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## Repeated Failure: Synchronic/Diachronic/Comic Timing in The Joker (2019)

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# ‘Repeated Failure: Time, Dressage and Thingness in *Joker* (2019)’

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper proposal explores the relationship of history and comedy in *Joker* (2019) through a comedy theory of broken thingness (Bergson 2003; Brown, 2001) and queer theory of failure (Edelman 2004; Halberstram 2011) – the interplay of the film’s use of comic timing and signifiers of historical time in its diegesis. I argue that *The Joker* uses its black humour to probe a disjointed affective relationship to masculine dressage, and the repeating crises of a city coded as 1970s New York. While arguably courting the ironising nihilisms of the Alt-Right (Nagel, 2017), multiple points of disruption undercut a protagonist who is framed more as ‘lucky fool’ than ‘canny trickster.’ Repeated comic and diachronic failure, I argue, exposes the ambivalent thingness of postwar urban masculinity - critically, derivatively, problematically and foolishly.

KEYWORDS: Failure, Thingness, Dressage, Joker, Halberstram, Bergson

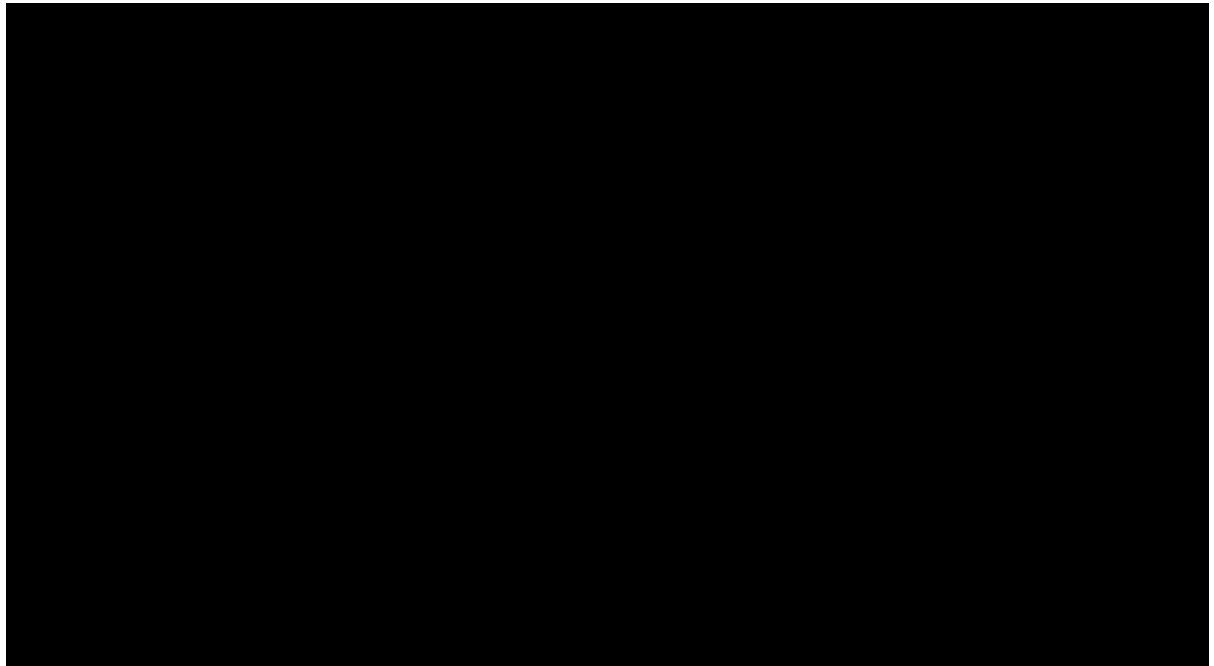


Figure 1

As *Joker* (2019) enters its final act, its protagonist sneaks into a screening of Chaplin's Great Depression Comedy *Modern Times* (1936), and with him we witness again the famous rollerskating scene where Chaplin avoids a precipice while blindfolded and oblivious [Fig.1]. Like Chaplin's Tramp, Phoenix's Joker/Arthur is a fool - a character of incidental success and tragi-comic failure - clowns repeating masculine performativities bent to socio-economic rhythms beyond their control. Failures of comic timing, historical returns and excessive derivativeness combine in *Joker* to articulate a kind of broken urban masculine dressage. The Joker, here skating blindly, becomes a thing-like (Brown 2001) looping mechanism that exposes ambivalent histories of 'failure' surrounding him.

