
Too Late the (Super) Hero, Todd Phillips' Joker

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Abstract: The article reads the film *Joker* by Todd Phillips as a denunciation of the pathologies of contemporary society and its self-destructive drift. Caused by a process of homogenization of the individual personality to collective models, it not only generates those conformism and massification phenomena underlined by postmodern reflection, but gives rise to processes of disintegration of the subject which lead to the uncontrolled explosion of violence. Prisoner of a growing and systematic dynamic of mimetic identification with the dominant models of mass society – through pervasive containment and control methods, such as "repressive desublimation" (Herbert Marcuse) and "redundancy" (Umberto Eco) – the individual, denied his own difference and uniqueness, is inexorably pushed towards Thanatos. This, now the dominant force, is capable of destroying humankind's best resources and putting the latter on course to a dead end. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Western society has been pervaded by a restlessness caused by humankind's tendency to destroy itself and the planet. This restlessness grew further in the following years in a directly proportionate manner to technological development and the exponential increase in its destructive potential, as made unmistakably clear by two world wars and the atom bomb. By way of a Freudian strategy, this unsustainable awareness was immediately repressed from the collective consciousness and projected onto another not scientific but "science fiction" dimension, characterized by "alien" enemy figures whose omnipotence could be contrasted by equally as fantastic creatures, namely superheroes. Quite simply, Phillips' film destroys the illusion and brings us back to reality: we are the enemy.

Keywords: Redundancy, Desublimation, Individual Difference/Collective Homogenization, Super (Hero)

1. Introduction – *Homo homini lupus*

In the first scene of the film Arthur Fleck/Joaquin Phoenix is putting on his make-up, painting his face like a clown: as if trying out a stage prop, he makes a sad expression that changes into a slight smile. He widens the corners of his mouth with his fingers, and then moves them down, to make the crying expression of a Greek mask. Then he pushes them up, making his mouth into a laughing mask, before suddenly letting go and revealing his true, painfully serious state of mind. On the radio the speaker is talking about 10,000 tonnes of garbage heaped in the streets of Gotham City/New York.

Todd Phillips' *Joker* is set in the 1980s, at the start of Reagan's presidency, with widespread unemployment, social service cuts and people without a roof over their heads or driven out into run-down suburbs. Life is tough for everyone and the first scenes plunge the spectator into the oppressive atmosphere of a-social drift where the dog-eat-dog attitude is

the direct consequence of the fight to survive. Arthur lives surrounded by this mass verging on maladjustment and worse, subjected to daily bouts of big or small, physical or moral, but above all gratuitous violence.¹ At the end of one of these days, worn out, he drags his painfully thin body up a long, steep stairway, to the dilapidated apartment where his sick mother is waiting for him to take care of her. At last, tired and frustrated, he can enjoy the only pleasant moment of his day: the live TV show with Murray Franklin/Robert De Niro.

The programme has just started and straight out it sets Arthur daydreaming about the American dream, about

¹ In the crowded street where he works, he is attacked by a gang of hoodlums who first steal his advertising board and then beat him up badly in an alleyway where no one comes to help him. As he goes home, after a disappointing session with the psychiatrist who is following (but not listening to) him for his depression and compulsive disorder, on the bus the mother of a child he is pulling faces at to make him laugh reacts by telling him to stop bothering her daughter. The day after his employer does not believe that he was beaten up, blames him for breaking the board and so asks for his money back.

getting noticed by the famous presenter and emerging from the studio audience to tell his story: that he lives with his mother Penny who calls him *Happy* and tells him to smile all the time because he, Arthur, the urban clown dreaming of becoming a comedian, has come into the world to bring joy and laughter. And he dreams that Murray calls him onto the stage, hugs him and says: "... You see all this? The lights, the show, the audience, all that stuff — I'd give it all up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you ...". Then the fantasy ends and we again see Arthur's painfully serious face.

2. Homogenization and Social Control in the Society of the Spectacle: The Spell of Redundancy

How many times have we seen the American dream on the cinema screen? The dream that even a no one can become a someone if they fight hard enough? We have seen it in every way we can imagine, from the most banal to the most refined. We have seen critiques and failures, with the basic structure taken apart and put back together time and time again. We have seen it set in all periods, including the future, in all societies and social categories, in every type of existence, however small. We could almost say that, in percentage terms, American cinema has projected little else. Indeed, the same time as cinema was being invented, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mass society was coming into being, along with capitalistic development – the formula that, in contemporary Western society and beyond, would far outstrip all others – later to become one and the same as the American dream [10].

