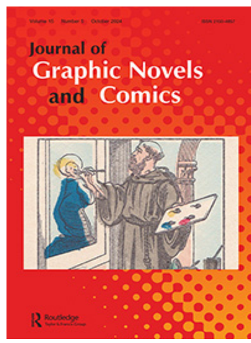

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Joker stages: popular performance and theatrical sensibilities in Joker comics and film adaptations

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ABSTRACT
Clown, performer, entertainer. The Joker's stage identities and innate theatricality have many facets. This article explores the violent clown's theatrical sensibilities across a range of Joker comics and films with the aim of opening up a conversation between the present and the past – between contemporary Joker 'stage performances' unfolding in comics and a powerful mix of historical contexts and cultural continuities that, we argue, continue to inform Joker stages in comics and film. The Joker's theatrical sensibilities, this study shows, are influenced by the aesthetics and cultural backgrounds of three intertwined phenomena: (un)happy comic performers from fictional films, stage hypnotists, and 'theatres of pain'. From these three phenomena emerges a dialogue with historical precedents of comic performance, hypnotic spectacle and the representation of violence (sometimes with comedic elements) that not only refers back to the late nineteenth century, but continues to shape the Joker's identity and stories, and helps us to better understand the character's aesthetic achievements and cultural power.

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Welcome, Creeps and Creepettes, to the **Killing Joke Club**!
('A Savage Innocence' in Ellsworth et al. 2019, 119)

'I'm the most sadistic comedian who ever lived' (Whitta et al. 2020), a 'faithful **court jester**' [whose job it is] to **entertain**" (Snyder, Capullo, and Clapion 2014).[1] This is how the Joker – DC Comics' infamous 'murderous nightmare clown' (Tynion et al. 2021) – introduces himself. 'I want to create things that no one has ever seen before', he explains, 'I have always considered myself more of an **entertainer**, really.' Not surprisingly, Joker's therapist links the violent clown's criminal machinations to 'performance art', and experiences their conversations as 'part of an act' (Lemire, Sorrentino, and Bellaire 2019). Accordingly, the Joker is sometimes perceived as a performer who specialises in comedy and pathos, i.e. the realm of mimes. 'His skin, the presentation ... He's not

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a clown – He's a **mime**. And what is a mime? Pantomime is the art of one actor playing all parts so well that the unreal becomes real before your eyes' (Snyder et al. 2020). Joker himself calls his violent delights a performance – 'See?! Little gasoline, flints in the shoes and . . . I've got a whole new routine!' (Snyder et al. 2015). He is the mentor of stage magicians and 'natural showmen who love driving [their] audiences past the breaking point' ('Trust' in Ellsworth et al. 2019, 165) and also heads, owns and/or destroys entertainment spaces, such as amusement parks (e.g. Higgins et al. 2013; Tomasi et al. 2020), circuses and freak shows (Moore et al. 2019[1988]) and TV shows (Hall et al. 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Nelson et al. 2022). In many stories, the Joker appears in theatres, improvised theatre spaces – such as the 'Got-Ham (S)Laughterhouse' (Rosenberg et al. 2023) – or comedy manors. The latter includes one that was 'once a renowned London Music Hall where the greats convulsed audiences . . . entertainers like Chaplin, Fields, the Marx Brothers' ('This one'll kill you, Batman!' in Ellsworth et al. 2019, 70). In sum, the Joker is associated with different genres and spaces of entertainment, comedy and theatricality throughout his comic book worlds and multiple storylines.

The research literature aptly confirms: 'Joker is a performer' (Bender 2022, 136), with studies exploring his multifaceted clown dimensions (e.g. Howell 2021; Jürgens 2014; Jürgens, Tscharke and Brocks 2022; Welsh 2023, 667–668), including discussions of Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*, Joaquin Phoenix's *Joker* and the original DC Comics graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (2019[1988]) in light of clown history, hobo and (Chaplin-like) tramp types of comic performers (Doidge and Rosenfeldt 2022, 72). The effect of different stage-based frames (comic vs. burlesque frame) and their potential for both audience identification and comic corrective has also been analysed with a focus on *The Killing Joke* and its film adaptation in a recent study (Welsh 2023), which shares an interest in the role of affective spatial locations with some other topical publications examining transitory and unhomely 'in-between locales' to shape Joker stories (Redmond 2022; Deeksha 2022). More so, pointing to the 'bleached skin and extreme rictus grin' of Tim Burton's Joker and his playful way of disguising and exaggerating everyday objects as well as Batman's tech toys, S. Ní Fhlainn calls the 1989 *Batman* film a 'theatrical revenge narrative' (without further exploring the theatricality, Ní Fhlainn 2022, 122). This, and an anthropological study of the clown facets of the Joker character, which briefly refers to Roman or Greek Shakespearean tragedy and mentions the Joker's theatricality (though without defining it, Wade 2022, 151), as well as a (comparative) study on the Joker's and Lady Gaga's love of the ostentatious and performative (Garneau 2015), are among the few research publications on the Joker's ubiquitous association with the stage and theatre. The question then arises: How can the theatricality, and by extension the Joker's theatrical sensibilities, be captured and defined?