Scholarship on comedy identifies three broad schema – celebration of superiority; purgative; and sudden apprehension of incongruity - but these recurrent dynamics are not mutually exclusive (Vandaele 2002, 221), and indeed repetition itself may be the foundation of comedy (Charney 1978, 82). This article focuses on the significance of repetition in dressage,<sup>1</sup> affect,<sup>2</sup> thingness<sup>3</sup> and queer failure<sup>4</sup> treating *Joker* as a black comedy built from a palimpsest of historical and textual allusions. Here I explore diachronic then comic failures through an analysis of the film in relation to social-historical contexts connecting the film's inspiration of 1970s New York to present issues surrounding masculinity (Ging 2019;

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<sup>1</sup> Bodily rhythms and gestures ingrained by society (Lefebvre 2004, 38)

<sup>2</sup> The vital, pre-linguistic intersubjective intensities related to experiencing feelings physically (Gregg & Siegworth 2010)

<sup>3</sup> The strange, alien, non-instrumental materiality of objects (Brown 2001)

<sup>4</sup> 'Progressive' subversion which takes "the form of investing in counterintuitive modes" (Halberstram 2011, 11).

Horrocks 1994; Neale 1983), mental health (Ehrenreich 2009; Redick and Witkin 1983) and urban American politics (Cowie 2010; Stein 2014), which I latterly theorise with Bergson's theory of comedy (2008) and queer theory (Edelman 2004; Halberstram 2011)

While arguably courting the ironising nihilisms of the Alt-Right (Nagel 2017), multiple points of disruption undercut a protagonist who is more 'lucky fool' than 'canny trickster.' These points of failure, I argue, involve intriguingly abject rhythms in both the choreography of broken punchlines and allusions to the long repeating history of systemic failure between the recessions of 1973-5 and present. This paper does not attempt to give a definitive account of the contested politics of the film, but it does hope to highlight ways in which this film mediates discourses surrounding social success and humour in a time of global crises. To explore this, we need to counter our intuitions regarding comedy, villainy and success through a mixed methodology of reception studies, visual and textual analysis.

To begin unpacking *Joker*, let us first address its reception before engaging with the diachronic contexts the film engages. *Joker's* mixed reception was united in its acknowledgement of the film's manifold referentiality. To *The Verge*, *Joker* was seen to "...follow in the footsteps of Joel Schumacher's 1993 drama *Falling Down* in portraying the world as a cartoonishly dark and uncaring place" (Robinson 2019), while for *Vox* the fallout of this darkness was "...reminiscent in some ways of *The Hunt* controversy" (Wilkinson 2019). If, for the *BFI*, it "...soars past its troubling ideological confusion on a cascade of Scorsese references..." (Newland 2020), success and failure are still predicated on allusiveness. Canonical comparisons are an established convention of critical discourses, but here the obviousness of *Joker's* references take centre-stage, obstructing its reception. *The Washington Post* characterised *Joker* as "A grim, shallow, distractingly derivative homage to 1970s movies..." (Hornaday 2019) - so suffused with quotation as to confuse legibility. For Glenn Kenny, the film cannot be grappled with without first addressing the vacuous handling of its influences, and even then only negatively: "Darkness no longer has much to do with feelings of alienation the filmmaker wants to express or purge, as was the case with a film like 'Taxi Driver' ...[nor] exploring uncomfortable ideas, as was done in 'The King of Comedy'" (Kenny 2019) and for *The Guardian* too, its intertextuality is identified as thin and excessive: "...obviously a laborious and pointless homage to the Scorsese/De Niro classic *The King of Comedy* with a bit of *Taxi Driver*..." (Bradshaw 2019). The film's derivativeness here reads as excessive extremes: if "...initial worries around *Joker* assumed the movie would be unnecessary, its impact negligible. The current questions ascribe it with too much importance, as if it might incite full-blown anarchy just by existing" (Robinson 2019). However, as Grant argues, the meaning of genre films is ordinarily uncontroversially based on their "serial or repetitive nature" (2010, 5), so how do *Joker's* repetitions fail?

