

JOKER

Directed by Todd Phillips
Produced by Todd Phillips, Bradley Cooper, and Emma Tillinger Koskoff
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 2019

The scary thing about clowns is that the performer-menace is cloaked in greasepaint-anonymity, so the audience-victim doesn't know what he is up against. But more important, clowns, with their grotesque smiles, produce a quiet revulsion that can easily give way to fear: if the clown is evil, if the clown *enjoys* doing wrong, then there is little chance that he will be dissuaded from his nefarious deeds. And you can't reason with a psycho.

Joker's most spectacular scene comes near the end, when Arthur is given a guest spot on the top-rated "Live! With Murray Franklin." He's only there as a cynical gesture by the host to highlight (or exploit) Arthur's awkward brand of comedy. Murray wants him on the show so they can mock him. Arthur makes an excuse for his surrealist drunk-driver joke by saying that it's been a rough couple of weeks, ever since he killed the three guys on the subway.

In volunteering this information, Arthur implies that—perhaps—the fortnight has weighed him down because his conscience is gnawing at him. But that's not it, exactly, is it? Once Murray Franklin reacts with disgust, then tries to elevate himself from Arthur morally, Arthur admits his satisfaction with his deeds, and launches into an angry (and, unfortunately, truthful) diatribe cataloguing the haughty indifference of Gotham's well-to-do.

His words present one 'face,' and his actions another. So it's not just the dichotomy of good and evil at play here—it's schizophrenia. Arthur is abstruse, and he is unpredictable. He never says the investment yuppies were kicking him, never exaggerates and says they were trying to kill him, never explains that they were louts and he was defending the honor of a woman. Arthur makes no excuses. This is frightening, the notion that he has no fear of punishment, that he can admit to a triple homicide on television, disregarding the consequences. Ironically, though, it's a bit dishonest. The "clowns" (Thomas Wayne's dismissive sobriquet) in the street prefer the idea of Arthur executing the men without provocation. Arthur could explain himself, but he's smart enough not to. He knows what the rampaging mob outside is driven by—hatred, plain and simple. Indeed, a new mantra has taken hold. And as the twilight fades, as a shameful epoch of patient restraint and submissive humiliation finally dies in convulsive agony, there is no going back: In order to get justice, the victim must become the oppressor.

One of the fascinating aspects to this gripping climax is Murray Franklin's reaction. He is repulsed, but he is not afraid. He is prompted by his producer to cut to a commercial, but he stays with the interview. Why? Does he hang on for ratings? Does he resent Arthur's play for moral superiority? Does he want to expose the clown? Ironically, everyone knows who this guy is—he's already been seen on national TV doing his nauseating comedy routine. That's what makes this scary—Arthur is *not* hiding behind make-up, but is projecting with it, and co-opting for himself a movement that he unwittingly started, a movement of anarchistic clowns.

Arthur thought his purpose in life was to confront the darkness with joy. But that purpose was instilled in him by a mother who battled insanity and subjected her son to extreme horrors. Once he decides that she has betrayed him, once he has killed her, there is nothing left to restrain him. He has simply given up. No longer will he tolerate the intolerable. He will stop being a friendly phony; he will abandon himself to destruction.

Arthur believed he could be a comic, but Murray Franklin laughed at him and labeled him a 'joker.' Instead of rejecting the insult, Arthur embraces it. If people won't laugh, they won't live. He will no longer confront the darkness, but affirm it.

For life is a joke, and he can't stop laughing.