Joker: A Critique of Society

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2021

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:162:080043

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-04-25**

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Zadar, 2021.

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Zadar, 1. travnja 2021.

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1. Introduction

The 2019 film *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips and starring Joaquin Phoenix, tells the story of Arthur Fleck, a social reject whose surroundings transform him into the villain known as Joker. The film has become an international success, winning 11 nominations and becoming the highest-grossing comic book film in history (Mendelson). Despite winning the hearts and minds of numerous critics and moviegoers, *Joker* (2019) raised concerns about the depiction of mental illness, toxic masculinity, and the transmission of violent messages in film. The film's reception has therefore been mixed, which allows us to examine various arguments and how each side approaches these topics in historical and contemporary contexts.

Throughout the history of cinema, it has been proven that films can have much more of an effect than one would expect, influencing cultural norms and political discourse. Whether these films inspired positive shifts or malicious doings, they served as impetuses for change and should therefore be examined as such. The controversial 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith is one of the earliest examples of cinema's ability to display social issues and to change the course of history. The film was praised by critics and political figures, which demonstrates serious racial issues of the time considering that the film depicted African-Americans as simpleminded and dangerous and the KKK[1] as the representation of American values and patriotism. It also provoked the rebirth of the KKK, proving how film can be used as a powerful political tool for promoting violence and supremacy.

The focus of the paper is to provide a perspective within the frameworks of sociology and political science, examining how *Joker* (2019) reflects certain socio-economic and political issues, as well as what response it elicited. The focal goal is to observe the way this film can

[1] Abbreviation for Ku Klux Klan, a white nationalist extremist hate group based in the United States that mainly targets African Americans

serve as a tool for analyzing social and political affairs from the 1980s until today, and the way it encourages political discourse regarding certain affairs.

In the initial chapter of the paper, two temporalities will be proposed; one in which the plot of *Joker* (2019) takes place in and the temporality of filmmaking, or today. By analyzing the main influence of the film, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), the paper will propose an overview of the political situation in the late 70s and early 80s, which will be observed in regard to Social Darwinism. Supported by Leybovich's research, it will be suggested that *Joker* (2019) represents a forty-year-long political cycle connected by these two temporalities, which potentially makes it a cultural commentary on the circularity of politics. In the following chapter, the depiction of mental illness in the context of the American Dream will be analyzed taking into account Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. Along the lines of Arthur's failure to achieve the American Dream, associations with incel communities will be discussed and identified in relation to Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. Finally, a comparison between the mentioned temporalities will be made regarding public feedback on films inciting violence, as well as a commentary on the way public discourse about violence in film has, or has not, evolved.

2. The political arc connecting the temporalities of *Joker* (2019)

2.1. The setting – Gotham or NY City in the 80s?

In order to discuss the setting of *Joker* (2019), it is imperative to delve into the film's major influence; Scorsese's 1976 psychological thriller *Taxi Driver*. Though some may label the references to this film as acts of plagiarism instead of homage, Scorsese revealed that he was involved with the *Joker* (2019) production for four years before dropping out. The main reason, he claims, was that he appeared to be more interested in Arthur's life than Joker's, or any comic book character for that matter (Sharf). It seems that the film's director Todd Phillips is not much different than Scorsese in that matter, nonetheless, this did not prevent him from directing, producing and co-writing the film. In an interview with *Empire Magazine*, Phillips even stated: „We didn't follow anything from the comic books, which people are gonna be mad about... We just wrote our own version of where a guy like Joker might come from. That's what was interesting to me. We're not even doing Joker, but the story of becoming Joker. It's about this man" (Travis). As expected, he was heavily criticized by comic book enthusiasts for giving Batman's nemesis a definitive origin story, which is antithetical to previous Jokers who were merely agents of chaos. Therefore, *Joker* (2019) is labeled as a Scorsese-meets-Supervillain psychological thriller as Phillips pays homage to Scorsese in a perceptible manner, from the setting of grimy NY City in the 80s to the casting of Robert de Niro.

In the opening scene of *Joker* (2019), the spectators are invited to the personal space of Arthur Fleck while he is putting on clown makeup at work and then forcing a smile in the mirror. In the background, radio news are broadcasting about the garbage collectors' strike and the overall devastating state of the city. This opening scene has an introductory purpose for the protagonist, but it also sets the unsettling tone of the film, as the scene that follows familiarizes the spectator with Arthur's surroundings - Gotham. The streets of Gotham mirror crime-ridden NY City in the late 70s and early 80s, which is also the setting of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976).