In what follows I argue that *Joker's* failure of repetition is reflected in its affects of repeated failure, and that its essential emptiness surfaces in the bare thingness of its protagonist's body, reminding us (unwillingly) of faltering historical progress. To expand our

understanding of this excessive referentiality, and begin articulating this ‘incitation’ in relation to urban masculinity, we need to consider first intertextual reference points and second the historical imaginary evoked by the film, answering Kenny’s rhetorical question “who knows what period detail looks like in fictional cities” (Kenny 2019)?

## Diachronic

If director/co-writer Todd Phillips makes “no secret of his love” for Scorsese’s oeuvre (White 2019), this canonical infatuation permeates Joker’s design. Production designer, Mark Friedberg describes Arthur’s clowns-for-hire workplace as “...Fellini by way of Lumet. Weird. Haunted. Rough. A place out of time in a movie out of time” (Quoted in Desowitz 2019). This ‘out of time’ is multiple and ambiguous citing filmic and comics precedents and drawing on the urban fabric of NYC past and present, and if there is a hollowness in this film’s postmodern referentiality that frustrates critics, it is postmodernity repeated from Scorsese’s alienated subjects to a history of previous Jokers, Debona highlighting that Joker is an ‘unbeing’ who lacks selfhood, existing through imitation (1997, 63). Indeed we can see a sympathy between these intertextual genealogies: the characters of Joker (*The Killing Joke*, 1988) and Pupkin (*The King of Comedy*, 1982), which Valereto (2011) and Greene (2007) respectively identify as characters exposing the ways in which ‘madness’ can mediate method in characters directed by delusions and socio-economic forces. In *Killing Joke*’s origin story, Joker argues that everyone is ‘just one bad day’ from madness. In *Joker*, Arthur bleakly states that he has “had a bad day,” but that he also cannot remember a happy one: “all I have are negative thoughts.” Thus, *Joker* embodies a repeating, recursive identity, reminiscent of Heath Ledger’s shifting accounts of Joker’s scars (2008) - an imitation which loses sight of its origin (Goodwin and Tajjudin 2016, 390).

Indeed, *The Dark Knight* (2008) provides a clear touchstone for *Joker*, and Arthur can be fitted into a sequence of anarchic nihilists for young alienated men to emulate (Kellner 2013,166). This threat is implicit in *Joker*’s reception, and in the context of a resurgent Right (Nagel 2017) and increasing white male terrorism (Gentry 2020) this trajectory also echoes the bleak ‘security imaginary’ of white anti-state vigilantism in Miller’s 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns* (Mann, 2017). Joker’s many incarnations have even been tied similarly to a deeper history of clowns performing “virtuoso killing acts” (Jurgens 2014, 450), but this concept of agentic ‘virtuosity’ is something *Joker* textually challenges. Arthur loses work, fails at comedy, succeeding by chance and beset by ignorance: parentage, psychiatric history, and even his subjective reality remain in a state of suspended ambiguity.

He embodies more a ‘fool’ than ‘trickster,’ an archetype which aligns with what Stott defines as ‘eccentric’ comedy descended from Erasmus in which values are inverted by characters that express wisdom through foolishness and sanity through madness (2005, 49). Here it reflects the ambivalent black humour of 1980/90s ‘killing jokes,’ an enduring strain

of intensified sadistic humour reacting to an increasingly threatening world (Lewis, 2006), significantly building on the subversive graphic novel *Killing Joke* which gives “reason another sense... where reason is maddened” as an epistemological acclimatisation to an irrational world (Valereto 2011, 76-77). *Joker* expresses this in alienated despair, “I just hope my death makes more cents [sic] than my life,” as much a slip as a pun for a character who regularly confuses homophones in writing. Arthur, then, is subversive and alienated, but no ‘evil genius.’

