"My balloons... He stole my balloons"

The Sign of the Joker
The Clown Prince of Crime as a Sign

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Abstract

The Joker both fascinates and repels us. From his origin in Detective Comics in 1940, the Joker has committed obscene crimes, some of the worst the Batman universe has ever known. Conversely fans have made him the topic of erotic and pornographic "fan fiction." Speculation about the Joker abounds; some fans have even claimed that the Joker is "queer coded." This work explores various popular claims about the Joker, and delves into the history of comic books and of other popular media from a semiotic viewpoint to understand "The Clown Prince of Crime" in the contexts in which he existed to understand his evolution. From his roots as a "typical hoodlum," The Joker even starred in his own eponymous comic book series and he was recently featured in a non-canonical movie. This work examines what it is about the Joker which fascinates us.

Keywords

Preface—On Writing about Popular Culture and Todd Phillip's "The Joker"

Popular culture is a moving target. When I started writing this monograph about the Joker, the movie, starring Joaquin Phoenix, was barely a rumour and they had not yet cast the lead. As I continued researching and writing, the movie entered the pre-production phase. As I started to write, the movie started shooting. I continued to write and to research and when I submitted

the final edited manuscript a few months ago, I understood that the movie would be released the following October. Here we are, late October 2019 and the Joker movie is likely to become the highest grossing "R" rated movie in history, so this work, as is all scholarship, is slightly out of date.

Folks do ask me what I think of Joaquin Phoenix's performance and my feelings are mixed. As a sign, the Joker is a representative of the untameable, the sociopathic, the irreducible. Todd Phillips' and Joaquin Phoenix have created a new representation of the Joker and one of the things that I hope that readers will understand after reading this work is that there is no one Joker, that each Joker is merely an interpretation, that each Joker is a sign of the Joker. While this version of the Joker may not fit into canon, what Phillips and Phoenix have done is to merely insert a new version of the Joker into the DC Universes. If the movie does well enough at the various box offices, there will be a sequel, or a resurgence of this version of the Joker and it will create a new canon, because the Joker is also a commodity, who has value on the open market.

Phoenix's Joker is certainly interesting from an academic point of view, but this work was done prior to the debut of this version of Joker. I may choose in future to write about this new incarnation but until such time, this is all I have to say about that topic

The Joker has always fascinated me. They call him "The Clown Prince of Crime" but he is never very funny nor is he particularly royal or Imperial. Instead, he is the embodiment of the reason that we fear clowns. The Joker fascinates me the way a snake is said to fascinate a bird. I cannot, despite myself, look away. When I had the chance to write academically about graphic novels, it was inevitable for me to pick the Joker. His face is ubiquitous. From memes online, to t-shirts, to golf club covers, the Joker's face, in all incarnations, is inevitable. Since his inception in 1940, the Joker has found a place in our collective psyches. I know there is much more to say on the topic, but the field is also daunting: there is more than eighty years' worth of material covering all popular media and the field keeps growing. And yet, the Joker is not going to die because, I believe he is one of the many ways that, we as culture use metaphor. The Joker is metaphor and an object and I believe that I have explored some of the "how" the Joker signifies, if not the "why."

I need to acknowledge several people without who I would not or could not have written this work. David Perley, Brian Baigrie and Andrew Baines of the University of Toronto assigned the original academic work which got me to thinking about the Joker as a signifier. Kenneth Green kept me going with encouragement. Paula Karger and Cindy Do read early versions of this manuscript and helped me edit. Mostly I would like thank the editor of this series Marcel Danesi, who believed in me. One afternoon, in passing, he asked me

if I could write a monograph on any topic to do with popular culture. I said I could. Then I panicked. I sat down and did some research into what the steps are which go into making a monograph. Then I wrote this manuscript.

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1 Introduction

In 1939, Detective Comics, issue twenty-seven, introduced the world to Batman.[1] He proved to be so popular that National Periodical Publications[2] subsequently gave him his own eponymous comic book "Batman." Issue one (Spring / Summer, 1940) introduced the world to a brand-new villain, "The Joker"[3] who appeared in two stories in that issue (Kane, Finger and Robinson J, 1940).[4] Visually, he looked like a cross between a circus clown and a "conventional hoodlum" with a white face and a red grin. However, this "Joker" possessed a bizarre *modus operandi*—he announced his crimes before committing them[5] and used a poison called "Joker Venom." This chemical caused his victims to grin horribly as they died in slow agony. While the use of Joker Venom or of some sort of poison was part of the Joker's "signature", the effects of this poison were not always consistent. For example, sometimes the "venom" caused the victim's faces to become white like the Joker's, other times it made them "lose their minds" temporarily or permanently, sometimes it made them laugh maniacally, sometimes it was immediately lethal and it sometimes just made them very ill. However, it always made its victims grin an awful red smile. So, despite the delivery method or the symptoms produced, the results of the Joker's poison were always the same: some form of insanity,[6] laughter, and the horrible grin.

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1 He was originally called "The Bat Man."
2 Now called DC Comics.
3 This comic book also introduced us to current villains Dr. Hugo Strange and to "The Cat" also known as "Cat Woman."
4 The stories are "The Joker" and "The Joker Returns."
5 This proclivity for announcing his crimes was a narrative trick which allowed the writer to get to the story without wasting time on exposition of the narrative. These stories form the genre, in detective fiction, of "How done it," rather than "Who done it."
6 We choose to use the term insanity, rather than mental illness, specifically because "insanity" implies the unknowable whereas "mental illness" implies the knowable.

Since his origin, the Joker has also found a place in our collective psyches. He even exists as "memes" on the Internet, depicting both the benign and the political. The sheer volume of primary material spans over eighty years involving all popular media, and even at the time of this writing, the field is still growing. This means that even attempting to consume everything in the entire Joker canon in one lifetime is just impossible. As Marco Arnuado points out in *The Myth of the Superhero*, it is impossible for one person to read, watch, play, purchase, and otherwise consume all of the items that contain or have contained the Joker or his image (Arnuado, 2013). Even if one were to try, more material on various media is being constantly produced. Furthermore, as huge as the field containing the Joker consumables is, it is also not clearly delineated, so any attempt to pin the Joker down to a single kind of genre is ultimately doomed to failure. There are t-shirts which bear image of actor Heath Ledger as the Joker, from the movie *The Dark Knight* (2008) which in turn point to the live action movie *The Dark Knight* and to a specific Joker, one who is unlike other Jokers but who also points to many specific Joker, depending on context. Other t-shirts bear the image of the Joker from the graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (1988) which, according to its writer, was originally not supposed to be part of canon and, by design, is not also like other Jokers, and yet still interacts in the Joker's universe with Batman and again points to a set of Jokers who exist and who are non-canonical. Both of these two Jokers, despite their disparities and differences also point, simultaneously to Batman and at the same time to their ancestor, the original Joker from 1940. We will explore the inter-relationship between these two "Jokers" who are ostensibly the same character, even though they are so very different.

Details render the rest of the field of Jokers moot. Once we have focused on a specific Joker we can no longer talk about the Joker as an idealized Joker, but we can compare specific Jokers to each other. On the other hand, we can talk in generally, in a fuzzy way, about all the Jokers as a "villain" or a "psychopath," or as a character without an alter-ego or a history, or even as the entire field of Jokers being related to the original Joker, without going into any real details. This field of possible Jokers includes depictions of women Jokers (Johns and Kubert, 2011), and even ostensibly "sane" Jokers (Wikipedia, 2019) in other timelines and universes. We will see that the set of possible Jokers is endless as are the possible meanings ascribed to the Joker. The Joker changes and is changed by the authors, editors and artists as is required to suit the needs of the stories, stories which are created to be consumed and purchased, so that the Joker exits as an object to be purchased and has no fixed form or personality except those which serve the needs of the marketplace. Ultimately, the

Joker is property, the intellectual property of DC Comics a subsidiary of DC Entertainment which is owned by Warner Bros. Since there are so many different versions of the Joker, with so many different personalities, it would be interesting to see, in court, what the actual legal limits of the Joker actually are, or if there are any at all.

Some facts that we can state are these: the Joker has lived over eighty years and has not aged even a single day since his creation in 1940. He is also, if anything more popular now than he has ever been. It can be proposed that one of the reasons for this extended youthful longevity is that Joker himself is a metaphor for a kind of "madness,"[7] that he is madness personified, but we must also understand that the Joker as he exists is both and ide and an object, he is a reified metaphor. We will therefore examine the manner in which the Joker's significations are represented. The closer we get to any one specific representation of the Joker, the less we can say about all the Jokers, so that, ultimately, we cannot talk about the Joker intelligently without specifying which Joker. The Joker as a character is defined by specific characteristics, but each specific representation points to the other representations even as it differs from them.

Of necessity our discussion will not follow a straight line. The reason for this meandering exploration is that there are so many different Jokers and so many places in which we find the Joker, so that taxonomy of Jokers, representations and appearances is just impossible. It would be preferable to say something specific about a specific Joker, but for every statement that we make, an exception appears. If we are to follow basic chronology from 1940 through to today, then how do we understand and explain that the Joker from the 1940s appears older than the Joker today, and, in fact that Joker, as a supposedly human character, does not age at all. The Joker, even as a field of study, resists straightforward and conventional typology and rhetoric. Instead, the authors have chosen a more Joker appropriate path. First, we have discussed the idea of the Joker as a clown. We have then placed that clown in a historical context. Further to that we have examined the Joker, *vis a vis*, the various contexts in which he has appeared, historically. Finally, we have examined the Joker as an object, and how that object signifies in popular culture today. Yes, the Joker is a clown and clowns follow their own logic, however disjointed it may be.

One major epithet used to describe the Joker is "The Clown Prince of Crime," but he is never very funny nor is he particularly royal. Even when he is the *Emperor Joker* (Loeb, 2007), he is not particularly imperial, despite sporting a

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7   The term "madness" is used, not in a clinical sense but, instead, stands as a placeholder for a conflation of "evil" and "insanity" both of which will be discussed later in this work.

crown and maintaining a court. As a clown, he does not merely upset the status quo, he only entertains himself and in so doing he gives credence to every coulrophobe's[8] nightmares. Moreover, the Joker is frightening and actually dangerous. The context with which we "normally" associate the Joker is comic books and movies, however, the Joker's image is used popularly in "memes" on the Internet to signify a certain kind of danger. How then do we explain that his visage graces t-shirts, golf club covers, ash trays and socks? Really, the Joker's face is ubiquitous, even almost inevitable in our culture. Still, the Joker presents as a clown, and clowns have their own semiotics. Therefore, of necessity, we will examine the semiotics of clowns and transgression and how these relate to the Joker. We will see that, in modern North American history, from Gwyneplaine, in the movie *The Man Who Laughs* (1928), to Pennywise, the evil clown in Stephen King's novel *It* (1986), the trope of the evil clown has burgeoned. From these depictions, we will see how the original European clown developed and changed in North America, as specifically aided by the Joker.

As we stated above, the image of the Joker is inevitable in our culture but, as always, the question is, "Which Joker?" because, despite several violent deaths and disappearances, the Joker continuously reappears, and each of these incarnations is so very different. There must exist within him some essential "Jokerness" because each time he appears, he is ostensibly the same Joker, even though his basic look changes, his basic personality changes, and even his history and etiology may change. We can state, positively, that historically, since his first appearance, he has continuously inhabited all of the various DC Universes and continuities,[9] and, at this writing, a non-canonical film version[10] called *The Joker* (2019) is being prepared to be released. The fact is that the Joker simultaneously inhabits many different narrative continuities at the same time and only some of these continuities are considered to be canonical. This idea of non-canonicity leads us to question the manner in which canonicity is responsible for semiosis in terms of the Joker, and how continuity or lack thereof affects the meaning of those artifacts in which he appears. Is it possible to reconcile the conventional gangster Joker of 1940 with Earth 23's superhero the Jokester (Batman Wiki, 2018) and is it even possible to reconcile both of these Jokers with Geoff John's upcoming series *Three Jokers*,

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8   A coulrophobe is someone who has a phobia of clowns.

9   One of the latest versions is "The Batman who Laughs" a "Jokerized" version of Batman, from another universe who has taken on the mission to kill the "real" Batman (The Villain's Wiki, 2019).

10   Non-canonical means that the film narrative does not follow any continuity before or after; it is a variant retelling of the story of a specific character without recourse to that character's established history.

an ostensibly canonical series, ostensibly to be published late in 2019? We will establish that there are, of course, more than merely three Jokers, because since his comic book debut, the Joker has also been represented in comic book "one-shots," graphic novels, on television and in films as both "live action" and animated, in several video games, unofficially as a protagonist in "fan fiction",[11] and represented on objects from coffee mugs to socks to golf club covers and even ash trays. Each of these Jokers is in a sense discontinuous to all the others and yet also each of them occupies a similar semiotic space.

We must also recognize that despite the conventionality of his image, there really is no conventionalized or standardized characterization or portrayal of the character of the Joker, with the caveat that he is always portrayed as mentally ill[12] or "criminally insane." We know he has green hair and white face, his lips are blood red and, aside from this one criterion, the character of the animated Joker, as vocally portrayed by actor Mark Hamill[13] is very different from Caesar Romero's live camp villain. Of the "live"[14] versions, one may argue over the differences and similarities between Caesar Romero's flamboyance, Jack Nicholson's nattily dressed hoodlum, Heath Ledger's sociopath and the sadist portrayed by Jared Leto[15] and again we must note that all of these versions of the Joker are very different. Of the animated version of the Joker, voice actors Troy Baker, Kevin Michael Richardson, Zack Galifianakis, Michael McKean, along with the aforementioned Mark Hamill, have, amongst many others, been the voice of the Joker and each of their characterizations is also unique. One may add to this kaleidoscope, the many different artists, writers and editors *et al.* each of whom have each had different visions of the Joker. The Joker is not a stock character, like "Pantalone" from the *commedia dell'arte*, and instead each time he appears is unique and discontinuous as much as it relates back to the Joker. It is for this reason that we may say that there have been some "great" or memorable portrayals of the Joker,[16] there is not one unique Joker

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11   Fan fiction is, as it sounds, non-commercial fiction that has been written by fans of the character and is often graphically erotic in nature.

12   Again, the exceptions prove the rule, where the Joker of Earth 23 is sane and a hero, in *Batman: White Knight* (2018–9) he is depicted as "sane" and the Joker at the end of *Cacophony* (2008–9) is depicted as temporarily stabilized with anti-psychotic medication.

13   Mark Hamill, famous as Luke Skywalker of Star Wars fame also did the voice work portraying the Joker on Batman the Animated Series (1992–1995), The New Batman Adventures (1997–1999) and also several animated movies. Some of these have been "collected" to form part of the DC Animated Universe (DCAU).

14   As opposed to animated.

15   As above, at this writing Joaquin Phoenix is in production with yet another version of the Joker to be released autumn 2019.

16   Mark Hamill's and Heath Ledger's portrayals come to mind.

at which we may point to say "this is the definitive and quintessential Joker." Each of these depictions, despite their differences, all point to the existence of a single thing, the character of the Joker and yet each one is different. One exploration we will do is therefore the meaning of these different depictions of the same Joker.

We may certainly speculate that a plausible reason for the Joker's relative longevity as a character is the fact that there is not a single Joker, or, we may speculate that the converse is true that perhaps the Joker's longevity is responsible for the many characters and faces of the Joker. While it is tempting to make *prima facie* explanations for this multiplicity and longevity and claim that the Joker is simply a manifestation the Jungian "Trickster" archetype,[17] and while this assertion is partially true, the full answer is far more complex. The Joker is never limited to merely anything and a fuller view via a deeper examination of the Joker is fruitful, specifically an examination as he is depicted in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989). We will demonstrate that the Joker not only embodies the Trickster archetype, but in fact the Joker represents many of the Jungian archetypes. The Joker is not merely what Umberto Eco calls "an intertextual collage (Eco, 1985)," the Joker himself is also a psychological collage, where the archetypes do form a kind of *bricolage* which signifies, but ultimate, does not form a personality.[18]

There is no one single Joker personality because each unique Joker has been modified, not for the sake of "art" or of "craft," but due to needs of the marketplace. Aside from being an artistic creation, the Joker is a commercial object[19]

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17   An archetype is a specific, predestined and primordial image that is impressed upon the human personality and which manifests itself in an "introspectively recognizable form of *a priori* psychic orderedness (Jung, 1985)." Because these archetypal images are encoded in the human psyche as a form of *a priori* knowledge, Jung and the Jungians contend that they manifest themselves in humanity and in all human creation. One example of this manifestation is the idea of "Monomyth" as proposed by the late Joseph Campbell. Monomyth is a framework upon which Campbell proposes that most great stories may be broken down into several specific tropes that, "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell, 2008)."

18   The DC Universe already has a "Trickster," an eponymous villain, and this Trickster has a hugely different modus operandi than the Joker's. This "Trickster" is far more whimsical and far more in keeping with his archetypal image so, that while we cannot rule out The Joker as having some elements of a Jungian "Trickster," the truth is far more complex.

19   This is not to say that there is a hierarchy of art, but that the reasons to create have little to do with "artistic feeling" and more to do with selling more comic books. Had Batman number one not succeeded it would have quickly been replaced and the Joker would never have appeared.

and as such the Joker is destined to be consumed specifically for money.[20] Historically, it was the viability of these commercial objects such as the Joker, that determined their success and these were restricted to existing within the exacting boundaries of sociocultural taboos and mores. Some of these taboos are so powerful that, in the past they have led to censorship as some artifacts for consumption were deemed as "obscene".[21] While, as far as we know, the Joker, himself, may not have been censored, comic books themselves underwent heavy censorship during the middle period of the twentieth century. This must have affected depictions of the Joker and so we will seemingly digress somewhat in this examination, to better understand how the comic book marketplace has changed. We examine the history of comic books in general, parts of which are not specific to the Joker, but will illustrate specifically that these dictates of the marketplace have shaped comic books. Following Marshall McLuhan's dictum that "The medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964)" we will also see how the comic book itself as one form of medium helped to shape the Joker as he was and also as the contents of the message and the recipient of that message changed, we will see how publishers responded by changing the medium. The Joker is not merely a mirror who alone reflects cultural changes. Rather, the Joker, as he has metamorphosized over time, points backward to ancient newsprint presses and forward to digital publishing. He has himself become a sign that points to a metamorphological and meta-temporal mutability, so what we see and read into the Joker, along with subsequent changes, define the consumer and culture within which the Joker and the reader exist. We will see further, following this thought, that the relationship between the Joker, the author[22] and the consumer, is a tripartite and reciprocal relationship.

The consumer is, in the case of ongoing commercial fiction, is in relationship with the producers of that fiction; together, they co-author the commercial property which is a consumable Joker. Of necessity then, we will examine the comic book, itself, as a sign and to examine the means via which comic books have metamorphized both in what and how they signify. The culmination of this idea exists in the discussion we will have over the death of Batman's

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20   The Joker is fast food, not gourmet food.

21   There has also been a history, in both English and North American of censoring and expurgating literature, but none of these have been commercial successes. Notably D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), became a commercial success, but only after a celebrated trial in England in 1960 by publisher Penguin Books, where the book achieved notoriety and was then "allowed" to be published.

22   The "author" of a comic book includes the writer, the inker, the colorist, the editor and the publisher.

partner Robin[23] at the hands of the Joker in *A Death in the Family* (1988). DC Comics polled readers to decide if Robin should live or die and the readers chose death. We understand that this is an extreme example of the consumer in partnership with the producers, it illustrates the point that consumption of goods is at the very least in relation between the consumer and the producer.

As part of the relationship with the consumer, the writers of episodic narrative fiction, such as comic book writers, also face the problem of narrative continuity. This problem is two-fold. First, if we describe the Joker as six feet tall, then he must remain that height unless we somehow explain, narratively, why his height has now changed. Second, as above, since the Joker has not ostensibly aged at all in eighty years, how we reconcile the "original" Joker who existed since the 1940's with the Joker in the aforementioned, non-canonical movie, *The Joker*. What is the relation between these two and why then has the Joker not aged, and are the disparities between the two even possible to reconcile? Comic books often have issues of character history, based on old or forgotten plot points and some of these may only be revealed retroactively. Narratives about the Joker contradict each other so that while many stories in the Joker's canon are somehow illuminative of his past, we have no one origin story, no definitive etiology of the Joker, moreover canon itself has changed enough times that it is impossible to state with authority that any characterization of the Joker is right or wrong, just different. Granted that some narratives fill in gaps left by others, still they also potentially created new contradictions and questions. Plainly, the Joker of 1940 simply is and cannot be the same Joker as the Joker of 1960, 1980 or even 2019. Also, while we simply cannot be satisfied with the Jokers of eras gone by, due to anachronisms, how may we reconcile "canonical Joker" with "non-canonical Joker" or even the two canonical Jokers of 1940 and 1988 with the Joker of 2019. We must then interrogate the notions of narrative consistency, continuity and reconciliation of a narrative, as they relate to comic books especially over a long time period, because despite the fact that the canon itself keeps growing, some of these attempts to reconcile the narratives themselves lead to apparent paradoxes and anachronisms.

