

Joker

(Phillips, 2019)

Component 1 Section B: American film since 2005

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

Specialist study areas:

- **Ideology**
- **Spectatorship**

Rationale for study: *Joker* is an interesting attempt to make a comic-book origin story a serious drama. It was initially greeted with critical acclaim, winning the Golden Bear at the Venice Film Festival. *Joker* garnered eleven Oscar nominations, with Joaquin Phoenix winning Best Actor while Hildur Guðnadóttir won Best Original Score. The film was also a commercial success (the only R-rated film to have grossed over \$1 billion). However, *Joker* also aroused controversy and many negative reviews for its stylised portrayal of urban alienation and class conflict, with some fears it may inspire copycat crimes.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

‘Street scene and therapist office’
00:00 – 05:18

‘Subway shooting and aftermath’
29:28 – 36:15

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 – STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- *Joker* is a film about masks and ‘shadow selves’. To compliment the two sides of the protagonist, the frail Arthur and the graceful yet demonic Joker, the colour palette uses contrasting colours and lighting levels. This externalises the inner conflict of the protagonist.
- A mix of close-ups (of Arthur’s face) and POV shots (from eye-line of other characters) reflect the key theme of alienation. The close-ups make us feel emotionally close to Arthur, at the start the proximity provokes sympathy, but as he grows more deranged it becomes scary.

Mise-en-scène

- The clown costumes that Arthur dons reflect his deranged state of mind. In the opening scene, the clown costume is traditional and cute but it also looks loose-fitting and bedraggled. The costume and make-up when he gets fired seems tawdry, especially the fake-looking green wig. Shortly after, on the subway, the rich guys steal his wig and Arthur’s face now looks demonic. Near the end of the film, as he prepares for his TV appearance, he dyes his hair green, symbolising that the Joker has taken over Arthur’s psyche completely.



Image by Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

- Though the time period isn't specified, the film's location of Gotham City has numerous references to New York of the early 1980s and particularly the seedy areas featured in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) – another story about an alienated young man.
- Sets and locations can often be used symbolically. Consider the meaning of the staircase by Arthur's apartment. At the beginning of the film, it seems to represent the uphill slog of Arthur's life, with his warm apartment and doting mother at the end of it. What is the significance of the staircase in the scene where he dances down them? What does it tell you about Arthur's mental decline and the personality of Joker?
- Critics praised Phoenix's performance, especially the way he humanises an iconic character that has previously been portrayed as an unfathomable sociopath. Particularly when Arthur succumbs to his 'condition' of inappropriate laughter, Phoenix communicates the character's pain (and shame) whilst still cackling hysterically.
- Students should consider Phoenix's performance at different points in the plot. How does posture and facial expression show Arthur's frailty and pain at the start of the film. How does rage, and then violence, fill him with energy? How does Phoenix show Arthur/Joker's growing confidence, but also his menace?

Editing

- There are numerous cuts between close-ups of Arthur's emotional reactions – with which we empathise. The wider shots are from the POV of other characters, which show the protagonist's increasingly twisted posture and behaviour. This helps us to see what a sympathetic character from a more objective perspective could be, where he appears more and more deranged and threatening.
- Editor Jeff Groth avoided flashbacks to Arthur's earlier life and shot sequentially to further emphasise the stages protagonist's transformation.

Sound

- The Oscar winning score by Hildur Guðnadóttir is all based around a cello performance that the composer improvised whilst reading the screenplay. In the opening scene, when Arthur is beaten in the alley, the cello is the only instrument. As darker forces begin to dominate the protagonist, more and more instruments in the orchestra are used, the sound of the full orchestra in the end overwhelming the cello entirely.

Performance

- Joaquin Phoenix did multiple takes for each scene, radically altering his demeanour, posture, face and vocals. This gave the director the choice of which 'version' of Arthur could be used.

Core study areas 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Considering the film's attempts to humanise an iconic villain, the portrayal of mental health issues is far from sympathetic. We pity the character at first, but as Arthur's insanity deepens, we increasingly see him from the 'outside'. The representations of Joker as a lonely white man and an incel are linked with the film's political and social contexts.

Aesthetics

- Martin Scorsese's urban films of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly *Taxi Driver* and *The King of Comedy* (1982), are clear inspirations, both thematically (both films deal with an alienated loner who goes to extreme lengths to get attention) and aesthetically. The production design revels in the dirt and sleaze of Gotham City, using every hue of yellow and green to give the impression the city is putrid and decaying.