This is no coincidence, and neither are the similarities between the two films' opening scenes; in *Taxi Driver* (1976), the initial scene also features the protagonist, Travis Bickle, at his work station. Bickle is verbal in his introductory scene as he informs the spectators right away about his honorable past and eagerness to work, giving the impression of a hard-working, honest American. Arthur, however, is more expressive than verbal as he forces a smile in the mirror and sheds a black tear. Both of these scenes serve as a first rendezvous with the protagonists, which then cut to grimy and deafening streets of an urban American city. The two cuts would have us believe that it is the same city, and according to some, New York was Gotham even before Batman. Early 19th century writer Washington Irving nicknamed NY City Gotham, as it was a synonym in English folklore for a village full of idiots (Bruney). In both films the reference is a decaying city in the late 70s and early 80s in which criminals hold the reins of power, so is this setting completely fictional or is it referencing an authentic narrative of NY City?

As this paper will continue to prove, the socio-economic background of NY City of this time period can be observed through the lens of Reaganomics. It must be noted that despite the fact that the presidency of Ronald Reagan lasted from 1981 to 1989, this paper will prescribe the Reagan Era extended meaning, incorporating years before and after the presidency. Therefore, even though *Taxi Driver* (1976) premiered five years before Reagan's presidency, some of the social and political issues portrayed in the film will be the driving force of neo-liberal policies and will mark the political climate of the 80s. In order to contextualize the realities of both films, from this point forward the paper will refer to the period leading up to his presidency, from 1976 to 1981, as the Reagan Era as well. To provide more insight, Ronald Reagan was the 40th American president whose neoliberal policies were marked by lower tax rates and reductions in government spending. By employing supply-side economics, he proposed high-interest rates for the wealthy, with the idea that they will invest more and

therefore boost the economy. With the 1% paying insignificant taxes and increased military spending, cutbacks in government spending had to be made.[2] This resulted in deinstitulizations, which included the abolition of Carter's Mental Health Systems Act of 1980.

In other words, along with cutting aid for the mentally ill, this meant rapid closure of mental institutions which led to homelessness. Coteli suggests that: „The deterioration of the state-society relationship was instigated by the rise of neo-liberalism in the Cold War era to a certain extent, and caused the social state understanding to be forgotten“ (39). *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle is thus repulsed by his surroundings; violence, prostitution and the general filthiness of the city. In a scene where Bickle meets the presidental candidate Charles Palantine, he tells him to: „clean up this city because it's like an open sewer, you know. Full of filth and scum“ (*Taxi Driver* 00:29:31-00:29:38). There's an ambiguity in his statement, whether he is referring to the actual filth or the overruling moral corruption that he is witnessing every day as a cabby. There's an almost identical portrayal of Gotham; garbage collectors go on strike as the uptown parts of Gotham fill up with trash and rats. The economic crisis of Gotham's municipality bears resemblance to NY's massive strikes in the 70s: „there was also a 17-week long garbage collectors' strike which left mounds of garbage in the streets for four months, attracting rats the size of cats and a prevailing stink that might have even shocked Dickens“ (Sullivan). Whereas *Taxi Driver* (1976) is an echo of then-current political and socio-economic situation in urban America, is there an underlying reason why Todd Phillips choose this exact period setting for *Joker* (2019)?

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[2] Brief conclusion based on the research conducted by Danziger, Sheldon, and Robert Haveman. “The Reagan Administration's Budget Cuts: Their Impact on The Poor” www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc52b.pdf.

2.2. Politics of circularity – how *Joker* (2019) represents a forty-year-long political cycle

According to Leybovich, certain US presidents represented a transformational era change and defined the political conversation for the next several decades, forty years to be specific. „Going backwards", Leybovich claims, „it seems like the consensus is: Reagan (1980), FDR[3] (1932), TR[4] (~1900), Lincoln (1860), Jackson (1828), and Washington (1788)." In agreement with this theory, Reagan's presidency inaugurated the Individualist Era, and all presidents who followed, whether they were Republicans or Democrats, continued these policies. Reaganomics are tightly related to the concept of Social Darwinism – „a system in which each individual is responsible for 'saving themselves' prescribes 'the elimination' of those who are 'unsuccessful'" (Coteli 39).