The Joker is still called by the stigmatizing appellations "psychopathic," "sociopathic," "crazy," and "lunatic"[24] but similarly, so in many ways, are the "normal" transgressions of the clown. The difference for us is that clown does

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23   Robin is the name of several fictional people who have adopted the role of Batman's helper and include Dick Grayson, Jason Todd, Tim Drake, Stephanie Brown, in another continuity, Helena Wayne, and Bruce Wayne's son Damian. This list changes depending on the "continuity" one chooses. For more on this please see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin_(character).

24   And, it is important to note that all of these terms are stigmatizing.

not kill, he does have limits which are circumscribed, in our culture, by "real harm" versus "play harm." The Joker does real harm to others and his harm is wholesale and dispassionate. When it comes to killing whole populations, he laughs uproariously, and his laugh is without pleasure. Even when he harms others to "prove a point (Moore and Bolland, 1988)" the Joker attempts to be more clinical, more surgical and this dispassion is in some way more disquieting than if he took pleasure in murder. Still, while the terms such as "crazy" and "psychopath" are indeed stigmatizing terms (Goodwin and Tajjudin, 2016), and while the Joker has become representative of mental illness, we must question if the Joker really does represent a specific genre of mental illness and if he does so, what illness does the Joker suffer from. We are not questioning if the Joker is "crazy," but instead we want to question in what manner might current psychiatry choose to diagnose the Joker, if they could at all. Perhaps, we are suggesting that the depictions of the Joker as mentally ill are merely a form of artifice, that the Joker, may be a sign of "madness" but of what kind. In our attempt to clarify this question and to answer it we will see that any attempt to diagnose[25] the Joker also tests the medical model of mental illness, and that as much as we want to call the Joker ill, he resists diagnosis.

Part of the reason for this uncertainty is that the Joker is a paradoxical sign that transcends itself to point to nothing. This type of sign points to other signs and ultimately, at the end of the chain, these signs, when reified, do not even mean nothing, but instead negate their own existence. We will discuss the Joker in terms of theory of signs and specifically these paradoxical signs to understand how they function in terms of commerce and capitalism and how this self-negation is partly responsible for the Joker's longevity. Before we do that, we will return to look at the Joker in terms of his physical form.

The Joker changes over time, his mode of dress and his face change, and the only static thing about him is his method of killing. Changes in the Joker are based on both artistic and editorial decisions and also on what the consumer will purchase. As much the Joker's physiognomy changes, it is because the Joker has no fixed look, the Joker has no fixed personality, no fixed personality disorder and no fixed past. The Joker is, instead, a series of ever-changing criteria which are shaped as much by the individual creators, writers, designers and artists as he is by the community and also by the media via which he is consumed.

These criteria begin with the comic book, where the Joker was born, and how the ideas of canonicity and retroactive continuity have come to shape the

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25   While we use the word "diagnose" it must be made clear that the authors are in no way medical clinicians of any sort.

modern comic narrative. To start our journey into the Joker, we will start off
with the fact that he is a clown.

2   Bad Clown, Evil Clown

When the superhero comic book first originated, heroes, aside from having
super-human abilities or "super powers", also dressed unconventionally in cos-
tumes with logos, masks and capes, ostensibly to protect their daytime identi-
ties. Sometimes these costumes grew out of their origin story, as does Batman's.
"Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot. So, my disguise must be able to
strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible
(Finger, 1939)." Their criminal counterparts also wore disguises, even though,
unlike the heroes, they did not need to protect a secret identity. So, the Joker
dresses as a clown and nobody asks the reason for it, because unconventional
dress is the convention of superheroes and supervillains. One is not a supervil-
lain unless one dresses unconventionally, and this is true of the Batman and of
James Bond. The Joker exists in colorful contrast, green hair, white face and red
lips, while pointing to the Joker, also indicate "Clown."

As Paul Bouissac has made clear in his work *The Semiotics of Clowns and
Clowning: Rituals of Transgression and the Theory of Laughter* (2015) clowns
have their own semiotics. The Joker, is a member of the species "clown" and,
as Bouissac has made clear, clowns themselves represent a kind of discourse, a
discourse of transgression (Bouissac, 2015). This idea of transgression is based
in a historical context and, correctly, the Joker has the white delineated face
of a clown, the "Auguste (Bouissac 2015)." We do not have to try and to rec-
ognize him amongst other clowns. His face, the same face he has worn since
1940, is very much representative of the Joker specifically and of the Auguste
clown conventionally, it is his "signature (Bouissac, 2015)." The "Auguste" is a
particularly stylized clown, conventionalized like "Pantalone", of the *comme-
dia dell'arte* and these are both particularly European creatures. The Joker, on
the other hand, resists this kind of typology, because unlike the Auguste or
Pantalone, the Joker is North American and does not come from the clown
academies. The Joker is instead a hybrid, historically taken from the academies
but then raised on the streets of North America.

Instead, if we were to place the Joker in the typology of clowns, we would
have to acknowledge that the Joker was not a conventional clown. While the
clowns that existed at the time the Joker was born were the European clowns
and the "Tramp" that it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century
that we began to have the vocabulary to speak of "The Evil Clown." Really the

Joker is, if not the quintessential prototype, then one of the prototypes of this trope (Dalarge, 2014). His white-faced physiognomy might want us to call him an *Auguste* save that his original hair included a widow's peak, implying age or premature balding, and his green hair was more a highlight color, rather than the shocking bold green mane which we find in more modern incarnations. His clothing was originally rumpled, to indicate a conventional gangster, not a clown, and aside from his clown face, greenish hair, his poison and odd *modus operandi*, there was nothing, as Peaslee and Weiner note, to distinguish him from any other hoodlum; his crimes appeared to be motivated by money (Peaslee and Weiner, 2015). He was a not a clown, in the sense we mean clown, he was a man dressed as a clown.

Since his debut, the shape of the Joker's face has changed more than once, from a square jawed "conventional criminal" with an extremely odd manner of murdering his victims to a ridiculously, triangular faced felon, in *A Death in the Family* (1988). In one section of this story the Joker's face is made-up to cover the whiteness of his "real" face, but no amount of make-up could disguise the distorted physiognomy. In *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) the only way to distinguish the, now aged, Joker from other members of the public, is his fading, green hair, and wrinkling white skin and, of course, the still shocking red lips; otherwise this Joker would have blended in and disappeared completely, again, a conventional criminal. Some of these depictions of the Joker are more surreal than other. The Joker, in the animated *The Batman* series (2004–8), is drawn surreally with a leonine mane to accentuate his maniacal and homicidal nature. There is no consistency to how we draw the Joker, so as Roy T. Cook notes "The Joker, during the events depicted in *The Long Halloween* (1996–1997) has six-inch teeth. In other stories, however, the Joker has normal dentition. So, what is going on? (Cook, 2015)." Whoever this Joker is, he is certainly not an *Auguste*, at least not a typical one, moreover his face and costume change from comic book to comic book to graphic novel to animated series to television to live movies. This mutability indicates, as Cook concludes, that we really cannot know anything about the Joker's physiognomy (Cook, 2015). Physically, the Joker is an enigma and his physicality changes at the whim of the artist's brush, yet he always wears the clown's face.

As Bouissac reminds us that each clown distinguishes themselves from the other clowns with a "signature," distinct face make-up which is painstakingly crafted over time (Bouissac, 2015) and the Joker's face is certainly distinct. These signatures also differentiate these clowns as distinct personalities from each other and from the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*. The Joker's signature, is, despite his physical changes, so very distinct, that we may link the Joker's face, as a signature with, what Marcel Danesi reminds us is, the

criminal's individual *modus operandi*, which is also called a "signature (Danesi, 2014)." The Joker's clown signature is his face and this is also mirrored in the faces of his victims. The Joker's clown signature is his grin, and is also his crime signature, which are indices to the Joker himself.

The clown face in itself is also a kind of mask, with the difference that the clown may remove his mask. The Joker and his mask are one and the same. He is his mask. We will note that the word "*persona*," what we call public personality, derives from the Latin for theatrical mask. Persona has come to mean the public everyday personality that a person assumes which differs from their own personality, such as a lawyer's or a doctor's persona. We slip these masks on in our daily lives and as theatre director Keith Johnstone writes about the phenomenon in his book, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1981), even make-up alone can have a profound effect on a person's demeanor. In describing a journalist acquaintance who, as an assignment, was asked to join a local circus for one performance, Johnstone recounts:

> Once the make-up was on, he became "possessed" and found himself able to tumble about, catch his feet in buckets, and so on, as if he'd been a clown in another incarnation. He stayed with the circus for some weeks, but he never got the same feeling without the make-up.[26]
>
>   JOHNSTONE 1981

The clown make-up, a kind of mask, is, in itself, enough to trigger the personality change, or, as Johnstone calls it, "possession." Johnstone continues that book section, entitled *Masks and Trance*, to underscore that masks are an important part of ritual and that "trance-states" or "possession," are common ways to talk about clown and mask work, amongst those who use them. Masks, clowns and possession speak to the irrational parts of our psyches and to the irrational in society.

Professional clowns experience a "mask" state as a form of transgressive trance, that may be brought on by the clown mask, or make-up. Reportedly the late Charlie Chaplin was able to act as "The Tramp" only after he had started to create the costume (Johnstone, 1981). Further to this, the famous comedy troupe The Marx Brothers always dressed in a specific manner, a manner that allowed them to act as physical and verbal clowns who transgress social

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26   In the section on Masks and Trance, Johnstone also mentions Charlie Chaplin's transformation into the Tramp character with which are familiar, noting that Chaplin attributed much of his genius to the Tramp, that it was only after transformation that he came up with comic ideas.

norms. Mikhail Bakhtin's work shows us that as a culture we have also delineated specific times and spaces for the spirit of transgression, and that this transgression involves both unreason and the carnal, which is to say that at Carnival we transgress by both word and deed. (Bakhtin, 1984). This verbosity and Dionysian physicality contrasts with the culturally normative and expected "moral" Apollonian continence of everyday life. It is during carnival, as Bakhtin shows us, that these dichotomies mix (Bakhtin, 1984). We have delineated times and spaces, religiously or culturally, when we may take off the masks of civilization and put on the masks of transgression, as we do in North America on Halloween. The difference is that while carnival, in Europe, was a time of religiously mandated "transgression," in North America travelling circuses and carnival spaces have also become synonymous with transgressive spaces. Rio De Janeiro and New Orleans are both notable as spaces where the spirit of carnival still exists as apart of Mardi Gras. "Carnival" as a religious state, as Mardi Gras is supposed to be, is well delimited, culturally and temporally, it has specific times and places and limitations, as Mardi Gras ends on Ash Wednesday. We may also say, contrarywise, we have delimited reason and culture from the chaos that surrounds it and have in sense banished it. In the case of the travelling circus and travelling carnival, they have taken a temporal locus and turned time into space so that where they travel, so comes Carnival.

The North American circus clown, or birthday clown, may delight us or makes us laugh, but the reason they do so is specifically because they are limited, that these clowns are "safe" dangers. Even if they get "hurt" we understand that in general they will get up again. These are the progenitors of Laurel and Hardy, The Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers who are other North American representations of the clown, known as the "Tramp," and their transgressions are limited to specific times and spaces. These circus presents us with "safe" dangers: human cannonballs, trapeze artists and the like. In modernity, there has even been a recurrence of the "sideshow," where along with horror movies, the Rabelaisian spirit of carnival still lives. The sideshow, first popularized in the movie "Freaks (1932)," travelled alongside circuses and displayed fire eating, sword swallowers, and those with real physical differences, and these humans were exhibited as curiosities such as "The Bearded Lady" or "The Fat Man".[27] Sideshows have even seen a resurgence today even seen a resurgence today. We have an innate need to transgress and clowns allow us to do so vicariously.

The clown, in North America, is then a sign of circus or of carnival, of the carnal and of unreason. As the name "carnival" itself attests, a reminder of

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27   It is no error that many of the illustrations in the Joker based graphic novel *The Killing Joke* reference the humans in the movie *Freaks*.

the flesh. While the North American clown may originally be descended from the European Auguste and the character clown,[28] prior to the year 1980, a conventional clown, in North America was not likely to be either of these. The typical North American clown, was primarily the "Tramp Clown," who was first popularized by Emmet Kelly as his clown "Weary Willie (Dalarge, 2014)." As Adam Darlage further notes, this character trope has, over the years metamorphosized further so that, at least in North America "Today, however, the evil clown is the preeminent clown within North American culture (Dalarge, 2014)." Dalarge, correctly notes that the Joker, because of his age, is in many ways the likely progenitor of all the evil clowns who follow him.

The trope of "Evil Clown" or "Horror Clown" has infiltrated all parts of the entertainment industry. There are, for example, transgressive rock acts such as Ozzy Osborne, Alice Cooper and Marilyn Manson, rock bands such as "Insane Clown Posse" and "Slipknot," and even pro-wrestling "heels (bad guys)" such as "Doink the Clown." In 1940 it may have been a true shock to see a criminal dressed as a clown however in 2019, it is a common movie trope. As Dalarge and Benjamin Radford note, aside from "Evil Clown" the most common clown trope is that of "Bad Clown," the clown as "incompetent and as not funny," who serve as vehicles of ironic humor.[29] Radford also explains in "Bad Clowns (2016)," that the Joker is, at least for our current culture, an exemplar of the "serial killer as clown" which was personified in John Wayne Gacy and his "Pogo the Clown." This notion will be explored further in the chapter, "Joker on the Couch," later in this work but for the moment we will acknowledge that "evil clowns," such as "Pennywise" from the book and the movies "It," are currently the foremost exemplars of the North American clown trope.

When the clown kills, as in a horror movie, there is usually some sort of justification, usually a horrible one, but a "rational" explanation nonetheless, based on skewed logic. When the Joker maims Barbara Gordon, he justifies his violence against her by stating that he was trying to prove a point.[30] If one presupposes that human lives do not matter, then, followed through to a logical conclusion, the Joker makes "sense". This logic is essential to the horror of the Joker. Even in the fantastical *Emperor Joker* (Loeb, 2007), where the Joker is able to change the physical laws of the cosmos, a skewed form of logic is followed

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28   This type of clown, as opposed to the American Clown, is well described in Bouissac's book.

29   Exemplars of this trope include "Krusty the Clown" from the Simpsons, Bobcat Goldthwaite's performance in the eponymously named movie *Shakes the Clown* (1991), and, arguably, Billy Bob Thornton's portrayal of Santa Claus in *Bad Santa* (2003) and its sequel *Bad Santa 2* (2016).

30   In *The Killing Joke.*

and this allows the Joker to be beaten. Really then, the reason that the Joker is so horrifying, is not merely the fact that he transgresses but that his transgressions follow a skewed kind of logic, that we can follow. It is not enough that the Joker clown transgresses. The clown transgresses in ways that horrify us, specifically because we can follow the logic.

3   The Joker: History, Canonicity and Continuity

When first available to the public, comic books were considered to be a form of "low" or at best "popular" art. These garishly colored periodicals were a cheap form of entertainment that were intended to be discarded after use; it was never the intention that they be considered "art" at all. One can only imagine the original comic book writers, inkers, colorists and editors being confronted with the ideas of continuity and canonicity. Most probably, they would laugh at these ideas. In historical context, comic books were not intended to be any form of collectible art and instead were intended to be a form of ephemera. It is only with the advent of the baby-boom of the 1960s, that comic books started to be taken seriously as art and it is at this historical juncture that, for the first time, comic book editors and writers were confronted these issues of narrative continuity and canonicity. We must remember that questions of canon and continuity are anachronistic when applied to the early days of comic books, but these ideas are important to understanding the Joker today. DC Comics has changed canon and continuity in comics books many times over the past eighty years and stories which at one time were considered canonical have been removed from canon, and non-canonical stories have entered canon. As an example, *The Killing Joke* (1988), according to its writer Alan Moore, is ostensibly a "one-shot" non-canonical story about the Joker and his origin. However, many elements from the story have entered canon. As another example, the fantastical story line, *Emperor Joker* (2000) includes a humanoid character from "the fifth dimension" who has the ability to reformat the entire cosmos. Notably *Emperor Joker* remains canonical, even though, of the two stories, *The Killing Joke* is the far more reasonably plausible. One thing we can state unequivocally, then, that canonicity has little to do with the plausibility of a story.

As the various different versions of the Joker appeared over time, some of these versions were inevitably inconsistent with each other and also with established comic timeline "history," or "canon". Editors and publishers initially solved this problem by stating that some of these versions of the Joker were deemed to have been "fictional" within this fictional universe, or "non-canonical," and other versions were "real," or "canon." So, while Bill Finger's

version of the Joker's origin, *Under the Red Hood* (1951), is "official canon," a completely different origin, in the Joker's own eponymous comic book (1975–76) stated that, as a child, he had been frightened by a clown, or something. The difference between the two origins is marked and completely irreconcilable, moreover, it has never been addressed, so, we may presume that the Joker comic book series is non-canonical. This simple incongruity is just one example of this kind of problem, it exists throughout the entire Joker *oeuvre* and indeed in all comic book lore.

We can state that canonicity, in comic books, is the privileging of one set of historical narratives over other narratives, and we call the privileged narratives "canon" and the others "non-canon", with the further caveat that canonical and non-canonical stories may exist simultaneously in our world. Canon works together with continuity which is also a crucial issue in this type of narrative. It is understood, for example that the Joker has green hair. Once we have established this fact, portraying the Joker with red or purple hair requires either suspension of disbelief or explanation why this change happened. In comic books we call this "continuity," and it is similar to cinematic continuity that it, "refers to the degree to which a film is self-consistent without errors (Dirks, 2018)." Comic book scripts and comic books themselves are similar to movie storyboards and scripts because they both represent a visual story with words. It is for this reason that we also use this technical term "continuity" to describe the internal consistency of comic book narratives, especially consistency from issue to issue and from story line to story line. Moreover, we have an added complication, for, as the Joker jumps from comic books to television to movies to video games, there must be some kind of visual consistency and, if not, there must be an explanation. We cannot portray the Joker as a tiger faced dog or a small blonde-haired girl, unless we explain why. If the Joker has green hair in one issue of a Batman comic book and then purple hair in the next issue or elsewhere, we, as readers, will want some sort of explanation as to why this hair color change occurred. Usually, there will be a narrative explanation to explain the change and, if there is no explanation then there is a problem with continuity.

The problem of continuity and canonicity in terms of comic books, also describes whether or not the story as written is considered to have occurred in the "normal" narrative continuity or in some alternative one. Some of these fictional stories are written so as to purposefully be discontinuous from the main story line,[31] to be created non-canonical, and we, as readers, need to know

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31   As an example, *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow* (Moore, Swan and Perez, 1986) speculated on Superman's last day as a Superhero and his retirement from public

which stories are contiguous to the main story plot line and which are not. The idea of canonicity and errors of continuity are so very, extremely important to fans of comic books and movies, and so to the creators of these consumables. Writers and editors are only interested in continuity as a preventative measure, so that, for example, in the upcoming Joker movie starring Joaquin Phoenix, the producers have already declared that this version of the Joker is non-canonical, to the various "DC Universes." This decision was made so that any deviation from existing canon may be forgiven but also allows DC to make the story or parts of the story canon at a later time. This "retroactive continuity" is also called "retconning." Since we do not know the future, it is entirely possible that this currently non-canonical narrative may later be deemed to be canon. None of this is very clear cut or definitive. While a graphic novel like *The Killing Joke*, was declared non-canonical by Alan Moore, its writer (Wilbur, 2016), DC's decision to incorporate parts of the story into canon blurred the difference between canonical and non-canonical narrative. DC later changed their comic book continuity stream multiple times, so that Barbara Gordon walked again, albeit with PTSD. Canon may change and then may change again, based on the needs of the comic book ecology.

When the number of these inconsistencies grew too large to rationalize into a single continuity, DC comics solved this problem by proposing that there were multiple universes, or, in their parlance, a single "multiverse" made up of an infinite number of universes. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Wolfman and Perez, 2001), later attempted to rationalize the DC story continuity by destroying most of the "infinite" universes, killing off some characters, and excising and re-interpolating some events, thereby creating a new continuity. *Crisis* was followed by an *Infinite Crisis* (Johns and Perez, 2008),[32] "The New 52"[33] in 2011, and "Rebirth" in 2016. In *Rebirth*, all DC properties, cities, towns and were suddenly ten years younger as ten years were, as part of the plot, deleted from the universe.[34, 35] Again, an attempt was made to try and "fix" a fictional continuity, using narrative to do so. The Joker not only managed to survive these purges

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      life and as another example the movie *The Joker* (2019) which, at this writing, is still in production.

32   The Joker plays a tiny but absolutely crucial role at the climax of this story.

33   What this "New 52" meant is that every DC property, including Superman and Batman and the Joker, started all over again with, yet again, new origins and continuity.

34   For a list of most of the DC Universes of "worlds" see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_DC_Multiverse_worlds Retrieved September 2, 2018.

35   One might also speculate, cynically, that "Rebirth" also allowed DC to remove 10 years from the age of every character to appeal, possibly, to a younger audience.

unscathed, he was, in fact, key to the conclusion of *Infinite Crisis*. The Joker is a key and pivotal part of the DC comic book roster.