However, Arthur - down-trodden, depressed, homicidal - in drawing on alienated masculinity, invokes a history of masculinity in ‘crisis.’ Indeed, some gender theorists describe modern masculinity as masochistic crisis: “a self-destructive identity... shrinkage of the self” (Horrocks 1994, 25). Hegemonic masculinity, moreover, is ‘constantly’ in flux, subject to changing bases and strategies (Neale 1983). An appreciation of this leads Grant to argue of cinema that: “Crises in the representation of masculinity are nothing more than especially insistent “defenses of patriarchy”” (Grant, 2010, 6). In 2019, “new toxic assemblages appear to complicate the orthodox alignment of power and dominance with hegemonic masculinity by operationalizing tropes of victimhood,” creating what Ging terms ‘hybrid’ masculinities (2019, 638). These operate in ambivalent tension with hegemonic ‘alpha male’ masculinity and can transgress normative values of athleticism and sexual prowess in attempts to defeat threats to white male privilege (Ging 2019). As Carroll (2011) and Ging (2019) argue, narratives of white male suffering in American culture can reinforce and naturalise the status of white male privilege.

Yet Kimmel has argued that white male privilege has been affected by recent trends of underemployment, wage stagnation and downward mobility, leading to reactionary movements (Kimmel 2015), declining socio-economic prospects for young men inciting defences of patriarchal privilege intersectionally linked to marginal class (Kellner 2013, 171). For all the reactionary elements of Arthur’s precarious hybrid masculinity, his condition is symptomatic - as beta-male antihero, Arthur’s murderous enactment of masculine crisis is a result of urban, capitalist and historical forces. These forces directly manifest in *Joker* as Arthur’s redundant therapist candidly reveals, in cuts to his support: “They don’t give a shit about people like you, Arthur. And they don’t really give a shit about people like me either.” NIMH data from the 1980s shows that state mental hospital capacity fell from 559,000 to 132,000 between 1955 and 1980 (Redick and Witkin 1983). Indeed, this can be attributed to the marketisation of healthcare which continues to the present day (Frakt and Carroll 2013).

*Joker* here becomes a more complex and contextualised representation of mental health than previous *Jokers*, framing health like selfhood as externally produced and environmental: “is it just me or is it getting crazier out there.” As a protagonist with limited agency, Arthur also avoids tropes of high-level functioning machiavellian ‘madness’ found in other *Jokers* (Goodwin and Tajjudin 2016, 389). Moreover, Arthur’s embrace of despair articulates a radical pessimism in opposition to popular discourses on wellness in America which Barbara

Ehrenreich identifies as a cult of ‘positive thinking’ (2009). As we see in Arthur’s repeated therapy sessions, this film does engage meaningfully with what Brown & Tucker term the complex ‘dispositif’ of mental health care systems, a tense conjunction of economics and affects (Gregg and Seigworth eds. 2010, 231).

Framing Arthur’s mental health is the ‘health’ of 1970s/80s Gotham/New York. In *Joker*, we see a wealth redistribution movement framed by strikes and the newspaper headline “Kill the Rich.” Police murder an innocent, and a corporate elite enter municipal politics on a platform of order and laissez-faire capitalism, in Wayne’s words: “those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven’t as nothing but clowns.” In establishing the urban environment of *Joker*, Friedberg describes a desire to capture the economic hardship of a city in flux: “Something bubbling up from the rubble... We wanted to make the iconic version of NYC at this time...” (Quoted in Desowitz 2019). Indeed, Stein argues that while many draw Great Depression parallels, the 2008-present recession has much more in common with the globalised 1970s (2014, 141), and we continue to suffer the consequences of America’s 1980s pivot from manufacturing to a precarious post-industrial economy with plummeting corporate tax and interest rates, leading to recessions which adversely affect the poor (Varufakis 2016).

*Joker* parallels reactions to the consequent growth in homelessness following the 1973-5 recession: urban liberalism’s transition to privatisation and social intolerance (Vitale, 2008: 2). Welfare state cuts which Arthur and his real-world counterparts endure actually constituted an iniquitous redistribution of spending with a massive growth in prison construction (Gilmore 2007, 19). Owing to the expansion of the prison system as an increasingly integral part of the US economy, prison guard and police unions in New York could even lobby for expanding definitions of imprisonable offences, producing a vicious cycle generating aggressive policing and income inequality (Hill 2011, 68). In deriving from the memory of 1970s/80s New York, *Joker* highlights historical continuity, providing an origin story for our present ‘bust-bust’ economy and America’s carceral state.