So, nothing new so far for Phillips' film.

Nevertheless, we are happy to carry on watching at the merely aesthetic level, accustomed to achieving pleasure in the only (or easiest) way we have known for the last seventy years of mass culture [5-8], using *the same structure over and over* in a *forever-changing form* [17-18].

In this connection, the considerations of Umberto Eco, in essays from the 1960s such as "Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals" [13] and "The Myth of Superman" [12], concerning contemporary industrial society's need for what he defines as *narrative redundancy*, are surprisingly topical. It is a *redundancy* that began to emerge in popular literature at the start of the last century, providing both the mass consumer and the contemporary cultured user with an indispensable and healthy opportunity for relaxation, as the former were forced every day to deal with "the alternation of standards, the dissolution of tradition, social mobility, the fact that models and principles are 'consumable'", and the latter with "superior art [which] only proposes schemes in evolution, grammars which mutually eliminate each other, and codes of continuous alternations" [12]. Eco's *hunger for redundancy* intends to describe the spasmodic desire to keep proposing the same, namely, the predominant taste for the iterative scheme. Think, for example, of just about all detective stories (from Conan Doyle to Rex Stout, via Agatha Christie etc.) [9, 11] with their

predictable plotlines and the comic books with the tales of superheroes (from Superman and Batman and all the rest up to the present day), forms of narrative which soon rapidly expanded into both film and television.

Entertainment, relaxation, every era produces them in its own way and to its own taste. But Eco adds that "the problem changes according to the degree to which pleasure in redundancy breaks the convulsed rhythm of an intellectual existence based upon the reception of information and becomes the *norm* of every imaginative activity" [12].

But in which psychological configuration does the obsessive iteration of the same scheme become the main, if not only means through which the subject can achieve pleasure? In other words, what need tries to satisfy the *hunger for redundancy*?

It is well known, from Freud onwards, that every human behaviour which becomes a compulsive way to respond to the stimuli that generated it can be defined as "symptomatic": and the *type* of symptom, its form, is at the same time the expression and clue to the type of *imbalance* (that is, the dysfunction generated by the excess or deficit of functional elements of the psyche) that it tries to compensate. In practice, by identifying the motives that "excite" us and allow us to achieve pleasure, we pinpoint what deficit we are attempting to make up for. And when the symptom is reiteration, this means that we feel pleasure not in discovery but in re-discovery, not in novelty but in the already known, not in *knowledge* but in *re-cognition*. To again use Eco's words, even detective stories, which seem to attract readers above all because they are unforeseeable, in actual fact "read for exactly the opposite reason, as an invitation to that which is taken for granted, familiar, expected. ... it is not a matter of discovering who committed the crime, but, rather, of following certain 'topical' gestures of 'topical' characters whose stock behaviour we already love" [12].

Therefore, just like children who love listening to the same story over and over again, we find pleasure almost only in repetition, in recognition of the same, to the point that in contemporary popular narrative, every new adventure, or rather its new form, told for our satisfaction, has to be "wrapped up" in the end and the hero in question returned to his or her initial physiognomy. Then, almost as if nothing had happened, we are ready for the next episode which will substantially finish in the same way, and so on and so forth.

Why *does everything have to change for everything to remain the same* and, in particular, what is the main element giving us pleasure precisely because, after dramatic and bloody episodes, it goes back to how it was before? The fact is that, like children in nursery school, when they wake up from the agonizing adventure of their afternoon nap, they feel pleasure because their existence is reconfirmed as they re-discover the transitional object and recognize the familiar face of the teacher who sang them to sleep. In the same way, after going through the umpteenth destabilizing adventure with the hero, we find pleasure and reassurance in rediscovering the continuity of our precarious *identity*. As if to say: safe again.

3. Homogenization of the Personality to the Collective Ideal Damages the Formation of Individual Identity

Which identity are we talking about? Starting from Ortega y Gasset and Hannah Arendt, via the Frankfurt School, in the end, more than anyone else it was Herbert Marcuse who denounced that the “totalitarianism” of mass society comes about by draining the subject of his critical ability, to the point of repressing the *individual* and *individual identity*. In essays from the 1960s which are disarmingly up to date, such as the *One-Dimensional Man* [20] and *Five Lectures. Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia* [18], Marcuse even claimed “the obsolescence of psychoanalysis”. Structured on the Oedipal dynamic, that is, the individual comparison-clash with the biological father as the process for drawing up one’s ego ideal typical of traditional modern society, in Marcuse’s view the advent of technologically advanced society stripped psychoanalysis of its analytical efficacy. Since mass society removes the ego from private comparison even *before* the *personal* subject is formed, the subject is immediately exposed to comparison with the *impersonal* collective model, immensely favouring his homogenization.