On a smaller basis, comic book story editors and authors also add to existing characters by "retconning". For example, Marvel Comic Book's "the Thing" first appeared in The Fantastic Four #1 (1961). As Mark Gottdiener explains, because of hegemonic theory, we presume, unless told otherwise, that Ben Grimm, who was transformed into "The Thing" was initially perceived as what was then considered to have been default, a heterosexual, white, Christian man (Gottdiener, 1985). Later in continuity, Ben Grimm's Jewish roots were suddenly revealed, as part of a plot twist (Mietkiewitz, 2017). While it may be argued that the Thing was Jewish all along,[36] it was only through retroactive continuity we only discovered that he is Jewish. This is to say that his character was endowed with the attribute "Jewishness" and that somehow this attribution now traces back over twenty years to the Thing's creation in 1961. Similar examples of "retconning" include DC's graphic novel *Kingdom Come* (Waid and Ross, 1996) which was originally published as a completely non-canonical Superman story and which was "retconned" into the many DC Universes which are extant in 2019.[37] Elements from stories which were ostensibly non-canonical, such as the brutal injury to Barbara Gordon by the Joker in *The Killing Joke*, later made their way into the "canonical" universe (Cronin, 2007). Essentially, "retconning" is often used to explain away possible conflicts, to change the continuity when a plot hole needs fixing or to give new attributes to a character which they may not have had or indeed may have lost.[38] Hence, as depicted in 1988, many believe that Joker, prior to his transformation into the Joker, was a failed stand-up comedian, and that this had been true since 1940. This is the power of retconning.

Problems of continuity are also dealt with in other ways such as by "rebooting" a hero or villain, by asserting a story happened in an alternate continuity or universe or by completely shutting down specific continuities. These "solutions" can create even greater plot paradoxes or plot holes. Later in this work

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36   In our culture it is a fact that that a character default unless otherwise stated is "white and Gentile" and this is true until any other announcement is made (Gottdiener, 1985). Until it was made clear that Ben Grimm was indeed Jewish, he was perceived as a gentile. For further discussion of this idea *vis a vis* Harry Potter Universe, we can state that Dumbledore was perceived as heterosexual until J. K. Rowling announced that he was gay. For more on this idea see Lesley Goodman's "Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory and The Death of the Author (2015)."

37   As of May 2019, DC's *Kingdom Come* takes place on Earth 22. We mention the year only because, due to retconning and re-retconning, we have no idea if this story will remain canon or not?

38   Alan Moore sidestepped this issue in "The Killing Joke" by having the Joker state that if he has a past that he prefers it to be "multiple choice (Moore and Bolland, 1988)."

when we encounter the Joker in non-canonical stories, such as Tim Burton's movie *Batman* (1989), we must understand that these are narrative cusps in the universes in which the Joker, Batman, Barbara Gordon and other inhabit, and, we must keep in mind these stories were not intended to be canonical, and therefore, discontinuous from the overall greater narrative. It was only after the fact that parts of these narratives were later absorbed into "continuity." We must also note that other parts that were once canon, were removed and so exist in a kind of continuity limbo. We also need to remember that the whole idea of continuity and canonicity in comic books was constructed, not only by the ostensible writers and editors of those stories, but in creative collaboration with the readers, who are the consumers of these comic books.

The Joker narrative, as a continuous thing, exists in a limbo, in the sense that we are not certain how much credence we are to give to any of it. There are fictitious biographies, such as Chuck Barris' *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (1984), where the song writer and game show host claims to have been a CIA operative. There are biographies of fictitious characters, such as Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye.* In, Margaret Atwood's early novel *Surfacing* (1972) and Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) we are provided with unreliable narrators of fiction, and we understand that this lack of credibility provides us with more information about the narrators. The Joker's biography is different as we are provided with many different narratives all recounted as if they are all equally true and, crucially, we have no real way to ascertain if any one narrative told about the Joker is more reliable than the next. The issue for us is that we are unable to establish credibility for any one version of the narrative and no amount of retroactive continuity can establish canon for such a character. Ultimately, the Joker exists, but establishment of any one narrative as belonging to the Joker alone is difficult because the Joker resists reification.

4 The Joker and the Comic Book as Index, Icon and Symbol

When we read a comic book, we have in front of us a page covered sequential panels of art. When we watch a movie, when see a television show, we must recall that what we are really seeing is merely "sequential art," drawings or picture frames, animated and redrawn quickly so as to create the illusion of a narrative which is accompanied by verbal cues. Some purists might cavil at the word "art" being applied to comic book characters; however, authors Tom Spurgeon and Michael Dean have noted in the title of their book, *Comics as Art: We Told You So* (2008) that comics books have been "art" for some time.

Comic books, movies, video games and television are, in a sense, a form of cognitive optical illusion in that we see discontinuous pictures, but because of their set sequence, cognitively we translate this artwork, tacitly understanding that they are intended to be read in a specific manner and to be understood as a narrative. Comic books, for one, are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer (McCloud, 1993)." Seminal critic Scott McCloud is interested in the specific form, comic books, to be consumed from the page, but we, as the consumer, actually have a choice. We may now view the individual artifacts of production of comic books, movies and cartoons, individual movie frames or cartoon cels,[39] and we may then choose to appreciate these individual panels or cels as aesthetic objects that are, themselves, collectible forms. We also then have the choice to replace these artifacts back into context as sequential art, which form a comic book or movie plot or to view them separately. There is a cognate in video games, where pictures get redrawn several times a second to produce the illusion of motion, and this can be viewed as a similar aesthetic principle, since video games pictures are also based on the pixel, which is merely redrawn many times a second. Ultimately then, although the means of producing each of these individual pictures, or pieces of art is different, what we are consuming, in each case, is a piece of art intended to be depicted in sequence which together are intended to convey some sort of narrative about the Joker.

In terms of narrative, then, since each interpretation of the Joker is always a re-interpretation of the original Joker, we may then also state that each version of the Joker, is intertextual with all other versions, in the sense that reference each other and also other texts (Kristeva, 1986). This means that the Joker points inward at himself and outward at other texts simultaneously. We must also note that each later version of the Joker points to each differing version in a cascade of representations so that each version of the Joker only represents the Joker as a metaphor, each one is only like the Joker, and that each one a likeness of the idea of the Joker. Each of these representational metaphors "circumscribes cultural units in an asymptotic fashion, without ever allowing one to touch it directly, though making it accessible through other units (Eco 1976)."[40] The "meaning" of every representation of the Joker only points to

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39   It is noteworthy that individual cartoon "cels (pieces of celluloid)" used in production of cartoons are often available for purchase and some can fetch prices upwards of $2000 USD or higher.

40   An asymptote is a mathematical term used in calculus to describe a line which approaches a curve but which only becomes tangential to it at infinity; it continues to approach the curve forever without ever actually reaching it.

some other Joker who ultimately point back to the "original" Joker. There is no possibility of any intersection of Jokers and, because writers and artists have kept rewriting and redrawing the Joker over the past 80 years, each new version Joker is both a brand-new creation and is also, simultaneously, an existing aesthetic outline which both the artist and writer fill in with details. This is similar, cognitively to the outline of a picture in a coloring book. Each new Joker iteration, is then, paradoxically, both a representation of the older Joker and is also, at the same time, a brand-new creation, because, while the Joker must be recognizable as the Joker, the Joker is recreated every time he is re-represented. In Baudrillardian terms, each version of the Joker is a simulation of the previous Joker, or, to the point, that the Joker is a simulacrum, that the Joker does not exist except in imagination, so that each version is constructed as a copy of the original Joker who also does not exist (Baudrillard, 1994). The Joker of *The Man Who Laughs* points to the Joker of *The Killing Joke* who points to the Joker of *Under the Red Hood* who points to the Joker of Batman number one, who ultimately is a fictional creation which does not exist, except in imagination.

This leaves us with a paradox because, every "copy" of the Joker exists as a placeholder which exists as a Peircean index to the original Joker, but because the Joker always changes, each version of the Joker is meant to be both, recognizably, a copy of the original and also, equally recognizably, a new thing unto itself. The Joker of the graphic novel *The Killing Joke* is recognizably different than the Joker of the movie *The Dark Knight* and yet, each must be, and is, recognizably the Joker, despite their many differences. The Joker, then, is not so much as character as much as he is an object, the "intellectual property" of DC Comics, a division of Warner Bros. Entertainment where each "new" iteration of the Joker is then also not a character but rather is an object, and as such, may be styled and revisited. Jared Leto's portrayal of the Joker, in *Suicide Squad* (2016), cannot displease us for being unlike other versions of the Joker because the Joker, is an object and instead the portrayal may only displease us for being unlike Jared Leto's version. Each iteration of the Joker is just an interpretation of an imaginary, non-existent original. Since each copy of the Joker is also meant to be an original version,[41] therein lies the paradox. We expect each version of the Joker to be a faithful copy of something and at the same time to be an original object, both at the same time. While we have aesthetic expectations of what a "Joker" is supposed to be, according to our own individual taste, and, while we may experience some versions that are according to those tastes,

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41   The need for each different version of the Joker to be non-canon speaks to the fact that each version is indeed a stand-alone simulation.

our dissatisfaction is not with the depiction of the Joker, but with our expectations of what we feel that depiction should be.

While we believe the Joker has some sort of character, the Joker is a consumable object, not a person. Moreover, this "object" is owned intellectual property that belongs to Warner Bros. and to DC Comics. As an owned object, the Joker then changes as the market also changes. If, for instance, "Joker vanilla" does not sell, we may be sanguine that a "Joker strawberry" option will be tried, if and only if, market research says it will sell. In this manner, the readers, as consumers of the Joker, have been transformed into mostly passive consumers. The availability of different flavours or colors of the same object feels like freedom of choice and given enough plausible choices, we exhaust ourselves (Bright and Logan, 2018). It is then crucial to understand the decision-making process that goes into what we consume and how we consume it. Understanding these will provide with the information to comprehend what the consumption of a given thing, in this case the Joker, means.

In the case of comic books and comic book "universes" much of the knowledge has become self-referential. The Joker points to himself and to all consumable items in which he appears or references, so the Joker, himself, becomes not just a single sign, but is really a polysemous system of self-referential signs which, in turn, refer back in time to the Batman "universe of origin." As a consequence of media, the Joker also indicates those actors who portrayed him, to the writers and editors who created him, to the movies in which he appears, to the other media via which we consume the Joker and even to Barack Obama and Donald Trump who have had memes of themselves portrayed as the Joker. Only finally does the Joker represents himself, reflexively.

The Joker is, all by himself, a Lacanian floating signifier on whose meaning we can fix only after having apprehended it, not as creating or consuming it. We tacitly agree that, as an object, the Joker has come to mean "madness" and "sociopathy," but even this meaning set of meanings is not even fixed, as we see in the non-canonical series *White Knight* (2017–8) where the Joker is the ostensibly sane hero and Batman is the insane sociopathic villain, one who causes terrible collateral damage to Gotham City. The Joker's is, as above, an open-ended culmination of signs and is at the same time his own universe of signs. We might then wish, wrongly, to say that the Joker is a "Hypersign" in Michael Riffaterre's sense of the word (Riffaterre, 2008). While "Hypersigns" ultimately do signify, they are pregnant with meanings which indicate outward forever. The Joker, on the other hand, while indicating outward to infinity, in this sense, is a sign which as attempt to reify it or tie it to an object that has some real existence, ultimately disappears in a puff of imagination. This disappearance occurs because the Joker does not actually exist. Further to this lack

of real existence, the Joker used to "not exist" relative to comic book narratives but today, he does "not exist" relative to a multiplicity of cultural experiences including video games and other collectibles.[42] When you reach for the Joker, there is nothing there. It is key that the Joker has never and, one may only hope, will never exist except as a creation of imagination. We call such signs "hyposigns" since, ultimately, they have less existence than what they signify.

Further to the above, historically there is little consistency to how the Joker is depicted. Each time he is "created," a brand-new variant of the genus "Joker" emerges to be consumed as ephemeral entertainment. Since all variants of the Joker were created through the aegis of capitalistic endeavor, the purpose of the Joker is to create an appetite for more Jokers. The Joker exists to sell the Joker, so that he is at least as much a commodity to be bought and sold as any other object. The caveat is that the Joker, and objects such as the Joker, do not have any "real" reality. They exist in the mind, if at all. The Joker is not alive, he is "intellectual" property, so that the Joker only appears where DC and Warner Bros. feel he will be lucrative.

The fact that that the Joker is an owned object may be one explanation for his seeming agelessness. In a span of eighty years the Joker has yet to age a day, and, we consumers treat this lack of aging as if it is completely normal. Notably, as a culture, we are used to the fact that characters in popular fiction do not age. Batman does not age and neither does the Joker. This agelessness is not anomaly but is instead a requirement of all characters in popular episodic and serial fiction and it exists as a corollary to the American Monomyth where:

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42   While our temptation is to explore the philosophy of "nonexistent objects," for the sake of this small work we will simply propose that "fictional objects" are part of the class of objects that we call "nonexistent objects." The Joker would be part of that class of fictional objects which do not have empirical existence and although they might exist by inference, most importantly, these objects can also signify. An example of such an object in our current culture would be Sherlock Holmes, a werewolf, a unicorn, et al. These objects are ubiquitous in our culture and they also signify but they are objects of fiction. We might even include, as part of that class of objects, fictional representations of real persons, such as depiction of Dr. Stephen Hawking, who certainly had real existence in our world, but who also portrayed a fictionalized version of himself on such television shows such as "The Simpsons" and "[The] Big Bang Theory." We are separating these "fictional" objects from "paradoxical objects" such as "the square circle" or "dry water" which by definition may not have empirical existence because they defat [defeat?] themselves, at least where we exist, by definition. We must also note, here, that any and all of these "fictional" non-existent objects may be represented by toy models and also other consumables and are, even at this moment, for sale. This kind of commerce would be impossible for "paradoxical objects."

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal in-
> stitutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to
> renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate,
> his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition;
> the superhero then recedes into obscurity.
>
>   JEWITT AND LAWRENCE, 1977

If everything returns to the status quo where the "community is restored" and
with the hero essentially disappearing, then so must the villain. These charac-
ters in commercial serial and episodic fiction do not age because they are part
of the status quo.[43, 44]

Characters who participate in stories which fall under American Monomyth
trope, including episodic fiction, do not age, specifically because they are all
simulacra and hyposigns. Each new representation of any of these commer-
cial characters is merely another simulacrum, which is a form that has been
created only to be consumed and points to itself as well as to whatever cul-
tural referents are needful at the moment and, when it is reified, it disappears
like a soap bubble. Any attempts to represent these characters as "real" ob-
jects or recover any type of "real" reality from them are futile because we are
then chasing simulacra. In Baudrillard's terms the Simulacra are "precessing
(Baudrillard, 1994)," that their connection to reality becomes more and more
tenuous and so they collapse into meaninglessness. Any such object, Minnie
Mouse, Bart Simpson or the Joker, are merely representation of objects which
represent other objects which are imaginary, so, as signs they point back to an

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43   Even in serial television, such as soap operas, characters, in general, do not age. The ex-
      ception would appear to be rare episodes of television shows or issues of comic books
      where characters are portrayed as having aged speculatively, but even then, by the time
      these specific narrative episodes end a stasis like status quo has been preserved. This is
      the reason why Bart Simpson, as a case in point, is still 10 years old even though The
      Simpsons debuted 31 years ago.
44   Serial fiction tells a single narrative or "story line or arc" which is not encapsulated in single
      episode, but is instead told over many episodes. Serials as narratives sometimes encom-
      pass an entire season of a television show and may, as in the case of soap operas, never
      actually come to a conclusion. "Episodic fiction" is narrative told in discrete episodes, what
      comic books call "one-shots." Occasionally stories may span more than one episode, such
      as the "Who Shot Mr. Burns" episodes of the Simpsons, but, in general, such a thing is rare
      in episodic fiction. For example, if the character Flash Gordon has himself appeared in
      a several serial and episodic movies and episodic television shows. These Flash Gordons
      representation of the "original" Flash Gordon, who is, himself, as above, a simulacrum.

"original" that also, by definition, also never existed. These objects only exist to be consumed, in anticipation of the next new version, which also exists only to be consumed.

Further, as noted above, these signs and their meaning are asymptotic in relation to each other. Any meaning or meanings which are ascribed to a hyposign, such as the Joker, and any new representations of these hyposigns are also asymptotic in relation to each other and to all other representations. Any plausible meanings or understandings that we might ascribe to these simulacra shifts from simulacrum to simulacrum in a form of "skipping," much like a rock skipping over the water, from discontinuous meaning to discontinuous meaning. This "skipping" is not inevitable because every version of the Joker does not lead, inevitably, to the next. Each one is completely discontinuous from the rest so that if we try and follow any one Joker to another in any form of logic, both of them disappear completely in a *reductio ad absurdum*. All the objects are imaginary and end up asymptotic to other asymptotes, imaginary objects with no real existence and with their meaning asymptotic to asymptotes to *ad infinitum*, similar to the chain of reflections in two mirrors. The caveat is that imagination, while "real" and also "true" have the same reality as "emotions" and "feelings."[45] Imaginary objects, just like feelings, do not of themselves signify and take their meaning from the context in which they exist and from both the meaning maker and the one reading that meaning.

These imaginary objects require a Peircean "representamen" or Saussurian "signifier." Otherwise we have free floating meaning in a Lacanian slippage of signifiers, which is to say that not only does the signifier slip but so does its meaning (Smucker, Boyd and Mitchell, n.d.), so that meaning itself is not tied to the signifier. These meanings require an actual object or picture or utterance of some sort, to carry their meaning. There is no sign of pure meaning which is not attached to some sort of signifier. Because any sign, including the Joker, cannot mean anything without signifying, he must be the signifier. This also means that in our case, these representations of the Joker which are presented to us today, ones which we are willing to accept to be "genuine," are all "similar" to the original simulacrum, in that they signify both the original object and themselves, and also that these all represent each other as representations of the Joker. These are all temporal indices in that point to a specific Joker at a specific time. These Jokers not only point at themselves synchronically, they

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45   We might differentiate from "discursive," versus presentation phenomena. For more on this see Susanne Langer's "Philosophy in a New Key (1957)."

also point backward temporally, as Peircean indexes[46] to an "original" Joker, who also never existed and who ultimately collapse into void.

We may, as a test of this idea, designate the very first Joker, the first simulation, the one which debuted in Batman issue #1 as "Joker Alpha." All later representations of this Joker are, in one sense, copies of this Joker, and therefore concatenate in a field of simulations of this original. Furthermore, we may propose that Joker Alpha is the first generation of Jokers so that all later Jokers, notwithstanding the generation, whether they are a copy, or a copy of copy, are by definition not "Joker Alpha" because they are representations of this original. Here, nomenclature breaks down because every Joker who is not Joker Alpha may not have been copied from Joker Alpha. We must highlight that it really does not matter what "generation" this newer Joker is as any generation that is not Alpha still points to Alpha. Also, as the generations continue, no Joker is "further" or "closer" a copy of Joker Alpha, it is merely representative of Joker Alpha. There is no Joker Beta, or Gamma, or Delta, there is only Joker Alpha and simulacra. All versions the Joker after 1940 are just "Beta" representations of this primary Joker "Alpha."

In the Peircean sense, then, secondary representations of the Joker serve both as Peircean indices to the Joker but are also iconic to the Joker and also symbolic of him. As a symbol, the Joker is so very recognizable as conventional cultural image that his likeness has been combined those of U. S. Presidents in "meme" form. The Joker is also a conventionalized representation and as such is both a symbolic sign and an index, which points reflexively as well as pointing at the media via which he is consumed. It is in these senses, we also must reiterate, that the Joker is an object and also objects possess no "real" or "objective" existence and that when such objects are reduced to their key components, we discover that these are devoid of any intrinsic value and, more importantly, they disappear into meaninglessness.

Like all signs, then, the sign of the "Joker," the Joker as a sign, is separate from its meaning, between language and speech, between what has been conceptualized and what is expressed, and this relationship between sign and signifier, the idea and the word, for Ferdinand de Saussure, is a purely arbitrary relationship (de Saussure, 1959). The Joker exists as an expressed sign, he is speech,

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46   We are using the nomenclature and typology of C. S. Peirce, the American Philosopher and founder of the American school of Semiotics. Peirce's typology of signs includes three major kinds of sign: an iconic sign which represents by resemblance (physical or otherwise), an indexical sign that represents by literally pointing to an object's existence (a finger pointing or a photograph) and a symbolic sign that represents by convention For a more detailed explanation of Peirce's semiotics, see Albert Atkins' wonderful article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Atkins, 2013).

and while this expressed Joker is a "hyposign," we may also suggest, here, that hyposigns, because they have no intrinsic meaning, are therefore useful psychologically, because each instance of these signs then represents completely blank signs. Each utterance then becomes its own virtual Rorschach, within which the interpreter invests meaning based on contextual clues. The meaning we invest in hyposigns come, not from the outside, but from the interaction of the sign, its context and our own psyches. Hyposigns have apparent intrinsic meaning, in these signs is created out of cultural units, as we have mentioned, which point elsewhere *ad infinitum* until they ultimately disappear. The meaning of these "hyposigns" is assigned, not because they have a meaning but because we want them to mean things. Hyposigns, aside from being indexical and iconic of themselves are also Peircean symbols. While an arbitrary Peircean symbol may be a hyposign, not all cases of symbols are also indexes, or iconic, in the Peircean sense. The fact that it is all three may be the sign of the hyposign.

