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Send in the Clowns: Twisted Masculinity, Supergendering and the Aesthetics of

Populism in Todd Phillips' *JOKER* (2019).

This chapter explores the interplay between the aesthetics of masculinity and populism in

Todd Phillips' *JOKER* (2019). Inhabiting "its own universe [and having] no connection to

any of the DC films that have come before it" (Phillips & Silver, 2018), Phillips' narrative,

the first R-Rated production to gross in excess of one billion dollars at the global box office

(Hughes, 2019), disregards the already muddled canon of the Batman cinematic franchise to

reconceive the origin story of its titular antagonist. At the heart of this reimagining lies a

confrontation with problematic masculinities and social inequality. In their prefatory note to

the original screenplay, writers Phillips and Silver set out the initial conditions for that

conflict. "It's a troubled time. The crime rate in Gotham is at record highs. A garbage strike

has crippled the city for the past six weeks. And the divide between the "haves" and the

"have-nots" is palpable. Dreams are beyond reach, slipping into delusions" (Phillips & Silver,

2018).

Set against this backdrop, our protagonist, Arthur Fleck, is presented to us in a

fractured, twisted and dysfunctional mode of masculinity that lies far beyond the

supergendered norm of the conventional superhero movie (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell, 2013;

Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Arthur is one of the "have-nots" with aspirations of being

one of the "haves". Perhaps more so, Arthur is presented as an "othered" (Diamond &

Poharec, 2017; Sune, 2011) form of masculinity, existing in an asymmetrical relationship

(Bernasconi, 2012) to both the audience and the denizens of Gotham City. To the observer

Arthur's situation looks bleak; his aspirations appear beyond the limits of his resources, the apparatus of social institutions acting upon him seeming more prohibitive than empowering.

It is through this lens of disillusionment and delusion that Phillips encourages the viewer to, at best understand, or at worst empathise with, Arthur's metamorphosis into the inadvertent inspiration for a populist movement. This chapter considers how the societal conditions of Gotham City are presented in such a way as to align with the key concepts of Mudde's ideational approach to populism (2004, 2017), establishing the context from which the Joker arises. This analysis considers how Arthur's othered mode of masculinity, along with the problematic masculinities of those around him and those constructed in opposition to him, function as a key catalyst for Arthur becoming the accidental champion of Gotham's disillusioned men. The chapter also assesses how the actions of Arthur/Joker's followers function as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6), with Arthur himself drawing upon criminality to situate the Joker as contemporary demagogue rather than a populist leader (Patapan, 2019), using populism as a discursive form (Aslanidis, 2015) to achieve his own self-serving needs.

The People, Arthur and The Elite

A prominent definition of populism in the literature is that of Cas Mudde, who describes the phenomenon as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This chapter draws upon that definition to demonstrate how the societal conditions of Phillip's Gotham City align with the core concepts of Mudde's ideational approach to populism. Specifically, this chapter explores how Mudde's four core concepts of ideology, the people, the elite and general will (Mudde, 2017, p. 29), function to

establish the societal conditions that facilitate the emergence of a populist movement within the movie.

At the heart of Mudde's definition of ideational populism lies the separation of society into two belligerent groups; the people and the elite. For Mudde, the fundamental opposition between these two groups is organised around the loose notion of morality, constructing a pure, homogenous and authentic people, and a corrupt, exploitative and self-serving elite (p. 29). It is through this moral mechanism that the formative conditions of ideational populism highlight and politicise perceived social inequalities in order to condemn the elites in power (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 32), and it is these perceived social inequalities that Phillips is keen to establish from the outset of the movie and, moreover, present to us through the lens of masculinity.

For Mudde, the people is the foremost of the core concepts of ideational populism (2017, p. 31), and in *JOKER*, we encounter that foremost force of ideational populism as they struggle against rampant social inequality. That encounter is negotiated for the audience in two distinct yet connected ways. Firstly, the people - as corpus of discontent, unease, and oppression - is expressed to us via the central allegory of the garbage strike and the recurring motif of the clown protests. Secondly, and for the overwhelming majority of the narrative, our interpretation of those people, their situations and the wider societal happenings of Gotham City, is steered via the unreliable, often delusional, lens of Arthur Fleck. This lens constructs a predominantly masculine gaze throughout the movie, whilst the aesthetics of that gaze construct a specifically othered (Diamond & Poharec, 2017; Sune, 2011) interpretation of the people, where, like most populist movements, the people and the elite are constructions based on a warped interpretation of reality (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 68). This facilitates a multifaceted process of othering within the diegesis of film, where Arthur is othered by the people, the people are othered by Arthur, and both are othered by the elite,

which leaves the audience to negotiate this nexus of otherness from their extra-diegetic location, which, of course, functions as a further form of othering on the macro level. Together, these two modes of encounter construct our understanding of the "have-nots" and set in play the perceived moral dialectic that will drive the conflict between the people and the elite, fabricating, patterns of binary opposition that form and reinforce the cause and effect logic of the narrative (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 2002, pp. 76-79).