An overt agent of Social Darwinism, *Joker*'s Thomas Wayne is a portrait of a right-wing NY billionaire who labels poor and disadvantaged as lazy, thus dividing the nation to those who have made *it* and those who have not. After Arthur shoots the Wall Street brokers, Thomas Wayne describes him as: „Someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until those kind of people change for the better, those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns" (*Joker* 00:39:14-50). Social Darwinism dismisses those affected by racism, generational poverty and mental illness, so they are not only predestined to fail, but are also viciously blamed for it. As Coteli puts it: „Those who fail in this struggle will be selected and eliminated. Phenomena such as poverty and sickness are perceived as personal mistakes rather than the consequences of economic or social inequalities" (40). If *Joker* (2019) is referencing a current political climate, there would have to be a reference to Donald Trump and

[3] Franklin D. Roosevelt
[4] Theodore Roosevelt

if there is a character bearing resemblance to Donald Trump, it is definitely Thomas Wayne; both are right-wing businessmen with inherited capital swearing their policies will rebuild the economy and therefore – society. Donald Trump is also guided by Social Darwinism, which is „the tissue connecting this shady conduct with the Republican Party's highest policy priorities", as reported by Chait. In a 1990 interview, he continues, Trump even claimed: "If I had been the son of a coal miner, I would have left the damn mines. But most people don't have the imagination — or whatever — to leave their mine. They don't have *it* … You're either born with it or you're not."

As stated, Reagan's Individualist Era pushed by Social Darwinism and neoliberal policies started around 1980 and was supposed to end with Trump in 2020, marking the forty years of a political era. Leybovich predicted a transformational progressive to be elected in the 2020 presidential election, and one could claim it is debatable to say if he was right. It is possible that Phillips was, though stating this film is not political,[5] unintentionally making a political statement or even a critique of then-current president Donald Trump. Schneider-Wettstein suggests that: „*Joker* (2019) achieves to connect two temporalities: that of New Ethnicity emerging during the 1970s, and that of evangelical prosperity theology entwined with Donald Trump's presidency" (2).

This is in accordance with Leybovich's theory of circular politics, which previous Jokers go on to prove; Tim Burton's 1989 Batman is a heroic figure – an individualist billionaire who saves the day and therefore marks the peak of the Reagan era, when people had more hopes in neo-liberal policies. In Todd Philips' 2019 *Joker,* Batman is merely present as we are invited to celebrate the fall of Thomas Wayne, a similar individualist billionaire business figure. To elaborate, Schneider-Wettstein claims that: „evangelicals had a massive influence during the

[5] During the 76th Venice Film Festival, Phillips told reporters at a press conference that Joker is "certainly not a political film"

1980s under Reagan and still hold that influence with Trump in office, making Joker a cultural commentary on the circularity of politics – critizing its origins and the consequences today“ (3).

2.3. Hell hath no fury like a proletariat scorned[6]

The lines between comedy and tragedy are blurred, but so are between past and present, reality and fiction - as we come to realize how contemporary these issues are. Some of the most popular films of 2019 deal with wealth gap, including *Parasite*, *Knives Out*, *Hustlers*, and *Uncut Gems* which would make 2019 the cinematic year of class conflict. If Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) reflects the issues of urban America in the Reagan Era, could we say that these films also reflect a certain reality, or dare we say a warning?

The year of 2020 gave rise to mass protests; from fighting dictatorship in Belarus to the Indian farmers' protest. Even though *Joker* (2019) could not have predicted these protests, the pandemic and all the social issues it entailed, it still came out in an already politically unstable time. Long-established issues of capitalism resurfaced in the wake of the pandemic, especially in the US where concerns such as social security have been swept under the carpet for the last few decades. These issues were aggravated as unemployment surged, and once-working citizens could not afford medical treatment or paying the rent. Though the pandemic confirmed the value of essential workers and the working class in general, many of them were denied paid sick leave for Covid-19 treatment. Reports show numerous businesses illegally denying paid sick leave for their workers, including McDonalds[7] and Amazon[8]. The World Bank predicted in a recent report[9] that the health crisis would push 150 million people into extreme poverty by 2021. On the other side of the coin, the total wealth of the world’s 2,189 billionaires has soared

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[6] Wordplay on the proverb *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned* created by journalist Alec Opperman in an article “Joker, Network, and the Politics of Recognition“

[7] See Campbell for an insightful analysis

[8] See Levin for further description

[9] See World Bank for a sampling of materials that reflect the range of experiences related

to a record high of $10.2 trillion during the coronavirus pandemic.[10] It is a tale as old as time – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