Here is a case in point. These cultural objects, these comic book characters are embodied only in the sense that any corporation, for example Time Warner, is "incorporated." We have started to take the word "corporation," which was initially metaphoric, culturally, and to mistake it for the real thing. A corporation is not a "real" body but is instead a legal fiction which exists for convenience.[47] The term "corporation" was originally only supposed to be a metaphor to describe a group of people acting in unison, instead its meaning has been conflated with "incarnated," or "made into flesh." In this sense, we mistake hyposigns for the things they represent rather than as cognitive placeholders. This is the danger with looking for any "meaning" in the Joker beyond the obvious; we will only find more and more simulacra which lead ultimately to nothing.

5   The Comic Book as Ephemeral

To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the medium is not merely the message, the medium also forms a communication channel via which the message is transmitted and this channel shapes the form of the message. Also, because the

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47   This slippage of metaphor for an object, that is to say in this case a group of humans to form a single "corps" or body, to reification of that metaphor as object, in this case "corporation is a body," seems to be inevitable within human discourse, since as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have demonstrated, human cognition is linguistic and that this linguistic cognition is based on metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

medium is culturally based, it also pre-interprets both the message and, as we have demonstrated, the contents of that message (McLuhan, 1964). As information theorist Claude Shannon, clarifies and explains, any packet of information, as a series of bytes, demands that this interpretation, this breaking down the message into transmittable and receivable packets, is necessary in terms of the message's existence (Pierce 1980).[48] In the case of comic books, the original medium was cheap newsprint paper, offset print with cheap ink, in large production sold all over North America. From the reader's point of view, the units into which we may subdivide comic books is, individual issues, stories, pages, panels on the page and then the dots of ink and the cheap paper. This phenomenon was noted by film director Michelangelo Antonioni in the movie *Blowup* (1966), instead using photographic paper and emulsion.

The medium that carries the ink, newsprint paper, deteriorates quite rapidly when exposed to air, it is "inherently unstable (Ritzenthaler, 1990)," because of its high acid content, so that unless measures are taken to preserve these comic books, they self-destruct over time. The pages become brittle and finally lose integrity. Comic books were a form of inexpensive entertainment, and were made with cheap materials, which were not meant to be collected. Their cheapness meant that they could be purchased by those who were by no means rich, which is important, because North America was recovering, slowly, from the Great Depression. Comic books were a poor person's entertainment, made for the lower and middle lower classes, and this context further shapes how we understand the medium. As a corollary to the previous sections, then, the Joker as an imaginary object and as hyposign only signifies in terms of how he, as an object is produced, how that object is disseminated and how it is subsequently consumed. As we examine the manner in which comic book production has changed, we will also begin to understand how the Joker's meaning has changed. The medium is indeed the message so based on the means which he was and is produced disseminated and consumed, so we comprehend the changes in the Joker.

A printing industry blog notes that comic books were printed using a four-color process[49] on newsprint and that this happened "until the 1970s (Waxman, 2012)." This changed, briefly, to Baxter Paper,[50] which was really too expensive, for the producers, and too difficult to use long term. Today the industry

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48   For an excellent introduction to information theory see John R. Pierce's excellent book, *An Introduction to Information Theory: Symbols, Signal and Noise.*

49   This kind of printing is also known as CMYK.

50   The first recorded use of "Baxter paper" was a Marvel Comics issue, cover dated February 1982 (Wolk, 2015).

standard is "40 to 50 weight paper (Waxman, 2012)." Comic books were no longer regarded as ephemera and their value had transitioned from items that were destined to deteriorate into trash into items which were now culturally worthy to collect. The character of the Joker himself then, instead as being regarded as an item of trash, also transitioned into a collectible item. This means that even if the Joker is a simulacrum of a simulacrum, even if he is a hyposign, that he has a fiduciary value, even though, technically, he does not exist. Changes in the method via which the Joker was consumed, actually indicated that his value changed, and we may pin-point this change to the mid-1980s.

However, we still do not really have a historical sense of the sociological framework that gave birth to the "North American Comic Book." While sequential graphics and narrative art may have existed elsewhere at other times and places (McCloud, 1993) and while cinematography, at that time, was also ubiquitous worldwide, we need to understand that the "North American Comic Book" is, unto itself, a specific cultural phenomenon. It is indeed a form of sequential art, but it is one that that reached its first prominence in a specific socio-geographical and chronological context. Today we must also acknowledge that these contexts have shifted away from the very specific North American market place to a global market, giving rise to such animated films as *Batman Ninja* (2018),[51] we must acknowledge that these characters were formed in a specific socio-cultural petri-dish.

Before we continue, we must address the question of the comic book as a specific form of "sequential art" or "narrative art." While it is plausible to read other forms of sequential graphic and narrative art such as Egyptian Hieroglyphs or Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus as "narrative art," these are not comic books and while they may be related, they themselves are not relevant to a discussion of the "North American Comic Book," except as an illustration that many human cultures may depict narrative in a graphical manner. We must limit ourselves to a very specific species of narrative sequential art the "North American Comic Book."

We do need to then delineate what we mean by the "North American Comic Book." Please excuse the following run-on sentence, but it encapsulates a good, specific working definition of the "North American Comic Book" for us to use, going forward. "The North American Comic Book" is a genre of periodical

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51   *Batman Ninja* or "*Ninja Battoman*" is unique since there are two completely different versions. One version was released in Japan and was written by Kuzuki Nakashima, while the American version, which was released digitally, was written by Leo Chu and Eric S. Garcia, essentially making it two different movies using the same "footage (IMDB, 2018)". This treatment is reminiscent of the fate of other Japanese Anime such as *Sailor Moon* and *Battle of the Planets*.

literature which was originally mass produced on cheap newsprint paper, with cheap ink and in lurid colors, which were intended to be consumed specifically in the United States and in Canada, during the Great Depression, and while the narratives these periodicals depicted consisted of sequential art that was made up of words and images set in squares, rectangles and "word or thought balloons"[52] that were also set in sequential lines going from left to right and from top to bottom, on sequential pages, that these periodicals also contained very simple narrative story lines consisting of stories of heroes and heroines or the fantastical and who may have dressed colorfully, who performed various exceptional deeds that the average person was not able, specifically because these characters were sometimes and somehow endowed with special abilities, and these periodicals were called "comic books" and were sold cheaply, for profit, and, moreover, that the narratives that these "comic books" depicted were not originally meant to edify or to educate but to simply to amuse or to entertain the consumer. Essentially, as an end object, comic books were cheap entertainment ultimately intended to become trash, with the consumer target as the ostensible target but really a midway conveyance. The consumer's purpose was passive, to be entertained and to discard the previous versions so as to create a market for more comic books, and this is a substrate into which the Joker was born.

We want to be sure that we are properly excluding other genres of periodicals that existed at the time. Also, we must clarify that we also mean to include the direct historical descendants of that genre, as characterized by a shared and common history of publishing houses and narrative characters. This definition of "North American Comic Book" of necessity, specifically excludes the infamous "pulp magazines" such as "True Confessions" and "True Detective," it excludes "horror magazines," "science fiction magazines," Pro-Wrestling magazines, "dime novels"[53] and even periodical magazines such as Mad and Cracked. This division is completely artificial but is also historically important because of all the above genres, only "comic books" later faced accusations that they were a menace[54] and in fact, it was specific these accusations which gave birth to Mad Magazine. The real issue here is that while some of these publications used lurid photographs and illustrations, most of these other forms of

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52   Word balloons and thought balloons are depictions of speech and thought which are, conventionally in comic books, conventionally shown rising above the speaker or thinker, hence the metaphor "balloon."

53   The term "Dime novels" refers to sensationalist, cheaply printed, usually paperback melodrama and western themed novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013).

54   See below.

ephemera did and do not consist of sequential art to aid the narrative but instead used static illustrations or photos to bolster the narrative. While Mad and Cracked magazines did use sequential art to tell narratives, neither of these two suffered from the same moral fury and restrictions which later affected comic books.[55]

Comic books, specifically the ones we are talking about evolved to entertain the many. While Europe was already fighting World War II, the USA had not and would not enter the war until 1941. The economy in the USA had not yet recovered from the economic depression and what did fill the air waves and the newspapers was news about the war in Europe and, importantly, stories of spies and of gangsters, such as Charles Luciano and Meyer Lansky. This cultural petri-dish spawned the superhero, one who could fight the corruption and injustice which seemed to be so prevalent. After 1941 when the USA entered the war, superheroes fought against the Nazis and the Japanese, who were both sometimes depicted in horribly racist fashion.[56] Super Villains, such as the Joker took a backseat to real life Axis characters such as Hitler, Mussolini and Hideki Tojo, Prime Minister of Japan. Comic books, aside from being cheap entertainment, were also cheap morale boosters and pro-American propaganda, used to counteract such propagandists as William Joyce, also known as Lord Haw Haw, Margaret Gellars, known as Berlin Betty, and a group of Japanese women who broadcast propaganda in English, collectively called "Tokyo Rose." The Joker, Two Face, Dr. Hugo Strange and the Cat Woman all remained dormant in this period. Interestingly, though, despite their supposed "evil," these villains did not collaborate with the enemies of America. Throughout this period, comic books remained a cheap and disposable form of entertainment.

Comic books, in their earliest incarnations, were created specifically to be consumed and then to be discarded. The consumer, although ostensibly the final user, was the middleman between the publisher and trash. Today, such refuse as Batman #1, might be worth millions of dollars. At the time, we must underline that there was no pretention to creating art; the intention was to sell as many magazines and comic books as cheaply as possible, which in turn

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55   Oddly, our definition of comic books does include such curiosities as the "Chick tract," a controversial form of evangelical and didactic religious Christian tract, which was originally produced by Jack Chick and his eponymously named publishing house, and which are still being produced. For more on the Chick Tract see "Chick Tracts, Monstrosity, and Pornography (Ulanowicz, 2015)".

56   Donald Duck fought Adolph Hitler himself in *Der Fuhrer's Face* (1943), which was originally entitled, *Donald Duck in Nutsi Land.* Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd raised money for war bonds in *Any Bonds Today* (1942), which also features a racist and "black face" Bugs Bunny doing an Al Jolson impression.

allowed the publishers to sell advertising, and it was this advertising from which the publication made money. The end product which was then intended to be discarded so as to create more room for more comic books and more advertising. There was never an intention that these books and magazine were to be saved and to be read later that month, much less eighty years later. The intention was to entertain and to create an appetite for entertainment in the form of more cheap fiction which would again be discarded and create more appetites for more cheap fiction. A contributing factor to the accidental value of comic books may have been the fact that, because it was the Great Depression, that one did not merely dispose of objects, even if they were meant to be ephemeral so that accidentally, a genre of entertainment, which was originally intended to be disposed of once it had been consumed was created, and that early examples of this genre still exist for us to comment on today. History shows us, that consumers read and reread these comic books, traded them, and resold them. This transition from *ephemera* to artwork took place through the 1960s; comic books began to enter the mainstream as *objets d'art* and reflecting the culture in which they existed. Comic book influences were obvious on the "fine" art of "serious" artists such as James Rosenquist, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein[57] and of Andy Warhol all of whose careers were completely dependent on the fact that these mundane and, up to that time, "non-art" comic books existed as a popular genre which they then exploited[58] in fine art forms. Mass produced objects that had once been doomed to garbage had now become a prized and even enjoyed as "fine" art, which, ironically, were also mass produced.

Since the comic book is no longer physically produced as it once was, it is important that we understand the Joker from pencil to printer. In the early years of the comic book, the story writer wrote a comic book script, usually in conjunction with the editor. Oftentimes, the script would provide a panel by panel and page by page description of the story, including action and dialogue. This script would then be handed to an artist, also called a "penciller" who, together with editor and the writer, would interpret this script into hand "penciled" outlines. These outlines would need to be traced by an "inker," which is to say that these outlines were manually traced with black India ink. The interiors of these inked drawings were then filled in by a "colorist" and this step would be followed by the "letterer" who hand lettered the final product,

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57   Roy Lichtenstein is controversial in that he "borrowed" many comic book images for his art without attribution to the original artists. David Barsalou has worked to ensure that at the very least the original artists got credit and Barsalou's work can be viewed at http://davidbarsalou.homestead.com/LICHTENSTEINPROJECT.html.

58   We mean "exploited" in both senses, in that these artists both "made full use of" but also "benefitted, perhaps unfairly" from the work of others, specifically in Lichtenstein's work.

including dialogue and sound effects.[59] Comic book production was a labor-intensive process involving, a minimum of five people, and, any mistakes, especially in the later stages, were extremely costly. This process contrasts with today, where all of these jobs may be done by a single person sitting at a computer with an electronic drawing tablet[60] hundreds of miles away from the production office and the printing press. Anyone may download software and templates and read how-to manuals, and even publish their own comic book online. Modern comic books are no longer printed on newsprint and the inks are themselves much higher quality, with the downside that the costs have also risen. A comic book used to retail for five cents in the 1940's. Today a special edition graphic novel may retail in the hundreds of dollars.[61] What this means is that over time, because of demand and because of the realization that comic books were meant to be collectible by the consumer, the producers of these comic books changed the product; there was an acknowledgement that comic books were meant to last and that comics books themselves were understood by their producers to have value.

This is why it is important to also understand the value of intellectual property in this mix. The Joker, as the Joker may only be produced in comic books by those who own that image. Recently, Devil's Due comics depicted Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez as Wonder Woman and DC Comics filed a cease and desist letter. Even the name of a character or a comic book title, can be the cause for lawsuits as in the curious case of Captain Marvel and SHAZAM! (McMillan, 2019). Corporations are extremely careful about their property and these characters are as much property as desks and other furniture, perhaps more, because desks can be replaced.

Our suggestion, earlier, that early Joker lacks any intrinsic value is based on the idea of plenty and also on the cheap comic books which were originally created to be consumed and then discarded. As we commodify the Joker, we also need then to understand this value is based not merely on the dyadic relationship between medium and message, but that value, as we discuss it, is a triadic and reciprocal relationship, not just between the medium and the message, but also includes the consumer (Peirce, 1866). The consumer of the message as part of this triad is essential to form the meaning of the message, as well

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59   The font "Comic Sans" gets its name because it resembles the hand lettering of older comic books.

60   For more on how comic book production has changed please see Glen Norcliffe and Olivero Rendace's article New Geographies of Comic Book Production in North America: The New Artisan, Distancing, and the Periodic Social Economy (2003).

61   Five cents in 1940 would purchase almost the same amount as a dollar in 2019 which is an inflation rate of over 2000%.

as its value, so, the medium, which is consumed as part of the message itself, is also consumed and also signifies; the message is shaped by both its medium and the consumer in a triangular semiotic relationship with each corner of the triangle affecting the shape of the sign which is being consumed. Accordingly, without a consumer to consume the sign, there may well be a message, but the sign is intrinsically meaningless.[62] If there is no medium via which to consume the message, then the message itself might be called an orphan, in the sense that a message may well exist but that it is not in any sense available to be consumed; there is no path via which the consumer may receive a message and so interpret its meaning and thus to apprehend it. To bring this back to comic books, any comic book in which the Joker appears is, in itself a consumable, is both the medium via which meaning is consumed, but which also may have an intrinsic meaning unto itself as a consumable object. The comic book itself also signifies, in a sociological, economic and historical context. It is in understanding this juxtaposition of media and messages in terms of their historical contexts, where medium, message and consumer meet and interplay, that our hypothetical consumer may consume a hypothetical message via a hypothetical medium within a cultural medium. We need to place the Joker in a specific spaces and times to see how changes in the mores and the world the shaped comic books also shaped the Joker.

6   Ages of the Joker

We understand that the Joker is an imaginary construct, however, we must also understand that this construct, despite issues of retconning and canonicity, also has a very real history in our universe. The Joker, despite being a fiction, was "created" in 1940. Any objective history of our world into which the Joker has been placed is based, partially, in the fantastical narratives which come from the pages of comic books, and, but importantly, the Joker is also based in an objective "real" world where real comic books and real movies are consumed by real people who pay real money for that privilege. As we have also noted, the Joker changes, and these changes are based in real world events, so that the era in which the Joker is consumed is as important in many ways as the era in which his stories were written. We must therefore be cognizant of the

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62   One might well pose the Buddhist riddle, if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one to hear it, does it make a sound? According to Peircean semiotics, it may well make a sound, but the event of "tree falling" does not signify without a recipient to apprehend the sign in some manner.

various historical phases, or "Ages" of comic books. While much has been written about comic book ages and their delineations,[63] comic book fans were the initiators of this idea and they, originally, were the ones who delineated various time periods of comic book production into a "Golden," "Silver," "Bronze" and "Modern age."[64] These "Ages" also reflect cultural changes. We will, of necessity, also address some questions of comic book historiography, because, while it is uncontested that the Joker first appeared in the, so-called, "Golden Age" of comic books in 1940, we do need to note that comic book historiography, is, in itself, a contested issue. There have been suggestions that current popular nomenclature has its faults (Woo, 2008) and also counterarguments that current nomenclature has its merits (Lewis, 2003). We are trying to understand comic books as they are understood by the consumers of those books and, at the same time, to understand and to respect established scholarly opinion. Really then, we may view the Joker and historicity of comic books *sui generis* and in relation to itself and to the world. Therefore, for clarity sake, unless absolutely essential, we will follow the most common nomenclature for the various comic book "ages" which are the "Golden Age (c. 1938–1945)," the "Silver Age (c. 1958–1968)," the "Bronze Age (c. 19769–1985)" and the "Modern Age (c. 1985 to the present)." The gap of thirteen years, in between the Golden and Silver ages, is often known as the "Interregnum" and will be explained later in this section. Most scholars agree on this delineation, to a greater or lesser extent, so that we will continue our study of the Joker with the understanding that none of these dates are exact, but are there to provide a guide to understanding.

The "Golden Age" of comic books, c. 1938–1945 (Quatro, 2004), was the age of creation, the creation of Superman and Batman and also of the Joker. This was the era of primary innovation and, if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then this was also that age of flattery. As one example, the Comic Book Resource web site has a list of over 50 comic book characters, who were created and, while supposedly "original" are also, arguably, imitations of the Golden Age Superman (Johansson, 2014). While physically odd and having an odd *modus operando*, the characterization of the Joker of this era was not an innovation he was merely a "typical gangster (Peaslee and Weiner, 2015)." What was fantastical was his *modus operandi*: So, while the Joker announced

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63   For more on this topic see (Getz 2018), (Mills, 2014), (Ndalianis, 2009) and (Schell, 2017). While all of these agree that there was Golden and Silver Age, Mills plays with accepted chronology to feature the work of Stan Lee and Schell loses us after the Silver Age. Still, the chronology of a Golden, Silver, Bronze and Modern Ages are those most accepted and understood by those who read and collect comic books.

64   Some fans also delineate platinum, copper, atomic and other ages but there is no real agreement on these delineations.

his intention to murder someone, he would not use a gun or strangle them, but he would use his "Joker venom."[65] There was no demand for "art," so the Joker's existence made little logical sense. The Joker was merely a "villain" which in turn served as excuses for Batman to "be heroic." Unlike modern comic books, there was no need to establish reasons for behavior; plots were simplistic and good guys were merely good, bad guys were merely bad. The Joker murdered only to drive the plot, whereby Batman could solve the crime. This lack of a fleshed-out characterization or plotline was typical for comic books of this era. The Golden Age Joker was a unidimensional puppet with an odd look and an odd manner of killing.

The next age is the aforementioned, so-called, "Interregnum" which was constituted by a cultural backlash against the popularity of comic books. Culturally, there was general prosperity in post-World War USA, and this meant that entertainment need no longer be "cheap." Seemingly of his own impetus, psychiatrist Frederic Wertham attacked comic books using the now ubiquitous radio as well as newspaper columns and a best selling book entitled *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), stating that there was a link between comic book violence and childhood psychological problems.[66] Jeet Heer explains that "In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Wertham was the intellectual spearhead of the anti-comics crusade, arguing in many articles and his 1954 best-seller, *Seduction of the Innocent*, that "comic books stultified the imagination of normal kids (giving them a taste for blood and gore that would prevent them from ever appreciating literature and fine art) and severely damaged the socially vulnerable, contributing to juvenile delinquency (Heer, 2008)." While, today, these accusations appear absurd and laughable, members of American believed Wertham and the topic was treated so seriously that that the publisher and owner of EC Comics, William M. Gaines, was called to testify before congress, "much like a Mob boss (Heer, 2008)." In a sense, the Joker was on trial, not for any crime he had committed, but for existing at all. Comic book publishers, fearing legislation that would define what they could and could not publish "voluntarily" adopted a code of acceptable behaviour in 1954 (History Matter, 2018) which included prohibitions against violence, sexual imagery

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65   According to Detective Comics #880, the Joker has over 50 different kinds and types of "venom" and so any inconsistencies in their various effects may attributed to this fact (Snyder, 2011).