Indeed, in Marcuse’s view, the subject can only maintain the perception of repressing subjective freedom and integrate into the collective without renouncing individual identity by keeping open the contrast between *Eros* and *civilization* [19], in other words the contrast between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. In other words, this perception could remain as long as the price for libidinal renunciation necessary for the subject to adapt to civil society was for the “personal” superego (generally projected onto the father) to negotiate a “private” Oedipal comparison. As such, the subject could remain aware of the tension between freedom/individual diversity and repression/social homogenization and, therefore, his own subjective uniqueness. Instead, by prematurely shifting the comparison to the collective model, from the outset the subject tends to be de-priv(at)ed of the possibility of building an individual identity and therefore the faculty to continue to perceive his freedom as resistance to homogenization. Consequentially, “the result is, not adjustment but mimesis: an immediate identification of the individual with his society ...” [20]. In practice, we have given up on the ego ideal, confusing it and replacing it with the collective ideal.²

² If it is true, as Freud says in *Civilization and its Discontents* [15], that every society is necessarily founded on a certain *quantum* of renunciation of the pleasure principle, that is, renunciation of individual behaviours incompatible with collective life, it is also true that in mass societies, the “civilization” process progressively expands this renunciation so far as to correspond to the subject’s self-alienation, that is, so far as to repress individual personality. But every instance of repression generates a projective reaction to make up for that which has been repressed: in traditional societies, the myth of the hero, that is, the myth of a very special individual, without doubt also fulfilled this compensatory function, in proportion to the quality and quantity of individual renunciation demanded of the single person for his or her suitable insertion in collective society. I think that the fact that since the 1930s, the myth of the hero has given way to that of the superhero, an exaggerated figure often with unlimited superhuman and alien powers, is one of the undeniable signs of the progressive

This process is driven, again according to Marcuse, by the fact that the collective model produced by concomitant and closely correlated phenomena such as technological development, industrialization, massification and democratization, seems to the subject to be a less negationist, more inclusive, participatory and liberal antagonist. Moreover, it is supported by the irresistible attraction of the “phantasmagoria of commodities”: “Now there is, in the advanced technological societies of the West, indeed a large desublimation (compared with the preceding stages) in sexual mores and behavior, in the better living, in the accessibility of culture (mass culture is desublimated higher culture).” [18]. With this *commercial desublimation* of Eros, created through the liberalization of production and free time and their mimetic shift into the collective sphere, instead of creating a less repressive society, what happens is that “the repression itself is repressed: society has enlarged, not individual freedom, but its control over the individual” [18]. In other words, it is urged to level the ego ideal with the collective model. Hence, the reality principle (society) incorporates the pleasure principle (the individual), and removes energy from *Eros*, the life instinct. As a result, it generates, and this is the worst consequence, an immense shift of the libido towards *Thanatos*, the death instinct: “The danger in mass formation which is perhaps least susceptible to control is the quantum of destructive energy activated” [18].

I will come back to this dreadful consequence later on. For now, I will focus my attention on the main consequences of the transformation of traditional society into mass society on the subject’s identity:

1. The subject’s renunciation of individual identity in exchange for the promise of well-being.
2. The consequent and absolute necessity for the subject to fill the identitarian void generated by this renunciation with the phantasmagoria of commodities.
3. The permanency of this renunciation which forces reiterative and *redundant* compensation.

What is more, one might add that while these consequences may have concerned mass society from its inception to the second half of the twentieth century [16], they involve its subsequent developments, through postmodernism up to the current “liquid society” [4], all the more. Indeed, these days the three abovementioned points are even more accentuated.