However, history tends to repeat itself and it was less than 250 years ago that Marie Antoinette said „Let them eat cake“, and then got executed by guillotine. Fast forward to 2020, as protesters set up a guillotine outside Jeff Bezos' mansion and demand higher wages for Amazon workers after the CEO's net worth surpassed $200 billion, making him one of the richest people in history (Holmes). In *Joker* (2019), rioters are seen holding signs that say „Eat the Rich“, a slogan oftentimes used by real-life protesting groups such as Antifa and Occupy Wall Street. Likewise, protesters in Lebanon, Chile, Iraq, Hong Kong and Bolivia[11] have been seen wearing Joker makeup and masks, so whether it be to hide their identity or to show solidarity with one another – the mask became a symbol of dissent. In the film, all of the protesters are immediately labeled as rioters, which is a very contemporary practice as we witnessed during the Ferguson protests in 2014 and the George Floyd protests in 2020. Unlike those protests, the one in the film does not really have a definitive motive; it seems to happen organically and pushes more of an *us vs. them* narrative as everyone who appears to be rich is hunted down. It gets to the point where reasonable resistance against the government becomes extremist, insinuating the extremism of the French Revolution when angry mobs took the chance of lawlessness. So, despite insisting on the film's apoliticism, it seems that Phillips does reference a certain reality, one in which a disenfranchised crowd takes a symbol of a murderer to express anger.

[10] See Morrow for a detailed analysis
[11] See Kaur

3. „I just hope my death makes more cents than my life“

3.1. Mental illness and the American Dream

Where do we draw the line between mad and reasonable? According to Foucault, it lies in the socio-economic structures of power. In *Madness and Civilization,* he proposes an overview of treatment of madness throughout Western history, from the infamous Ship of Fools in the Middle Ages to Freud's psychoanalysis. Foucault claims that Pride was the sin of man before the Fall, which was followed by Sloth, or „the absurd pride of poverty“ (56). In the eyes of many religions and leaders, poverty is immoral and something to be punished, and as madmen were unable to work they were labeled as lazy, or idle. As Foucault puts it: „It is not immaterial that madmen were included in the proscription of idleness. From its origin, they would have their place beside the poor, deserving or not, and the idle, voluntary or not“ (57-58). In this context, mental illness is judged on the basis of morality, along with poverty, sexual promiscuity or homosexuality. The notion of morality in this sense is associated with Judeo-Christian values; those who work are worthy and those who don't are lazy and shall be banished from society. Therefore, the premise that the Devil is lazy is determined; “Through work, man returns to the order of God's commandments; he submits his liberty to laws that are those of both morality and reality.” (Foucault 248).

When Arthur's social worker asks him to show his journal, she reads out the following sentence: „I just hope my death makes more cents than my life“ (*Joker* 00:06:25-00:06:27). Schneider-Wettstein argues that „The word ‘cents’ is a homophone to ‘sense’: \’sen(t)s\. Arthur uses the homophones here synonymously to create the metaphor MONEY IS MEANING. In other words: cents are sense, thence money is associated with success and success is equalled with meaning, or a meaningful life. This relationship is as ambiguous as are homophones“ (2). From this viewpoint, to be worthy and to be a member of the society, one must take the opportunity to participate in the American Dream. As history goes to show, many people have

been excluded from the American Dream, hence the Civil rights movement and The women's liberation movement, just to name a few. Arthur Fleck, however, is a white man – something many on the other side would deem as luck of the draw in the rigged game of the American Dream. Nevertheless, he was a victim of abuse and he suffers from mental illness which are considered to be the main factors of his strange behaviour, thus excluding him from achieving his dream of becoming a comedian, though it does not prevent him from *trying*.

Throughout the film, we follow his fruitless attempts to become an acclaimed comedian, as he is ridiculed, beaten and discouraged. Naive and optimistic, he tries to follow the rules of game and truly believes he is talented enough to become successful. Arthur is clearly delusional is his attempts to gain attention, as he creates fantasies about an audience that adores him, a father-figure who encourages him and a woman who loves him. The illusions that he has talent, a caring mother, and a lover are all shattered at once, leaving him with the realization that the American Dream is, in fact, a myth. There are numerous examples of the ideal American male in Hollywood who embody these aspirations; iconic characters who are agents of violence only for the protection and good of others. They represent strength, economic independence and charisma all the while protecting American values from outside forces. In a nutshell, they define masculinity. Arthur strays far from this ideal, his deformed and abused body is nowhere near beautiful and strong, and his mental illness combined with trauma prevents him from becoming successful and economically independent. He also lacks charisma and social skills which alienates him from everyone around him, from his coworkers to his neighbour.

However, from the perspective of people who never even had the chance to believe in the American dream, this state of anger and shock that Arthur finds himself in seems absurd. For instance, when Arthur's social worker, who seems to be an African-American woman, informs him that they are closing down their offices – he is not distressed by the fact that she might be losing her job. She proves this point by saying: „They really don't give a shit about

people like me either“ (*Joker* 00:41:46-00:41:48). It seems as if this shocking revelation that the American Dream is nothing but a fantasy is not universal, nor common in all groups of people. One could even go as far as saying that this distressing epiphany is a phenomenon unique to white experience. In *Joker* (2019), however, there is a whole transformational sequence where the spectators witness Arthur's realization that he is not special and that the world does not owe him anything.

