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Surplus-Enjoyment and Joker

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Abstract

Žižek has asked us to consider when we should care about the *tyrant's bloody robes*. He was asking whether we should show restraint in responding to terrible injustice. The unsettling depiction of 'Joker' in Todd Phillips' (2019) film of the same name goes some way to answering this question. We witness in this film a Joker unlike the many others we had seen in the Batman cinematic universe. Arthur Fleck is not a villain, at least not when he sets out to live in our world. In his own words, he is just a man with 'nothing left to lose' living a life that has become 'nothing but a comedy'. He is not the chaos spreading sociopath depicted in *The Dark Knight* (2008). He is a man with a mental health condition. An outcast. Pushed around by society until he decided to do something about it. But why is a vigilante in a bat mask acceptable, but one in clown make-up is not? Maybe our traditional understandings of "right" and "wrong" and our childish cultural tropes about "good" and "evil" no longer serve us as they should when our heroes are greedy corporatists and our villains are the marginalised, disabled and mentally ill. Could it be that the Batman stories we have heard since we were children are designed to make us fret about the tyrant's bloody robes? In this paper I explore Žižek's analysis of Joker alongside his accounts of surplus-enjoyment with particular reference to Arthur Fleck's life whilst living with a disability.

Introduction: A vigilante in clown make-up

When should the 'tyrant's bloody robes' matter? Žižek asks us to consider this position in reference to Robespierre's reproach to his followers concerned about the deaths of innocent people killed during the revolutionary terror. 'Stop shaking the tyrant's bloody robe in my face', Robespierre told them, 'or I will believe that you wish to put Rome in chains' (Žižek 2009: 3). Should restraint be shown when responding to terrible injustice? The unsettling depiction of 'Joker' in Todd Phillips' (2019) film of the same name goes some way to answering this question. This Joker is not like the Jokers we have been accustomed to in the Batman cinematic universe. Arthur Fleck, we are carefully told, is a victim, not a villain – at least not at first. He is just a man with 'nothing left to lose', whose life has become 'nothing but a comedy' (Phillips 2019). He is a man to be pitied, living with a mental health condition that makes him awkward and an outcast. He is pushed around by everyone until he pushes back – but it is precisely when he pushes back that he provokes the anger and criticism of the elites of Gotham.

Why should a vigilante in a bat mask be considered an acceptable hero, but one in clown make-up considered dangerous, immoral and unacceptable? Are our childhood heroes really the greedy corporatists and our villains the marginalised, disabled and mentally ill? What a lesson to teach a child! Could it be that Batman stories (until now) have been designed to make us fret about the tyrant's bloody robes?

In this paper I frame this predicament with reference to Žižek's work on *surplus-enjoyment*. We encounter the excess of enjoyment precisely at the moment we are confronted with the horror of our desires, and when we encounter their very impossibility. Surplus-enjoyment is the something new created from our symbolic encounters and is borne of our true wish to never be (fully) satiated.

This paper is ordered in the following way: first, I explore three media responses to the Todd Phillip's movie, *Joker* (2019). These responses range from the medicalisation of mental illness, to claims that the movie insults the mentally ill, to

the belief that the movie ‘perfectly’ represents mental health and disability (Edgar 2019). In the second section, I explore Žižek’s recent and early work on *surplus-enjoyment*. In the third, I argue that Arthur Fleck in the process of becoming Joker operates in the uncomfortable spaces and absences of surplus-enjoyment. His transformation is complete when he fully accepts – and fully identifies with – his disability. In the fourth section, I account for the role of ideology in creating a world where a Joker exists. Finally, I argue for a reading of Žižek’s work on surplus-enjoyment and ideology alongside the work of Simone Weil in the hope that a more compassionate world might be possible.

The question we must ask is not why does the Joker commit acts of violence, but rather why does the world create Jokers? As environmental destruction continues amidst cries that climate science is part of some kind of left-wing conspiracy, and as post-COVID-19 recovery remains slow and disproportionately felt by the poor, marginalised, young and disabled, we should ask why we all still have to eat out of the trashcan of ideology. Perhaps, like *Sesame Street*’s Oscar the Grouch, we must all embrace the garbage to find satisfaction and enjoyment.

Joker!

How should we watch Todd Phillips’ *Joker* (2019)? Žižek (2022: 322) argues that the ‘three main stances’ that the media have adopted to the film ‘perfectly mirror’ the division of Western politics. The conservatives are concerned that the film will inspire violence. The politically correct believe it has racist overtones and partially obstructed discriminatory themes yet are also enthralled by its ‘blind violence’. Leftists praised the film for ‘faithfully rendering the conditions of the rise of violence in our societies (Žižek 2022: 323).