To begin with, the garbage strike presents the people as a looming yet intangible threat of social unrest. Just like they have been in life, they are consigned to the background of the narrative, with us learning of their suffering indirectly through media broadcasts, newspaper headlines and snippets of conversation. Indeed, in the opening scene of *JOKER*, we hear on the radio that a state of emergency has been declared, with the commentator suggesting that the garbage strike has an impact on everyone. This assertion soon becomes incongruous with the visual aesthetic of the film, as we see that it is the inner-city streets of the "have-nots" that are strewn with rat infested garbage, while the "haves" of the suburbs remain garbage free. In this way, the matter of the garbage strike allows the narrative of *JOKER* to establish a baseline binary of morality, where the purity of the people is disrupted by the inability of the Gotham elite to resolve the industrial dispute, and the specificity of their struggle is negated by the false notion of the issue impacting on everyone.

The building undercurrent of tension throughout *JOKER* first permeates to the narrative surface when Arthur interacts with his social worker. During their session, Arthur asks, if the city is getting crazier or if it's just him (p. 00:04:30); his social worker replies that times are tough, pointing to unemployment as a cause of distress and discontent (p. 00:04:48). This exchange establishes the lived experience of the people for the audience and situates Arthur as one of those people: a "have-not" who is struggling and needs the help of social services. However, the exchange also sets Arthur apart from the people via his mental

illness and, indeed, Arthur sets himself apart by framing the people as a force external to him. This adds a level of complexity to the layering of binary oppositions within *JOKER*, where the people are drawn in opposition to the elite and Arthur is drawn in opposition to both the elite and the people.

The core masculinities at play in *JOKER* form a striking visualisation of this layered and exclusionary process of opposition, where the denizens of the talent agency with which Arthur works, Ha-Ha's Talent Booking, exist far from the traditional hyper-masculine modality of the conventional action movie (Tasker, 1993a). Rather than adopting the traditional hard-body aesthetics of action cinema (Jeffords, 1994), the clown performers of Ha-Ha's appear as a collection of past-their-prime misfit males, best represented by the middle-aged, balding and overweight Randall, and the often ridiculed and exploited little person Gary. They exist on the fringes of masculinity, forced to scratch out an existence via a mechanism that accentuates their very otherness. Yet even among these masculinities, Arthur is set apart from his fellow performers, who do not feel comfortable around him. Arthur's body is a key location of this extended otherness. Emaciated and twisted through unusual posturing, Arthur's body is presented as a site of spectacle to be read in opposition to that of the conventional action movie body (Tasker, 1993b). Rather than represent the traditional masculine ideals of strength, power, resiliency and heterosexual desirability (Brown, 2016), Arthur's slender, bruised and beaten body inverts such coding, constructing a spectacle of the othered amongst the others.

As such, the narrative of *JOKER* presents to the audience an additional framework of inequality as experienced specifically by Arthur. Arthur believes himself to be pure. Indeed, he self-situates as morally just when he daydreams about appearing on the Live with Murray Franklin show, receiving praise and respect from Franklin and the audience when he tells them that as the man of the house, he takes good care of his mother (00:13:12), with Franklin

suggesting that this sacrifice must cause his mother to love him (00:13:24). This forms an opposition in and of itself ; whilst Arthur does indeed live with and care for his sick mother Penny Fleck, Penny devotes the majority of her time writing letters to former employer Thomas Wayne asking him to help her and her son, despite the fact that it is Arthur, not Thomas, who delivers her primary care. Here Arthur is presented as being inadequate in fulfilling the role of the absent masculine provider that Penny yearns for. Penny interprets Arthur's masculinity as less than that of Thomas Wayne, framing Arthur as a child in need of help, rather than a strong masculine provider. The latter is, of course, how Arthur identifies himself and how he would like others to perceive him, yet, in the narrative of *JOKER*, Arthur is only presented as the righteous masculine provider from within the context of his own delusions.