3.2. Is Arthur an incel?

There are many critics of the film, some of them being lifelong fans of the *Batman* franchise and others condemning the film's insensitivity and its supposed objective of inciting violence. Be that as it may, the film's popularity has been growing since its release, as it earned the title of the most profitable comic book movie and 11 nominations, the most of any comic book-based film ever.[12] So, what makes a film about a mentally ill killer so favored by the general public, and could this praise be potentially dangerous?

One of the film’s harshest critics, David Ehrlich, called *Joker* (2019) “a toxic rallying cry for self-pitying incels”, claiming that “the film appears to justify its protagonist’s kill drive as a refusal to be a punchline.” The film sparked controversy around the topic of toxic masculinity and incel communities, due to allegations that it encourages the spectators to sympathize with a social reject who finally decides to act through violence. To elaborate, an incel stands for involuntary celibate, and in most contexts, it refers to an ideology or an online community on platforms such as *Reddit* or *4chan*. Ehrlich continues to argue that Arthur is:

> “a talented man who swallows the red pill and becomes convinced that nobody is. That perspective allows Phillips to feign an apolitical stance and speak to the people in our world who are predisposed to think of Arthur as a role model: lonely, creatively

[12] See Mendelson for full description

> impotent white men who are drawn to hateful ideologies because of the angry communities that foment around them."

In other words, it has been suggested that Arthur Fleck embodies the characteristics of incels; he is isolated, angry, unattractive and unsuccessful. Moreover, after being rejected in multiple spheres of his life, he decides to retaliate. Many fear Arthur could serve as a *saint and martyr* figure to incel communities and white supremacist groups in the US, thus provoking them to commit crimes like those featured in the film. In the past decade, Beckett claims, there has been a significant increase of incel-related attacks in the United States and Canada, having claimed as many as 40 to 50 lives. As reported by Meindl and Ivy; "incel communities have also been linked to mass shootings, with one mass shooting occurring approximately every 12.5 days."

There is a stereotypical portrait of mass shooters in the US – white, angry, young men who have failed in performing their masculinity, in the professional or romantic domain. In a way, Arthur Fleck fits the narrative, especially after he realizes that his idol, his mother and neighbor do not recognize him in the light he wants to be recognized in. Because he expresses his anger through acts of violence, should there be a concern that there will be those who might imitate this behavior? The research by Meindl and Ivy shows that there has been "a contagion effect, similar to a copycat effect, where the occurrence of one mass shooting increases the likelihood of another mass shooting occurring in the near future." Meindl and Ivy also suggest that „a better model is generalized imitation, which can help explain the increased likelihood of people engaging in behaviors similar to those they have been made aware of or actually observed." In other words, people with personality disorders such as sociopathy are intrigued and encouraged by the media attention and popularity of, for example, mass shooters and serial killers. This increases the probability of them imitating these acts for the sake of being recognized, because they are disempowered and ignored by the system as mentally ill individuals.

Pundits such as Ehrlich point out that incels and white supremacists will be encouraged to commit violent crimes because they witness Arthur being glorified by the masses in the film. Likewise, they would be even more emboldened when film critics and movie goers praise the portrayal of Arthur as a mentally ill person. This is in accordance with Meindl and Ivy's theory of generalized imitation, as they claim that "people are more likely to imitate a model who is similar to themselves, particularly in terms of age and gender; who is of an elevated social status; who is seen being rewarded; and who is seen as competent. "

In his book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (2017), Michael Kimmel reflects on what he calls *the aggrieved entitlement* of white American men, or the sense of failure to obtain the promised economic and social privileges. Kimmel claims that this failure to procure a successful career or a partner leads to violence and resentment towards certain social groups and therefore shifting blame on them, rather than taking responsibility for themselves. Does Arthur, or should he, take any responsibility for his situation? As a victim of abuse and as a mentally ill person, he is entitled to medical treatment and should not feel responsible in this sense. However, is he entitled to a career in comedy and to a relationship with his neighbor? This is where his entitlement gets problematic; thinking that the world owes him success and a partner because he considers himself a good person.