Similarly diverse accounts were offered in three articles that have appeared in *The Guardian* that considered the representation of mental illness in the character of Arthur Fleck/Joker. In 2019, two ‘junior doctors’ working in ‘acute inpatient psychiatric wards’ penned an opinion-editorial arguing that the depiction of mental health in *Joker* was ‘dangerously misinformed’ and perpetuates ‘damaging stereotypes’ (Driscoll & Husain 2019). The doctors lament this dangerous development in a time when there have been ‘great leaps’ in mental health

awareness since mental illness can now be discussed ‘without shame’ as a result of ‘effective information campaigns’.[1]

In another article, Hollywood director David Fincher (of *Fight Club* [1999] and *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* [2011] fame) echoed these sentiments with his claim that *Joker* was a ‘betrayal’ of people living with mental illness and a product of a ‘risk-averse’ Hollywood making billions off yet another Batman flick (Pulver 2020).

The third article was written by disability advocate Justin Edgar (2019), who argues that ‘The new Batman spin-off understands perfectly the frustration and helplessness caused by involuntary mental health conditions – but refuses to milk them for tragedy’.

> Set in dystopian Gotham of the 1980s, it’s a world where the vulnerable of society, such as single mothers, the elderly and people with mental health issues are crammed into crumbling housing projects, while super-affluent bankers live it large. The villains in Joker are filthy rich, such as the bullying, Trump-like Thomas Wayne who blames the poor for their own poverty as he campaigns to become mayor (Edgar 2019).

It is, in Edgar’s (2019) view, ‘first-person cinema told from the point of view of someone with mental health issues’ and is able, through Arthur Fleck, to break down some of the stigma of having poor mental health and transform it into a kind of perverted superpower. As Arthur Fleck remarks in the much-memed and shared quote from the movie; ‘The worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don’t’ (Phillips 2019).[2] He finds freedom at the precise moment he embraces his disability: ‘Remember you used to tell me that my laugh was a condition, that there was something wrong with me? It isn’t. That’s the real me’ (Arthur Fleck in Žižek 2022: 334). His uncontrollable laugh, his ‘autonomized partial object’, symptom or ‘sinthome’, is something he learns to fully identify with (Žižek 2022: 334). In so doing, he learns to enjoy the horror that his life has become.

Enjoy!

Žižek (2022: 2), in his most recent book *Surplus-Enjoyment*, argues that it is the ‘paradoxes of surplus-enjoyment’ that sustain the ‘topsy-turviness of our time’.

Building on the 'old Freudian question' of why being oppressed sparks enjoyment, Žižek (2022: 6) argues that power is not wielded over people through fear alone, but also by 'bribing us for our obedience'. In exchange for our 'obedience and renunciations' of the objects of our desire we gain a '*perverted pleasure*' in the renunciation itself – 'a gain in loss itself' (my emphasis). This *perverted pleasure* is what Lacan referred to as surplus-enjoyment. As such, surplus-enjoyment functions as a paradox. It is an enjoyment that results from an enjoyment not experienced:

> Surplus-enjoyment implies the paradox of a thing which is always (and nothing but) an excess with regard to itself: in its "normal" state, it is nothing. This brings us to Lacan's notion of *objet a* as the surplus-enjoyment: there is no "basic enjoyment" to which one adds the surplus-enjoyment, enjoyment is always a surplus, in excess (emphasis in original. Žižek 2022: 6).

Some of Žižek's earlier work on *objet petit a* and surplus-enjoyment can be found in *Looking Awry* (1992). Through these concepts we find the essence of the psychoanalytic notion of *drive.* Or, 'more properly', Lacan's distinctions between aims and goals (Žižek 1992: 5). The *goal*, in this view, is the destination where the *aim* is the 'way itself' – the things done to (supposedly) reach the destination. 'Lacan's point', Žižek (1992: 5) argued, 'is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim'. In turn, 'the drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive … to continue its path to and from the goal'. The true source of enjoyment becomes 'the repetitive movement of this closed circuit'.

'Surplus' enjoyment is enjoyment without the enjoyment – another in a series of commodities that can be indulged with their malignant component subtracted (Žižek 2002: 10). In the renunciation of enjoyment, we feel a more indefinable enjoyment. Žižek's best-known account of this phenomenon, and perhaps one of his most well-known ideas, was provided in *Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012) in his account of the attraction of Coke. Coke is:

> The perfect commodity. Why? … A commodity is never just a simple object that we buy and consume. A commodity is an object full of theological, even metaphysical, niceness. Its presence always reflects an invisible transcendence. And the classical publicity for Coke quite openly refers to this

> absent, invisible quality. Coke is the real thing … What is that "it", that "real thing"? (Žižek 2012).