This notion of injustice and unrecognised contribution builds throughout the narrative, constructing a cycle of perceived moral inequality, where Arthur is continually undermined in his activities and aspirations. This undermining continues into Arthur's professional context, where the conditions of his employment at Ha-Ha's Talent Booking are also established as morally unjust, when his boss Hoyt does not believe that Arthur was jumped by a group of kids and asks him to pay for the sign that the kids used to beat him with. As the sign no longer exists, Arthur cannot return it; therefore, with Hoyt unwilling to consider further discussion on the matter, Arthur must accept this injustice. Arthur's reaction to this situation draws directly on the allegory of the garbage strike, with Arthur going to the alleyway outside Ha-Ha's and kicking at the piles of uncollected garbage bags until he eventually collapses amidst them, becoming one with the discarded waste of Gotham City. Here Arthur displays an inverse of what Tasker terms the controlled performance of the hyper-masculine (Tasker, 1993a, pp. 233-236), where he beats the garbage rather than fighting his cause with Hoyt.

The conceptualisation of Arthur as an unwanted environmental object is extended further when he meets Sophie and her young daughter in their apartment building elevator. When the elevator temporarily stops, Sophie turns to Arthur and makes conversation while they wait for the elevator to resume, telling him that the building is awful (00:19:15). When Sophie's young daughter parrots this line back at her, Sophie playfully mimics shooting herself in the head. Arthur misinterprets this exchange, thinking that Sophie is attempting to bond with him, and attempts to continue their interaction once they are out of the lift by mimicking shooting himself in the head. Out of context, this unsettles Sophie, who becomes wary of Arthur and retreats to the safety of her own apartment. Here, Arthur is presented as a problematic masculinity: much like the piles of rat-infested garbage blighting the city, Arthur is a potential source of danger, further separating Arthur from the rest of the "have-nots". This constructs an oppositional binary around Arthur's self-conceived purity, and the impression of him held by the wider community. At its most bleak, therefore, *JOKER* situates Arthur's mental health condition as another problematic issue for the people, one which, like the garbage strike, has been neglected by the elite. This is visualised in stark terms for the audience via Arthur's journal, where he writes about being expected to hide his mental illness (00:25:43).

Such problematizing of Arthur's conception of his own masculinity continues in his relationship with his mother, when, as he bathes her, she stresses how Thomas Wayne is a good man and if he only knew of their plight that he would help them. Yet when Arthur tells her that she does not need to worry about money as his stand-up comedy is ready for the big clubs, Penny doubts his abilities, asking him why he thinks he could be a stand-up comedian when he is not funny (00:20:51). Penny not only undermines Arthur's ability to be her masculine provider, but also an essential element of Arthur's sense of identity. After this interaction with his mother, Arthur develops an unwanted and unsolicited fixation with

Sophie, following her first to school as she drops her daughter off, and then to her place of work, only retreating when he fears she may have seen him. Later, Arthur slips into delusion, imagining that Sophie comes to his door to ask if he was following her. She is not angry that he followed her, instead she is glad, joking that she hoped he'd come to rob the place. Arthur tells her he has a gun and could come by tomorrow. Sophie laughs; she finds him so funny. Arthur invites her to come to his stand-up performance and she agrees.

This further problematizes Arthur's masculinity and his ability to form relationships with the female-identifying characters around him. While his real-life retreat signals that Arthur is, at least to some extent, aware of the inappropriate nature of his relationship with Sophie, his fantasy connects his masculinity and sexual attractiveness with violence and danger. This turns the negative external perception of his personality into a positive by drawing on the wisecracks traditionally used in action cinema as a mechanism for breaking moments of symbolic tension (Tasker, 1993b, pp. 29-31).

When Arthur visits Pogo's Comedy Club as a customer he does not fit in there either, his uncontrollable laugh setting him apart from the rest of the audience. Worst still, when Arthur visits Pogo's as a performer, his imagined mastery of comedy doesn't materialise and his stand-up is a disaster, the people unable to engage with him due to his laughing and his material appearing trite and passé. In the real world, Arthur appears out of touch. He is unable to connect with the audience on an emotional level. In the face of this adversity, Arthur attempts to resolve the conflict by once more escaping into delusion. He imagines that the performance is a success, with the audience recognising his talent; Arthur connects that adulation with his sexual prowess, visualising Sophie in the audience just as she promised. She is entranced by his performance, allured by his comedic abilities, and afterward, he imagines that the success of his performance facilitates a wonderful date between the two. Arthur's masculine aspirations are again contrasted with the realities of his existence. Arthur

wants to be seen as a successful, sexually attractive male, who is respected in his profession and venerated by his new lover. Arthur imagines that he is competent at forming relationships with the female identities around him, and, moreover, he imagines that these relationships are built on appreciation of him as a provider and master of his craft.