On the other hand, Arthur's acts of violence are not governed by an ideology or hartred towards a certain group of people, like women or people of colour. It could be argued that he only kills those who have wronged him; it starts with self-defense and then turns to retaliating against those who abused and ridiculed him. Arthur smothers his adoptive mother upon discovering that she abused him in his early childhood and he stabs his former coworker Randall, whom he finds responsible for losing his job. Later on, he will shoot his former idol and father-figure Murray Franklin for publicly humiliating him. Even though none of these murders were justified, he spares the lives of those he considered to be respectful or kind

towards him. For instance, after Arthur mercilessly kills Randall in front of another former coworker Gary, he decides to spare Gary's life. He even says: „You were the only one that was ever nice to me“ (*Joker* 01:30:01-01:30:04). While the concern regarding this film is partially justified, it cannot be argued that he shifts the blame to a specific group of people. Whereas incel related crimes target specifically women, and white supremacists' crimes target people of colour, Arthur's crimes are not political or ideological.

3.3. Theory of recognition

When Arthur recognizes himself in the media, both when Murray ridicules him and when people start wearing clown masks, he is defined by the politics of recognition, or the state of being acknowledged. Accordingly, he wants to be recognized by his supposed parents, his idol, his social worker and his neighbor. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel Honneth suggests that the notion of being recognized is focal in analyzing social conflicts. Honneth argues that there are “three forms of recognition: love, rights, and esteem” (1), and therefore “three forms of experiences of disrespect, each of which can generate motives that contribute, in turn, to the emergence of social conflicts” (2). In other words, recognition occurs in a private, legal and social sphere: the private being *love*, the legal being *rights* and the social being *esteem*. He goes on to claim that “Taken together, the three forms of recognition -love, rights, and esteem - constitute the social conditions under which human subjects can develop a positive attitude towards themselves” (169).

According to this theory, the first step in becoming a liberated and valued individual is being recognized in the private sphere by friends and family, which provides emotional security. Secondly, he or she must be recognized in the legal sphere, meaning that this person is valued as a citizen and thus acquires certain civil rights, such as social security and the right to vote. And thirdly, in the social sphere, one’s contribution to society is recognized and

respected, which is manifested in the sense of solidarity and community. When these forms of recognition are obtained, one is able to become a truly autonomous and valued person.

In the private sphere, Arthur Fleck is not recognized by his family; throughout the film he believes that he does not have a father and that his mother is the one who needs caring. It is not until the very end that he finally discovers the truth about his adoption and the abuse carried out by his adoptive mother. He finds a father figure in a man he never even met, Murray Franklin, whom he will end up killing. Arthur seeks emotional connection, which is why he creates a fantasy around his neighbor Sophie Dumond, a single black mother who lives in his building. Though she is one of the rare people in the film who is kind towards him, their encounter does not last more than a few minutes. This would lead to the conclusion that Arthur is yet again not recognized in the private sphere, this time by his love interest Sophie. All three of these figures will disappoint Arthur; his adoptive mother who lied and abused him, Murray Franklin who ridiculed him and Sophie Dumond who does not even know his name. In the social sphere, he wants to be recognized as a person who brings laughter and joy to society, so his ultimate goal is to become a comedian. In reality, Arthur works as a professional clown in a company where nobody respects him, and his stand-up performance will make him a laughing-stock. This means that his contribution to society is not valued, thus excluding him from the social sphere.

The legal sphere is associated with human rights, which are not fulfilled in Arthur's case as his treatment and medication are not provided anymore by social security. As his social worker announces this, he says: "You don't listen, do you? I don't think you ever really hear me. You just ask the same questions every week. How's your job? Are you having any negative thoughts? All I have are negative thoughts . . . for my whole life I didn't even know if I really existed. But I do. And people are starting to notice" (*Joker* 00:40:43-00:41:20). This sequence allows us to examine the lack of recognition in the eyes of his social worker who represents

government-provided services and ultimately – the system. Also, it warns us that if the system refuses to recognize him, he will continue his quest for recognition somewhere else and become anything or anyone to be acknowledged. In this sense, Arthur became Joker because people started noticing him only as this destructive persona; he is invisible and weak, but Joker, on the other hand, is exalted and a symbol of resistance. To follow up the research by Meindl and Ivy, "when there is mass media coverage on a killer, media attention is perceived as rewarding the actions of the shooter through notoriety, thereby also increasing the social status of the shooter." This is exactly what happens in *Joker* (2019); those who are disenfranchised and not recognized by the state see a symbol in a persona whose actions would habitually be deemed as unethical.