This extra, absent something is not a positive attribute of Coke that can be measured, identified, or added. It is that 'mysterious something more' – an 'undescribable excess that is the object-cause of my desire' (Žižek 2012).

Žižek's work on surplus-enjoyment has a considerable back story that draws in several concepts to which he has devoted many words in elaboration. In *For They Know Not What They Do* ([1991]2008: 230) Žižek frames 'surplus-enjoyment' as emerging from Freud's concept of the 'economic problem of masochism' in relation to the 'pure loss' experienced in the castration anxiety. '[A]ll objects that appear in its place', he adds, are measured '*against the background of a radical absence*' (emphasis in original). This 'loss' opens a psychic space in which we 'calculate' all of our gains and losses:

> no later profit can recompense us for castration; since every possible profit appears within the space opened up by the very act of castration – since there is no neutral position from which we could "compare" gains and losses – the only possible field of their comparison is the empty space constituted by the "wiping out" of the Object (Žižek [1991]2008: 230).

Castration anxiety, for Žižek, introduces a kind of cognitive binary of an object and its absence, and a dialectic between these forces. Every effort we make to fill, or traverse, the loss invariably falls short.

This psychoanalytic path leads Žižek to use three terms in ways that render their meaning as substantially the same thing – '*objet petit a*, the surplus-enjoyment, the object-cause of desire' (Žižek [1991]2008: 230). It is also clear from Žižek's early work that surplus-enjoyment is directly linked, through this process, to fetishism and the emergence of ideology. Following Lacan:

> ideology … designates *a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility*. This difference corresponds to the one which distinguishes the Freudian from the Marxist notion of fetishism: in Marxism, a fetish conceals the positive network of social relations, whereas in Freud a fetish conceals the

> lack ('castration'[3]) around which the symbolic network in articulated (emphasis in original. Žižek [1989]2008: 50).

So where for Marx the fetishized commodity may work to cover the cracks, in traditional psychoanalysis the fetish stands in for the impossibility that our loss can ever be retrieved. The more we try to win-back what is gone, the worse our predicament becomes. This is particularly important when we consider Lacan's surplus-enjoyment owes much to Marxist surplus-value. But where a Marxist approach attempts to account for 'loss' through commodification, it also reproduces through commodification a kind of 'surplus-object' created from 'the leftover of the Real eluding [commodified] symbolization' (Žižek [1989]2008: 51). The absent-loss persists, made tangible by our failure to make satisfying meaning out of the 'intricate symbolic cobwebs' we spin out every day in engaging in our social worlds (Žižek 2001: 47). The castration anxiety – our working, daily metaphor for loss, doubt and uncertainty – becomes the absent real-cause on which we are free to blame all our troubles since, in the most practical terms, it is the object which can never be, and should never be, attained. It is here that ideology enters – via fantasy – in earnest.

For fantasy to function, for it to remain 'operative', it must maintain its 'distance' from its explicit fulfillment. Against this fulfillment, fantasy must remain a 'transgression' (Žižek [1997]2008: 24). Žižek uses the example of the TV show *MASH* (1972-1983) to demonstrate this point. Where the show is positioned as anti-military, making comedy from its idiotic rules, pouring scorn on the pointlessness of war, all of the characters play their roles in the war machine. It is precisely 'this very distance' that is a particularly pure form of ideology:

> The lesson is therefore clear: an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical do it, that there is a rich human person beneath it: 'not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person' is *the very form of ideology* (emphasis in original. Žižek [1997]2008: 26-27).

Žižek draws attention to G.K. Chesterton's 'Defence of Detective Stories' where he argues that 'civilisation itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellion' (Chesterton in Žižek 2009: 54-55). Detective stories show that 'morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies'. It is always the 'particular

transgressions' that gain our attention, but it is in their opposite, 'the absolute transgression' where the trauma resides. '[T]he highest form of violence', Žižek (2009: 55) argues, 'is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as "violent"'.

Fleck!

Could it be that Arthur Fleck operates in these spaces of surplus-enjoyment? Much like the incels and clowncels that revel in their hopelessness (Žižek 2022: 323), find enjoyment in their inability to find sexual partners, and make their weakness a source of power, does Arthur Fleck not encourage the downtrodden to *own it?* – embrace your nothingness since you have nothing to lose! It is your advantage over the affluent that fret over everything that might be taken from them!

Žižek (2022: 334) draws attention to the meaning of Arthur Fleck's name – in German, *fleck* means blot, stain or spot. Arthur Fleck represents, by name and by character, 'a disharmonious stain in the social edifice, something with no proper place in it'. Not only is Arthur a *stain* in the sense that he does not belong and is treated as though he should not exist, but also due to his uncontrollable fits of laughter that are the result of brain injury – the Pseudobulbar Affect, a 'neurological condition' (Edgar 2019) – sustained as a result of an attack by one of his mother's boyfriends continuing the trend of betrayal at the hands of father-figures in Arthur's life:

> The paradox here is that in the standard Oedipal scenario, it is the Name-of-the-Father which enables an individual to escape the clutches of maternal desire; with Joker, paternal function is nowhere to be seen, so that the subject can outdo mother only by over-identifying with her superego command (Žižek 2022: 334).