I think that it can be said that individual diversity contributes to the correct working and development of the collective psyche in the same way as biodiversity contributes to nature. Hence, by disposing of individual identity, the subject’s fundamental faculties are immensely weakened. These are linked to her diversity, such as critical ability based on the autonomy of thought, and creative function based on the originality of her imaginative ability. Indeed, this is the prime human faculty for the process of adjustment to the reality both of the single person and society as a whole. The progressive disempowerment of these faculties, to the point of their repression, therefore paradoxically leads to a drastic

and mass repression of individuality in contemporary society.

reduction in the same capacity for individual and collective adjustment. With the loss of critical and imaginative functions, the breadth of the conscience is reduced, along with its foresight capacity. In addition, the denied individual faculties no longer come together in social sharing but instead come into conflict with society. As a consequence, the denial of individual identity corresponds to the weakening of social bonds which are no longer guaranteed by the psychological categories that promote them, such as collaboration, solidarity, empathy, etc.

Now, aware of the repression of individual identity, we can state that in the “best-case” (or rather worst-case) scenario, namely of successful homogenization, the mass-human tends to take shape as an infinitely individualist subject; a subject whose unlimited desire only achieves temporary satisfaction in a circuit of anorexia/bulimia, endlessly filling an infinite void of induced needs.

In the “worst-case” (or rather best-case) scenario, that is, in the case of unsuccessful homogenization, we have *Joker*.

The director chose to propose none other than him, Joker, the one of Batman's many enemies not so much characterized by the destructive capacity of his actions, but by the perversion of his psychological and moral motivations. So, we may think that Phillips wanted to stage a personal attempt to analyse the subject's current identity crisis. Aggravated by the economic crisis of the past 15 years, it can be compared to the 1980s because, now as then, the distinguishing feature is the betrayal of the “social pact” (the renunciation of individuality in exchange for well-being). It is a crisis worsened and complicated by years and years of indiscriminate liberalism which not only exaggerated financial imbalances in society but caused an exponential decay of moral values, supplanted by the one value of profit. When the discontent reaches such unsustainable levels, the director seems to say, the consensus control mechanisms are no longer able to limit the existential anguish. While the resulting desperation forces some to painfully open their eyes to their condition, it also enables them to reveal the “spell” concealing reality and put an end to the game itself.³ In the case of *Joker*, it breaks off the reiteration of the spectacle and the same *hunger for redundancy*.

As we will see as the film goes on, Phillips' *Joker* is unlike even his most illustrious predecessors, such as the *Jokers* of Jack Nicholson and Tim Burton (in *Batman* from 1989) or Heath Ledger and Christopher Nolan (in *The Dark Knight* from 2008).⁴ While these figures in reality do not break any scheme and remain an integral part – as internal mechanisms functional to the game of endless reiteration – of the iterative representation of the narrative series, like the shadow projection of the hero in

question, this *Joker* manages to avoid, albeit in a tragic way, the coercion to repeat such a predictable fate.

4. Shift of the Libido from Eros to Thanatos and of Individual Identity from Arthur Fleck to *Joker*

Fatherless,⁵ the “otherness” of Arthur Fleck⁶ is marked by a stigma, a rare pathology⁷ which forces him to laugh every time he finds himself in an anxiety-inducing situation: just like his colleague who is derided by everyone because he is a dwarf and therefore evidently different, the compulsive laughter puts an indelible stamp on Arthur's diversity. In a society based on the repression of individual identity, this mark therefore prevents him from achieving “normal” mimetic adjustment.⁸ Furthermore, the symptomatic expression of unsuccessful repression, his *laughter* gains undeniable symbolic value as the return of the repressed: *laughter* is the “gospel” that Arthur Fleck is compulsively forced to bring into the world, a world that has repressed the joyous function of laughter by burying it under piles of misery, vulgarity and sadness, and disempowered its subversive strength through *desublimation*.⁹ In practice, it is a world in which there is absolutely nothing to laugh about. Driven by this vocation and, despite it all, armed with good will, in the diary of negative thoughts that the psychiatrist has made him keep, Arthur also notes down jokes and stage gestures that he gets from TV shows such as *Life*, or from the performances of amateur comedians in a little club where he would also like to perform. Becoming a comedian is the ego ideal that would allow his individuality to exist in the world, to recover his lost sense of belonging, because it is based on the relationship with others, which is both socializing as it is mediated by the cathartic function of laughter, and individualizing because the critical effect of laughter watches over and guards against homogenization. Arthur feels that laughter is the means to rediscover his perception of existing in the sense of “being-there” and “being-with”, because it is the vehicle to possibly reintegrate relational values in life such as kindness, attention towards others and empathy. In mass capitalistic society, together with the denial of individual identity, these values are expunged because they are opposed to other “values” such as individualism, the tyranny of profit and unlimited desire. This is the messianic task that Arthur unwittingly but tenaciously embodies. He has to reveal to the world the excluded value, the denied *opposite*, and, like other prophets before him, will fulfil it along a path of passion and death. This time, however, there will be no resurrection.