A. Howell's analysis of the identity of Arthur Fleck/Joker in the 2019 *Joker* film provides a productive starting point for exploring the character's theatrical sensibilities, suggesting that the eponymous clown is informed 'by images and ideologies of entertainment' and 'show biz aesthetics' from 'the campy comedy of Cesar Romero's candy-coloured prankster (*Batman*, ABC 1966–68), to Jack Nicholson's pop-funk-driven criminal set-pieces (Batman 1989), to Mark Hamill's richly theatrical voicework for various animated Jokers, each channelling Claude Rains' tour-de-force performance as *The Invisible* 80 *Man* (1933)' (Howell 2021, 79; Garneau 2015; for explanations of Joker character fluctuations see; Hassoun 2015, 3). We argue that, beyond these points of reference, it is the history and cultural context of the Joker

character that feed into his theatricality and theatrical sensibilities by providing clues and pointers to early films and to the popular live performance where stars like Charlie Chaplin and W.C. Fields began their careers. The Joker's theatrical sensibilities find their genesis in nineteenth-century music hall, vaudeville, or the more *osé* burlesque and even Grand Guignol (a form of violent theatre). Drawing on the links to those popular stages, early film comedy and literary contexts, this article aims to open a conversation between the present and past. Between contemporary Joker 'stage performances' unfolding in recently-published comics and a powerful mélange of historical contexts and cultural continuity, we argue that Joker narratives refer back to late nineteenth-century stage aesthetics and continues to inform Joker stages in comics and film. Aware of the collaborative intricacies of Joker (comics) creation (Sartain 2021), this study approaches Joker material – comics and films in particular – through the lens of intertextuality. A strategy for producing discourse coined by Julia Kristeva, intertextuality is defined as the creative or interpretative transposition of signs or sign systems into another, leading to a mosaic of quotations by way of citations, allusions, borrowings, adaptations, imitations and the like. All of these elements highlight the dialogical relationship of one text (defined as something we make meaning from, so a text can be a film, see Jürgens et al. 2024; McKee 2003) with other texts. 'If every text is an intertext', Frank D'Angelo explains, 'then every intertext is a context that issues invitations for readers or viewers to adopt a certain perspective for reading or viewing. Intertextuality can be said to create its own contexts in addition to the immediate rhetorical situation' (D'Angelo 2009, 43). This approach to texts highlights intertextuality as 'a profitable source of ideas about arrangement, especially about narrative structure' (D'Angelo 2009, 44) and invites us to discuss narrative patterns, tropes and themes *across media*. It is also a prompt to explore the fictional power of characters like the Joker, who are not always the authors of their own stories. Through this lens, this study shows that the Joker's theatrical sensibilities are essentially shaped by the aesthetics and cultural backdrop of three entangled phenomena: (un)happy comic performers from fictional films, stage mesmerisers (also called hypnotists) and 'theatres of pain'. From these three phenomena emerges a dialogue with historical precedents of comic performance, hypnotic spectacle and the representation of violence (sometimes with comedic elements) that not only continues to influence the Joker's identity and stories, but also helps us to unpack the character's aesthetic achievements and cultural power.

(Un)happy comic performers and the voyeuristic thrill

Alongside other films from the 1920s and 1930s, the creators of the Joker character – Jerry Robinson, Bob Kane and Bill Finger – were inspired by Paul Leni's 1928 *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) (see Andrea 2011, 98; Couch 2010, 8, 9, 36, 47–50; Prawer 1980). Based on an 1869 novel by Victor Hugo, *The Man Who Laughs* film drama follows the story of Gwynplaine (Conrad Veidt), a comic performer travelling with an eighteenth-century carnival freakshow, who was surgically disfigured as a child by a king – his face distorted into a wide, permanent grin – and discovers that he is the missing son of a disgraced nobleman. While Jerry Robinson came up with the concept for the Joker, based on a playing card, Bill Finger had the idea of bringing Veidt into the Joker conversation.[2] 'Bill, who was an avid reader,' Bob Kane remembers,

