it tends towards a critique of society in a far too general sense, it still has some strong moments of clarity with regard to the isolation and emotional dysregulation often described as symptomatic of certain chronic mental health conditions.

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Driscoll, Annabel and Mina Husain. "Why Joker's depiction of mental illness is dangerously misinformed." *The Guardian*, 21 Oct, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/21/joker-mental-illness-joaquin-phoenix-dangerous-misinformed>. Obtained from Warner Bros.