Riding the subway home after being fired from Ha-Ha's Talent Booking for taking a gun into a performance at a children's hospital, Arthur encounters three drunk "Wall Street" types harassing a young woman on the train. This is Arthur's first direct interaction with the forces of the elite in the narrative. The Wall Street Three are a representation of the "haves". They are also a representation of the hyper-masculine mode of representation common to action cinema (Jeffords, 1994; Lehman, 2013; Tasker, 1993a, 1993b, 2019). Dressed in suits, they look down their nose at the young woman on the train abusing her for not engaging with their drunken antics. Here, they form a spectacle of the hyper-masculine, where they define and articulate their masculine strength though conflict (Tasker, 2019), and draw themselves in opposition to the femininity of the train passenger.

Such articulations of the "hard" body in action cinema have long been deployed to reinforce and disseminate an idealised mode of masculinity that emphasises strength, toughness and assertiveness (Jeffords, 1994). These deployments have also long facilitated indirect discussion around the contentious issues of gender and sexuality via the medium of cinema (Lehman 2013, 1-2). Functioning as such, the Wall Street Three operate as a marked articulation of the contemporary debates around toxic masculinity (Veissière, 2018), speaking to issues such as patriarchal hegemony (Messerschmidt, 2018), white male privilege (McIntosh, 2018), and heteronormativity (Utamsingh, Richman, Martin, Lattanner, & Chaikind, 2016) which, somewhat ironically, provides the injustice to which Arthur's murderous violence first emerges.

The young woman looks to Arthur for help, but Arthur does not help her; instead, he starts to laugh. This attracts the attention of the Wall Street Three, as they think that Arthur is laughing at them. Taking his bag away from him, they mock his appearance as a clown and then start to beat him, constructing a spectacle of their hyper-masculine superiority. Arthur, unable to compete physically with his accosters, retaliates by shooting all three dead. Through this action, Arthur rebalances his internal conflict, fighting his cause rather than avoiding the confrontation as he did earlier with Hoyt.

This transformation is, however, temporary. Escaping from the scene of the murders, much like after his earlier confrontation with Holt, Arthur locates himself amidst the garbage piled streets. Fleeing home past the huddled homeless, the inadequacy of Arthur's masculinity is reinforced as he is surrounded by the symbolism of the unfortunate and dispossessed. This reaffirms Arthur as the antithesis of the symbols of privilege and entitlement with which he just interacted. It is only once Arthur is safe at home that he can again appropriate the behaviours of the hyper-masculine, where he connects his violent actions with sexual desirability and power, aligning himself with the familiar hyper-masculine tropes of action cinema (Brown, 2016) by engaing in a fantasy about sleeping with Sophie.

The Wall Street Three notwithstanding, elite proper are most prominently represented by the Wayne Family, which forms an antithesis (Mudde, 2017, p. 32) of the people and Arthur. This moral binary is first made explicit to the audience when Arthur and Penny watch a TV news report detailing Thomas Wayne's reaction to the subway killings. Wayne describes the murdered men, all of whom worked for Wayne Investments as "Good. Decent. Educated. And, although I didn't know them personally, like all Wayne employees, past and present, they're family" (p. 00:37:06). Here, the narrative again draws directly on the incongruity between the actuality of the Wall Street Three as experienced by the audience,

and Wayne's interpretation of their character, situating his viewpoint as one that has been corrupted by his position, allowing him to privilege his own "special interests and [the] inauthentic morals of the elite over those of the people" (Mudde, 2017, p. 30).

This notion of privileging the interests of the elite over the people is further exemplified when the discussion turns to the public reaction to the killings:

> TV HOST: There appears to be a groundswell of anti-rich sentiment in the city. It's almost as if our less fortunate residents are taking the side of the killer.
>
> WAYNE: Yes, that's a shame. It's one of the reasons why I'm considering running for Mayor. Gotham has lost its way.
>
> TV HOST: What about the eyewitness reports of the suspect being a man in a clown mask?
>
> WAYNE: Well it makes total sense to me. What kind of coward would do something that cold blooded? Someone who hides behind a mask. Someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until those kinds of people change for the better, those of us who made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns. (00:37:17-00:37:37)

In responding this way, Wayne clearly articulates a Manichean distinction between the people and the elite assuming "that the people should be conceived as a dangerous mob while depicting the elite as a reduced group of actors who, due to their intellectual and moral superiority, should be in charge of the government" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 515). As such, Wayne recodifies the moral binary between the people and elite of Gotham City to a "struggle between the forces of good and the forces of a knowing, diabolical evil" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 515), with both sides holding themselves as the former.