> had read a 'photo-play' edition of this book, made from the screenplay, and he showed me the photo of Conrad Veidt as Gwynplaine. He had a leering, grotesque grin and sad, funereal eyes. 'Here's a picture of the Joker character,' Bill exclaimed. 'Copy it and I'll write the first Joker story using the practical joker theme as a running plot against Batman.'(Kane and Andrae 1989, 105)

Resembling a grotesque blend of human clown and death mask, '[t]he makeup used by Veidt crystallised the Joker's grinning countenance' (Andrea 2011, 91; Kane and Andrae 1989, 107). 'His face laughed, not his thought', Hugo's novel clarifies. 'It was an automatic laugh, and all the more irresistible because it was petrified. No one could withstand that gaping' (Hugo 1888, 291). It was thus the 'exaggerated nature' of the film character that led to the 'distorted, carnivalesque [Joker] villain' (Couch 2010, 50), a reference that appears again and again in Joker stories. In an early story, for example, the superclown steals a painting entitled 'The Laughing Man' (*The Joker* #5, Pasko et al. 1976), while in a more contemporary story he is called 'The pale man. The one who laughs at us' (Snyder et al. 2015). In *Batman: It's Joker Time* (#2), among the Joker origin stories explored is one in which he is mutilated into '**he who laughs** . . . a **pariah**' while in another one he is shown in front of a poster that reads 'Conrad Veidt "the Man who laughs"' (Hall et al. 2000b, 11 and 30). The Joker's identification with both 'unhappy' comic performers and unhappy, 'violent laughter' is arguably a connection to the *commedia dell'arte* (an early form of professional theatre, popular between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries), whereby the *lazzi* (a repertoire of physical comedy gags)[3] and the peasant *zanni* clown 'contributed to fiendish characters including *Arlecchino*'. Such 'characters were believed to hold purely evil personality traits' (Belkhiri 2023, 38). *Arlecchino*, considered an ancestor of the Joker, 'was a narcissist with no empathy, capable of changing appearance and tricking people' (Belkhiri 2023, 38). *Batman: Nosferatu* provides another example. Here, the 'theatre' is the site of monster-making entertainment reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, when a 'miraculous **Laughing Man**!', or a version of the Joker, is created and presented (Lofficier et al. 2017, 155). Jokers make other explicit references to the theatre or spectacle in a way that relies on linguistic ambiguities, double-meanings and trickery like some *lazzi*. The *lazzo* of the flies, for instance, features a servant declaring that there are no flies in his master's house, but it is full of people, in the same way that the Joker plays with words when tormenting his victims, like the phrase 'let's put a smile on that face' which presages their disfigurement in *The Dark Knight* (dir. Christopher Nolan 2008). As one would expect, the contemporary allusions to the lineage of such dubious, unhappy-but-laughing characters often elicit violent laughter, such as when the Joker sponsors the transformation of a Harley Quinn fan into a Joker, including facial reconstruction (Palmiotti et al. 2017). Many comics keep adding to the referencing tradition, such as *Batman: The Man who Laughs* (Brubaker et al. 2008) and the very recent series *The Joker: The Man who Stopped Laughing* (2023–2024). The latter includes a number of 'laughing men' with surgically altered, Joker-lookalike physiognomies, references to Leni's film, as well as extensive reflections on the essence of comedy. We thus learn from the Joker: 'A good joke is like a trap. – You set everything up for your audience. – They think they know what's coming. – And then the twist' (Rosenberg et al. 2023).

While Gwynplaine, the unhappy comic performer who literally embodies physical violence and ambivalent/ambiguous laughter in *The Man Who Laughs*, is the most prominent foil for the Joker, other (un)happy clowns also make regular guest

appearances in Joker stories, adding their own twist to Joker's clown pedigree. One of the covers of the recent comic book story *Harley loves Joker*, for example, shows the Joker, in full purple splendour, aggressively staring at Harley in front of a poster featuring a white clown head with the words 'Laugh, Clown, Laugh' (Dini et al. 2015). *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* is a 1928 silent drama film starring Lon Chaney, who was hailed as 'one of the world's top motion picture attractions' (Blake 1993, 3), about yet another hapless comic performer. Directed by former sideshow performer Tod Browning,[4] Chaney is associated with the cultural intertext of circus and freakshows (Studlar 1996). These intertexts, in particular, invoke what has been categorised as 'ways of staring' (see Garland-Thomson 2009), which range from the curious to the exploitative, and have accompanying variations of agency accorded to the spectator and object or subject of the gaze. The gaze of the freak show audience, for instance, implies an ambiguous degree of agency for the 'freak', partly due, as pointed out by Bruce Henderson, to the blurred or absent boundaries between the character, their performance and their physicality (Henderson 2010, 456).