⁵ His mother told him that his father is dead.

⁶ *Fleck*: a small particle or speck of something, often something that causes disturbance, to be brushed off, for example, a fleck of dandruff.

⁷ Classified as a particular symptomatic form of pseudobulbar affect, which is very difficult to treat.

⁸ “The worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don't”, reflects Arthur. “You're a fuck-up, Arthur,” his employer says when he fires him.

⁹ As claimed by Umberto Eco.

³ As happens to Truman Burbank/Jim Carrey in *The Truman show* by Peter Weir, and Neo Anderson/Keanu Reeves in *Matrix* by Andy and Larry Wachowski.

⁴ In short, Burton's *Joker* is born a gangster and dies a gangster, like the classic shadow figure of the hero and not unlike all of Batman's other criminal adversaries: antagonistic figures necessary to continue and reiterate the dynamic. In his gratuitous pursuit of evil, Nolan's *Joker* becomes the sum and symbol of absolute wickedness, still confirming the reiteration of the eternal struggle between good and evil.

Let us go back to the film and start again where we left off. It is the morning after and Arthur Fleck is at work, sporting the bruises from being beaten up the day before. He is getting ready with his clown colleagues: one of them, a slippery, smooth-talking character, gives him a gun because, as he says: "You gotta protect yourself out there, buddy. Too many wackos." It is *normal*: when frustration exceeds bearable limits, Thanatos enters the stage, conjured up by a conscience now tending towards cynicism, forced to dig up the basest self-preservation instincts as the last resource to oppose annihilation. Hence the destructive energy produced by the desublimation of Eros sets on its reactive way until it inevitably brings the subject to identify with the death instinct. Arthur Fleck will learn fast too, even though he is not really cut out for it; that evening, by himself in his room, he tries to act tough and accidentally fires a shot that makes a hole in the wall; the day after, when playing the clown for children in a cancer ward, the revolver falls out of his pocket to everyone's embarrassment. But when he goes back home, he meets Sophie with her daughter in the broken lift of the run-down apartment block. Sarcastically stigmatizing the down-at-heel conditions of their existence, his neighbour greets him by putting two fingers to her head and pretending to shoot. Attracted to her, the next morning Arthur follows her to work. Later Sophie rings on his door to cheerfully tell him that she had noticed him and hoped he had followed her to rob the place: "I have a gun," Arthur replies, "I could come by tomorrow?"

The arrival of the black twin of Eros traces the opposite poles: life instinct and death instinct, laughter and violence are the red thread that Arthur Fleck will follow right until the end. What is more, I think that these poles are also a possible key to reading and understanding Phillips' film. Eros and Thanatos are also the two communicating vessels in the adjustment to reality process which, through the osmosis of the *libido*, enable the psyche to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, on condition that the imbalances remain commensurately proportional to each other. On the contrary, if one descends too far, this will inevitably lead the other to inflate, causing a personality imbalance, as we will see.

The day after, the psychiatrist informs Arthur that there have been some welfare cuts and she can no longer follow him or prescribe him his medicine. Then he is sacked on the spot because of the gun episode in the cancer ward. This is a blow that is too hard to handle, but worse is yet to come. Still dressed as a clown, as he goes back home, deathly depressed, three arrogant yuppies are harassing a girl in the semi-deserted subway car where he is sitting. The tension makes him break out into his uncontrollable compulsive laughter, drawing attention to himself. The three start to poke fun at him, but this time Arthur reacts, shooting and killing them. After sprinting away as far as he can from the scene of the crime, he goes into a public toilet to change and catch his breath. There he calms down, looks at himself in the mirror, or rather, *sees himself* for the first time, sees that he exists and starts to make slow, martial art-type movements. Then he goes home, bangs on the door of Sophie's apartment, goes in and kisses her.

With his living instinct (Eros) undermined by repeated

frustrations, the individual identity reacts and reappears through the death instinct (Thanatos), bringing about the perception of refund strength.