It is here that Žižek (2022: 327) draws a distinction between *the Joker* as depicted in earlier Batman films and *Joker* as depicted in Todd Phillip's film. In Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker is the 'only figure of truth'. Batman lies when he allows Harvey Dent to absorb the consequences of the Batman personae. Harvey lies when he claims he is Batman. The lie, we are told, sustains the

phantasmic dimensions within which Batman's important vigilante work takes place. Something similar occurs in Zack Snyder's *Batman v Superman* (2016) where Batman's hidden identity frees him to develop a fail-safe to check Superman's unrivalled power – it is something that Superman himself complies with as the ultimate good guy, revealing to Batman that he knows his true identity but will keep his secret for the greater good.

Nolan's Joker is a man with a mask, but one who is 'fully identified with his mask' (Žižek 2022: 327). There is, for Žižek, no ordinary, normal person beneath the mask, and no traumatic back-story that would explain his actions:

> This is why Joker has no back-story and lacks any clear motivation: he tells different people different stories about his scars, mocking the idea that he should have some deep-rooted trauma that drives him. It may appear that *Joker* aims precisely at providing a kind of socio-psychological genesis of Joker, depicting the traumatic events which made him the figure he is (Žižek 2022: 327).

Arthur Fleck 'identifies himself with his fate' in a 'free act' that positions Arthur as a 'unique figure of subjectivity' (Žižek 2022: 328). When Arthur says 'You know what really makes me laugh? I used to think that my life was a tragedy. But now I realize, it's a fucking comedy' before he murders his mother, he rids himself of the maternal hold on his life and her superego injunction to 'laugh' (she also nicknames him 'Happy' and tells him to 'smile' and that he was put on this earth 'to spread joy and laughter').

His mother lived a similarly miserable existence – a 'half-dead impassive victim of paternal violence', a single mother, with an obsessive belief that Arthur's father is Thomas Wayne and an insistence that he will soon sweep in and save them from their poverty. Indeed, the picture of what constitutes a paternal influence in Arthur's life is a repeating ambiguity in the film. Arthur believes that Wayne is his father and arrives at the gates of Wayne Manor, interacts with Bruce Wayne as a child, and assaults Alfred. He also approaches Thomas Wayne at a prestigious function that he crashes. After a short discussion Wayne punches Arthur in the face. Žižek (2022: 328) notes that the film is 'elegantly' non-committal as to whether Thomas Wayne is truly Arthur's father, and fan theories abound. Brett Cullen, the actor who played

Thomas Wayne, stated that he played the ‘big bathroom confrontation’ as though he was Arthur’s father (see Chitwood 2020).

Thomas Wayne is not the only figure of paternal abandonment in the film. Murray Franklin – who hosts a late-night comedy talk-show that Arthur and his mother watch – is a figure in Arthur’s fantasies, imagining scenarios where Murray acts in loving and fatherly ways. When Arthur is invited on Murray’s show he provides a ‘chance of social integration and public recognition’ (Žižek 2022: 328). For Žižek:

> One is almost tempted to say this duality of Wayne and Murray enacts the opposition between “bad” and “good” father (in this case, the father who ignores Arthur and the father who recognizes him), but the integration fails, Arthur sees through Murray’s hypocrisy and shoots him in the midst of the TV show, and it is only at this, after repeating the murder of his mother in the public murder of a paternal figure that he fully becomes Joker (Žižek 2022: 328-329).

And this dichotomy says nothing of the other absent-father in the film – Joker’s biological father who did not raise him and who may ultimately turn out *not* to be Thomas Wayne. But this circuit is closed too; again in ‘another elegant move’. Wayne is murdered by an anonymous clownmask-wearing follower of Arthur’s crimes – ‘a member of Joker’s new tribe’. As such ‘Both Oedipal enigmas’ are left unanswered – we know not the identity of Arthur’s father nor Wayne’s murderer (Žižek 2022: 329).[4]

But if murdering his mother and a paternal figure is what turned him into Joker it was not the only force. We must also acknowledge his acceptance of the ambivalence of his surplus-enjoyment. He no longer seeks to traverse the fantasy (Žižek [1997]2008: 24-25) and find a father-figure – Arthur accepts that one is not needed and he is left with no desire to address the absence. This acceptance allows Arthur to accept his ‘pure loss’ and to secretly understand that anything that appears in the place of his father is inadequate ‘against the background’ of the trauma of his father’s childhood absence (Žižek ([1991]2008: 230).