Following on from the question of Chaney's agency in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* is the more assertive dynamic of the cast of Tod Browning's film *Freaks* (1932), and by extension, where control or agency figure in the Joker's storylines. A favourite pastime of the unhappy–happy Joker clown across his manifold iterations and storylines is to exert control over others. He achieves this through a variety of means. Weapons, science or more obscure devilry are all deployed (Jürgens, Tscharke, and Brocks 2022; Welsh 2023), as well as methods, means and strategies that tap into popular forms of entertainment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was the heyday of circus arts and popular performance (Jürgens 2020; Jürgens and Hildbrand 2022). Most prominent among these, beyond the attractions of the circus (including freakshows), are forms of mesmerism – that is, the spectacle of hypnosis on stage (also called hypnotism or magnetism) – *fête foraine* (funfairs) and amusement parks,[5] and Grand Guignol. The Grand Guignol was a now-legendary theatrical form operating in Paris between 1897 and 1962 that specialised in plays of violence, horror and sadism. These, along with late nineteenth- and some twentieth-century fictional narratives are referenced in Joker stories (as we will see below) and create a continuum of hypnotic and violent popular spectacle that incorporates additional elements of popular performance such as Punch (Guignol in French) and Judy. These forms of entertainment also appear as prominent sources of inspiration in fiction through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, such as the Victorian-era 'sensation novel,' a melodramatic genre that possessed a theatrical sensibility of its own, and spoke to the same mixture of public fascination with or fear of violence, taboo and social anxieties of the age (Hughes 1980).

In the same way, the presence of the freakshow or more simply the menagerie and displays of various artefacts or remains melded the scientific with the mysterious. It was billed as an edifying experience and therefore socially acceptable to view (see Py and Ferenczi 1987). The Nightwing comics sequences in *Nightwing Volume 3: Death of the Family* (Higgins et al. 2013) feature a nightmarishly violent entertainment space populated by Joker-made zombie creatures as an example of Joker-shaped 'amusement' spaces. They offer a perversion of the original circus or travelling show as a theatrical presentation of ostensibly educational attractions, and in some ways are perhaps spot-on. Historically, a common feature was the inclusion of museums and the display of different species from the menagerie. In this way, there was an argument in favour of the circus as

having an educational function, but also offering a voyeuristic thrill to see curios freakshows, and dangerous animals. In practice, the menagerie and freakshow function as 'theatres of pain' via exploitation if not explicitly inflicting pain on characters and inhabitants, with a constant sense of display and voyeurism attached. The exploitative gaze of the spectator and voyeuristic thrill of the funfair or circus are not limited to the living: the educational aspect of the displays was sometimes of specimens, famously P.T. Barnum's 'Feejee Mermaid' (made from the carcasses of a monkey and fish stitched together), but also human bodies like Joice Heth, whom Barnum had billed as a supercentarian and nursemaid to George Washington (Reiss 2001, 2–3). Upon Heth's death, Barnum announced a public autopsy and charged admission (3). This display is not far removed from something done by the Joker, when he exhumes the corpses of circus performers and their animals, though he does quip that '. . . digging up the bodies of former Haly's circus members **is** a bit theatrical, even for **me**' (Higgins et al. 2013).

Mesmerising and parasitic: 'we are the Joker!'

Medical notions of hypnotism and tales of hypnotic suggestion in the popular press fuelled the popular imagination in the late nineteenth century, stimulating its use in fiction, magic shows and cabaret for entertainment purposes, inspiring writers and stage performers alike, especially hypnotists, who put their subjects under hypnosis and had them perform 'tricks' in their externally controlled ('somnambulistic') state. Hypnotised audience members were asked by the magnetiser to express emotions that resembled states of hysteria, which included hysterical laughter (Brancaccio 2017). Where the Joker hypnotises and manipulates crowds of people (we have previously discussed some of these cultural continuities in science-related Joker stories, see Jürgens 2023; Jürgens, Tscharke, and Brocks 2022), there is an allusion to historical performances of magnetisers, mesmerists and hypnotists. These are different terms which were used, sometimes interchangeably, to capture the same type of performance, held on stages or on the street, in view of passers-by (R. B. Gordon 2001, 143). So too were demonstrations of prestidigitation and film projections found at fairgrounds and popular theatres. In *The Killing Joke*, the Joker combines these same entertainments as a way to drive Commissioner Gordon mad.