It is not uncommon that the masses side with people who decide to *take matters into their own hands* when the government fails to. On January 11, 2020, 25-year-old Filip Zavadlav committed a triple homicide in broad daylight in Split. The men he shot, just like those in *Joker* (2019), were not just any men – they were drug dealers who practically controlled the city and threatened his family. This event, like the one featured in the film, gained media attention because of the socio-economic roles between the executor and the executed. In the following weeks, Filip Zavadlav was largely defended by the public, as thousands of people joined the Facebook group *Justice for Filip* where they organized a protest and hired one of the most prominent lawyers in Croatia.[13] Is there something rotten in the state of Denmark? To call the work of the social services and the judicial system an underperformance would be a kind gesture. Both the killing of these three men and the support Zavadlav received are the embodiment of the public's outrage towards a corrupt system in which criminals are protected. In an interview with Ana Marija Kostanić, psychologist Igor Čerenšek stated that:

[13] See "Stručnjak za sigurnost o masovnoj podršci trostrukom ubojici: 'Ne bih isključio mogućnost osvete'" for a detailed analysis

"Throughout history, people always had the tendency to side with those who fight for justice and who speak for the weak, even when they do it in a socially and legally unconventional way. In the eyes of the society, sometimes the end justifies the means, especially if an underlying noble intention is being identified. It is not unusual that people associate with an avenger, in fact, a large portion of the film industry is based on this notion, which makes this associating and advocating for the *avenger* common and not at all unusual."[14]

Ultimately, Arthur is in the lack of being acknowledged in three different spheres. When he finally gains attention, it is through media, and people who are disenfranchised praise him and wear clown masks as an homage to their hero. *Joker* (2019) is without doubt a film about an individual who lacks recognition, however, in a broader context, it is also about a whole mass of people failing to be recognized. The angry mob sees a symbol in a psychotic clown for the same reason Arthur adopts the persona of Joker, because it is better to be recognized as someone cruel than not at all. The act of being recognized is a foundational political act and this can be examined in *Joker* (2019) as political protests and riots begin by both the lack and the act of recognition of Arthur and the masses.

4. Canceling Joker?

On March 30, 1981, US president Ronald Reagan was nearly assassinated by John W. Hinckley Jr. in Washington, D.C., who was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Hinckley's intentions were not political, in fact, he tried to assassinate Reagan so he could get the attention of the actress Jodie Foster, who played a 12-year-old prostitute in *Taxi Driver* (1976). According to Kiernan, Hinckley told psychiatrists he had seen *Taxi Driver* (1976) as many as 18 times, which is why they played the film in the courtroom in front of the jurors. The movie was „the last piece of evidence offered by Hinckley's lawyers in their effort to convince the jury

[14] This statement was translated from Croatian to English

that Hinckley was legally insane when he wounded Reagan and three others and should not be held criminally responsible for his acts“ (Kiernan). One of the witnesses, she writes, testified that:

> „Hinckley mimicked even the smallest things that Travis Bickle did. He wore an army fatigue jacket and flannel shirts, drank peach brandy, took lots of pills, kept a daily log of his frustrations and eventually bought three guns as Bickle had. Like Bickle, Hinckley toyed with his guns while he watched television and practiced with them at a target range.“

However, there is a significant difference between them - in the film, Bickle's violence is rewarded. This case is extremely important in the discourse of the relationship between the artist and the art. The question arises; is the artist responsible for how the spectators will interpret their work? Hypothetically speaking, if we eradicated, or in mediaspeak - canceled works of art found guilty of inciting violence or valorizing villainy, what would be left of art? Surely, there is a good deal of *safe* art, one that is bereft of bloodshed and villains, but how deprived would the world or art be without characters like Tony Soprano, Walter White or Raskolnikov. If we were to analyze them in same way as Arthur Fleck, all of these characters could be labeled as white angry men who deliberately make the decision to kill, just like him, or Travis Bickle. Should art suffer because of a handful of those who may misinterpret it? After all, one could misinterpret any work of art and pin the blame on the creator, for instance, Charles Manson insisted that The Beatles' *White Album* was to blame for his crimes. A few days after Hinckley attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan, Kenneth R. Clark reported for *Bulletin Journal* and encapsulated this thought very precisely: „Television and movies suddenly loom like Frankenstein monsters, their power far greater than that of their creators. Whatever they do, some few of the sick and demented who watch feel compelled to do.“

Moreover, the fear of life imitating art and worries of copycat behavior were provoked when *Joker* (2019) premiered in theatres, especially because of 2012 Aurora, Colorado shooting when a gunman opened fire during a screening of the film *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). It is still a matter of debate whether the Colorado gunman was inspired by the character of Joker, or even if the film had any relevance to the shooting. Nevertheless, the families of the victims feared that *Joker* (2019) would provoke a similar event, which led them to release a formal letter addressed to Warner Bros. CEO Ann Sarnoff. Parker claims that Sandy Phillips, one of the people who signed the letter, said that Joker is „like a slap in the face." It must be noted that the letter did not call for the film to be banned, but for the creators to be mindful of the potential consequences it may provoke. In this sense, *Joker* (2019), whether one considers it *good* or *bad*, sparked debate over important issues regarding the influence of cinema and the filmmaker's responsibility. The meeting place of these diverging arguments provides a forum – a place of discourse which would not be possible if we simply dismiss or eradicate every work of art which we can accuse of valorizing villains or violence.

