

Madeleine Salman
msalman@bu.edu

The Joker Misses the Punchline

At a seedy comedy club deep in the bowels of Gotham city a sickly-looking man stands in front of the microphone blinded by the spotlight. His suit is the color of dried blood and his greasy face wears a tortured smile. The man is performing stand-up, but in a room full of people he is the only one laughing.

This scene from Todd Phillips *The Joker* perfectly encapsulates the tone of 2019's most controversial hit. The film is set in late 1970s Gotham and follows Arthur Fleck's bloody descent into madness as he transforms into DC comic's infamous villain, the Joker. But this movie isn't your average superhero in spandex reboot. Phillips uses the Joker's gritty origins to deliver a bleak representation of wealth disparity and mental illness in present-day urban America. However, the stylized 1970s aesthetic and edgy social commentary that give *The Joker* its purpose repeatedly fails to make any meaningful impact throughout its two-hour run time. The Joker may be laughing, but he doesn't have much to say.

On the surface, *The Joker* is made to look like the fast-paced dramas of the late 1970s. Think of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* or *The King of Comedy*. In fact, Todd Phillips cites them as the primary visual influences on *The Joker*. But *The Joker* is more knockoff than homage. What defines Scorsese's films is their unpredictability; the direction and scene blocking keeps the audience in suspense about whose perspective they are going to see next. Additionally, Scorsese builds a sense of isolated madness by jump cutting between details and wide shots. This disorients the audience and pulls them into the character's psychological state. Although isolation, madness, and disorientation are all central themes in *The Joker*, Phillips foregoes the subtle storytelling and instead occupies himself with replicating Scorsese's grimy color palette

and washed out lighting. Phillips does a good job at visually immersing the audience in the films depressing tone, but the cinematography feels like a flat filter. It just doesn't penetrate the central plot as compellingly as the visuals in Scorsese's films. Leaving us with a sequence well composed but emotional empty pictures. Phillips gives us pennies on Scorsese's cinematic dollar, and I left the theater feeling shortchanged.

The Joker's visuals aren't the only disappointment. The film is smothered by several tonal issues that can all attributed to its director. For starters, the Joker's attempt at a bold commentary is mired down by its own provocativeness. Rather than presenting a thoughtful criticism on wealth and power in America, Phillips bludgeons us with one "woke" set piece after another. In one particular scene, Arthur Fleck is on a late-night talk show with his idol, Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro). After graphically murdering Murray on air, Fleck turns to the in-studio audience and delivers a call to arms. He tells the "have-nots" to rise up against the "haves" and to extract justice by setting the city ablaze and the destroying inequality it represents. Here, Phillips touches on real issues that deserve to be explored in mainstream film but presents them in a way that is all-too-obviously done for shock value and tweetability. Ultimately cancelling out their intended effect. Essentially, *The Joker* is like a goth girl in high school. Its more concerned with looking edgy and being "different" than with offering any new ideas or thoughtful insight about the social issues it's trying to embody.

Phillips also condescends to his audience. He relies on large displays of civil unrest, violence, and outbursts of uncontrollable laughter to tell the story of a mentally ill man struggling in a broken city. This in your face style filmmaking may work for Todd Phillip's other films like *The Hangover*, because the outrageous punchlines require obvious set ups. But cerebral, political films like *The Joker* require a lighter touch. For the film to succeed, Phillips

has to trust that his audience will understand that a truly broken society is one that has accepted injustice as the norm. The idea of the Joker as a rallying symbol would be interesting for a traditional superhero film, but in a genre defying movie such as this it feels condescending and insincere.

For me, what saves the film is Joaquin Phoenix's performance as The Joker. The intensity of his facial expressions and the vulnerability he channels in the first half of the film inspire me to feel empathetic towards a psychotic, murderous clown (which is something I never thought I'd say). Additionally, the dancer-like quality that Phoenix's brings to his performance adds an extra layer to the Joker's heart-breaking madness. In one pivotal scene, Arthur Fleck confronts the reality of his situation through a ballet solo in a dimly lit public bathroom. In those beautiful shots, Phoenix more closely resembles Natalie Portman's trembling grace in *The Black Swan* than Heath Ledger's unhinged insanity in *The Dark Knight*. Phoenix carries The Joker and makes the film a profound artistic experience in spite of its critical issues.

To close, I think that The Joker is an okay film made by an overly ambitious director. Todd Phillips is out right terrible, but the film's style and desire to be a part of something bigger than itself proved to be too much for a director known primarily for screwball comedies. The Joker has some real poignant and powerful moments. But more often, the film works in spite of Phillips and not because of him.