Another nineteenth-century spectacle that overlaps with hypnotism in the Joker's plots is puppeteering, since he repeatedly engages in plans that revolve around the manipulation of characters, and in so doing, he moves from a character partly reminiscent of Punch to a malign puppeteer himself. One such example is in *Nightwing: The Joker War*, wherein the Joker, as magnetiser and puppeteer to exert control over others, uses a crystal to hypnotise his antagonist Nightwing, while being referred to as a 'memory vampire'. As a result, Nightwing follows his lead and confirms: 'You talk. – I listen', and happily agrees to be Joker's 'Dickyboy' (Jürgens 2023). Aptly, Batgirl summarises: 'That sick maniac has total control of Dick', who has been turned into a 'puppettt' [sic] Jürgens 2023). In other stories, it is Batman who highlights that 'clearly ***he's*** [Joker is] pulling the ***strings***' (Dini et al. 2015, 169). The use of props or of people as puppets (functioning as a prop of sorts) also appears in *Trust* (from Detective Comics #833–834, Ellsworth et al. 2019), where Joker teaches a magician everything he knows 'about poison, explosives and other playthings', because he feels that they are '**kindred souls**' (Ellsworth et al. 2019,

140–185). Here, the minion-as-puppet can be argued to take on elements of Western imaginings of voodooism (the compliant servant) and the supernatural, as a victim of *parasitic* hypnotism. Indeed, the Joker is called 'a **parasite** [who] has remained **maddeningly elusive**! The **Joker**, arch-criminal to the **world**, has threatened death for men whose only **offense** was failing to follow the **crime-clown's lunatic logic**!' (Englehart et al. 2020, 114) Calling the Joker a parasite is logical in itself, given that the parasite originally embodied the social role of a jesting buffoon (Welsford 1966, 55, cf. 28, 20–24) and proto-clown (Jürgens and Maier 2020), who received free food for entertainment. 'The origin of the fool or clown', Riggan explains, can thus not only be traced to the *commedia dell'arte*, but also 'to the social parasite of second-century Greece and to Plutarch's accounts of parasites' (Riggan 1981, 79) – and this role was *theatrical* (Serres 2007, 190). The parasite 'goes on stage, sets up the scenery, invents theater, and imposes theater. He is all the faces on the screen. If he is a man, he is at the origin of comedy, tragedy, the circus and the farce' (Serres 2007, 63–64). Maybe not surprisingly then, in *Batman: Bloodstorm*, the Joker refers to a cohort of vampires as parasites before declaring himself their leader (Moench et al. 2016, 109). Here, as in many other Jokers stories, his position is to 'be between', to interrupt and to create a new order. According to the philosopher Michel Serre, who was interested in the cultural meanings and definitions of the parasite, this is the key: the parasite 'intervenes, enters the system as an element of fluctuation. It excites it or incites it; it puts it into motion, or it paralyzes it. It changes its state, changes its energetic state, its displacements and condensation' (Serres 2007, 191). Arthur Conan Doyle's 1894 novella *The Parasite* provides both a useful foil for understanding how this form of parasitism manifests itself in contemporary Joker stories and a point of inspiration, as does Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in relation to the plot of *Bloodstorm* and the disruptive power of the parasite on its host or victim's energetic state. Alterity (which includes foreign-ness) plays a key part across these narratives.

While not a clown, the antagonist in Doyle's *The Parasite* who employs parasitic hypnotism is, like the Joker, explicitly rendered as Other. The middle-aged mesmerist from the West Indies is described as 'pale', 'well over forty' and 'crippled' (Doyle 1895, 12–13). The character, Miss Penclosa, is therefore framed in terms of disfigurement that signpost otherness. Her influence is experienced as an 'overmastering impulse' (Doyle 2011, 40) by her victim, a professor she turns into a laughingstock. He complains: 'She can project herself into my body and take command of it. She has a parasite soul; yes, she is a parasite, a monstrous parasite. She creeps into my frame as the hermit crab does into the whelk's shell. I am powerless' (33–34). Across various iterations of the Joker's representation, he has a comparable *modus operandi* and is marked as physically different, sometimes as a result of disfigurement which is treated as visual shorthand for his own parasitic nature and monstrosity, or his criminality (Doyle in Habbe 2015, 49). Todd Phillips' imagining of the Joker, for example, as a working-class no-hoper with unspecified mental health conditions, depict him as a form of parasite (given his parlous mental state and his socioeconomic status) and as Other, thus an object of both fear and fascination. In this very context, an additional element of representations of the Joker to draw on nineteenth-century texts is the contemporary use of mental illness as fodder for comics and films. In essence, this trope is the twenty-first-century equivalent of the Victorian-era sensation novel, with attendant implications of exploiting alterity or mental illness. Films like the very *Joker* (2019) hinge on representation of mental illness

in a way that is akin to sensation novels or studies conducted by the likes of Cesare Lombroso (regarded as the founder of modern criminal anthropology), equates an individual's mental state with criminality or predisposition to criminal behaviour (Lombroso and Ferrero 1893). This is arguably the case made with reference to the Joker's descent into crime, whereby he is othered as mentally unstable and a 'criminal mind' (see Karpenko 2017).