The social unrest that ‘bubbles up’ from this political ‘rubble’ in *Joker*, manifests as a masked movement reminiscent of the tactics and aesthetics of more recent Anonymous and Black Bloc activism, but also evoking a 1970s transition in working class activist identity which “appeared less as social-realist heroes of the industrial age than in ways that were simultaneously profound and strange, militant and absurd” (Cowie 2010, 9), the product of a loss of hope in progressive politics. This ‘strange militancy’ presents itself ambivalently in *Joker* as radical and messy: externally read as ‘Kill the Rich,’ but in Arthur’s own words “everyone is awful.” At its most abject, this bubbling political rubble is reflected in the mounting trash of the city’s historical and fictive garbage strikes that haunts Arthur in multiple scenes. From his therapist’s vantage we see Arthur’s ‘activism’ in a failing language of failure: “Imagine your hole [sic] life ends on the sidewalk,” a remonstrance against a precariat trashed, discarded and ‘abjected’ - the process “by which others become shit”



(Butler 1999, 134).

## Comic

Collectively these diachronic contexts show how Joker repeats and catalyses its intertextual and historical touchstones of ambivalent pessimism and failure, connecting past and present socio-economic crises through sets and bodies. These abject things embody historical forces, harbingers of strange militancy and an abject foolishness we will now theorise in terms of comedic and queer ontologies.

Arthur's character is a body which cannot speak back to power - continually shut down by Thomas Wayne, his therapist, even the TV network which cuts off his televisual debut as he repeats the catchphrase: "And remember, that's- [life]". His speech is regularly broken and dislocated, laughing asynchronously with the comedy club crowd, pausing in his public performances to consult barely legible notes. Here, in his abjection, we find not a coherent identity, but, as we saw earlier, a derivative impersonation. Instead of an articulate, agentic protagonist we have a symptomatic and automatic body, often silenced by bouts of uncontrollable laughter, haunted by the history of violent and unpredictable clowns as Jurgens identifies in relation to other Joker texts: laughter becomes a corporeal mark, a form of abstracted violent affect (2014, 447), "substituting for speech when nothing can possibly be said." (Stott 2005, 134).

Muted and blinded like Chaplin, Arthur is most peaceful in moments focused on proprioception - dancing, eyes closed, as diegetic sound fades and the score swells. Indeed, Arthur is perhaps most harmonised with the crowd at two moments in the film - his final, public, silent dance, and his quiet identification with Chaplin's performance as he advances on Wayne. Conflict ends violently for Chaplin (Caron 2006, 9), and so too for Arthur when Wayne punches him as he breaks into laughter. Arthur, who seeks belonging in a society he disrupts, also echoes the performative labour of Chaplin's Tramp which Caron sees as an ambivalently subversive and conservative "slapstick clowning" (2006, 5). *Joker's* humour is physical: misfiring/dropping his gun, losing balance, colliding with cars and doors. Like silent slapstick, his uncertain and stuttering rhythms demonstrate that even walking in this world is problematic (Caron 2006, 8), and by disrupting the instrumental sequences of labour and being in the world, slapstick disrupts and inverts capitalist rationality (2006, 13). Repeating these rhythms of urban life to the point of comic failure, Arthur exposes the strangeness of clowning, talk shows, and even the act of running, and so opens them unintentionally to uninhibited and violent alternatives.

In *Joker's* strange moments of silent and non-instrumental gesture, where Arthur dances quietly and slowly to invisible rhythms, the audience experiences something of the strange transition from silent to sound cinema, which Spadoni argues "resensitized viewers to the artificial nature of cinema" (Spadoni 2007, 121). Drawing on the strangeness of silent-era

slapstick helps *Joker* sensitize us to the strange affective undercurrents of history and shifts our attention to the interruption of body and gesture.