He is immediately hailed a legend. The news of the murder of the three yuppies on the subway committed by someone disguised as a clown sparks a collective mimetic reaction: the latent malaise of the mass of social outcasts, betrayed by the unkept promises of the social pact, explode onto the streets of Gotham. Crowds of demonstrators in clown masks flood the streets, railing against the government elite, just as the elections are due to take place. A potential candidate for mayor is Thomas Wayne, a rich businessman to whom Arthur's mother writes adoring letters, begging him to help her and her son in memory of the years when she had worked as a maid in his home: all of which have gone unanswered. Arthur reads one and finds out that he is the unacknowledged son of the very same Thomas Wayne. The news that he – who believed he had no origins – has a father rekindles the hope of finding the affective basis of his identity. So, he goes to the magnate's villa where he meets his son Bruce (the future Batman), a sad child playing by himself in the garden. He tries to make him laugh with some magic tricks, and then by pushing up the corners of his mouth, but the loyal butler intervenes, treating him brusquely. When Arthur says that he is Wayne's son and asks to see him, Alfred disdainfully answers that it is not true, that at the time his mother Penny had started to suffer from schizophrenia, inventing a delirious story of the secret affair. Upon hearing these words, in line with Newton's third law¹⁰ or, as we have already seen, following the Freudian script of Eros/Thanatos that accompanies the whole film, the distraught Arthur attacks him and runs away.

As every attempt to find a contact and exchange of affections in his existence is cut short, his living instinct transfers more and more energy to the death instinct.

This is also what happens when Arthur, dressed up as an attendant, slips into the theatre where he knows Thomas Wayne has gone to see a show.¹¹ He follows him into the toilet to talk to him but Wayne dismisses him, suggesting that he wants to blackmail him, denies being his father and shows this by saying that Arthur is not even the son of Penny Fleck: she had adopted him and then gravely neglected him and ended up being shut up in a lunatic asylum. At that point, Arthur laughs his compulsive laugh. Disgusted, Wayne punches him and goes away, warning him not to go anywhere near his son again.

This cynical Thomas Wayne is a perfect representative of the individualistic values of contemporary society, very different from the figure described in the Batman comic strips: a father and enlightened figure who loved Gotham and his fellow citizens, whose premature violent death would drive Bruce to become Batman and fight for those same values.

So, the illusion that he can retrieve a positive origin lasts the space of a morning. And the mental energy invested in

¹⁰ Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

¹¹ In line with the topic in question, the performance is a projection of the film *Modern Times*.

the failed attempt prompts the inevitable equal and opposite reaction: after ascertaining the crude truth about his mother from her medical records, Arthur kills her in the hospital bed where she was recovered for a stroke. "Ma, remember how you used to tell me that God gave me this laugh for a reason. That I had a purpose. To bring laughter and joy into this fucked-up world: *Happy?!... I haven't been happy for one minute of my entire fucking life... I used to think my life was nothing but a tragedy, but now, now I realize it's all just a fucking comedy,*" he says as he suffocates her with a pillow.

The deceit is revealed once and for all: the hope for a better life is just an illusion, a means to guarantee social control by eternally shifting the goal of realization out of reach; hence, by killing his mother he is putting an end to a life made false by the utopia of a possible redemption.

The disillusionment does not end here: having stripped the parental figures of their masks, a devastated Arthur goes to Sophie. They had met often since the time he kissed her. She had gone to watch his performance at the comedy club, then they had been out together for a pizza and she had gone with him to visit his mother, showing him recognition and complicity. At last, a soul who noticed him and wanted to be with him. But when she finds him in her house, Sophie is scared. It is as if she had been surprised by a stranger. Arthur realizes that his meetings with the woman had only taken place in the delirium of his imagination, they were nothing but the umpteenth trick of his frustrated desire.

Eventually, we get to the showdown with the most important figure, his "spiritual" father, Murray Franklin, the presenter of *Life*. As we saw at the beginning of the film, he is Arthur's living legend, his ego ideal.¹² Murray has the typical talk show host air about him, the laidback but at the same time bubbly American everyman. He is reassuring because with conscious comicality he is able to deal with the destabilizing dynamics of the thin line that separates the tranquillity and continuity of everyday life from the chaos of instincts while at the same time apparently wishing to welcome ordinary people and bring out their talent. However, just when Arthur is watching an episode of the show, Murray broadcasts a recorded clip from his performance in the comedy club, when his initial stage fright had forced him to fight off his compulsive laughter. After christening him "Joker", Murray mocks him mercilessly. It just remains for Arthur to add this last, painful and definitive realization to the long list of disappointments: Murray Franklin is made of the same stuff as Thomas Wayne, or rather he is one hundred percent at his service, at the service of the economic and political elite in power. Through *Life*, he carries out the dirty work of guaranteeing the status quo. In this *redundant* trap, individual originality is filtered by the collective model and *desublimated*, stripped of subversive value and subjected to the judgement of conformity, that is to say, whether it passes or not as mimetic integration. Is it an affable exception that confirms the rule or should it be rejected and excluded?