Crime and the practice of hypnotism are frequently linked in Victorian fiction, a trope that spans novels and plays, either as adaptations or as narratives developed specifically for the theatre, potentially born out of stage hypnotism and music-hall acts (Garcia-Walsh 2020, 24). While primarily found in Britain, French melodramas by Victorien Sardou and others made the same links between mesmerism/hypnotism and transgression or criminality, ranging from theft to seduction to murder. One such example is Charles Warren Adams' *The Notting Hill Mystery* (first published in 1862–63 as a serial, and then 1865 as a novel). As in the plot of Adams' text, in stories where 'someone [has] been "jokerised" and driven mad' (Johns et al. 2020), the Joker is not technically guilty, having brainwashed underlings to do his bidding and commit crimes on his behalf. This is a way to exploit Batman's moral dilemma of fighting back and wounding the very people whom he is trying to save from the Joker. A key plot point of *The Notting Hill Mystery* is the antagonist's use of mesmeric powers and proxies to commit murder, which explicitly raises questions within the text of who is guilty of committing which crimes. One element that is absent from the Joker, at least so far, is the matter of sexual charge or frisson that accompanies mesmerism in late-nineteenth-century fiction, either in the case of the stage hypnotist Svengali with the maiden protagonist Trilby in the famous 1894 novel of the same name by George du Maurier, or Miss Penclosa's manipulation of the object of her affections (see above). However, this may change with the next film, in light of his complicated and toxic relationship with Dr Harleen Quinzel, better known as Harley Quinn.

Theatres of pain

In *Batman: Haunted Gotham*, the Joker tells young Bruce Wayne that he 'might want to go out [with his parents] tonight . . . perhaps to the theater' (Moench et al. 2000, 7). The choice of wording is left unclear for the reader until three pages later, when one realises that the theatre in question is an operating theatre run by a scientist who is passionate about post-mortem reanimation, linking to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a further reference along with the wordplay of Italian *lazzi*. Dr Emil Varner, the scientist in question, is not only able to successfully bring a dead body back to life, but he is able to transmigrate his own soul into a corpse that is assembled from the remains of six different people. In this guise, Varner is known as the '**patchwork Joker**' (87) and described as a barely human 'flesh puppet' (94) – a hideously laughing, murderous zombie Joker (see also Lofficier et al. 2017 mentioned above). In *Batman: Europa*, the 'Kabinet Kaligaris' (Casali et al. 2016) is another theatre of pain, equating criminality with sadism, brutality and early film. In this case, it specifically cites Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* as an influence (Jürgens, Tscharke, and Brocks 2022) or rather as an intertext, once again referring to the context of popular stages, sideshows and hypnotism-induced crime. However, it is unclear whether the comic's reference is

more to Caligari himself as another Svengali figure (a predatory, ethnically Other, using victims of his hypnosis to do his bidding) or to the somnambulist Cesare who commits the murders, in the same way as confusion arises between Dr Frankenstein and his monstrous creation. Joker stages are theatres of pain, and this is made very explicit in comics, when the 'Clown Prince of Crime himself, the Joker, has plans to turn an amusement park into a theatre of pain' (Tomasi et al. 2020, back cover). Such 'theatres of pain' that Jokers create and inhabit span the literal and figurative, and are indebted to performance traditions that stretch from the Renaissance to the turn of the twentieth century. These theatres and their attendant violence are the *commedia dell'arte* tradition in Italy (see above), nineteenth-century funfairs which endured in largely the same shape from the second half of the nineteenth century until approximately 100 years later, and the Parisian Grand Guignol. Indeed, this connection is implicitly acknowledged by the Joker when he makes reference to 'the **Grand Guignol** of it all!' in a piece of expository dialogue (Tomasi et al. 2021).

The Théâtre du Grand Guignol, an infamous stage in Paris, described as 'venerable filth' (Nin quoted in Gordon 1997, vii), was famously identified as a theatre of pain from its inception in 1897 until its closure nearly one century later. Plays performed there focused on narratives of torture, rape, murder, madness and maiming of characters. It derives its name from the Lyonnais translation for Pulcinella (Punch and Judy), and therefore translated the violence of puppetry into stage productions in which fainting audience members were *de rigueur* because of its exaggerated violence, adapted into a more adult format (Gordon 1988/1997, 14). Subject matter for Grand Guignol performances was not, like the Joker plotlines, wholly fabricated, but drawn from the *faits divers* columns of the multiple daily newspapers available in Paris and in Montmartre, where the Théâtre du Grand Guignol found its home. *Faits divers* were typically the scandal and sensation stories, whole regular segments of newspapers that were devoted to true crime stories and bizarreries about torture, murder, sexual violence, sadism, abuse and disasters (M. Gordon [1988] 1997, 7). The Grand Guignol had thus a tradition of playing with ideas of good taste and the taboo, something very much linked to the Joker and his appeal to contemporary incels or the more problematic aspects of the Batman franchise, if not his popularity alone. Within Grand Guignol, laughter is part of a complex response, not unlike the ambiguities cultivated around the Joker's laughter and whether it derives from a medical condition, a nervous tic, a neurodiverse response to stimuli, or taking genuine pleasure from the pain that he causes. Grand Guignol laughter is destructive but not wholly out-of-place, for instance as a nervous response (Hand and Wilson 2002, 58).