Core study areas 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- On the film's release, many people took to social media to voice concerns that Arthur could become a hero figure for incels. Incel is abbreviation of 'involuntary celibate', a phrase used to describe an online community

of young men who feel they cannot get sexual relationships, despite wanting to. Their frustrations often take the form of hostility towards women and numerous acts of violence have been perpetrated by men who identify as incels. Some critics feared *Joker* would inspire real-life crimes. Students could consider the portrayals of women in the film, particularly Penny and Sophie, but also Arthur's therapist. In what ways does Arthur (and the film) blame them for his insanity?

Cultural

- The Joker is one of the most iconic comic-book characters. Created as a nemesis for Batman, he represents the binary opposite of the Dark Knight. Where Batman has a strict moral code and aims to battle crime and uphold law and order, the Joker is dedicated to sowing chaos and murderous mayhem. Many actors have played him as a charming psychopath, particularly Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). In Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), Heath Ledger won acclaim for his performance as an even more deranged and sociopathic version of the character.

Political

- *Joker* could be seen as an anti-capitalist film. The billionaire Thomas Wayne is portrayed as an unsympathetic bully. He accuses the underprivileged denizens of Gotham City of being 'clowns' whilst vowing to rescue the city if he is elected mayor. Some critics saw Wayne as a reference to Donald Trump, another tycoon who won political power by condemning disadvantaged people as being 'losers'.
- The civil disruption *Joker* inspires could be seen as a reference to the Occupy Wall Street movement, another political group who expressed opposition with social and economic inequality. Many protestors wore 'Guy Fawkes' masks to hide their identity and show solidarity with the famous 16th century revolutionary who attempted to blow up Parliament.

Institutional

- The dark and disturbing storyline was considered a risk by studios. However, films like *Logan* (Mangold, 2017) and *Deadpool* (Miller,

2016) had shown that adult-oriented superhero movies could be a commercial success.

- *Joker* also can be classed as an 'origin' movie like *Cruella* (Gillespie, 2021) and *Maleficent* (Newton Howard, 2014) where iconic film characters, particularly villains, are portrayed in a more sympathetic light. Students may want to consider origin movies in relation to Steve Neale's ideas about genre and audiences.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: STARTING POINTS

Spectatorship

- Arthur/Joker is a good example of an anti-hero – a protagonist with whom the audience empathises, but who indulges in anti-social and criminal behaviour. Many critics attacked the way the film justifies violence as a way for vulnerable and disadvantaged people to empower themselves.
- Consider emotional responses to Arthur's behaviour at the start of the film, before and after the subway incident and during the last half hour. To what extent do we sympathise, empathise or pity Arthur? Does that excuse/justify the crimes he commits?

Ideology

- Though there are references to anti-capitalist and anti-authority movements like Occupy and Anonymous, *Joker's* main philosophy seems to be nihilism. This is a belief that all values are baseless: morality, religion, social structure, love, family, truth. All of these rejected by a nihilist, whose only purpose is to destroy or to revel in the chaos. *Joker* may attack the wealthy and powerful, but *everyone* is portrayed negatively: the rich are awful, but so are the poor, so are women, so are people of colour. Students could consider what they feel Joker's world view is, is there any sense of hope in the film?

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:**'Subway shooting and aftermath'**

29:28 – 36:15

- Director Todd Phillips said he wanted this scene to feel like a “fever dream”, where the audience isn’t completely sure it is real. The flickering lights add to this feeling, so when Arthur first shoots one of his assailants, we’re not sure what has happened.
- The scene on the train was filmed on a stage but with a hydraulic system creating the carriage’s movement. The camera is handheld, which creates a sense of immersion and makes us see things from within Arthur’s space. It is steady from his eye-line, which creates a sense of distance.
- Consider the different use of camera in the scene on the subway and in the bathroom after. How is the cinematography different? How does the lighting appear both grimy and ‘glamorous’ (like stage lights)? What does this tell us about Arthur’s emotional state after the shootings?
- Pick three moments (maybe using screengrabs) from the start of the scene, the mid-point (especially during the murders), and the final scene in the bathroom. How has Phoenix’s performance changed?
- Compare this dance routine with the more famous dance – down the steps – once Arthur’s transformation into Joker is almost complete. Consider Phoenix’s performance, the aesthetic, and the use of music. Phoenix said he felt Arthur is a character “with music inside of him”. Previously we have seen him dance as part of his job and in his personal life to express pain or affection. How is his dance in the bathroom different to these in style and in what they are expressing?