66   Professor Carol Tilley, having recently examined Wertham's papers concluded that Wertham "manipulated, overstated, compromised and fabricated evidence," in the interviews that he conducted and that therefore his conclusions were probably false (Tilley, 2012).

and denigrating depictions of race.[67] The ramifications of this new code were so extremely serious that, to quote one of the "cartoonists" for Mad Comics, Spain Rodriguez, "I was shocked when EC's [comics] were effectively banned (Reidelbach, 1992)."[68] To further contextualize these accusations, the writers of Batman and Robin we accused of glorifying a homosexual, or, at the very least, a homoerotic relationship, Wonder Woman was accused of lesbianism. It was even suggested that the "S" symbol on Superman's chest could stand for the Nazi storm trooper sign of "SS (Heer, 2008)."[69]

While superhero comics existed during the Interregnum, they were just not innovative. As this gap was starting, Bill Finger did give us an origin story for the Joker (Detective Comics #168, 1951). We must note that this story was published just prior to the launch of the code. After the comics code was adopted, there was no room for a "conventional hoodlum" with a bizarre visage and frightening method of murder, so the Joker, amongst other characters lay dormant waiting for some kind of revival.

While the "Silver Age" is commonly dated 1958 to 1968 (Quatro 2004),[70] Anthony Mills attempted to create a new schema based around the launch of Stan Lee's "Marvel Comics" publications in 1961 (Mills, 2014). Mills' work

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67   A side effect of this prohibition on denigrating depictions of race is that it caused almost all characters in comic books to be depicted as Caucasian, because artists and writers were afraid and went overboard to avoid problematic depictions of races other than Caucasian. Further study on this particular area is beyond the scope of this work.

68   EC was known for "Horror" comics, including *Tales From the Crypt* and *Tales Calculated to Drive You Mad,* also known as "Mad" Mad Comics transformed themselves into a humor and parody magazine, the now ubiquitous Mad Magazine, which, coincidentally, is now owned by Time Warner, that same company that owns DC Comics, the home of the Joker.

69   At this point in history, even a hint of homosexuality or of homoeroticism in public was considered to be absolutely morally repugnant (and was also considered to be, at the very best, to be signs of mental illness and at worst of complete moral decrepitude). To balance these accusations, DC launched the characters Batwoman and Batgirl to balance Batman and Robin with plausibly heteronormative relationships and also gave Wonder Woman a man. We should also that while the Nazi SS formed in 1925, the idea of Superman as a Nazi icon is extremely far-fetched notion since he was created by Jerry Siegal and Joe Schuster, two young Jewish men, in 1938.

70   While others have suggested other dating schemas, we will follow Quatro's chronology, first because it is the most common usage and we want other to understand the nomenclature and second because, while some might argue otherwise, there is no good reason to change this schema. In an article on this very problem, popular comic books writer, Ken Quatro states: According to fanzine historian Bill Schelly, the first use of the words "golden age" pertaining to the comics of the 1940s was by Richard A. Lupoff in an article called "Re-Birth" in COMIC ART #1 (April 1960). The delineations of the Silver Age are less sharp, but the term itself came into common usage sometime later, around 1965–66. To relabel these periods now would cause unnecessary confusion (Quatro, 2004).

ignores the very real innovations DC Comics continued to make in comic books. Critic Peter Sanderson suggests that, rather than privilege Marvel over DC or vice versa that perhaps the relationship between the two was more comparable to the contemporary films of the "major movie studios" versus films of the "French wave (Sanderson, 2003)." While both publishers consistently produced comic books, the essential difference between the two was that of style and of focus, rather than any sort of privilege (Sanderson, 2003). Both DC and Marvel, as ostensible competitors, both contributed greatly and it was in this atmosphere that the Joker was revived.

At DC Comics, editor Julius Schwartz "reinvigorated the superhero comic book genre (The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2004)" by remaking such heroes as Superman, Batman, Green Lantern and The Flash, by transforming their Golden Age incarnations into true Silver age heroes and villains. Publishers, writers and editors created new origin stories and "retconned" and "rebooted" characters and histories to suit the times and markets.[71] The Golden Age's Green Lantern, Alan Scott found a "magic ring" in the 1940's while late 1950's Hal Jordan, was a more "modern" Green Lantern, whose ring had an extra-terrestrial origin and whose costume reflected a more "Atomic Age" ethos. Batman and the Joker were also both "modernized." Rather than changing them, they were just displaced temporally and suddenly became contemporary.

While not strictly apropos to the Joker, we must note that toward the end of the "Silver Age," comic books started to depict more mature themes. "Underground comics," also known as "alternative comics," were published by small presses and because these were not subject to the comic book code, they were known for depictions of sexuality and drug use, and their content was often satirical and ribald in nature. As examples, "The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers" by Gilbert Shelton, and Robert Crumb's "Fritz the Cat" and "Mr. Natural" depicted sexuality, violence and recreational drug use.[72] The popularity of these underground comics, allowed mainstream comic books, to loosen their own editorial strictures, so, while mainstream comics were still technically published under that comics' code, they began to reflect more modern and mature themes. DC's story line *Snowbirds Don't Fly* (1971) shows Green Arrow's sidekick Speedy as a heroin addict, and Marvel Comics' Harry Osborne,

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71   Let us not forget that above all, that these comic book characters are all consumer goods to be created and then sold for profit.

72   Ralph Bakshi's animated movie "Fritz the Cat (1972)," based on Robert Crumb's comic book, was notorious for being the first ever animated film to receive an X rating.

the Green Goblin, is shown to abuse prescription pills (Lee, 1971).[73, 74] On the other hand, comic books still shied away from depictions of extreme violence.

The Silver Age also was responsible for the "Batman (1966–68)" television series and the "Batman (1966)" movie both starring Adam West as Batman and Burt Ward as Robin. One of the recurring villains on the show was a flamboyantly theatrical Joker portrayed by closeted queer actor, Caesar Romero.[75] While the style of the TV show and of the movie was extremely lurid, garish and deeply sentimental, it was, some critics said, for those very reasons that the TV show was also so successful. To quote the LA Times:

> Critically, Batman is kicks, even though the intellectuals will call it "in" and "camp (a device which allows them to lower themselves to enjoy it)" and the kids will love it like when you and I were young, Annie.
> PAGE, 1966

Romero's Joker was in step with the show; while it could be read as hyperbolic, television's Joker, depicted by Romero, was outrageously and ostentatiously "out there." This, in a sense was a theme of the entire Silver Age where mainstream comic books, despite innovating characters, portrayed sentimental and hackneyed tropes that were replayed with a bit of a more of a modern twist. The innovations of the Silver Age were in many ways merely cosmetic; they re-affirmed the status quo. While underground comic books could be in favour of recreational chemicals and unabashed sexuality, the mainstream comic books were still careful to ensure that we knew that drugs were harmful and that sexuality was for marriage. The Silver Age's Joker was a figure of flamboyance and fun, and he was missing the palpable menace he had personified during the Golden Age.

The Bronze Age is notable for the appearance of the eponymously named comic book series *The Joker* (Maggin, O'Neill and Pasko, 1975–6). This series

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73   Stan Lee purportedly got around the Comic Book Code guidelines by tacitly removing the seal of approval for the one or two issues where drug use was depicted and then re-adding it to subsequent issues.

74   The comic book code was also changing and was revised in 1971. Instead of not depicting drug addiction at all it was changed to only "depicting drug addiction as a vicious habit (Comics Code Revision, 1971)."

75   Steve Star states of Caesar Romero that "Famous, also, as a "confirmed bachelor," the "Latin from Manhattan" was Hollywood's most professional and popular escort" although later in the same paragraph Star admits this was a ruse because "It was well known in Hollywood that the likable Cesar (sic) was gay, and it was well assumed that after he dropped off his beautiful date, he would end up in the arms of a current male lover (Star, 2006)."

was the first one ever dedicated specifically to a comic book villain. It was published during the period of compliance with the comic book code, however, so an editorial decision was made that the Joker's "insanity" would be toned down and that he would have to be jailed at the end of every story (Stewart, 2009). Story plots were fueled by the conceit that somehow the Joker was able to escape prison, almost at whim and that, somehow, he turned his personal prison cell into a hideout called the "Haha-cienda." It was there that the Joker would be reincarcerated at the end of each story (Stewart, 2009). While "The Joker" comic book only lasted nine issues, its very existence was a sign the DC Comics understood that the Joker was a property that could somehow be exploited. Perhaps it was cultural *mores* which constrained them at the time, DC Comics seemed unable to use the Joker, as a cultural, consumable object, to his full effectiveness and this non canonical *The Joker* ended.

Coincidentally, the Bronze age started the same year that Warner Brothers purchased the parent company that owned DC Comics however, it is not a coincidence that it ended with the publication of Marv Wolfman and George Perez's series *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985–86). This series completely changed the landscape of comic books. In 12 comic book issues, Wolfman and Perez completely destroyed the old continuity of the entire DC universe. Shockingly, some heroes died. Just as shocking in some ways was Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).[76] In this "non-canonical" or "alternative" history, the 55-year-old retired Batman, returns to fighting crime. The success of Miller's apocalyptic storyline demonstrated that stand-alone, non-canonical series could be both well done artistically and, at least as importantly, that they could be extremely profitable.

Other innovations of the Bronze Age were similarly disruptive. Women heroes and characters of color started to be introduced as more than mere caricatures or plot devices. All characters started to obtain more dimensions and fullness so that heroes could be seen to have weaknesses. Plot lines and narratives in general started to become fuller and more complex.

Crisis on Infinite Earths and *The Dark Knight Returns* were the transitions between the Bronze age and the modern age. In the Modern Age, heroes were now mortal and not all stories were canonical. Just past this transition, in 1988, the Joker finally managed to kill a member of the "Batman family." *A Death in the Family* (1988) culminated in the death of Robin, Jason Todd, at the hand of the Joker.[77] The importance of Robin's death cannot be overstated. We may have called the Joker homicidal, now he had killed Robin. As important as

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76   Not to be confused with Christopher Nolan's movie *The Dark Knight* (2008).
77   Jason Todd was later resurrected aa have been Supergirl and The Flash.

Robin's violent death is to understanding how the cultural ethos changed, it is equally crucial to include Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's misogynistic depiction of the Joker in *The Killing Joke* (1988). Moore's story itself is controversial and is also extremely gruesome in its lurid depictions of violence against women. Moore has the Joker shoot Barbara Gordon,[78] in cold blood, through the abdomen and spine, crippling her. The Joker then photographs himself molesting her body. Having witnessed his daughter being shot, her father Police Commissioner Gordon, is kidnapped by the Joker's henchmen, who strip him naked, humiliate and torture him and then show him the photographs of the Joker's assault on her body, in an attempt to render him insane. The Joker's rationale is that, "I want to prove a point (Moore and Bolland, 1988)" the point being that all it takes to drive someone mentally ill is one bad day. Gordon is rescued by Batman and, in a very real sense, Gordon is the hero of this narrative. He retains his sanity and his humanity, despite the extreme provocation. At the same time, in a concurrent story line, the Joker is depicted as an anonymous failed stand-up comedian who turns to crime to raise money for his wife and unborn child. When his wife is killed in an electrical accident, this unnamed comedian tries to renege, is forced to continue with the crime and after fleeing Batman, who has interrupted the crime, falls into a vat of chemicals bleaching his skin, dying his hair green and his lips bright scarlet. These continued traumas ostensibly force this comedian to lose his mind and turn into the brilliant Joker, thus depicting the Joker's bad day. The story's *dénouement* is a confrontation between Batman and the Joker where we realize that neither of the two is particularly sane, that both of them have historically had, as the Joker notes, traumas, ones that formed them (Moore and Bolland, 1988).

While Alan Moore claims that he never intended the Joker in *The Killing Joke* to be canonical, many elements of the narrative rely on canon and did become canon. Moore relies heavily on canon, specifically on *The Man Behind the Red Hood*, moreover, he does not seem to have informed DC about the fact that the story was supposed to be non-canonical, as the maiming of Batgirl was taken into canon. While critical reception was hugely positive[79] is important that we understand later critical reaction to Moore's story. As Sharon Packer writes "Anyone who feels that feminist critics overreacted to the [Barbara Gordon's] accident is advised to consult the source material ... Moore's 'The Killing Joke' is sadistic to the core. It shows [Barbara] Gordon stripped and mutilated, with before, during, and after photos of the attack displayed before her

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78   We, the reader, also know that Barbara Gordon is, or was at the time, the heroine Batgirl.
79   Alan Moore and Brian Bolland won the Will Eisner Comic Industry Award for writing and illustration, respectively. The award is the comic book industry's highest accolade.

bound and gagged father, the police commissioner. She is more than merely disabled (robgrontowskisbusdriver, 2016)." We must also note that if the story was non-canonical, that Moore intended this violently misogynistic violence merely to drive the plot of a graphic novel. But, while Len Wein, the editor, and Jenette Kahn, DC's publisher, allowed the violence, as requested by Moore, we must also note that that this was not a causal concession. Crucially, Wein and Kahn ensured that if Barbara Gordon was to be harmed, permanently, that she not be abandoned, and Barbara Gordon's presence continued in DC comics as a disabled superhero named Oracle. Despite Moore's intention to abandon this defiled and disabled woman character and his insistence that "The Killing Joke" was a stand-alone story, Barbara Gordon was Oracle, a strong and powerful disabled woman, a wheelchair driving hero. Later, when she walked again, it was Barbara Gordon, in the guise of Batgirl, who hit the Joker,[80] and she hit him hard.

Still, *The Killing Joke* was transformative of the Joker, This version of the Joker continued to be referenced in DC properties, such as in stories like *Cacophony* (Smith, 2008–9), *The Man Who Laughs* (Brubaker and Manke, 2005), *Death of the Family* (Snyder, Glass, Higgins et al. 2012) where Barbara Gordon references her PTSD and also, as mentioned above, hits the Joker. Elsewhere, *The Killing Joke* is referenced homage in Tim Burton's movie *Batman* (2006), in numerous video games from the "*Arkham*" series, in "*Injustice—Gods Amongst Us* (both a video game and a graphic novel prequel)" and in a slightly different form in the animated movie "*The Killing Joke* (2016)" which was adapted from the graphic novel. T-shirts, showing the Joker losing his sanity, continue to be sold.[81] According to writer and director Christopher Nolan, *The Killing Joke* led to the vision of the Joker as represented in his movie *The Dark Knight* (2008). Merely because Moore decided that his story was non-canonical, *ex post facto*, and even though he now refuses to discuss his career at DC at all (Wilbur, 2016), despite this petulance, Barbara Gordon was still crippled by the Joker, and she remained crippled by the Joker.

At writing, both officially canonical and officially non-canonical continuities exist at the same time and both contain the Joker. There are "canonical" storylines where we find *The Batman Who Laughs*, a Batman variant from another

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80   In *Death of the Family* (2012).

81   See https://www.amazon.com/Comics-Killing-Joker-Hands-T-Shirt/dp/B07BL37GJS/ref =sr_1_9?ie=UTF8&qid=1537028167&sr=8-9&keywords=joker+t+shirt retrieved on September 15, 2018 at 12:17 EDT. We must note that these are the authorized uses of the Joker's countenance and that we must presume that there are at least as many unauthorized uses, as well.

universe who, poisoned with Joker Venom, killed the Joker and has taken on aspects of the Joker. On the other hand, we have the "non-canonical" "White Knight" series, where the Joker goes "sane" and prosecutes a "psychopathically" destructive Batman. The television show Gotham teased yet another variant Joker, and a non-canonical movie is being released in the last autumn. Above all, however, the Joker is an imaginary object and this object is, strictly, a product to be marketed. It makes sense then by curbing the uses of the Joker, that apparent "scarcity" adds to the Joker's value as an object.[82] The fact, as noted, that the Joker's image is restricted at all, is further evidence that the Joker is not a "character" in the traditional sense, but is absolutely a commodity; the property "the Joker" is based in the image so that there are commercial restrictions to using that image as an owned intellectual property.[83] The irony is, of course that the Joker is so well known, and his image has become so conventionalized that "fair use" means that the image may appear in cat memes on the internet.[84] This fame and popularity form a slippery legal slope where too much popularity can lead to loss of ownership, so DC is sure to assert control, just to maintain ownership of the Joker, as an asset. This issue arises when the Joker's image is used in memes, to signify certain kinds of mental illness.

7 The Joker on the Couch[85]

To quote Batman, "Normal criminals usually have logical motives but the Joker's insane schemes make sense to him alone (Dini, 1993)." However, while he spends time in "Arkham Asylum," and, while he is called "mad," "insane," "psychotic," and "crazy," we have yet to determine if the Joker is truly mentally ill in any medical sense. Were we to bring the Joker to our local psychiatric facility, we are curious what diagnosis a professional might give the Joker? Using

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82   Earlier, in the series, "Gotham" actor Cameron Monahan who plays the Joker tweeted that, "Pure green [hair] was off-limits to us (as well as the name "Joker"), a decision from high-up as they wanted to reserve these for films. A decision which ultimately I respect. They did not want to dilute the very lucrative brand (Monahan,2018, May 12)." The Monahan character, Jerome, was only revealed as the Joker climax and denouement of the entire series "Gotham."

83   Some comic book characters, such as the Norse God, Thor, exist in the public domain. This is why any movie or comic book may use Thor as a character at any time, while they are restricted from using the Joker.

84   A simple Google search of Joker + Cat + Meme yields thousands of results.

85   An earlier version of this chapter was published under the title "Joker on the Couch: A Case Study." Copyright 2018. ICI Global, Used by permission.

tools at our disposal, and with the caveat that we are not diagnosticians, is it even possible to diagnose the Joker?

We conflate the terms "evil," "mad," "psychopath," "sociopath," and "insane," and use these as descriptions of the Joker, so, we also must understand that we are conflating terms of morality with terms of mental health. Ideally, in our culture, we try to people by their actions and not to judge them by their thoughts and inclinations, so, we hope that officers in courts of law judge the defendants solely by their actions, as well. In an idealized world, we try to punish those guilty of crimes only after due process of the law, based only on their actions, not on probabilities they might have committed a crime. We try not to punish those that we disagree with or dislike. After the crime has been committed, we do not speak of such offenders as definitely going to reoffend; instead we speak of "likelihood to re-offend" and we try to base this likelihood on some sort of objective criteria. Even so, like Batman, we want to call the Joker "mad," "crazy," and "evil."

We like to hope that our legal system truly presumes that the suspect is innocent until proven otherwise. One of the principles of common law is that a person can be guilty and aside from some cases of murder,[86] guilt has little to do with intentionality or even knowledge of the law. Essentially, a criminal action must have actually been committed by a suspect before we try them[87] in a court of law and therefore the court requires sufficient evidence that indicates that the person on trial may be guilty[88] before they sentence them. Ultimately then, we cannot declare the Joker "guilty" without due process of the law nor can we call him "insane" or a "psychopath" unless he has been diagnosed by a physician or other qualified clinician.

As with any suspected criminal, the law does not ask the Joker if the illegal act was intentional or even if he was cognizant of the law. Though we believe that the Joker means to be disruptive on a grand scale, intentionality, before the law, is completely irrelevant. There is a single loophole, that we believe that those who may culpable of committing a crime might also have extenuating

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86   The law in some jurisdictions differentiates between first-degree or premeditated murder
      and second-degree murder, where the murder was a crime of passion and even man-
      slaughter, where a person may have been killed unintentionally.
87   Even the word "suspect" presumes that person on trial may have committed the crime.
88   This is the *corpus dilecti* (body of the crime) which is a model and in its most classic
      sense is comprised of the means, the motive and the opportunity to commit the crime in
      question. A suspect in a crime should ideally have all three of these, however in modern
      times, due to "Jury nullification" we have seen "suspects" where these 3 things are in place,
      still walk away with a "not guilty" judgement. Such phenomena are beyond the scope of
      this work.

circumstances. Importantly, for the Joker, one of those extenuating circum-stances is being found *non compos mentis* "of unsound mind." It is possible for the Joker to be found not guilty, due to being of unsound mind, *non-compos mentis*.

Historically, the legal definition of unsound mind included "idiocy and lu-nacy (Maudsley, 1874)"[89] and as late as the 1700s insanity was viewed as a form of diabolical possession where mental illness was seen as "a form of psychic struggle in which the Devil and God battled for the psychosomatic control of the subject, spiritual and bodily health forming a unity (Laffey, 2001)." When we judge the Joker in terms of the opposition of "evil" or "insanity," what we then have is the coexistence of two completely different lenses and therefore two different ways to define "evil": evil as a moral construct (including demonic possession) and evil as a medical or psychological construct (mental incapa-bility or insanity).[90] Also, it is noteworthy that in our culture, for the most part, we have reduced to evil to the latter and have defined it as a lapse or mental illness,[91] and also that we continue to stigmatize those who are truly mentally ill with a taint of evil.

However, to explore the Joker specifically in terms of madness and evil, we do need to question what methodology to use so as to extract a credible ver-sion of the Joker from the various and numerous historical portrayals. As we have seen, the Joker is a historical bricolage, a "crazy-quilt" who is constructed from a hodgepodge of pieces and bric-a-brac, whose actions sometimes seem arbitrary and incomprehensible even to him[92] but who at other times does things to make some sort of logical point.[93] While we cannot make a moral

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89   Although we no longer use these terms, the concepts of "idiocy and lunacy" still exist in
      other forms. In case law someone may be found not guilty by reason of inability to com-
      prehend the law or not guilty by reason of insanity. For the time being, we will be using
      the archaic definition of idiocy as "extreme mental retardation (Merriam-Webster, 2017)"
      and the archaic definition of lunacy as "insanity" or "a periodic insanity thought to be
      ruled by the phases of the moon (Merriam-Webster, 2017)."