This binary opposition is made personal to Arthur through his direct interactions with the Wayne family. After reading one of his mother's letters to Thomas Wayne, Arthur discovers that Penny believes Thomas Wayne to be his father. Arthur is enraged by this but, again, Penny uses this knowledge to situate Arthur's masculinity in opposition to that of Wayne. She tells Arthur that she could not be with Wayne because of how such a relationship would appear; as such, she positions herself as inferior to Wayne. In telling Arthur that she can only imagine what the people would say about him, Penny insinuates that Arthur's inferiority to Wayne is more pronounced than her own, and that this inferiority is so marked that it may bring about shame for Wayne if the information became public knowledge.

Reacting to this discovery, Arthur journeys to the Wayne estate. Travelling by train, as the skyline of Gotham City recedes amidst the emerging greenery of the countryside, Arthur sits in a clean carriage amongst the "haves", who are all male, white, neatly dressed and engrossed in reading their broadsheet newspapers, which position Thomas Wayne's campaign as progressive (00:48:33). Arriving at the estate, Arthur entertains Bruce Wayne through the bars of wrought iron gate with magic tricks and flowers before reaching through to mould Bruce's face into a smile, until Alfred arrives and separates Bruce from Arthur, asking Arthur to identify himself. Here, Arthur once more self-identifies as pure, telling Alfred that he is a good person (00:51:24), however, upon learning that Arthur is Penny's son, Alfred becomes hostile toward Arthur, telling him that his mother was delusional and a sick woman, before laughing at the notion that Thomas Wayne might be Arthur's father.

The Alfred Pennyworth of *JOKER* is presented, therefore, in contrast to his other cinematic incarnations. Here Alfred appropriates the behaviours and appearance of the hyper-masculine. Alfred is large and well built. He steps in close to Arthur in order to threaten him. He is not above mocking those whom he perceives as his lesser, and it is this mocking that causes Arthur to reach through the gates and grab Alfred by the throat, choking him before

running off. Here, the incongruity of the greenery and the city, as well as Arthur and the other

commuters on the train, and the physical partition imposed by the high walls and gate,

function to visually manifest for the audience Arthur's "(1) separation from the elite and (2)

connection to the people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 68).

Arthur eventually confronts Thomas Wayne in the Wayne Hall theatre. Here the

binary opposition of the people and the elite is perhaps most marked. Making his way

through a raucous and violent clown protest, Arthur sneaks into Wayne Hall dressed as an

usher. Outside, the streets are a raging torrent of "have-nots", strewn with litter, angry men

and angry police officers. Inside, there is calm, as "haves" sit in orderly rows, dressed

identically in their finest evening wear, amidst the sumptuous décor of the theatre. This

constructs the notion of "one homogenous corrupt group that works against the 'general will'

of the people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 12) and furthermore, situates that group as a

"cultural elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 26), who have the time and resources to enjoy

an evening at the theatre while the city descends into chaos around them.

Pausing for a moment to watch Charlie Chaplin perform on the screen, Arthur shares

in a laugh with the great and good of Gotham City, reminding the audience that by

"determining the main opposition to be between the pure people and the corrupt elite,

populism presupposes that the elite comes from the same group as the people, but have

willingly chosen to betray them" (Mudde, 2017, p. 30). This betrayal is then laid bare, when

Arthur comes face to face with his suspected father in the bathroom. Wayne first assumes that

Arthur wants an autograph, then once Arthur explains who he is, Wayne denies that he is

Arthur's father and tells Arthur that his mother had to be arrested and committed due to her

delusions. When Wayne asks Arthur if he wants money, Arthur reacts angrily, telling him he

wants some decency, before asking "What is it with you people?" (01:03:48). This reinforces

Arthur's construction of the people and the elite as a potentially warped interpretation of

reality (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 68), where either Arthur has bought into the delusions of his mother, or Wayne is attempting to gaslight Arthur, manipulating him into insanity (Abramson, 2014). Moreover, when Wayne ends the exchange by punching Arthur in the face and threatening to kill him should he ever come near his son again, it is Wayne who appropriates the form of the supergendered ideal, typifying the conventional gender norms associated with action cinema (Rosenberg, 2013).

This process of betrayal is then amplified in *JOKER*, becoming a central theme of the narrative that is located specifically on Arthur. Arthur is betrayed when he returns to see his social worker and attempts to discuss his feelings with her. Rather than addressing what Arthur is telling her, his social worker instead informs him that there is no more funding for his programme. The city has shut them down. Arthur tells her that for most of his life, he has doubted his own existence and it is only now that he is being noticed (00:39:24). His social worker simply replies that they don't care about him or her, and doesn't reply when Arthur asks her where he will get his medications now.