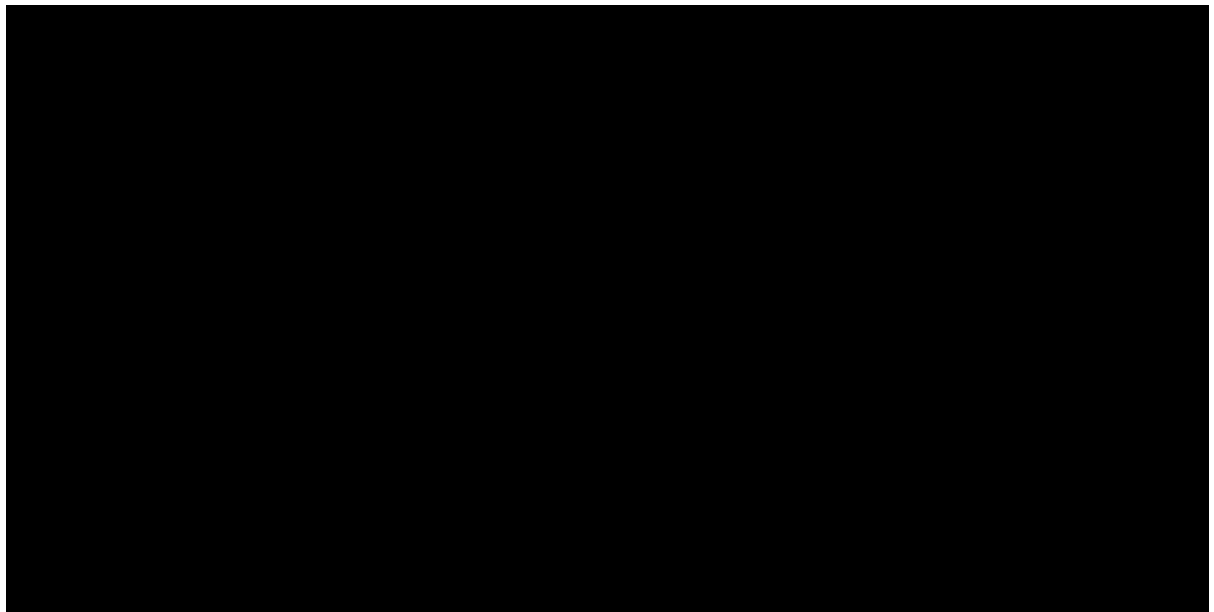


Figure 2

These undercurrents present what Lefebvre terms ‘dressage’: to be social is “...to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways” (Lefebvre 2004, 39), and we see this expressed in Arthur’s bone and musculature which ‘bubbles’ under his skin - shoulder blades that writhe like waves across his back as he stretches his shoes for work [Fig.2], or the way his legs tremble and the skin tightens over his ribcage as he watches the news. Comedy here helps expose dressage, as Bergson describes its framing: “Instead of concentrating our attention on actions, comedy directs it rather to gestures” (Bergson 2003, 41). Arthur’s rhythms alternate between violent and silent, between ungainly running and fluid dance. He haltingly acclimatises to the shocks of firing a gun through repetition, and Arthur’s rehearsals lead to comically fudging his punchlines, misfiring and dropping his weapon in scenes which replicate *King of Comedy*’s drop of a firearm during a kidnapping. Repeating and miming his actions, both within the diegesis and across texts, *Joker* reflects the slow, repetitious process of socialisation and dressage through which he experiences violence: “Humans break themselves in like animals.” (Lefebvre 2004, 39). Like bone bubbling under the skin, Arthur bends and is bent by the pressures of white urban masculinity, repeating the ‘impersonation’ of textual precedents in a manner which distorts its limits and opens new ambivalent modes of being (Ngai 2005, 117).

As Horrocks argues of masculine performativity “...the man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half-human.” (Horrocks 1994, 25). In Arthur’s bending body we see Bergson’s Jack-in-the-box: “Crush him down beneath the lid, and often he will send

everything flying... It is a struggle between two stubborn elements..." (Bergson 2003, 23-4). The mechanical - which is in Bergson's sense the rigid inflexibility of conventions, codes and learned dressage - conflicts with the organic - vital affective rhythms - in a violent exposure of the artificiality of the former. Like Bergson sees in the performances of clowns more broadly, Arthur exemplifies "the transformation of a person into a thing [which] seems to be taking place before our eyes" (Bergson 2003, 22), revealing the rigid materiality of urban masculinity.

To bring together *Joker's* use of temporal contexts and rhythms, I lastly turn to Queer Theory to draw together the political effects of these social and comedic breaks and repetitions. Arthur's attainment of qualified and compromised happiness in a dark world, raises Halberstram's incisive question concerning life under oppression: "What is the alternative... to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?" (Halberstram 2011, 1). One might respond that Arthur, in his desire for social recognition as a comedian, is fixated in a relation of 'cruel optimism' to an object obstructing his flourishing (Berlant 2011, 1), but when we see Arthur dance down the long, vertiginous steps of his Sisyphean commute, in spite of harassment, cuts and unemployment, is this not flourishing, however darkly?