Ideology!

In a section of *Living in the End Times* (2010: 56) titled '*What Does the Joker Want?*', Žižek argues that ideology often 'assumes the guise of its very opposite' – '*non-ideology*' (emphasis in original). This guise gives form to the construction of 'alternative fictional realities' where 'what actually happened' becomes 'beside the point':

> Rewriting the past is an act of generosity which enables the subject to change her future. Even if the fictional realities they construct are not pretty … there is a secret "pathological" profit in this shift, a "surplus-enjoyment" is generated (Žižek 2010: 57).

It is at this point where ideology enters as we retreat into comforting *enjoyments* against a 'background' of unbearable experiences and loss. Dealing too directly with our trauma 'generates an atmosphere of anxiety, a deep sense of claustrophobia' (Žižek 2010: 57). In his account of the Israeli film about the 1982 Lebanon war *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), Žižek argues that reframing the horrors through the eyes of an Israeli soldier with a focus on their anxiety and trauma is 'ideology at its purest'. By focussing on the perpetrators experiences we can:

> obliterate the entire ethico-political background of the conflict, involving questions such as what was the Israeli army doing deep in Lebanon? … Such a "humanization" thus serves to obfuscate the key question: the need for the ruthless political analysis of what is being done in terms of political-military activity (Žižek 2010: 58).

This precise turn is replicated in *Joker* (2019) when Arthur Fleck shoots and kills three drunk men in suits in an act of (partial) self-defence after he intervenes to prevent them from harassing a young woman. The response in Gotham is mixed. The media reports on brutal murders carried out by a psychopath in a mask. Many of Gotham's elite are outraged. Gotham's millions of marginalised people, however, don clown masks and celebrate the killing of privileged yuppies, echoing sentiments from Bret Easton Ellis' (1991) controversial novel *American Psycho*.[5] In his appearance on Murray Franklin, Arthur shares his dismay at the outpouring of emotions for the dead yuppies whilst the marginalised and underprivileged of Gotham suffer everyday with little notice:

> the way I see it, what happened was a good thing. All of you, Gotham, the system that knows so much, you decide, you decide what's right and wrong. What's real and what's made up. The same way you decide what's funny or not … I killed those guys because they were awful. Everyone's awful these days … Why is everyone so upset about these guys? Because Thomas Wayne went and cried about them on TV? (Phillips 2019).

And how does Arthur bypass this ideological stalemate of sympathising with the aggressors? With outbursts of obscenity in the form of violent jokes and ultimately murdering Murray Franklin live on television. But any good Žižekian audience would likely agree with the Joker's assessment: 'humour is subjective' (Phillips 2019).

This is emblematic in *Joker* (2019) of the ideology of no ideology – the tyrants are innocent bystanders and ideology-free whilst the marginalised in clown masks are the *activists*. Arthur fantasizes that Murray Franklin might provide him with the fatherly nurturing figure he had craved. One of his mother's boyfriends had sexually abused Arthur when he was a child and inflicted a head injury that caused his laughing fits and permanent disability. Watching the Murray Franklin show allowed Arthur to revel in the fantasy that some of the qualities of his absent father might be regained through his admiration of Murray Franklin. He imagines vivid scenarios where Murray tells Arthur that he is proud of him and would be glad to call him his son. Arthur imagines Murray saying: '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' (Phillips 2019). And that, for Arthur, may have been enough for him to recoup his loss.

Arthur's fragile phantasmic repressions are shattered when he watches on television Murray Franklin mock his stand-up comedy. He stands in his mother's hospital room in the moments after a police officer asked him whether his laughing fits, a symptom of his disability, were being faked as 'part of your act' (Phillips 2019), and watches Murray Franklin mock his laughing and his comedy routine.

It was precisely the absence of Arthur's father that makes the symbolic circuitry of his life function. In confronting his brutal reality of his hopelessness, poverty, marginalisation and mental illness his immediate predicament worsens (arrested, incarcerated, identified as a murderer) but, in turn, real change becomes possible (no longer bothered by his disability, a new perspective on the world, feeling

empowered), echoing Žižek's sentiments on the election of Trump and his defeat of Hilary Clinton (Žižek 2019).