The betrayal of Arthur is extended to his mother when Arthur travels to Arkham State Hospital to investigate Wayne's claims that his mother is mentally ill. There, a clerk reads from Penny's file, telling Arthur that Penny was clinically diagnosed as suffering from delusional psychosis and narcissistic personality disorder, and found guilty of endangering the welfare of her own child. When the clerk refuses to give Arthur the file, Arthur steals the file and reads that Penny was frequently and involuntarily admitted to Arkham, lobotomised and that he had been abandoned by his natural parents and adopted by Penny. Arthur slips into delusion, imagining himself at Penny's interrogation, listening as Penny asserts that Thomas Wayne had the papers made up to hide the truth, and Dr Stoner explains that she let her then boyfriend harm her and Arthur, leading to Arthur suffering severe trauma to his head. This functions as an inverse for the devoted care that Arthur has provided to his mother,

constructing a moral binary where Arthur's actions and sacrifices have been pure, motivated by a selfless duty of care toward his mother, while his mother has exploited him since early childhood, beholden to men laden with hyper-masculine tendencies.

This revelation causes Arthur's delusions to collapse. Returning home, Arthur visits Sophie for real, sneaking into her apartment and sitting on her couch. When Sophie finds him there, reality intrudes on Arthur's imagined relationship, as she reacts with fear and revulsion. Here Arthur realises that he is not an incarnation of the traditional masculine ideals of strength, power, and heterosexual desirability (Brown, 2016, p. 134). This again forms a binary of betrayal from Arthur's perspective, where his loving relationship is not reciprocated by Sophie, who, fearing for her child, asks him to leave (01:14:36). As such, the intrusion of Arthur into Sophie's home situates Arthur as a potential analogue for his own abuser, and when Sophie suggests that she could call Arthur's mother for help, Arthur once more simulates shooting himself in the head, leaving the fate of Sophie and her daughter unclear, while heading back to the hospital to kill his mother rather than seek her help.

The final betrayal of the elite perpetrated on Arthur is that of Murray Franklin. After footage of Arthur performing at Pogo's is screened on Live with Murray Franklin for comic effect, Arthur is invited to come onto the show as a guest. As Arthur rehearses for this appearance, it is insinuated that he plans to kill himself live on air, hoping that his "death makes more cents than my life" (01:36:14). Events transpire somewhat differently during his appearance, however. After Franklin makes fun of Arthur, causing the studio audience to laugh at him, and Dr Sally chastises him for making an inappropriate joke, Arthur reveals that he killed the Wall Street Three (01:37:19). Franklin, Dr Sally and the audience react to this information with disgust, and it is here then, in response to that repulsion, that Arthur presents himself as a reluctant and non-political vox populi, expressing the general will of the people (Mudde, 2017, p. 33) to Franklin and his television audience:

Oh, why is everybody so upset about these guys? If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me! I pass you every day and you don't notice me. But these guys, what, because Thomas Wayne went and cried about them on TV? […] Have you seen what it's like out there, Murray? Do you ever actually leave the studio? Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody is civil anymore. Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy. You think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? They don't. They think that we'll just sit there and take it, like good little boys! That we won't werewolf and go wild! (01:39:00-01:39:49)

In this way, Arthur publicly foregrounds a set of ideas that symbolise a widespread antagonism between the downtrodden people like him, and the exploitative elite like Thomas Wayne. This emphasises the "primacy of popular sovereignty, whereby the virtuous general will is placed in opposition to the moral corruption of elite actors" (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, p. 6). Furthermore, his discourse conceptualises that vox populi and its associated general will as masculine, describing the people holistically as "good little boys" while anchoring the Manichean binary around two male identities - his, and Thomas Wayne's - thereby constructing a masculine context (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015) for the populist clown protests of Gotham City.

Ultimately, Franklin reinforces Arthur's role as the vox populi by affirming the "anti-populist rhetoric of the establishment" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 68), which solidifies Arthur as the inadvertent champion disillusioned males in Gotham City, as he enacts that perceived general will of the people by executing Franklin live on his television show:

FRANKLIN: You finished? I mean it's so much self-pity, Arthur. You sound like you're making excuses for killing those young men. Not everybody, and I'll tell you this, not everyone is awful.

JOKER: You're awful, Murray.

FRANKLIN: Me? I'm awful? Oh yeah, how am I awful?

JOKER. Playing my video. Inviting me on this show. You just wanted to make
fun of me. You're just like the rest of them.