The circle has closed and Arthur has nothing left: no past

(no father or mother) and no future (no partner or ego ideal), just the reality of the present. Now only a faint glimmer of existence emerges in him when he exercises violence, that is, when paradoxically forced to betray himself, *Happy*, and his vocation to bring joy and empathy into the world.

Arthur has lost all good reason to live. Helped by the remarkable success that the video of his performance had nevertheless gained, and – irony of fate – an invitation to appear on an episode of *Life*, he decides to commit suicide live on TV. Most likely, this gesture is in memory of the only empathetic event in his sad life: when, a few days earlier, the only time when they had actually met, Sophie sarcastically pretended to shoot herself. He tries out the scene at home, imitating the guests' entrance on the show and the moment when he would shoot himself. Then, as he puts on his clown, or rather "Joker" – as Murray had christened him – make-up, two of his ex-colleagues come to visit him, Gary the dwarf and Randall, the big man who had given him the pistol. They say that they have come to pay their condolences for the death of his mother Penny, but Randall is really there because he is worried that the police are going around, asking questions about the yuppies' murder. Arthur suddenly attacks him with a pair of scissors and kills him by smashing his head against the wall. Instead, he lets the terrorized Gary go unharmed because he says: "You were the only one who was ever nice to me."

The new injection of Thanatos has an immediate effect and in the now legendary scene from the film a newly energized Arthur triumphantly descends the steep stairway hitherto symbol of the immense labour of existence. With a mix of artistic and aggressive gestures, he dances down the stairs to the rousing rhythm of some rock music,¹³ in the war dance of his devilish rebirth.

On the way to the show he manages to escape from the two detectives that have been on his heels throughout the film by blending in with the crowd of clowns once again demonstrating against the city council. However, his attitude is strangely bland, respectful almost, maybe, in accordance with Marcuse, as if to suggest a permissive superego, the main tool of the *desublimation* and *mimesis* processes aimed at controlling mass society.

The performance on the stage of *Life* is the final showdown in the duel to the death between Murray, the prepotent promoter of the collective homogenization process, and Arthur, the expression of the uncompromising resistance of individual identity. The clash takes place in a disquisition about laughter, that is, about what is funny because it *conforms* (Murray) or what is funny because it is *true* (Arthur).¹⁴ The rapid sparring match reaches its peak when Arthur declares that he is the clown murderer, claiming that the gesture was "funny" insofar as it was the killing of "awful" people, typical representatives of a world where

¹² Meant, in the Freudian sense, as a factor of individual realization.

¹³ Underlining Phillips' attention to detail, it is worth mentioning his choice of music: "*Rock and Roll Part 2*", an instrumental from 1972 (known as the "*The Hey Song*", because the only vocal part is the word "hey") composed by dubious English glam rock star, Gary Glitter, presently in prison for child sexual abuse.

¹⁴ Laughter as a reaction of exorcism *versus* laughter as exposure.

“nobody thinks what it’s like to be the other guy”. At this point, while Murray is saying that he does not want to hear any more jokes and calling the police, Arthur carries on, raising his voice to quip: “What do you get when you cross a mentally-ill loner with a system that abandons him and treats him like trash? ... You get what you fucking deserve!” and shoot him in the head.

This reversal of his suicidal intentions into murder completes the progressive shift of Eros into Thanatos and of Arthur into the Joker: “Good night and always remember ... That’s life!” he says sarcastically to the television cameras as he recites the phrase Murray always says at the end of the show.¹⁵

As the clowns’ revolt explodes, and one of them kills Thomas Wayne and his wife right in front of a downcast Bruce, on the devastated streets of Gotham an ambulance crashes into the police car that is taking Arthur to the police station. The clowns free him. Reinvigorated after the incident, he climbs onto the bonnet of the car and, cheered by the delirious crowd, with his bloody fingers traces the Joker’s smile on his lips: *consummatum est*. In the last scene of the film, we see him in the Arkhan Asylum,¹⁶ in a session with a psychiatrist. With an understanding look, she asks him why he is laughing: he answers that he is thinking about a joke and the flashback shows Bruce, dumbfounded by his sadness, standing in the alleyway with the bodies of his parents.¹⁷ “Do you want to tell it to me?” says the psychiatrist. “You wouldn’t get it,” answers Arthur and, to the notes of *That’s Life*, he runs off down the hospital corridors, leaving bloody footprints, followed by the nurses for eternity.