90   For the sake of brevity, we will conflate mental incapacity (sub-average intellectual ca-
      pacity (Merriam-Webster, 2017)) and psychological incapacity (severely disordered and
      incompetent mind (Merriam-Webster, 2017)) into a single thing. The differences between
      these two and their impact would be worthwhile exploring elsewhere. Also, for the sake
      of brevity, we will also not explore the idea of cultural constructs and the semiotics of evil,
      although this topic alone would be a more than worthwhile.

91   The closest we get to identifying "real" psychopaths in our culture, is when we identify
      serial killers, but we also must be aware that this is psychopathy at its most virulent.

92   "Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I
      wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just … *do* things (Nolan,
      Nolan and Grover, 2008)."

93   *Viz,* the aforementioned *The Killing Joke.*

judgement and decide whether or not the Joker is "evil",[94] it is possible for us to gather literary evidence and to question whether or not the Joker, as constructed in this manner, is constitutionally capable of understanding his own actions and their consequences.

Our enquiry is then into the nature of the Joker's understanding of what he does. Is the Joker *compos mentis*? To try and determine the answer to this question, we will create a specific model of the Joker, one with a specific history, and then test this model using several known and recognized psychological tools. In so doing, we will attempt to determine, within the bounds of the model that we created, if the Joker might be regarded of sound mind. If he suffers from any known category of incapacitating mental illness, we would understand that he is not legally responsible for his actions.

As above, we need to note that, as a character, the Joker has no canonical origin story (Peaslee and Weiner, 2015). While Peaslee and Weiner do acknowledge "the usual story" that "somehow" the Joker was created by falling into a vat of chemical waste (Peaslee and Weiner, 2015) we have also noted that in the Joker's eponymously named comic series he was "frightened by a clown." The various writers have created multiple origin stories which differ, sometimes significantly, in the basic details and also in emphasis. Moreover, even when he himself tries to do so, the Joker tells us different versions of his own origin (Nolan, Nolan and Grover, 2008). Not only may we not rely on what was said about the Joker, we also may not rely on what the Joker says about himself.

We could attempt to rationalize the entire eighty-year canon, and include film, television, comic books, graphic novels and videogames, and, once having distilled these down, to look for points of reference, and for differences between them. This approach, taken by Goodwin and Tajjudin, in *"What Do You Think I Am? Crazy?": The Joker and Stigmatizing Representations of Mental Health* (2016) allows them to find interesting, but disparate, stigmatizing references to mental illness, across the entire corpus. On the other hand, for the

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94   The word "evil" is in itself so very highly overdetermined and constructed that it has effectively become a parody of itself so it in a sense also a hyposign. Because "evil" is therefore meaningless in a greater sense, rather than attempt to secularize the word "evil" and to separate it from its religious roots, we will acknowledge that the word "evil" is semantically null, in the sense that we cannot point to a thing and call it "evil," but only point to representations of evil and to uses of objects as evil. We are not stipulating that "evil" does not exist, so this then leaves us a with paradox. We will therefore acknowledge that any attempt to define the word evil, semantically or referentially, leads to logical or theological conundrums, though we insist that "evil," despite this problem, does indeed "exist" in some manner. For that reason, and for the sake of this chapter, we will not concern ourselves with the definition of "evil" in the philosophical sense and, instead, we will concern ourselves with only "evil actions" as opposed to mental illnesses.

sake of this experiment, we are trying to limit the Joker to a specific etiology so, our approach, rather to include all possible multiple references. We must then acknowledge that the Joker is a commodity, that this commodity represents an imaginary fictional character, and that this character changes every time a different author writes a new version, so that any attempt to reconcile even any one or two different depictions of the Joker with the entire canon of all the Jokers is impossible. As Goodwin and Tajjudin note, "The Joker's different personalities have emerged due to the changing nature of the comic book medium (Goodwin and Tajjudin, 2016)." The Joker, as a narrative character, is well over 75 years old (Goodwin and Tajjudin, 2016)[95] so that if one was to attempt to reconcile a single narrative from the material, that because of the various differences and inconsistencies created by history, this task would be impossible. We choose not to explain away these inconsistencies via retconning or another narrative device, and instead our chore is to select a specific model of a specific Joker from these multiple depictions. We will then have a single point of reference, a single version of the Joker, to test.

We are going to take a three-pronged approach to this problem. First, rather than try to shape a single Joker from the corpus of all the Jokers as they exist today we will instead limit our discussion to a specific Joker, the Joker of *The Killing Joke*,[96] specifically because, despite Alan Moore's protests, it is mostly canonical and specifically because it depicts the Joker prior to his becoming the Joker and it gives us an etiology. Second, because we cannot determine truth from falsehood, we will presume that where we see graphical depictions of the Joker's past depicted by an omniscient third person (such as his origin as depicted in *The Killing Joke*) we will believe these depictions as objectively true.[97] Third, then, when the Joker tells us about himself and there is no other third-party evidence to corroborate what he says, such as when talking about his past,[98] we will treat these assertions as suspect, or, possible, if not outright

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95   At this writing 80 years old.

96   While there are many reasons not to choose the Killing Joke, Moore and Bolland's narrative is not about anyone else but the Joker. Moore's point, that Batman and the Joker are similarly obsessed resonates, and the depiction of Joker's origin gives the character a depth which is lacking elsewhere.

97   Even if *The Killing Joke* was a non-canonical story, the number of incidents, including the shooting of Barbara Gordon, have since moved to the so called "canonical" Batman universe so this give us precedent to do the same with this the Joker origin story.

98   In movie *The Dark Knight*, The Joker tells two different stories about how he got his facial scars (Noland, Nolan and Grover, 2008). This makes both of those stories suspect. Moreover, in *The Killing Joke*, The Joker says "If I am going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice (Moore and Bolland, 2008)." Therefore, we cannot trust what The Joker says as true.

lies. These statements may also be merely true, subjectively. The benefit of this approach is that it provides us with a narrative basis upon which we can properly create a model and then attempt to form a "diagnosis" of this model.

According to this methodology, the Joker suffered both emotional and physical trauma, both in terms of his immediate family life (his wife and unborn child died in an accident)[99] and to his own body (when his skin was bleached, his hair was permanently dyed green and his lips became twisted into a permanent grotesque, bright red rictus). We also see that, prior to these traumas, he also saw himself as failure in at least three ways: he hated his job at the chemical plant and he managed, somehow, to escape that job to try stand-up comedy. He was unsuccessful as a comedian and he was also unable to provide for the needs of his family, which added to his feeling of failure. He felt so guilty and remorseful over this lack of success that he became involved with a criminal gang, ostensibly for the money, to help his family improve their lot in life. Crucially, even after this nameless unsuccessful man's wife and unborn child lost their lives in an unrelated accident, the criminal gang insisted that he take part in the crime, which caused him even more emotional distress.[100] When the crime itself went badly, due to Batman's intervention, the Joker was abandoned by the criminal gang and only escaped by swimming through a vat of unknown chemical waste which burned his skin, bleaching it permanently white, dyeing his hair permanently green and twisting his mouth into a permanent crimson grin. Narratively, through a combination of the chemical bath and of the various traumas, the Joker "lost his mind" and then decided to seek some sort of "revenge" on Batman and on society.

We discover, as part of Moore's script that the Joker was approached to assist in this criminal endeavor only because he was familiar with the lab, that he had previously been a laboratory assistant at the very plant where the crime took place, so that he therefore knew the layout and the security regimen of the plant. We know that the Joker's very first crimes, immediately after this trauma, were serial killings, where he kidnapped the homeless and used them as experimental animals to test and to refine versions of his "Joker venom," a new poison which caused people to die with a twisted and grotesque smile on their faces (Brubaker and Manke, 2008) (Kane, Finger and Robinson, 1940).[101] He then killed a number of the major shareholders of the chemical plant, who he had also decided to blame for his disfigurement, using this new poison

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99   All references in this narrative are from The Killing Joke unless otherwise noted.

100 This distress was pre-trauma. After the trauma, the Joker does not appear to be able to have a low affect or emotional distress.

101 This methodology indicates that the Joker had achieved some sort of postgraduate degree.

(Brubaker and Manke, 2008) (Kane, Finger and Robinson, 1940). The Joker also tried to kill everyone in Gotham City by adding a version of this poison to the city's water supply (Brubaker and Manke, 2008) (Kane, Finger and Robinson, 1940). After he was caught by Batman, he was subsequently incarcerated in jail, or, in later versions, in Arkham Asylum (Brubaker and Manke, 2008).[102] The Joker has an extremely morbid sense of humor. It seems that he does not care for people in general, but seems to have developed some sort of an attachment to Batman. Also, as Peter Coogan notes "The Joker sees his crimes as art (Coogan, 2006)." After the Joker shoots Barbara Gordon, making her a paraplegic, he then records the defilement of her injured body and plays that recording to her kidnapped father as a form of torture, under the guise of *Grand Guignol* style theatre, which is later depicted in *The Killing Joke*.

What we have gleaned from the above to form a useful model of the Joker is that:

1. The Joker is educated, that he is probably in his mid to late 30s and that he is also into a second career—perhaps third—as he has been a lab assistant and a comedian.

2. Prior to the trauma depicted in *The Killing Joke* he seems to have had a good conscience, because he tried at the very least to care for his family and felt guilty when he could not.

3. He was capable of having at least one relationship and he attempted to fulfill what he saw as his duty toward his partner and family (he had a wife who was pregnant and, importantly, he tried to support his wife).

4. He suffered guilt and depressed feelings because he could not fulfill those duties.

5. The Joker made poor choices based on his desire to support his family (joined a criminal gang).

6. He suffered several terrible traumas in a short period of time (death of his wife and unborn child, forced to commit the crime despite no longer feeling as if he needed to and the trauma of swimming in the chemical bath in the red hood, which disfigured him).

7. After those traumas occurred, the Joker underwent a major personality shift or change.

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102   While this narrative does not occur within *The Killing Joke*, it takes place in both in *The Man Who Laughs* and also in, the short narrative, *The Joker* in Batman issue number 1. This story is canonical and also we believe it is indicative of the murderousness that may be attributed to The Joker. Therefore, we are using it as evidence to help us understand the Joker better.

8. After the trauma, he has demonstrated little regard for human life and other social norms but, importantly, the Joker does not kill or harm people randomly or get pleasure out of hurting them randomly. Instead, he always has some form of rationale, no matter how bizarre, for the harms that he commits. In *The Man Who Laughs*, the Joker only experiments on others to perfect a specific poison and not out of any sadism or desire to kill[103] (this experimentation also speaks to higher education and great intelligence). He harms Barbara Gordon, to experiment on her father.

9. Prior to his trauma he was able to form at least one stable emotional attachment[104] but afterward he does not even seem interested in such. He later claims to be in love with Batman and uses this "love" as an excuse for his crimes (Morrison and McKean, 1989). He also has a good sexual relationship with his wife as she claims that he is "good in the sack (Moore and Bolland, 1988)."

10. The Joker does not exhibit remorse over the trauma he causes others.

11. Prior to his trauma he was willing to perform a criminal act, albeit with the excuse that he was helping his family; after the trauma he was not only willing to do crime but he has also repeatedly initiated many heinous crimes.

12. Post trauma, he has been incarcerated many times and has repeatedly escaped from custody. He continues to re-offend.

13. Batman has offered to help him, or to try and find him help, which the Joker has refused.

15. The Joker knows who he is, where he is, what year he is living in.

16. He understands the impact of his actions, so he is not psychotic in the traditional sense.

17. He does refer to people as objects and treats them contemptuously: he compares Barbara Gordon to a book and her father to a turnip.

18. After the trauma, the Joker does not seem to be promiscuous or even sexual in any way.[105] When he molests the injured body of Barbara Gordon,

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103 And, yes, experimentation on humans unto itself, especially without consent or other ethical safeguards is in itself evil and also experimentation to kill people is evil. The point in this is not to stress the Joker's evil. The point is that the Joker has some sort of a rationale, even if that rationale, in itself, is evil. A real-life example of this might be the human experiments that took place during the Holocaust by Dr. Josef Mengele and others.

104 Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects people between time and space (McCloud, 2009).

105 While we are more than aware of the existence of Dr. Harleen Quinzel, alias Harley Quinn, in these fictional universes, her relationship with The Joker appears to be one of extreme counter transference (the emotional reaction of the therapist to the patient (Merriam-Webster, 2017) as opposed to any mutual affection. One could speculate that

    it is not for any personal prurient gratification, but instead to disturb others, specifically her father.

19.   He is not delusional in the sense that he does not hear voices or see visions and his thoughts are not purportedly racing.

20.   He blames others for his predicament.

21.   We are uncertain how well he sleeps or the duration of his sleep but when he is involved in a project, he does become focused to the exclusion of all else.

22.   It is worthwhile noting that, prior to his trauma, the Joker suffered from depressive symptoms based on his situation and that afterwards he no longer seems to suffer from depressive symptoms or even from conscience.

Is the Joker then a "madman?"[106] To answer this question, the first tool we used is what is arguably the most common diagnostic tool used by North American Psychiatrists. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, or as it is commonly known DSM-5[107] is over 950 pages long and, according to its own advertising, is, "an authoritative volume that defines and classifies mental disorders in order to improve diagnoses, treatment, and research (American Psychiatric Association, 2017)." This volume is also not without its controversies and it is not without its opposition.[108] Despite its flaws, the DSM-5 is the basic tool of North American mental health practitioners and is used to help determine taxonomy[109] of patient mental illness.[110] Aside from

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    the 'turning' of Dr. Quinzel in Harley Quinn was another of The Joker's experiments but any further speculation on this matter would be beyond the scope of this chapter.

106   While the term "madman" can be seen as ableist because it provides a stigmatizing view of mental illness, it is worthwhile remarking that the "Mad pride" movement has reclaimed the term "Mad" and it is in this sense that we use it (Wikipedia, 2017).

107   DSM-5 is intended to be used only by trained mental health professionals, although it is often used by others (Cuthbert and Insel, 2013) who may not have had this training. A quick internet search of how to use the DSM-5 resulted in links to a number of expensive courses and tutorials for pay. While mystery surrounds the usage of DSM, the actual use of the manual is, in reality, not that difficult. The fact that the book itself is quite expensive (it retails for $160 + USD) plus the fact that usage requires expensive courses (usually medical school or PhD in Psychology) precludes the average layperson from actually purchasing and using the DSM-5. It is therefore, in a sense a totem of medical culture since in itself it is not that hard to use but that there are systemic cultural barriers to obtaining the actual book.

108   See (Greenfield, 2013), (Wakefield, 2016), (Cuthbert and Insel, 2013).

109   Some practitioners question the need for diagnosis of any sort. Some activist psychiatric patients now label themselves "Psychiatric Consumers" or "Psychiatric Survivors (Wikipedia, Psychiatric Survivors Movement, 2017)" moreover, when it comes to taxonomy, many of these survivors refer to themselves by the generic term "Mad (see above)."

110   DSM does not help with etiology (except when used to create a differential diagnosis) nor does it help with the treatment of any specific disorder.

other controversies, the major factor which might preclude us from using DSM as a guide to diagnosing the Joker is the fact that in some cases it excludes patients from diagnosis based on its own criteria.

Psychiatrist, Dr. Allen Frances, one of the editors of the personality disorders criteria of the DSM-5, notes that "to qualify for narcissistic personality disorder, an individual's selfish, un-empathetic preening must be accompanied by significant distress or impairment (Frances, 2017)." Narcissism is a large part of what is termed the "Dark Triad (Furnham, Richards and Paulhus, 2013)" which is used to identify psychopathy and the inability to determine narcissism would mean that, even if he fit all the other criteria, that the Joker is not, according to medical standard, a narcissist. While he may be selfish, "un-empathetic" and preening, the Joker is not, or does not appear, impaired nor does he appear to be distressed, or, at the very least, he does not complain of distress. Therefore, clinically, according to DSM-5, the Joker does not suffer from a personality disorder and is not a narcissist, simply because he does not exhibit the criteria necessary. While it is up to medicine to decide if DSM-5 failed the Joker or if the Joker failed the DSM-5, the Joker is precluded from being diagnosed specifically because of this one criterion. Writer Alan Moore wrote a compelling story but one without a medical basis, according to DSM-5.

The fact is also that the Joker does not recall his past, or recalls it as "multiple choice (Nolan, Nolan and Goyer, 2008) (Moore and Bolland, 1988)." We could then propose that the Joker has one of many different personality disorders including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Avoidant Disorder, Antisocial Disorder or some Dissociative Disorder. The DSM-5, however, itself renders most positive diagnoses problematic and complex because each diagnosis in DSM-5 carries along with it, both the criteria to validate positive diagnosis and also criteria to invalidate positive diagnosis. Importantly, some of the diagnoses in DSM-5 preclude others and some of them must include other, so that even someone trained in diagnosis using DSM is presented with challenges to properly diagnose a patient. Also, psychiatric diagnoses are also additive so that a patient who has been diagnosed with one disorder in the past will always have that disorder on their medical "chart," even if it is mutually exclusive to another diagnosis with which the same patient is subsequently diagnosed. Moreover, the symptoms which are required to qualify for one disorder are often ambiguous and may include several other disorders or preclude others, so, while we might be speculate that the Joker suffers from some sort of dissociative disorder because of the trauma he incurred, any such diagnosis is also invalidated by the fact that, as far as we know, he does not undergo periods of derealization, and this "derealization" is absolutely required by DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). To further illustrate this problem,

because he does have amnesia and confabulates his past, we might even best describe the Joker as suffering from Beriberi, a vitamin B1 deficiency common in alcoholics, since we can say that he also exhibits some of the mental symptoms described by Korsakoff's syndrome but we can eliminate it based on lack of other symptoms. The point here is that, as non-clinicians, we can state with good confidence, because of Dr. Frances' exclusion, that the Joker probably does not fit within the diagnostic rubric of DSM-5. The DSM-5 itself is not sufficient because its own definitions precludes diagnosis of the Joker, due to lack of impairment and distress on his part.

ICD-10 is different than DSM. It is used to diagnose all illnesses, including physical ones and according to Cuthbert and Insell:

> ICD is necessarily designed for health settings around the world, to be used not only by practitioners with widely divergent levels of expertise but also in cultural settings where assumptions about the etiology and nature of disorders may be highly dissimilar from the Western milieu of the DSM. Accordingly, the ICD places stronger emphasis on public health applications than the DSM, and one reflection of this emphasis is the use of definitions that emphasize short text descriptions of each disorder rather than the polythetic symptom lists of the DSM.[111]
>
> CUTHBERT AND INSELLS, 2013

This means that while the DSM is meant for a specialized elite group of specially trained practitioners, ICD-10 is meant to be used world-wide by those who might not have access to the training required to use DSM-5. In reality, while the American Psychiatric Association would rather you use DSM, it is a clinical upstart, and ICD-10 is still the official diagnostic standard in the USA (Cuthbert and Insel, 2013). DSM-5 is also extremely expensive and it requires extensive training where ICD-10 is available for free online and is meant for those who may have "divergent levels of expertise (Cuthbert and Insel, 2013)." ICD-10 and DSM-5 do not map well onto each other (Cuthbert and Insel, 2013) although, in North America, ICD is generally used to diagnose physical illness; DSM is supposed to be used only by those trained in the esoteric mental arts. The Joker, who presents with a single set of symptoms, will be diagnosed completely differently depending on whether one uses DSM-5 or ICD-10.

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111   DSM is published, for profit, by the American Psychiatric Association. ICD is a project of the World Health Organization which is a branch of the United Nations and is available for free online. The latest version is ICD-11 which is available at https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en.

Because ICD-10 does not have the requirement that the patient be in distress or that experts only use it, we may "diagnose" the Joker, pre-trauma, we may diagnose The Joker with a brief reactive disorder (F43.2);[112] he is depressed due to his situation, which he hopes to alleviate with a desperate measure, becoming a criminal. We may propose that his subsequent amnesia, post trauma, is caused by dissociation (F44.0) and that he suffers from hostility to the world (F44.5) and that his bizarre personal appearance (F46.1) and his verbosity (F46.7) are symptoms of a Dissocial Personality Disorder[113] (F60.2). This is defined as a:

> Personality disorder characterized by disregard for social obligations, and callous unconcern for the feelings of others. There is gross disparity between behaviour and the prevailing social norms. Behaviour is not readily modifiable by adverse experience, including punishment. There is a low tolerance to frustration and a low threshold for discharge of aggression, including violence; there is a tendency to blame others, or to offer plausible rationalizations for the behaviour bringing the patient into conflict with society (F60.2).