FRANKLIN: You don't know the first thing about me, pal. Look what happened,
because of what you did. What it led to. There are riots out there. Two policemen
are in critical condition [*Joker laughs*] –and you're laughing. You're laughing.
Someone was killed today, because of what you did.

JOKER: I know. How about another joke, Murray?

FRANKLIN: No, I think we've had enough of your jokes-

JOKER: –What do you get…

FRANKLIN: –I don't think so.

JOKER: …when you cross a mentally-ill loner with a society that abandons him
and treats him like trash? […] You get what you fucking deserve! [*Joker shoots
the side of Murray's head off*]. (01:39:00-01:40:51)

In *JOKER*, therefore, Arthur is presented as the antithesis of the supergendered superhero
ideal (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell, 2013; Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). He is the othered
masculinity that will take on the hyper-masculine elite. He is the expression of the subaltern
masculine position. He is the "have not" who will disrupt the "haves". He is the othered
strongman who has "to be more creative" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 68) in his
articulation, and does so by weaponising his otherness and proclivity to violence.

General Will, Thin Ideology and the Accidental Demagogue

Arthur's self-conceptualisation as the vox populi of Gotham City notwithstanding, the
presentation of the general will of the people in *JOKER* is detached from Arthur. The people
take Arthur as their champion, rather than Arthur recruiting them to his cause. Indeed, it is

the people who, by appropriating Arthur's image, empower Arthur in his transformation into the titular Joker. This demonstrates that "charismatic leadership is about a specific bond between leader and followers, which is defined at least as much by the expectations and perceptions of the followers as by the individual characteristics of the leader" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 66). In *JOKER*, as is always the case with Arthur, this bond is one of detachment. Arthur is apart from the populist movement he 'leads'. As such, the general will expressed in the narrative aesthetics of *JOKER* "refers to the capacity of the people to join together into a community" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16) and struggle toward a "popular sovereignty" (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, p. 6) independently from Arthur.

In the early stages of the narrative, that expression appears to haunt Gotham City through the mass media, manifesting in a dumbed down modality (Crick, 2005) via newspaper headlines and TV sound bites. After Arthur has committed the subway murders and is on his imaginary date with Sophie, we see a newsstand with the headlines covering killer clowns and vigilantes (00:43:35-00:43:50). After this, Arthur makes contact with a passenger in a taxi wearing a clown mask (00:44:08), signifying the start of his influence on the disenfranchised. Later, after Arthur's mother has been taken to hospital, Arthur lies on his bed in apparent depression while on the floor beside him, the headline of a discarded newspaper discuses a new movement focused on killing the rich (00:58:46).

Arthur perks up as a TV news bulletin details how this looming spectre of potential civil unrest has now boiled over into organised demonstrations, where many of the protestors have come dressed as clowns (00:58:51-00:59:24). Here again, the emergent movement is unintentionally reinforced by Wayne's "rhetoric of the establishment" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 68), as it is Wayne's derision of the struggling people as "clowns" that has inspired them to appropriate Arthur's image as the emblem of their movement, demonstrating that "…depending on the political culture of the country in which the populist leader mobilizes,

her or his 'extraordinary' nature lies on very specific and different features" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 62).

In this way, Arthur can be perceived as appealing to the people "on the basis of a 'cult of the leader', which portrays him as a masculine and potentially violent figure" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 63). Arthur, however, does not rule. He has no control over the actions of his cult and is not involved in the organisation of their movement. He is a cult leader detached. This notion of disconnection is made evident in the latter stages of the narrative, where Arthur, now transformed into the Joker, mingles anonymously with the protestors on the train as he makes his way to the Live with Murray Franklin show, then laughs at their rioting from the window of a police car as he is led away from the scene of Franklin's murder. Only for a brief moment are the people and Arthur seen as one, when the police car containing Arthur is rammed by a van, and three clown protesters pull Arthur from the wreckage and leave him on the hood. As Arthur starts to come round, his "followers" urge him to get up, giving him the adulation he has been seeking as he rises. In return, Arthur dances for his people, painting a smile on his face with his own blood. After that, Arthur is once more separated from his movement, stripped of his Joker attire, and incarcerated, like his mother before him, in Arkham State Hospital.