The Joker's taste for hyperbolic violence may echo the plotlines of Grand Guignol, but have also found resonance with a contemporary demographic that revels in theatres of pain. Since the first *Suicide Squad* film in 2016, one demographic has been increasingly identified with the Joker as fans: incels (a portmanteau of 'involuntarily celibate', males with a vocal online presence who tend towards extreme right-wing views and behaviour, see Broyd et al. 2023). Broyd et al. argue for a view of incels that incorporates diagnosis of mental disorder, something that fits with an opinion expressed in *The Joker: Death of the Family* of the Joker's influence as having a different effect on people depending on their mental state and stability, or lack thereof. We read in this comic book story: 'I understood the *influence* Joker has. – Something that affects people, on an almost subconscious, primal level. – For most people, regular people, he inspires fear. – For the less *stable*

people – he simply *inspires*' (Snyder and Capullo 2013 [Detective Comics #16-17]). Comparisons have been made between the radicalisation of individuals by incel propaganda, in the same way that the term 'brainwashed' has entered common parlance in relation to extremist groups, cults, or communities like online fandoms (see Moskalenko et al. 2022; Nielsen 2024). Members of the Joker's audience who are hypnotised or otherwise 'brainwashed' may be argued to have a greater degree of agency (the suggestibility of the hypnotised participant). Willing hypnotism or submission then interweaves with the fear that the Joker acts as a beacon or clarion call for incels, given how Grimes (2008, 67–68) argues that mesmerism is in fact more dynamic and kinetic than the mere binary of passive victim and active mesmerist or hypnotist.[6] Incels have seized on elements in popular culture like characters or figures whom they deem to be worthy of praise or attention for their difference and their views which range from the unsavoury to the extreme, encompassing male supremacism and terrorism (Tsaliki, Chronaki, and Redmond 2022). In *The Killing Joke*, one of the Joker's henchmen introduces him as the 'ultimate non-conformist', which frames the Joker for readers as antihero or, as a riskier proposition, a rallying point for incels. Self-identification with characters like the Joker then echoes the *Faces of Death* story (Daniel et al. 2012) and its refrain, 'We are the Joker!', with implications for the broader fandom. Despite the prominence of violence as public spectacle and the enduring impact of comic performance genres across *commedia dell'arte*, Punch and Judy and Grand Guignol, one divergence of the Joker's representation and his popularity among incels in twenty-first-century texts is the *lack* of comedy.

'What the hell do I know about theater?!' – Joker's theatrical sensibilities – conclusion

Across multiple storylines and media, the Joker constantly remakes 'himself as a different sort of spectacle' (Howell 2021, 80) – a spectacle that, as we have seen, is inextricably linked to the aesthetics of popular stages and theatres. Although one Joker states 'what the hell do I know about theater?!' (Snyder et al. 2015), his body is 'shaped by popular entertainment's aspirational, utopian fantasies, from which he forges a new physical identity and way of being in the world' (Howell 2021, 80) – a comment made by A. Howell about Arthur Fleck in the 2019 *Joker* film that also applies to Joker comics. He may laugh, and via various machinations he may induce laughter in his offsiders or victims, but the violence of the Joker is humourless, and moving away from the campy slapstick of the 1960s television series or the cartoonish violence of other Joker iterations that have relied more heavily on Punch and Judy and vaudevillian-inflected slapstick. Given the stylistic indebtedness that the Joker has towards older performance forms, he seems in the twenty-first century to have moved more explicitly towards the Grand Guignol. Or in the words used in *The Clown at Midnight*, after the 'baleful comedy and criminal infamy all those years ago', during 'the Satire Years before Camp,' we are now experiencing 'the raw, expressionistic art' of 'New Homicidal' (Morrison et al. 2014) and Grand Guignol-like Joker stages. Where Grand Guignol is seen as a more violent successor to the *commedia dell'arte* and provide a 'dialectic' between horror and humour (Hand and Wilson 2002, 76), part of its subversive power derives from its mixture of humour with over-the-top violence (sometimes black humour). That said, audiences or specific demographics