The ICD-10 goes on to describe such a person as "amoral, antisocial, asocial, psychopathic, and sociopathic (F60.2)." This is an accurate depiction of the post trauma Joker who has "callous unconcern for the feelings of others (F60.2)" and disregard for any social conventions. He rationalizes his behavior, "to prove a point (Moore and Bolland, 2008)" and he has a "low threshold for aggression, including violence (F60.2)." ICD-10, in its definition of Dissocial Personality Disorder, does exclude "Conduct Disorders (F91)" which are limited to children and "Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder (F60.3)." The Joker is not a child nor is he "Emotionally Unstable." He has, at least according to ICD-10, potential for Dissocial Personality Disorder and provisionally, and we must stress this, not professionally, we can diagnose the Joker, at least this model Joker, with this disorder.[114] We must include the caveat that this

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112   References to illnesses in ICD will be done via "billing code."

113   Most many medical articles conflate Dissocial Personality Disorder in ISC-10 with Antisocial Personality Disorder in DSM-5 (Mayo Clinic Staff, Antisocial Personality Disorder, 2017) (Hare, Hart and Harpur, 1991). The objection to this, aside from, as we have mentioned above, an inexact one to one mapping of similar ailments, is the fact that DSM-5 precludes diagnosing anyone whose symptoms do not include distress.

114   The etiology of personality disorders is still in dispute. Scientists are unsure whether genetic or environmental factors, or both, are responsible for their appearance. For more on this see (Reich, 2006).

"diagnosis" is made over the specific version of the Joker we have described and that other versions will vary.

Given this "diagnosis," however, we could wonder, would the Joker be labelled as a psychopath by a test that purportedly determines just this condition? The PCL-R (2003), was developed in the 1970's by Dr. Robert Hare, a Canadian psychologist and is current being sold in the form of a "'Quick Screener' kit" with a retail price of $265.00. Hare says that, "The enormous increase in theory and research on psychopathy over the past two decades owes much to the development and adoption of the PCL-R as a common metric for assessing the disorder (Hare and Neumann, 2008)." Hare and Neumann further describe the PCL-R as "a clinical construct rating scale that uses a semi structured interview, case history information, and specific scoring criteria to rate each of 20 items on a 3-point scale (0, 1, 2) according to the extent to which it applies to a given individual." As noted above, the PCL-R is not so much a medical determination of illness, so much as a criminological determination of likelihood to reoffend but most importantly, Hare never defines what he means by psychopathy. He tells us that "psychopathy" is something that is tested by the PCL-R and, as above, Hare asserts that the PCL-R is uniquely useful because it tests that "disorder" which he calls psychopathy (Hare and Neumann, 2008). Hare defines the test by that which it tests and he defines that which he tests by the test. He never asserts a good definition of "Psychopathy."

Also noteworthy is that an individual score of 30 or greater is considered to diagnose a psychopath in North America, but in England an individual only needs a score of 25 to be diagnosed as such (Wikipedia, Psychopathy Check List, 2017).[115] As above, this would make psychopathy a societal or sociological distinction. Psychopathy is not a medical determination or a diagnosis; it is sociological and criminological determination of what the PCL tests. Because the test itself is expensive to obtain, being a for-profit enterprise, we decided to see if free examples were available online. There are many online "free" versions of tests which claim to base themselves on the PCL-R. We chose the Proprofs version of PCL-R which is called "Hare PCL-R 20 Questions." Similar to the

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115   This difference is remarkable, and not only because, while Hares claims the PCL-R tests psychopathy, which he claims is a medical disorder, different cultures have decided that they will tolerate more or less of the quality psychopathy (whatever that means) to use the label psychopath on a person. While medical science universally says that an HgA1C level above 6.5 is diabetes (Mayo Clinic Staff, A1C Test, 2017) anywhere in the world, different countries can legislate the score by which a person is determined to be a psychopath. Psychopathy is then not a medical diagnosis but a sociological distinction; an English psychopath with a PCL-R score of 27 would not be a psychopath in North America since he is "less" of a psychopath.

PCL-R, this test scores each question on a triadic basis, (Hare uses a 0 a 1 or a 2, which maps onto the Proprofs "rarely, sometimes or often") with a total possible score of 40. As Proprofs says "This test contains the 20 items from Robert Hare's Psychopathy Checklist Revised. Points are assigned for each question and then tallied for your results (Proprofs, 2017)." The difference is that instead of baldly choosing a trait, a PCL-R tester might take several weeks interviewing someone to determine similar information. Since we already have a basic character sketch of the Joker we will use it, instead of interviews. So, for example, trait number one is "glib and superficial charm" and we would rate the Joker as "often." Trait two is "grandiose estimation of self", and again we would rate the Joker "often." The Joker would rate high on "need for stimulation," "sometimes" for "pathological lying," high again for "cunning and manipulative." The Joker would, presumably, score low on sexual promiscuity and also on problems in early upbringing.[116] When it comes to "Juvenile delinquency" we have a problem. Since we do not know the Joker's childhood history, we cannot answer this question however, we can propose that since he was willing to take part in a crime (the crime that caused his disfigurement) that it is reasonable to say "sometimes." Unsurprisingly, at the end of the test, the Joker scores 31[117] which is clearly within the definition of a psychopath in England but only on the borderline of psychopathy in North America. It is the Joker's apparent lack of any sex drive plus the fact that his early life is an enigma which explains this possible ambiguity.

While we have created a mock diagnosis of the Joker, we have also noted that the PCL-R and the DSM-5 are not really helpful as diagnostic tools moreover, PCL-R's "diagnosis" is not a medical diagnosis at all. And, despite its ubiquity in clinical practice, we were completely unable to use the DSM-5 because its own instructions precluded us from using it. One wonders how many clinicians ignore these preclusions and diagnose anyhow. Also, we need to ask if trauma alone enough to cause a person's personality so drastically and if so, is it enough to make someone a psychopath? We simply do not have enough information to form a solid opinion.

That being stated, we created a model Joker and proceeded to test that model; we have also discussed these various tests as models, unto themselves. One major issue, mentioned above, is that it is expensive to diagnose a patient and even the ostensibly free ICD comes with "billing codes" to aid billing

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116   One of the problems with this model of the Joker is that, as above, we have no clear idea of who he was prior to the major trauma which transformed him into the person he is today.

117   Even if we had said never about juvenile delinquency, the Joker would have still been in range.

patients and insurance companies. Aside from this criticism, using the ICD-10 is extremely straightforward. It is easy to use and, we could argue if we were mental health professionals, the diagnosis of "Dissocial Personality Disorder" which we obtained is a proper diagnosis. It is also extremely important to note that this entire section, except for two mentions (one of these as a footnote) has been extremely cis-centric and androcentric, we have completely ignored those sectors of society most often called "hysterical," "sick" and "degenerate," the feminine, the queer and the trans-sexual. So, while we have certainly found issue with psychiatric testing and diagnoses when it comes to men, we can only imagine the issues when we might wish to view the same issue through a gynocentric or a queer lens. The good news is that that while we really cannot conclude much, yet we still have hope that at some point our understanding of these issues will allow us to be more humane and more compassionate, and that we will be enabled to treat mental illness, not as an evil to be eradicated but, as a legitimate form of illness that has a true cure. It is worthwhile, to note here, that as Foucault points out, we have lost the language of madness (Foucault, 1988). The Joker may be ill according to modern constructions, but perhaps it is his madness that truly terrifies. Now, though, we have a measure of who the Joker is, in the sense that, as a character, he is fictional and as such, his psychopathology is equally fictional. The Joker is an object and he is what his authors think psychopathy could look like, in an artistic manner. The Joker satisfies the lay reader narratively, even as the inaccuracies in his depictions may frustrate the specialist. To continue though, since we have an idea of who the Joker is, we should understand how the Joker is.

8   The Ontology of the Joker

What we can positively state is that the Joker, as an object, is also a sign that he represents something or someone. We may also state that this sign very much, only exists in a fictional substrate, that while the Joker it is real, he does not exist in "reality."[118] One would hope that we know that by "Joker" we mean a

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[118] Delimiting "fiction" and "reality" in the sense that we mean is difficult, especially in a cultural milieu such as ours where real persons play fictional versions of themselves on television and in movies. We also live in a "post-truth" world where "objective facts" are subordinate to beliefs and to emotions. The objective unreality of vampires or of the lack of efficacy of horological natal astrology is subordinate to what people wish to believe. Thus, we have Flat Earth conspiracy theorists, and those who hold that vaccines cause autism or are responsible for mind control. For more on this topic see Lee McIntyre's Post Truth (2018).

fictional object, about whom we can say meaningful things, and yet this object also has "real" existence in the Batman and DC universes.[119] As we have established, merely saying "the Joker" is not enough because of the sheer multiplicity of possibilities.

Instead of a single Joker, who, in a form of synecdoche, may stand for all Jokers, we must acknowledge that each version of the Joker also has a certain kind of unique singular existence. Each representation of the Joker represents all the others, but at the same time this relationship is reciprocal so that that the entire field of Jokers all also indicate each individual Joker, that this includes representations which are both realized and also still potential. Paradoxically, all of these Jokers exist together and separately, simultaneously, and as we stated when we attempt to reify this field into some sort of meaning, it disappears into a hyposign. One reason for this is that the Joker is never a unique representation. We may wish to say that he represents the Jungian "Trickster" archetype, but as Hannah Means-Shannon states, the Joker represents, not one, but many Jungian archetypes, all at once, to wit, the Trickster, the Shadow, the Anima, the Abyss and the Ruler (Means-Shannon, 2015). Means-Shannon cites the graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious Place on a Serious Earth* (Morrison and McKean, 1989)*,* and she reminds us that the Joker's meaning transcends single meanings, in this case archetypes, by design, in this case, because Grant Morrison designed this version of the Joker, to, instead of having a single psychological *gestalt*, to be a chameleon whose presentation and psyche change as his environment changes. Writer Grant Morrison has a fictitious Arkham Asylum psychiatrist state, "Unlike you or I, The Joker seems to have no control over the over the barrage of sensory input he's receiving from the outside world. He can only cope with that chaotic barrage of information by going with the flow (Morrison and McKean, 1989)." Morrison does not view this lack of control as a negative, because it results in what Morrison has this psychiatrist call a kind of "super-sanity (Morrison and McKean, 1989)."[120] This version of the Joker is a direct reflection of his environment, and this "super-sanity" manifests itself as a form of what we would call sadistic, murderous psychopathy. The result of this input, Morrison tells us, is that the Joker has no real innate personality of his own, and instead, because of how the mechanism is described, that the Joker's constant reflection back of stimuli is not "self-will." The Joker has no personality in the sense that we

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119   Meanwhile, a real robber has been dressing as the as the Joker, to commit petty crimes, in Toronto (Gordon, 2019).

120   The idea of "super-sanity" is completely fiction. "Sanity," as we construct it, is a relative state; either one is "sane" or one is not compared to existing criteria. There is no transcendence of sanity.

would understand it and instead his output of sadism and psychopathy is a form of *mimesis*, where his sensoria are reflected back as murder and pain. To compare, the Joker of *The Killing Joke* is mentally ill but still manages a kind of logic, while Morrison's Joker is driven, not by logic, by the sheer volume and variety of inputs which he receives. This Joker is a psychedelic Rorschach of all the stimuli that he apprehends. He is defined, not by past experiences, but by the culmination of what has just immediately happened, immediately in the ephemeral now. It is because of these constant changes that, as Mean-Shannon states, the Joker is not constrained to a single trope of meaning but he is many archetypes, many systems of meaning, a kaleidoscope of meanings, some of which may, by design, correlate to unconscious Jungian archetypes and some of which just point outward. Morrison's Joker may indicate and signal, but he does not willfully create meaning (Means-Shannon, 2015) except that which we choose to read in, based on the total sensorium. The Joker is polysemous by design; he doesn't have a single static meaning and, crucially, Morrison's Joker is not even meant to be understood, so any meanings that we attribute to this Joker is actually attributable to the projection of our own desires and feelings.[121] What we see in this Joker is ourselves projected onto another, in this case a semiotic blank slate. Yes, he does represent our dark side, but he also represents the mercurial and the changing and all those things which we wish to repress and which inevitably find their way out.

To understand the Joker of *Arkham Asylum*, we need to go back to the final panels of *The Killing Joke.* In the second to last panel, Batman and the Joker face each other. In the last one we have darkness and a laugh which ends abruptly. As readers, we are left with the question, "Does Batman arrest the Joker or does he kill him?" and while both answers are plausible, Grant Morrison speculates:

> That's why it's called "The Killing Joke." The Joker tells the "Killing Joke" at the end, Batman reaches out and breaks his neck, and that's why the laughter stops and the light goes out, 'cause that was the last chance at crossing that bridge. And Alan Moore wrote the ultimate Batman/Joker story—he finished it.
>
> CRUMP, 2013

Morrison's view, then, is that story is non-canonical, and that not canonical stories like *Arkham Asylum* can explore these characters and change them.

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121   Psychological projection "is a form of defense in which unwanted feelings are displaced onto another person, where they then appear as a threat from the external world (The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017).

Compare the *Killing Joke* and *Arkham Asylum* versions of the Joker with *Emperor Joker* (Loeb, 2007) who is just as sadistic, but who also does not kill. We may speculate that the Joker does not murder because Batman is absent throughout most of the narrative, but, as the Postmodernists would tell us, Batman is conspicuous specifically because of his absence. Throughout *Emperor Joker* we see Superman tortured psychologically, yet we wonder where Batman is. In fact, that is the solution, that the Joker is so obsessed with Batman, that Batman inhabits the space, in the sense that the act of not thinking of a pink monkey forces one to think of a pink monkey. Even though this Joker is sadistic, he has some vulnerability and some kind of empathy, although this empathy is used to savor others' discomfort. He has vulnerabilities and these lead to his defeat. We know at the end, that some sort of stable status quo will be maintained. We have no such guarantee with non-canonical stories.

"Canonical" Joker's may be just as puzzling. The Joker of *Death of the Family*[122] (Snyder, Glass, Higgins et al, 2012) is not merely frightening, he is incomprehensible, having requested that another hero surgically remove his face. This bizarre act is a literary MacGuffin[123] because, while the rest of the narrative ostensibly exists around the Joker trying to find his face, he attacks all the other members of the Batman Family,[124] claiming that they only get in Batman's way. Bizarrely, this Joker claims to love Batman and his reason for attacking them is because they keep him from achieving real potential, the "reasoning" that he uses to kill and maim. Notably, as part of this narrative, Batgirl, one who regained the use of her legs and who has been treated for PTSD, confronts the Joker for the first time since *The Killing Joke* and is able to beat him on her own terms. Still, at the end of the narrative the Joker again disappears and it is unclear if he is alive or dead. The Joker never dies—he just disappears and then reappears. This Joker is never "dead", he is just alive or missing, and this idea is highlighted at the end of *A Death in the Family* (1988). The Joker bludgeons Robin (Jason Todd) with a crowbar and then, just as Batman arrives to save

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122   The title is an obvious reference to *A Death in the Family* (1988).

123   A MacGuffin is a narrative device, an object or an objective, around which the rest of the plot hangs, even though the object or objective is given no explanation. Examples include the letters of transit from the movie *Casablanca* (1942) and the suitcase in the movie *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

124   The "Batman Family" is a loose organization of those "super heroes" who are associated with Batman including: Robin, Batgirl, Robin, Nightwing, Batwoman, Red Hood, Oracle et al. For a more complete list see http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/Batman_Family.

the day, detonates a bomb, killing both Todd and Todd's mother.[125, 126] At the end of the story, Batman and Joker fight it out and, when both are at risk of being killed, Superman swoops in and rescues Batman. Superman cannot find the Joker. Batman laments that his relationship with the Joker is characterized by lack of resolution. This liminality characterizes the Joker, he is both alive and dead.

The Joker, as a sign, fits neatly into the American Monomyth narrative trope. Story narratives are created and retconned and characters are resurrected and removed, not to serve the story, but to serve the marketplace. Once dead, Robin/Jason Todd is alive again as an antihero "Red Hood." These resurrections form an extension of the American monomyth, so that over several plot cycles and even over decades, multiple story arcs and "multiverses," narratively, the status quo is maintained. It may take longer for it to be restored, but restored it will be. As a case in point, in the animated movie *Batman Beyond: Return of The Joker* (Dini, 2000), the once dead Joker manages to resurrect himself in the future, using a microchip to reprogram Tim Drake's, a former Robin's DNA, and the new Batman, Terry McGuiness,[127] under the tutelage of the former Batman, Bruce Wayne, must track him down. While this, on the one hand satisfies the American monomyth by again defeating the Joker, the return of the Joker to the Batman's rogue's gallery is also a re-establishment of the status

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125   DC was only willing to kill the character, Jason Todd because fans did not like him; this murder was a commercial decision. Ultimately, the decision was left to a phone poll and by an extremely slim majority DC comics decided to kill Robin. As Glen Weldon points out, the idea to kill Robin within the canon had possibly come from other, non-canonical, Batman sources. In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) Batman refers to an empty Robin costume as "a good soldier (Miller 1986)," and we are to presuppose that Robin had passed. Weldon speculates that because *The Killing Joke* (where Barbara Gordon was maimed) was so very popular and, also, since *The Dark Knight* (where Robin was shown to be dead) was also so very popular and also that the Jason Todd / Robin character was so very unpopular, that "By giving readers that chance to kill off Robin, they were effectively saying, 'We can make this [*The Dark Knight*] canon (Weldon 2016).'" Ultimately this was a weak artistic choice, because the DC editors, while attempting to make the story artistic, tried to absolve themselves by leaving this important decision to a popular vote.

126   1988 was a time before the interminable "reboots" and re-imaginings of Batman. This is even before the Jack Nicholson version of the Joker in *Batman* (1989) and before the multiple comic book deaths and resurrections of those members of the Batman family, including the literal resurrection of Jason Todd in 2005's *Under the Red Hood*.

127   The *Batman Beyond* (1999–2000) universe (which was later retconned to be part of the DC Universe) depicts a future Gotham city where Bruce Wayne has retired as Batman and his mantle has been picked up by a young athletic man, Terry McGinnis.

quo for the Batman fiction.[128] The American Monomyth, as trope, is inevitable when analyzing episodic or serial fiction.

Resurrections[129] are an inevitable corollary to the American Monomyth. We believed that with the deaths of *Crisis*, with Barbara Gordon's injury and with Jason Todd's death that maybe The American Monomyth no longer held sway.[130] The fact that the Joker might actually permanently injure or even kill a member of the Batman Family was an indicator that the "American Monomyth," was also, perhaps dated. In a post *Crisis* world, we believed anything thing could happen, that heroes could die, and that the Joker could kill them. What did follow the deaths, however, were the resurrections. Ultimately, Superman, once dead, was resurrected. Batman (although not dead) found his way back through time. Barbara Gordon regained the use of her legs. The reason for these reversions is that the ecology of comic books, and indeed of all serial fiction, will not let a major character die forever. Even the character the ostensibly already "dead" Spectre and Deadman, both already ghosts, have themselves undergone several "deaths" and "reincarnations." Over time, in comic books, characters do not stay dead. The American monomyth must be satisfied so that at the end, status quo is maintained. The Joker, as a character, exists in this liminal limbo and is resurrected when the comic book ecology requires.

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128   In his book "The Number of The Beast (1980)" late Science Fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein proposed the term "ficton" by which he meant an indivisible unit of fictional narrative, but the term may also be used to mean "fictional universe". His characters went on to visit the Land of Oz and the Mars of the Edgar Rice Burroughs "Barsoom" stories. Although Heinlein obviously meant this as form of tongue in cheek explanation for Epistemology, Ontology and Teleology, and one that allowed him to combine his own fictional universes, Thus the DC "Universe" is its own "ficton" and when their universes intersect, as when Sherlock Holmes meets Batman, this intersection affects only the ficton within which they met. According to Heinlein, the number of possible fictons or universes is the "Number of the Beast" which he reads as 6 to the 6th power again to the 6th power or approximately $1.0314425\text{e}+28$ (1.0314425 followed by twenty-eight zeroes) fictons or universes.

129   Once dead and now resurrected DC heroes and villains include: Hawkman, Hawkgirl, 2 different Green Lanterns (Hal Jordan and Kyle Rayner), Green Arrow, Deadman, The Spectre, Superman, Superboy, Sinestro, Solomon Grundy and Captain Boomerang. For a more complete list see: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Resurrection.

130   For more on this idea see Lang and Trimble's "Whatever happened to the Man of Tomorrow: An Examination of the American Monomyth (1988)" where they explore the death of Superman and how superhero Captain America had to change. The point they make is that while character change is possible, these changes must happen in specific ways. Characters are immortal but they must change with the times. This is the reason that character's like Dick Tracy, Mary Worth and Mandrake the Magician no longer exists in the marketplace; they did not change.