Given that the narrative of *JOKER* does not reveal a clear outcome for the clown protests or Arthur, other than the killing of Thomas and Martha Wayne, which of course functions as the origin story for Batman, the central thrust of populism mobilized in *JOKER* could, therefore, be seen as a "thin-centered ideology based on a Manichean, anti-elitist logic and a desire to reclaim political institutions on behalf of "the people" (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013, p. 23) which "lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political questions" (Stanley, 2008, p. 95) asked within the narrative. Indeed, this lack of solutions to fundamental problems is a theme often present

in the wider DC Universe. Batman, in most of his cinematic incarnations, explores the difficulties of masculinity, inhabiting a mode of manhood that is divided and troubled. Conceptualised as such, Batman enacts hyper-masculine violence against an array of villains in an effort to protect the people, while never resolving the crime-ridden social order of Gotham City or restoring the disintegration of his family that brought about his hyper-masculinity in the first place (Jeffords, 1994, pp. 95-100). Ultimately, as the last images provided to the audience of the Gotham City of *JOKER* are those of the city burning, and the last images provided of Arthur are those of incarceration, violence and chaos, the "morphological structure" (Stanley, 2008, p. 99) appropriated by the people from Arthur to form the expression of their populist movement can be seen as defective, just like Arthur himself. As such, where the Gotham City of the wider DC Universe looks for its saviour in Batman, the Gotham City of *JOKER* finds instead only Arthur Fleck.

This failure of the popular movement to achieve ideological coherence (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 89), realised for the audience by the failure of the narrative to provide a comprehensive conclusion, could, therefore, also be caused by Arthur's lack of a true ideological drive. When Arthur as the Joker first meets Franklin in the green room prior to his appearance on his show, Franklin asks Arthur if his painted face means he is a part of the protests (01:31:37). In response, Arthur tells him that he does not believe in the protests; he paints his face for his act (01:31:41). Later, on the show, Franklin asks Arthur to confirm that his look is not political, which Arthur does, telling Franklin that he just wants to be funny (01:35:32). Once Arthur has declared that he killed the Wall Street Three, Franklin asks him if he started this movement to gain notoriety (01:38:29), to which Arthur replies, "Come on, Murray. Do I look like the kind of clown that could start a movement? I killed those guys because they were awful" (01:38:36).

In this light, Arthur's actions can be seen to have been misinterpreted by the people who, having framed an aspect of their social life that is problematic and developed an "urgency to take corrective action" (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 99), organised their movement around Arthur's empty discourse that "contains ideational elements that have been mistaken for constituting ideology" (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 99).

For Arthur, the movement around him is enjoyable but incidental to him. What is important to Arthur is pursuing his own goals. He wants to make the people laugh. He wants to make people see the world the way he does, and he wants to do so using violence and criminality. Arthur is, thus, not a populist leader in the modern conception. Arthur is not constrained "by the success of liberal aspects of modernity, specifically the principle of the rule of law and the institutions shaped by it in modern constitutionalism" (Patapan, 2019, p. 754). Arthur is more akin to the traditional demagogue. Arthur seeks "personal, rather than common advantage via unscrupulous appeals to the desires and passions of the many" (Patapan, 2019, p. 754).

As such, in *JOKER*, the confused aesthetics of populism can be seen to correlate with the contested nature of populism as a concept (Mudde, 2017, p. 27), constructing a narrative where the hopes and dreams of the people appear to be "beyond reach, slipping into delusions" (Phillips & Silver, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the complex interplay between the aesthetics of masculinity and populism in Todd Phillips' *JOKER* (2019). In doing so, it considered how the societal conditions of Gotham City are presented in such a way as to align with the key concepts of Mudde's ideational approach to populism (2004, 2017). Specifically, the chapter demonstrated how the fundamental opposition between the people and the elite of Gotham City is organised around the notion of perceived social inequality, and how that inequality is

expressed via the general will of the people, as represented by the clown protests that grow and spread throughout the narrative, as well as via the self-assumed vox populi of Arthur Fleck as the Joker. Moreover, this suggests that the general will of the people – and its articulation by that vox populi – exists within a masculine context, constructing an overtly masculine phenomenon, realised by, and anchored around, a Manichean binary of masculinity.

Central to this articulation of populism is the othering of masculinity, where the people and Arthur are presented as an authentic inverse of the inauthentic hyper-masculine elite and supergendered Wayne family. Furthermore, the actions of the inadvertent followers of Arthur as the Joker function as a thin-centered ideology which, when formed loosely around the notion of the disenfranchised male rising up in anger against perceived social injustice, provided little in the way of meaningful solutions, and indeed resulted in no meaningful social resolution being demonstrated in the narrative. Finally, rather than being an ideologically driven populist leader, Arthur himself draws upon criminality to become a modern-day demagogue who, in the end, used the discursive form of populism to achieve his own self-serving needs rather than those of the people. Together, and ultimately, these analyses demonstrate how Phillips encourages the viewer to understand and perhaps even empathise with Arthur's metamorphosis into the Joker. It does this by constructing an othered lens of social inequality, disillusionment and delusion.

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