5. Conclusion - End of the Road

Arthur laughs the bitter and resigned laugh of a person now able to see the self-destructive destiny of a closed, claustrophobic society, where the “other” (his diversity, his individuality) is considered a mere alien body, an enemy to annihilate. And, by compulsively pursuing this end, society paradoxically ends up imploding and destroying itself.¹⁸ These days, this self-destructiveness is greatly aggravated [1-3]. Indeed, in the period from the start of the development of mass society up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, an important quantity of destructive energy could be abreacted by

¹⁵ “That’s Life” is the title of a famous song sung by Frank Sinatra. The chorus goes:

I’ve been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet
A pawn and a king
I’ve been up and down and over and out
And I know one thing
Each time I find myself
Flat on my face
I pick myself up and get
Back in the race

¹⁶ The mental hospital where his mother Penny had been recovered as a young woman.

¹⁷ By rejecting Arthur as his son, Thomas Wayne condemns his own son to orphanhood.

¹⁸ The finale of “That’s Life” goes: “I’m gonna roll myself up in a big ball and die. My, my”.

directing it against enemies over the border. Now, however, in the globalized world (of which Gotham City seems to be a prefiguration),¹⁹ the aggressivity generated by the desublimation of Eros can no longer be conveyed towards an “elsewhere”: while we may insist on denying it, there is no elsewhere anymore. The same also goes for the frenetic forward thrust of capitalism. Forever in search of “external” and new territories to exploit, in the globalized world capitalism has come to the end of the line. Now, making a rapid about-turn, it directs its hunger for profit towards the only market that has not yet been squeezed out, the only remaining *species* and territory, *ourselves* and *our world*, situated in the only remaining space, that is, *within* society itself.

From this point of view, Phillips does not in any way seem to be, as a large part of film critics have asserted, the umpteenth voice announcing the end of capitalism *par soi-même*. At least, that is not all. If anything, he announces the end of everything, pointing to an irreversible mass suicidal tendency, a cul-de-sac with not even a glimmer of hope on the horizon.²⁰ Arthur Fleck is the witness to this. Moreover, in spite of himself, he is the reactive accomplice of the inescapable self-destructive drift of humankind.

This is why, in my opinion, the character of Joker cannot be likened to the lengthy list of deviant and antagonist figures who, fully functional to the reiterated production of superhero adventures, ensure the continuity of the *redundant* spectacle. Nor, moreover, can the film *Joker* be thought a mere prequel to the future adventures of orphan Bruce Wayne, as other critics have said.

Besides, precisely because of the lack of any possible salvation, the slightest glimmer at the end of the tunnel or, therefore, a non-fatal prognosis, the film risks tacking onto the long list of diagnostic films from the end of the last century: commendable, but in the face of the urgency that it denounces, not enough. To use the words of Jung, since the start of the third millennium, we have been looking out for the emergence of a new archetype which, as happened in the past, can bring with it a new cure to transform and renew humankind. Now, however, twenty years into this century, not the tiniest trace is to be seen... Maybe because, and it is sad just to think about it, Phillips is right: to paraphrase a famous war film,²¹ for a humankind headed down a dead end, it is “too late the (super) hero”.

¹⁹ There does not seem to be an outside world in Gotham: the only distance of any occasional importance in the city where the Batman stories are set is the distance between the outskirts and the city centre. Even when the rest of the planet does appear – for example, in the young Bruce’s training which took place all around the world – it is not an alternative possibility, but is totally propedeutic to the episodes that take place, from start to finish, exclusively in Gotham.

²⁰ The Joker in *Joker* seems to share the same nihilistic drift as Jack in *The House That Jack Built*, the film by Lars Von Trier which came out in cinemas at almost the same time: the director seems to use the series of murders by a serial killer (Jack) to track the progress of human destructivity against all living things, people, animals and nature, before he ends up in hell himself. I cannot go into this comparison here, but I think that the similarity is worth pointing out.

²¹ *Too Late the Hero*, film by Robert Aldrich from 1970.

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