Indeed, as Žižek (1992: viii) has long argued, even reality itself operates with a kind of surplus-enjoyment attached. Our lifeworlds are made up of realities that contain 'the surplus of a fantasy space filling out the "black hole" of the real'. Our 'ideological *sinthome*' sits at the 'core of enjoyment' in 'every ideological edifice' that sustains our 'sense of reality' (emphasis in original. Žižek 1992: ix). But it is through our engagement with others that we can confront the horror of how the other views us:

> When we demand an object from someone, its 'use value' (the fact that it serves to satisfy some of our needs) *eo ipso* [by the thing itself. Emphasis in original] becomes a form of expression of its 'exchange value'; the object in question functions as an index of a network of intersubjective relations. If the other complies with our wish, he thereby bears witness to a certain attitude towards us. The final purpose of our demand for an object is thus not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but *confirmation of the others attitude toward us* (my emphasis. Žižek 1992: 5)

When Arthur confronts Thomas Wayne and Murray Franklin he is demanding to be seen; demanding recognition. When he reaches out to Wayne and Murray, he is not desiring them to play the role of the absent-father. Rather, he is seeking confirmation that the world really is as he sees it – ugly, unforgiving … a tragic comedy. Meeting Wayne and Murray is all the confirmation that Arthur requires and gives him his permission to act out. What other options do we have when our reaching out is met with rejection, hostility, and incivility (as Arthur is repeatedly subject to throughout the movie)?

Mental Illness, Disability, and the Nature of Injustice: Žižek avec Weil

> People are so uncivil – *Joker* (2019).

In her famous essay 'Human personality', Simone Weil (2014: 57) considers the meanings of cruelty and injustice. 'You do not interest me', she begins. 'No man can say these words to another without committing a cruelty and offending against

justice'. Where every person is 'sacred' what is it that constitutes human sacredness?

> Although it is the whole of him that is sacred to me, he is not sacred in all respects and from every point of view. He is not sacred is as much as he happens to have long arms, blue eyes, or possibly *commonplace thoughts*. Nor as a duke, is he is one; nor a dustman, if that is what he is (my emphasis. Weil 2014: 59).

What would make this person sacred would be that 'his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him'. Weil argued that the enduring psychic condition of all humanity from birth to death is an expectation that 'good and not evil will be done to him' (Weil 2014: 59).

Žižek (2009: 54) refers to Weil in arguing that 'desire' is in good standing when the quest for 'property and power … enables an individual to achieve independence' in the world. But when this healthy desire transforms into an ever-increasing quest to 'demand more' such people 'do not know how to stop themselves; they know no limit'. Weil (1994: 325) argued that 'There is always a sense of limitlessness in desire'. But if we find ways to enjoy 'Limited desires' then we are 'in harmony with the world'.

It is here that Žižek finds disagreement with Weil. It is, in Žižek's (2009: 55) view, precisely this baseline of *limited desire* that forms the absence, the loss, from which the objet petit a, and the associated surplus-enjoyment, springs forth. From this conundrum emerges an 'irreducible ambiguity':

> the source of the good [limited desire] is a power that shatters the coordinates of our finite existence, a destructive power that, from the standpoint of our limited stable life-form, cannot but appear as evil (Žižek 2009: 56).

It should be no surprise then that the affluent people of Gotham are so affronted by the rioting of the marginalised wearing clown masks. On the surface this appears as plain subjective violence – *you are rioting and destroying property and interrupting our peace!* But the truth is much more complex and speaks to the realities of 'subjective' violence – *why should poor people be seeking their desires!? They have yet to establish even the limited desires of sufficient food and security!*

Is this not precisely the form of the response to 9/11 and the War on Terror? The blank retorts of New Yorkers asking “why has this happened?” were met with incredulity across the globe in regions where the US had for many years plundered for oil and precious minerals. Perhaps what New Yorkers were really asking was what right do the marginalised, whose basic needs are not met, have to push back. To paraphrase Jordan Peterson, *get your house in order before you seek your desires!* (Žižek & Peterson 2019).

But here we return to Weil’s (2014: 61) account of human cruelty and injustice and note her plea for ‘institutions’ that encourage a type of ‘public freedom’. This freedom would not be constructed from outspoken declarations, but of an ‘attentive silence’ that hears the ‘faint and inept cry’ of the marginalised and the suffering. Such a version of public freedom would substantially improve the misery in Gotham and the world’s major cities.

Leftist filmmaker Michael Moore was addressing these kinds of concerns when he argued that *Joker* was a ‘timely piece of social criticism and a perfect illustration of the consequences of America’s current social ills’ by highlighting the role of the ‘bankers, the collapse of healthcare, and the divide between rich and poor’ (Žižek 2022: 323). Similar themes are explored in Matt Reeves’ *The Batman* (2022) (an unconnected contribution to the Batman/Joker universe staring Edward Cullen as Batman), but with a twist. The Riddler’s crimes of revenge against the elite of Gotham – an elite that stole money intended to help the marginalised – are framed as immoral and wrong. Batman himself, with whom the Riddler believed he was working alongside, ridicules him for his beliefs. Vito Oddo (2022) notes that, ‘Once and For All’, the all-conquering villain of Gotham City is ‘Social Inequality’:

> Contrary to other major DC superheros, Batman is usually involved with street-level crime, punching robbers and drug dealers in the middle of the night. There’s an obvious problem with Batman’s approach to the issue, as criminality more than often comes from social inequality, instead of the innate moral inclinations of criminals … we tend to forget that social inequality is a problem you cannot punch in the face (Vito Oddo 2022).