Like the eccentric model of Erasmus' fool, Halberstram argues that we should reflect on our definition of 'flourishing,' and value failure positively because of its rejection of normative values (Halberstram 2011, 171). Through the film's frustration of sympathy for the homicidal Arthur, we see a radical negativity, and a rejection of the belief that we live in a rational world in which simple compassion can address structural inequality. This contrasts with Wayne's crooked, normative appeal to compassion for his rich, sexist, loutish employees - "good, decent, educated" men - and antipathy for the poor ("clowns").

For Edelman, conventional calls to compassion attempt to bind us to unquestionable laws, leaving us at Neoliberalism's mercy: "For just as compassion confuses our own emotions with another's, making it kissing cousin to its morbid obverse, paranoia, so it allows no social space that is not already its own..." (Berlant ed. 2004, 159). In the context of *Joker*, however, we see this hegemony contested through Arthur's ambivalent relation to audience sympathy and critique of the hypocrisy of compassion - as Arthur argues, Wayne cannot imagine "[being] anybody but themselves." Where news reporting the abusive Wayne employees killed by Arthur expects unanimous agreement that all death is tragic, Arthur breaks the discourse by both laughing back at power and reappropriating its catch-phrase "that's life." Indeed, so totalising is the discourse of compassion that the network stops broadcasting mid-sentence, Arthur's silence leaving open a space of pure negativity. *Joker* thus refuses affirmative solutions to the systemic issues that constrain him, rejecting neoliberalism's "demand to translate the insistence, the pulsive force, of negativity into some determinate stance or 'position' whose determination would thus negate it..." (Edelman 2004, 4), preserving the radical potential of *Joker's* 'maddened reason' to break logocentric

compassionate discourse, in a movement echoing what Valereto (2011) identifies as *Killing Joke's* escape from rationality. Where Kenny sees *Joker's* negativity as an emptiness, Halberstram argues strongly that breaking free of neoliberal capitalist logic requires us "to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back..." (2011, 110).

In order to pursue this project of radical negativity, to subvert the calls for the orderly city or capitalist productivity or positive thinking, Halberstram proposes we build a counter-canonical history of failures. Instead of "grim scenarios of success that depend upon 'trying and trying again'" (Halberstram 2011, 2), we might, like Arthur, break with the rhythms and dressage of becoming to explore the freedom of social unbeing (2011, 23). Indeed, as I have attempted to demonstrate, *Joker* reminds us through derivative intertextual impersonations and the repeating of a history of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic crises: "To capture the complexity of these shifting relations... we have to be prepared to be unsettled by the politically problematic connections that history throws our way" (Halberstram 2011, 171).

As the product of failed comic timing and a history of failure, Arthur's radical negativity exposes a powerful form of unbeing. If, in militarised Western societies: "repetition [is] pushed to the point of automatism and the memorisation of gestures..." (Lefebvre 2004, 40), Arthur exposes this absurd automatism - the absurd imposition of rationality on an irrational world, of positive thinking in a condition of systemic inequality, of order in a situation of abjection, of the contraction of the welfare state and the expansion of the carceral state, and ugly feelings contorted by rigid systems.

*Joker's* failing repetitions and derivativeness affects us powerfully because it too exposes the strange thingness of its textual and performative antecedents and generative contexts, reminding us of the awkward reality that we are "caught up in things and that the body is a thing among things" (Brown 2001, 4). Through repeated gestures of failure, *Joker* exposes the thingness of the social relations that surround, animate and constitute his body and his identity.

Like the Tramp of *Modern Times*, Arthur finds himself leading a protest accidentally - neither entirely progressive nor entirely reactionary, but decidedly, and intriguingly, a fool. While *Joker* ostensibly attempts to narratively and temporally ground the Joker's character, Arthur instead emerges as a silent, abject discord of things. As the character retreats into the quiet realm of the silent-era fool, he repeatedly blurs time between the historical and intertextual past and present in a negative excess of derivative quotation that frustrates critics and refuses to cohere in a compassionate narrative. Repeated failure, then, in a Bergsonian sense, exposes the rigid thingness of urban masculinity - critically, problematically and foolishly.

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