may respond to the violence of the Joker as closer to comedy despite the absence of explicit humour.[7] Ambiguities between popular theatrical performances of the spiritual and the scientific (or educational) are exploited by the Joker, but are very much in keeping with public shows during the late nineteenth century that melded the 'quasi-spiritual' and psychic experiences such as clairvoyance and hypnotism (Drinka 1984, 260; R. B. Gordon 2001, 30).[8] Gordon points out the ambiguities of nineteenth-century displays of hypnotism and mesmerism that fulfilled a simultaneously educational and voyeuristic purpose as 'scientific demonstrations, supposed manifestations of spiritual phenomena, and popular spectacle' (R. B. Gordon 2001, 30), something which is also characteristic of Joker stages. In keeping with his pedigree, when Jokers appear on stage they blur or eliminate boundaries, including those between characters (themselves and their victims), their performance and their physicality (as was characteristic of freakshows), they exert control or agency over others (like hypnotists). Thus Joker iterations draw from and add to a continuum of hypnotic and violent popular spectacle, perversions of the circus show type: a theatrical and clownesque insanitorium. Joker attempts to resist categorisation through his unhinged persona in a dual role as 'demon' and 'jester,' which grants him a degree of licence to enact horrific excesses as a means of catharsis in a comparable style to the Grand Guignol theatre. Narratives and dialogue situate him outside of regular rules or beyond the pale in terms of his nature as much as his behaviour and extreme criminal acts, which lend weight to his construction as 'a diseased demon jester from a negative world beyond all human laws' (Morrison et al. 2014). The Joker's resistance to categorisation in tandem with his pastiche of historically informed stylistic influences will have interesting implications for the next cinematic iteration of the franchise as a jukebox musical, another form of pastiche.

Notes

1. All emphasis in this and the following quotes is taken from the original texts which often do not have page numbers. The authors are fully aware that it is insufficient to reference the authorship of comics with only one or two names as is common in academic writing, as each comic is the result of the talent and hard work of many people. Space does not allow us to include all writers and artists – colourists, letterers, cover-artists, co-authors and many more. Further information about the comic book artists referred to in this paper can be found at www.comics.org.
2. Bob Kane fuelled the well-known controversy around the Joker's creation in a number of statements, including a 1994 interview with journalist Frank Lovece for *Entertainment Weekly*'s 'Children's' section by claiming that 'Jerry Robinson had absolutely nothing to do with it.' ('Bob Kane Interview' 1994). 'I do not doubt that my ex-assistant', Kane explains in his 1989 autobiography *Batman & Me*, 'is sincere in believing that he did, in fact, create the Joker, but time has eroded his memory. [. . .] If Jerry Robinson had come to me first with the Joker playing card, then I would have drawn the Joker in the image of that card, instead of like Conrad Veidt in the movie' (Kane 1989, 105, 107). However, DC historian Nelson Bridwell seems to have resolved the issue by confirming: 'as Bob Kane recalls Bill Finger as The Joker's creator, and Bill told me it was Jerry Robinson's idea, I think we can accept Jerry as having come up with the concept' (Andrea 2011, 91).
3. The notion of the *lazzo* was carried through to Punch and Judy, with Punch as the English derivative of the *commedia*'s Pulcinella (Andrews 2019, 180; Grove 2021, 267–268), arguably

to be supplanted in contemporary texts about the Joker with recurring plot to defeat Batman or enact various other schemes.

4. 'At the age of 16, he ran away to join a traveling sideshow, becoming the "barker" for "The Wild Man of Borneo" (actually a black man from Mississippi in make-up). He toured one season with Ringling Bros. as a clown before abandoning the circus for vaudeville' (Blake 1993, 67). See also Studlar on Chaney: 'Although he was literally on the sideshow platform in only a handful of his films, he was [. . .] perhaps no less than America's greatest freak exhibits of the twentieth century' (Studlar 1996, 199).
5. Emerging amusement parks such as Coney Island have been called the turn-of-the-century 'pyrotechnic insanitarium' of the 'electric carnivalesque' (Dery 1999, 8).
6. Also see Auerbach (1981), which argues in favour of a greater degree of power accorded to the mesmerised party, here specifically looking at the novel *Trilby*.
7. Horror texts, for instance, were more commonly seen in the light of grotesque or black humour, in a study of 16-to-24-year-olds (Wells 2000, 28).
8. The popular fascination for such performances has endured to the present, as is evidenced by television programs such as *Penn and Teller: Fool Us* (The CW Network, 2011-).

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