As the author points out, the three protagonists in the film are orphans from different social classes. And, as such, possess differing sensibilities. Bruce Wayne is affluent.

An orphan, sure, but not an orphan in the way the Riddler is an orphan, and he reminds Batman of this fact. A key irony is that while the orphaned Bruce Wayne grows up in Wayne Manor, Edward Nashton, who grows up to become the Riddler, resided in an orphanage located on the Wayne estate. Selina Kyle is also made an orphan at seven by a gangster in the Gotham underworld. She has a more moralistic edge – a kind of less violent, Robin Hood-styled personae who steals and seeks revenge but for the right reasons – but shows herself capable of taking murderous actions when she feels it is justified. Of course, the Batman does as well. In a scene towards the end of the film after one of the Riddler's recruits – a recruit drawn from the impoverished and marginalised of Gotham – almost kills him, the Batman administers to himself a shot of adrenaline and begins beating this man to a pulp. Only Gordon prevents Batman from murdering him.

Indeed, violence is central to the Gotham City in all Joker/Batman films. But Moore, and Žižek, mock the voices of the hysterics on the political right who argue that *Joker* (2019) may cause social unrest or violence (see Lazare 1971: 131). As Moore (in Žižek 2022: 324) argues:

> Our country is in deep despair, our constitution is in shreds, a rogue maniac from Queens has access to the nuclear codes – but for some reason, it's a movie we should be afraid of … The greatest danger to society may be if you DON'T go see this movie … This movie is not about Trump. It's about the America that gave us Trump – the America which feels no need to help the outcast, the destitute … the fear and outcry over Joker is a ruse. It's a distraction so that we don't look at the real violence tearing up our fellow human beings – 30 million Americans who don't have health insurance is an act of violence. Millions of abused women and children living in fear is an act of violence.

Naturally, this situation is business-as-usual in the United States. As Chomsky and Waterstone (2021: 120-121) have detailed, these kinds of rights have long been rejected by people in power in the US. The US's UN Ambassador under Reagan, Jeane Kirkpatrick, dismissed notions of 'socioeconomic' and 'community' rights as 'a letter to Santa Claus', a position supported by her Russian counterpart. In 1990, the US's representative on the UN Commission on Human Rights, Morris Abram,

dismissed such rights as ‘preposterous’ and ‘little more than an empty vessel into which vague hopes and inchoate expectations can be poured’. He bizarrely added that it may even be a ‘dangerous incitement’ (in Chomsky & Waterstone 2021: 121).

Joker (2019) is not about Trump, but it is about a nation that makes Trump’s election possible. Similarly, I claim that *Joker* (2019) is not about Joker – it is about a nation that produces a Joker. Here I am reminded that the US literally does produce Jokers; whether they are right-wing or left-wing terrorists, incels, clowncels, or people inspired by the Joker emulating his crimes (although the most famous of these was not inspired by the Joker at all. See Desta 2019[6]; Shelton 2020).

But perhaps, as Žižek predicted six years ago with Trump’s election, this is the beginning of real change. In many parts of the world, the rise of the political right has been met with their rejection in parliamentary politics – such as in Australia where leftist parties won the federal election, the state election in Victoria and are predicted to win the state election in New South Wales; in Ireland and Northern Ireland where Sinn Féin are now a central player in government, splitting the votes of the major parties; in the US with Joe Biden and the blowback against Trump; even in the UK where Lizz Truss demonstrated the failure of conservative economic theory. But we have also seen a return to dominance of the totalitarian tendencies of ‘woke’ activism, which generates its own blowback (see Howie 2022). Is this real progress and real social change? Perhaps time will tell.