9   Sexuality and the Single Joker

While distasteful to some, and possibly titillating to others, we must address
the Joker's sexuality, or lack thereof. On the Internet, one finds claims that the
Joker is queer coded, and, also on the Internet, there exists the phenomenon
of fan fiction, much of which features the Joker. The fact is that many fans
have written speculative, sometimes erotic or even pornographic fiction, also
known as fan fiction, or "Fanfic," which features the Joker alone and with other
characters, both canonical and not in situations of their own devising. "Fanfic
authors comment on and transform the canon through switched narrative per-
spectives, altered romantic combinations of characters, expansions of minor
characters or scenes, or a play with the temporal boundaries in prequels and
sequels (Leavenworth, 2015)." While fan fiction is then a means for fans to in-
teract with the material and to seemingly participate in the creative process, it
does allow them to negotiate the relationships and to play with those relation-
ships in ways that may not have been intended by the original author. Tom
Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) is an entire play
structured around two minor characters from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
and is in a sense an artistic version of fan fiction because it is essentially specu-
lation about two canonical characters, and it speculates on their relationship
and relationship to *Hamlet.* "Fan Fiction" interrogates the relationships of
canon and is speculative expression based on imagined experience of imagi-
nary characters, that were created elsewhere. These speculative stories play
with and respond to canon, and, importantly writers of canon may and do also
respond to fan fiction. The now canonical relationship and subsequent mar-
riage of Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy is one example of DC responding to fan
fiction and making it "reality" or canon. Responding in this manner is also an-
other example of the producers responding to the consumer in order to sell
more product for consumption. As Aidan J. Byrne and Samantha Fleming have
stated that "Given this relationship between the market and desire, and the
web's general move from privately funded to advertiser-funded hosting, a range
of erotic and pornographic fan fictions make it possible to interrogate claims
made about fan fiction as a space outside of neoliberal discourse. (Byrne and
Fleming, 2018)." Fan fiction, as a commodity, has been subsumed into part of
the entire economic process within which comic books and other media are
created, produced and consumed. Notably, the Joker does appear in a lot of fan
fiction, specifically those that appeal to prurient curiosity and especially of a
sadomasochistic variety. While one might be concerned, when one considers
the ages of those producing fan fiction, and the ages of those for whom it is
produced, this exploration begins to make sense, in terms of psycho-sexual

biology. Since most fan fiction is produced by and for those who are pubescent and just post pubescent; what we would call adolescent and young adult,[131] and these are those people in our culture who are the most curious and speculative about sexuality in our culture, so their fiction then speculates about the hypothetical sexuality and sensuality of fictional characters.

In canon, the Joker is rarely portrayed as a sexual being, at least in any consenting circumstance. Brian Azzarello's *Joker* (2008), depicts a truly unpleasant Joker, a cheap thug, one who spends time in strip bars, one who takes loyalty for granted and who makes revenge personal and who sexually assaults a henchman's wife as "punishment" for a perceived disloyalty. Notably, the Joker takes no pleasure in this assault; the rape is as clinical as surgery. The Joker does not assault for pleasure or for self-gratification and the woman in question is completely objectified by the authors as an extension of her husband, not as a separate being. This sexism parallels Moore's sexism in *The Killing Joke* where Barbara Gordon is similarly assaulted, not for any personal gratification, but to harm her father. This action objectifies Gordon and renders her into an extension of a man, her father. This portrayal of women as objects is often done by "bad guys" to demonstrate that they are "bad" and to further drive the plot.[132] That being stated, the Joker is by no means a good example of heteronormative behaviour or heterosexuality. When it comes to heterosexual depictions, the Joker is at best a sadist[133] and at worst a rapist.

Another question, then, is to address the speculation that the Joker is, or has been, "queer" or "queer coded." At this writing, a Change.org petition started by user "Elena Shestakova" from Russia, wants to "Make the Joker Gay again."[134] A simple search reveals that a large number of comic book blogs and fan fiction give credence to Shestakova's assertion, that the Joker was once gay. We must question if the Joker really ever gay and if he was, should we care? This is not a simple question, but it turns out to have a simple set of answers.

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131 Puberty and pubescence refer to biological stages. Adolescence and young adult hood refer to cultural stages.

132 The portrayal of women in comic books, as extensions of men or as objects to be harmed which moves the plot has been brought up extensively, but one of the best resources for a list of this nature is undoubtedly "Women in Refrigerators." To quote the website "Not every woman in comics has been killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies befall her, but given the following list (originally compiled by Gail Simone, with later additions and changes), it's hard to think up exceptions." What then follows is a list of such women.

133 This is not to stigmatize consensual BDSM and such relationships, however, the Joker appears to not care about consent.

134 https://www.change.org/p/make-the-joker-gay-again.

First, as we stated above, actor Caesar Romero who portrayed the Joker was indeed a closeted gay man. However, to confuse this assertion, many homosexual men, especially during that era, played heterosexual men in the movies and on television. Some such as Rock Hudson and Troy Donahue were also renowned "Ladies' men" on screen and lived their lives as closeted queer men. While the need to closet is tragic, the fact that they were successfully closeted just speaks to their prowess as actors. It does not render the characters they portrayed as queer. If this was so we could then say that Gal Gadot's portray of Wonder Woman renders Wonder Woman a Jewish Israeli, an assertion which is absurd.

Second, the actual, "evidence" is that according to a zine[135] written by Hal Schuster, "When [artist] Neal Adams did his own version of the Joker in 1973 he decided that the Joker was and always had been homosexual. So [,] he not only returned the original ruthlessness to the character, but added veiled references to this aspect as well (Schuster, 1986)."[136] One blog even follows Schuster's assertion with a horrifyingly sadomasochistic image from Kevin Smith's Batman narrative *Cacophony* (2008)[137] as further evidence that the Joker is queer. The problem with this "evidence" is that while the image Smith conjures up for his own narrative are meant to be vile, disturbing and sadomasochistic in nature, there is no absolutely zero evidence that any of this image is meant to be sexual. Instead, they could be merely signs of psychopathy and mental illness. While Schuster's "evidence" is quoted by many online fan blogs, and even by Shestakova in her petition, there is absolutely no other evidence, aside from Shuster's assertion that this assertion was in any manner the truth.[138] While Schuster's assertion is interesting, it is, at its absolute best, merely anecdotal.

While some may wish the Joker to be queer, in reality the Joker represents, as long-time Batman writer Paul Dini says, "Permission for artists and actors and writers to go to their darkest places (Dini and Risso, 2016)." Smith's image may be dark and disturbing, but it is supposed to be because so is the Joker. The Joker represents the dark, the disturbing, the evil, the things we in the "normal" human world repress on a day to day basis and which find their way out in sadomasochistic fan fiction and in comic books. Ultimately, while some may wish to associate these dark and disturbing sadomasochistic images with

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135   A zine, short for "fanzine" is a magazine written about a particular subject by amateurs for other fans.

136   Schuster is trying to say that the Joker was "queer coded."

137   This blog bases its claim on further "evidence" in Batman Cacophony (2008) where the Joker says that he wants to sodomize Batman's dead body. https://lgbtgroupproject.word press.com/2014/08/11/queer-villainry-the-joker/ retrieved August 23, 2018 at 10:57 AM EDT.

138   Attempts were made to reach Neal Adams vie email, but we were unable to reach him.

"queer" or "gay" coding, this association says more about those wishing to do about the associating than it does about the Joker himself. As above, attempts to hypostatize the Joker only end up acting as an index to our thoughts, like a Rorschach.

Further, even if the Joker was "supposed" to be homosexual, or a sadomasochist or, *ad absurdum*, a Freemason, but nobody knew, does it really matter? Did it matter thirteen years after the fact, when Schuster published the "fact" that the Joker was supposed to queer, in his zine? Most importantly, does it matter today, over forty-five years later? Moreover, do queer folks require a homicidal, dissocial, psychopathic, sadomasochist who represents the dark and unseemly sides of the human psyche to stand as a form of representation of queerness in media? Is there not a danger in conflating the Joker's mental state and homicidal tendencies with his supposed closeted queerness? The answers to these questions, as far as we understand them, would appear to all be moot. If the Joker was queer then, this queerness does not affect our understanding of who he is today. Even more importantly, the Joker's "queerness" is impossible, at this writing, to substantiate, historically. As mentioned above, the Joker does not seem to have any real sex life or real relationships, despite the existence of non-canonical fan fiction[139] and despite the existence of Harley Quinn[140] and her once great affection for him. Really then, the Joker resonates with us only in those cases where we also resonate with the creator of the work. Whether this resonating has anything to do with hypothetical archetypes is only true only if one believes in archetypes.

What of the Joker and heterosexuality? While he does perform indignities to Barbara Gordon's body, and while he does assault Johnny Frost's wife in Azzarello's narrative, one might argue that the Joker's actions are not sexual, but punitive. Both Frost's wife and Barbara Gordon are treated as objects or chattel property, and the indignities are meant to hurt and to punish the men in their lives, with the women as collateral damage. This is not to lead us to understand the Joker as some sort of sadistic libertine, but rather that the Joker, unlike the "normal" sadist who practices consent and derives sexual pleasure,

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139   For some examples of such fiction see https://www.wattpad.com/stories/joker/hot.

140   Dr. Harleen Quinzel, AKA Harley Quinn, has, in the past, suffered for many years in a relationship with the Joker, which at the very nicest can best be described as merely sadomasochistic or abusive. As she has been recently retconned, Harley, is a legitimately queer character and, in her latest incarnation, she has found a mutual and respectful love with another DC villain, Pamela Lillian Isley, AKA Poison Ivy. https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/poison-ivy-harley-quinn-couple-canon/. This relationship is notable because, despite the former code that prohibited depictions of homoeroticism, both Harley and Poison Ivy are both women.

does not obtain even "normal" pleasure even from the harms he inflicts on others. This contrasts with the stand-up comedian in *The Killing Joke* who we see in a heteronormative relationship with a woman, that she loves him, and that they are about to have a child together. Not only was this proto-Joker "normatively heterosexual," we can glean that his sexual prowess would seem to mitigate other of his other perceived short comings since, despite the fact that he cannot support a family, his wife says, "at least you're good in the sack." It is not possible to compare this "normal" man with the "sadistic" Joker.

10   In the Name of the Joker

As noted above, we conflate evil with mental illness, and while the Joker may or may not be mentally ill, there is no question that we regard him as some sort of evil. It is discomfiting to realize that the Joker, in many ways, reflects our own baser qualities, the ones, that we hope are covered in a veneer of civilization. This is how the Joker horrifies, that as Paul Dini says above, he represents the evil and depravity that exists inside of us, should we let go (Dini and Risso, 2016). The Joker, we may propose, is also a personification of "evil," in a secular and theological sense.

As we determined in the section "The Joker on the Couch," our culture conflates the ideas of mental illness and evil. The term "illness" pertains to a medical model of the world and the term evil pertains to an ethical, moral and religious model. Our culture still makes the presumption that "healthy" individuals and "healthy" cultures behave in an ethical and moral manner, because we conflate moral wellness with mental wellness. Also, as we noted above, we excuse those who are "guilty with an explanation." The Joker not only behaves in an "immoral" or "unethical" manner he also lacks the excuse of what we might call a rational explanation. In short, the Joker does, what we call evil, and this evil lacks a rational basis of any sort. It defies logic. Theologian Paul Tillich, would call the Joker a "symbol" of evil in the religious sense of the word (Tillich, 1958). Tillich defines a symbol as having four qualities. These qualities are: a figurative quality (by which he means a metonymy or synecdoche so that in a sense it includes Peircean iconic representation, such as the Joker's face which may be seen to represent madness), a perceptibility (by which he means that something "intrinsically invisible is made visible" but not in the numinous sense and by this Tillich means an idea or an ideal, or in the Joker's case, evil), an innate power (and by this Tillich presupposes an intrinsic numinous quality to the shape or form of the object and in the Joker's case we can say that he represents madness, in the Foucaultian sense) and, finally, its acceptability to

others as representing such.[141] While Peirce's Semiotics would say that a symbol represents by convention and in a specific context (Atkins, 2013), Tillich's idea of a symbol is a Peircean symbol which is further contextualized as "religious" or having to do with matters religious.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the Joker's context is evil mayhem and murder, and also that evil is conflated as a religious as well as a mental health matter. It is therefore possible to propose that the Joker is a modern and also secular "religious" symbol, in this case of senseless evil, chaos, mayhem, sadism and destruction. This idea lends itself to the archetypes as proposed by Jung, but Jung's archetypes are not necessarily religious and that Tillich's symbols are by definition religious.[142]

This is not to state outright that the Joker is a religious figure who represents evil, rather that in this secular world that we have psychological needs. One of our needs is a way to represent the apparent chaos of what we call evil. The Joker is a clown, he is not a nice clown, or a good clown or even a particularly funny clown, he is an evil clown. He is the clown of nightmares and the clown of madness. Yes, the Joker is a clown and clowns are transgressive, but the Joker represents the dark side of the carnival, of the fleshly, which is transgression and unreason without a safety net or any limits at all. The Joker is not a circus clown and although depicted at the circus, he is of another breed, the particularly American breed, the evil clown, the clown of nightmares and horror films.

Historically, the Joker is rooted in the culture of North American comic books and in stories which are based in the criminal gangs, the so called "Cosa Nostra" of the early part of the century. Led by such colorfully named gangsters as Benny "Bugsy" Siegel, Charlie "Lucky" Luciano and "Scarface" Al Capone, of whom were dangerous sociopathic killers, these men represented the dark and venial side of the Jazz age. A "Joker" would certainly not stand out. Despite prohibition, alcohol was readily available and it was supplied by such men as

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141   We not going to debate the existence of phenomena such as religious power and whether or not they are innate, as opposed to constructed, however, if we posit that "numinousness," or the experience of the holy, is a human experience and is later constructed, we may propose that the experience of its opposite, the experience of evil, is also in a similar sense, religious. Then, the Joker is certainly a symbol in Tillich's sense of the word, as he represents the opposite of this experience. For more on this see Tillich's article "The Religious Symbol (1958)."

142   Tillich, as a Christian, was interested in "goodness" and the transcendent symbolism of the positive and best of human faith, which he then characterized as "Ultimate Concern" and, we must remember that for Tillich, the most transcendent of those concerns was "Christ on the Cross (Tillich, 1957)." Representing "evil" is similar to representing "good" so that while Tillich is obviously interested in "positive" religious symbols, that it is also possible to have "negative" symbols.

Luciano, Siegel and Capone, who were also known for running prostitution rings, for illegal lotteries, also known as "running numbers," and for protection "rackets" amongst other things, and Siegel, not the worst of the lot, was known to be associated with "Murder Incorporated," a gang which acted as the enforcement arm of the Italian American and Jewish American criminal mobs, both in New York and elsewhere (Simmons and Lasker, 1981). One may presume the Joker and the other comic book criminals got their nicknames in a warped form of homage to these men, whose exploits were heard on the radio and read about in newspapers and who were household names. The heroic exploits of such men as Eliot Ness were also commonplace on the news and would have formed a narrative template for the detective as the hero of serial fiction. These were all part of the cultural ethos.

It is because of his many origins, or rather, his lack of any specific origin, that the Joker, as a sign, is extremely mutable. The Joker, as a sign, is not fixed in terms of history or even in terms of who he is. The Joker comes from nowhere and he is no one. Two Face is attorney Harvey Dent, Cat Woman is Selina Kyle, The Penguin is Oswald Cobblepot, Poison Ivy is Pamela Lillian Isley, Harley Quinn is Harleen Quinzel and the Riddler is Edward Nigma.[143] We still have no idea who the Joker is. We know the faces behind the masks of the other criminals, and they can remove their masks. We do not know the face of the Joker except for the clown face which has become, for us, a representation of capricious madness and evil. Importantly the Joker's face is just that, his face, it is no longer a mask, it is who he is. From our point of view, the Joker could be anyone who is "having a bad day (Moore and Bolland, 1988)." Ultimately, that is one reason why the Joker fascinates us, because we too have had bad days and we can identify.

11   Conclusion

While the journey to find the Joker has been, in many ways, meandering, the information gleaned in this manner has allowed us to understand the Joker in a much fuller way than if we had followed a seemingly more traditionally straight forward route. The Joker is not "merely" anything and attempting to hypostatize him results in, perhaps, understanding a specific Joker, but, on the other hand, we really cannot say anything specific about the character of the Joker, as attempts to do so just result in multitudinous exceptions. Even the attempt to understand the Joker as located North American specifically as

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143   Edward Nigma, the Riddler is an expansion of E. Nigma or "enigma", "a riddle."

a phenomenon is disrupted by the existence of the Japanese anime style movie *Batman Ninja.*

The Joker grew out of a cultural need for a certain kind of cheap entertainment that reflected the time in which he was created, a time which was reflective of the Great Depression and of the criminal gangs who grew out of Prohibition and those who were caught in the poverty of the economic depression needed some form of escape which was provided, in part, by comic books. This entertainment reflected the world of the poor so, it was made specifically to be cheap and to appeal to the multitudes; it was cheap both in the inexpensive sense and in the sense that it did not pretend to be high art. Comic books were supposed to have been disposable, so that even the paper used at the time is unstable. While it may not have been on purpose, these comic books of that era physically degrade when exposed to air and self-destruct over time.

Comic books featured costumed heroes and villains. Of costumes, the Joker is a clown, of the North American variety, which is different than European clowns. He is an evil clown, an early example of the genre, however, as he keeps changing through time, the Joker has also become more and more representative of the genre. In this sense he is his own descendant. He is Joker, both father of Joker and son of Joker. Of course, the Joker cannot remove the clown makeup. He is irrevocably and indelibly marked, in a sense tattooed with the sign of the Joker, which is the white face, red lips and green hair.

The Joker is also an exemplar of how characters behave in serial fiction. Any comic book or serial fiction character is a sign and this sign and also a series of signs and also sign systems unto themselves. These sign systems point beyond themselves and are seemingly meaningful but ultimately reduce into nothing. Rather than continuing *ad infinitum*, these signs collapse into a dearth of meaning, which ultimately results in null meaning. Moreover, we have learned that, rather than being rare, these sign systems, these "hyposigns," are common. In a sense because they can mean anything, ultimately, like a sign without a context, they mean nothing.

We have also addressed the "problem" of the Joker's sexuality. While some writers have claimed that the Joker is "queer" or somehow "queer coded," our research has successfully debunked this particular myth. The only "official" source of this supposed fact, the only so-called evidence, is a fan based and fan published magazine,[144] and they do not attribute any source to this claim. Attempt to reach the artist Neal Adams were futile. Every other, "reference" to the Joker being queer, as far as we could find, cites this one piece of un-

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144   The authors have obtained a hard copy of this magazine.

substantiated evidence. Ultimately, the claim that the Joker is "queer coded" is based on rumour and speculation. Moreover, were we to speculate that this speculation is true, this information changes nothing at all about the Joker. Again, speculatively, if the Joker has any sexuality at all, he is a sadomasochist who enjoys causing others pain and humiliation to others without the constraints of safety or consent. We may then state positively, that since none of his actions appears to give him any sexual pleasure, that the Joker is asexual and aromantic. While some of the things he says may shock and disgust us, we may attribute that to the Joker wanting to cause a reaction, his mental illness, not the fact that he is exhibiting sexuality. Really then, any sex life attributed to the Joker is an external projection of the reader's own desires and that any sexuality attributed to the Joker really tells us more about the writer and the reader than about the Joker.

To survive as a character and, more importantly, to survive and to be marketed as viable commercial property, the Joker has had to change through the years. He, as an object, has existed over 80 years in multiple incarnations, with no fixed identity, no fixed history, and no fixed origin story. Instead, he exists in the eternal and ephemeral now so that who he is and how he is, defines for us who we are, because he is essentially a blank slate, representing the tastes of the authors and editors, and also of the public. Because the public forum is so immediate, we can know immediately that the public loved Heath Ledger's version of the Joker and hated Jared Leto's version. Moreover, because he has no fixed past and no fixed identity, the Joker can have any identity that we choose. He is a polymorph who fits as a catch all and this is one reason that he has such longevity.

There are questions that do remain unresolved. While we did visit the ideas of imaginary characters and of characters who represent themselves in fiction a further discussion of this topic is definitely warranted. While much has been written about the philosophy of imaginary objects in the past, one area that is yet to be discussed is the blurring of reality and fantasy, which occurs when real personages portray fictionalized versions of themselves. In what way does the physicist Stephen Hawking who portrays himself on *The Simpsons* or on *The Big Bang Theory*, relate to the physicist Stephen Hawking who wrote *A Brief History of Time.* The relation would initially appear to be simple, however, it would be worth investigating the relation of fictional Hawking to "real" Hawking. Another example of the above is the relation of the fictious autobiography, such as the one written by Chuck Barris, to Barris himself.

Unfortunately, because of the times to which the Joker points, our discussions have, of necessity dealt with heteronormative, CIS gendered men. We

must not be untrue to the material and look for a queer Joker where none exists, nor look for homosexuality, or any sexuality, where it was repressed or absent. Any other stance is unfair to the material itself. The Joker was not interested in romance and any assumptions that we make about performativity and gender must be based in the era in which the material was produced. It is not that comics books were repressed, sexually, it is that they were not allowed to express sexuality at all, and even any heteronormative sexuality that might be expressed was highly encoded in culture normative ritual.

Ultimately though, the Joker is just a commercial property and as such he is worthy of safeguarding. We can ask questions now which even in months may have completely different answers. One example is that earlier in this work I stated that the Joker would not appear on the television show Gotham. As I type this sentence, and as Gotham is in its final year of shooting, it looks like Jerome may turn out to be the Joker after all. Because of the marketplace anything can happen as long as it satisfies the consumer's demand. It is the triadic relationship between the consumer, the producer and the medium itself that will ultimately decide the sign of the Joker.

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