5. Conclusion

This paper sought to provide an insight into the film *Joker* (2019) within the frame of reference to political science and sociology. It can be divided into two contextual parts; the first one analyzing the way this film portrays socio-economic issues of urban America, and the second section which inspects academic and public reception of a film demonstrating violence. After discussing the setting of the film and the references to *Taxi Driver* (1976), it was established that there is a political arc connecting this temporality with the moment of production. According to Laybovich's theory, this would make *Joker* (2019) a commentary on a forty-year-long political cycle, thus criticizing the roots and the consequences of the current political system. The focus was then transferred to the discussion about mental illness and American white men, in reference to the American Dream. The paper inspected the criticism and the association with the incel community, with the notions of imitated behaviour and theory of recognition. It was argued that even though this film portrays Arthur in a way which provokes sympathy, the arguments that he could be an incel are mostly unfounded. Moreover, the paper provided a commentary on the relationship between the artist and the way people may interpret their work, thus concluding the arguments about the fears of imitated behaviour.

The aim was not to determine whether the film is exceptional or not, but to examine it as a cultural phenomenon - a film that was adored by critics and viewers alike. Because of its enormous success, it had an impact on the film industry and popular culture in general. Accordingly, the focus of this paper is to demonstrate that the film's success is due to its relevance in today's culture, despite the fact that it is supposed to be set in the 1980s, showing how these 40-year-old issues are still present in our society.

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7. Joker: A Critique of Society: Summary and Key Words

The main goal of this paper is to provide an analysis of the film *Joker* (2019) within the frameworks of sociology and political science. The paper insists on the power of film as a medium for demonstrating social problems and as a major part of popular culture. As an extremely popular film, *Joker* (2019) was able to unintentionally launch a public discussion about the portrayal of violence in film, toxic masculinity, and the wealth gap. As a part of that public discussion, this paper sought to analyze the two temporalities of the film; the setting of NY City in the 80s and the temporality of filmmaking. By analyzing these two temporalities, it was argued that a political arc could be drawn between them, making *Joker* (2019) a social commentary on the issues of a forty-year-long political cycle stretching from the 1980s until today. Because of these issues, it was argued that Arthur was not recognized in multiple spheres of his life which caused him to search recognition in other forms, thus creating the destructive persona of Joker. The paper also proposes an argument why the crowd sees a symbol of resistance in Joker, both in the film and in real life. In a way, the paper also suggests that a society that ignores the vulnerable will breed its worst enemies: criminals, or in this case, psychotic clowns who start revolutions.

Key words: *Joker* (2019), politics of circularity, Ronald Reagan, social commentary, mental illness, American Dream, incels, theory of recognition, cancel culture

8. Joker: Kritika Društva: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Cilj ovoga rada je pružiti uvid u analizu filma *Joker* (2019) unutar okvira sociologije i političkih znanosti. Rad inzistira na tvrdnji da film služi kao sredstvo za izlaganje društvenih problema što ga čini značajnim dijelom popularne kulture. Iznimno popularan film, *Joker* (2019), uspio je nenamjerno potaknuti javnu raspravu o prikazivanju nasilja u filmu, toksičnom maskulinitetu, i imovinskom jazu. Kao dio te javne rasprave, ovaj rad nastojao je ispitati dvije temporalnosti ovoga filma; radnja filma koja se odvija u New Yorku 1980-ih i trenutak filmskog stvaralaštva. Analizirajući ove dvije temporalnosti, ustanovljeno je da postoji politički luk koji ih povezuje, što bi značilo da je *Joker* (2019) društveni osvrt na probleme četrdesetogodišnjeg političkog ciklusa koji traje od 1980-ih do danas. Ustanovljeno je da zbog spomenutih problema Arthur nije bio prepoznat u više područja svoga života što ga je navelo da pažnju potraži drugdje i da stvori ličnost Jokera. Rad isto tako predlaže da društvo koje zanemaruje one najslabije stvara svoje najgore neprijatelje: kriminalce, ili u ovom slučaju, psihotične klaunove koji započinju revolucije.

Ključne riječi: *Joker* (2019), cirkularna politika, Ronald Reagan, društveni osvrt, psihički poremećaji, Američki San, inceli, teorija prepoznavanja, kultura otkazivanja