Conclusion: Living in the trashcan

Popular television show *Saturday Night Live* recently parodied *Joker* (2019). The skit involved a comedic movie preview for a movie called *Grouch* – a gritty origin story telling the tale of how *Sesame Street*’s ‘Oscar the Grouch’ came to find himself living in garbage (Donnelly 2019). A human named ‘Oscar’ is a simple garbage man, collecting trashcans on suburban streets before a descent into madness sees him increasingly embrace a fetish for trash. In this dystopian *Sesame Street*, Snuffy (the large, brown elephant creature) is a pimp, Big Bird is a stripper, and the neighbourhood has fallen into ruin. Bert and Ernie are mugged on the street, and Bert is stabbed. The skit ends with Oscar fully embracing the garbage and his grouchiness. He smears mud and shit on his face, pours garbage over himself and

makes a garbage can his home to become the Oscar the Grouch we know from the *Sesame Street* children's program.[7]

The lesson here, as Žižek ([1997]2008: xiv) has long argued, is that we are all, always, eating out of the trashcan of ideology. The *objet a* always has this potential to turn into shit. In the long fight scene in *They Live* (1988) – well know to Žižekian scholars – Nada tells Armitage 'I'm going to give you a choice. Either put on these glasses or start eatin' that trash can'. But Armitage does not want to wear the glasses that allows the ideology in reality to be laid bare. He understands the potential for his relative peace to be undermined by seeing through these glasses:

> The violence staged here is positive violence, a condition of liberation – the lesson is that our liberation from ideology is not a spontaneous act, an act of discovering our true Self. We learn in the film that, when one looks for too long at reality through critico-ideological glass, one gets a bad headache: it is very painful to be deprived of the ideological surplus-enjoyment (Žižek [1997]2008: xii-xiii).

The lesson, as it is with Coke (and Oscar the Grouch), is that 'We are obliged to enjoy. Enjoyment becomes a kind of weird, perverted duty' (Žižek 2012). Coke operates as a direct embodiment of its marketing slogan – it is '*it*'; 'pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions' (Žižek [2000]2008: 19). In this way, our desire for something is never just a desire for the certain thing or object, it is always 'desire for desire itself' (Žižek 2012). The trauma of experiencing desire is that it might be fully met, so we 'desire no longer' and 'The ultimate melancholic experience is the experience of a loss of desire itself'. There is no way to overcome this dilemma by returning to a way of life where we only consume for our needs and sustaining requirements. 'The excess is with us forever' (Žižek 2012).

And what happens when Coke is no longer *it*? When it is warm, or goes flat, or perhaps is no longer popular? It transforms from 'sublime to excremental' (Žižek 2012). We find ourselves again eating from the trashcan.

Žižek's accounts of surplus-enjoyment touch on many of the key psychoanalytic concepts that he has explored throughout his career. It involves elements of castration anxiety, object-relations, therapeutic elements relating to the analyst as object (Žižek 2005: 57), *jouissance*, *objet petit a*, absent real-cause, the Other,

superego and the Real and the Imaginary. It has the potential to govern the operation of ideology as well as fetishism and disavowal. It positions the traumatic intervention of the father as central to all social experiences and, as such, oddly echoes the most damning critiques of psychoanalysis. In short, surplus-enjoyment is ubiquitous, and its existence stands for a kind of *surplus* or remainder – a potentially fraught attempt to traverse an edifice that has emerge in the lifeworlds of people in the 21st century.

But the concept of surplus-enjoyment is not as complex as it first appears. Our path to understanding it is through Marx – it is the economic surplus-value, but for the psychoanalytic concept of enjoyment. It is the enjoyment that we gain beyond the point we have satisfied what we need to survive. Coke contains sugar, and it sort of quenches a thirst for a while. But its value goes far beyond this – what we accumulate in enjoyment is transcendent in comparison. Arthur's father, if he had raised him, may have provided comfort, love and security – the things he needed to survive and be well. But without him he has become the person he is meant to be. He has become Joker.

Notes

1. I want to acknowledge that for people managing mental illnesses those problematic comments likely feel like cold comfort.

2. A comment often communicated to me is that people who suffer from mental health concerns that result in panic attacks would love to be able to hand someone a card like the ones Arthur Fleck carries to forego the need to explain what was happening. They might read "Do not be alarmed. I am having a panic attack. It is something I have to live with". People with mental health issues do not enjoy explaining themselves and often fear how others will react to their illness.

3. This interjection is in the original text.

4. This would be an obvious opportunity to explore Lacan and Žižek's work on the symbolic, imaginary and real father, and perhaps Freud's conception of the primordial father. This is a large area of psychoanalytic thought and I do not believe I could have done it justice here. As I wrote, however, I was consulting Žižek ([2000]2008: 20-23) where surplus-enjoyment and Coke are discussed and then related to the 'Name-of-the-Father', as well as Žižek's ([1991]2008: 133-135) discussion of 'Father-Enjoyment' in relation to the symbolic, imaginary and real father.

5. Which, perhaps expectedly, occurs in a similar historical timeframe of 1980s Manhattan.

6. Desta (2019) notes that despite the James Holmes' murders being incorrectly referenced as inspired by Heath Ledger's depiction of the Joker, these murders are widely believed to be Joker-inspired. As such, there has been concern that this false perception may trigger (ironic) "copycat" attacks.

7. The skit can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqpak5lFxvs

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