



'Everything Must Go': Joker as a Banner for Postmodernism

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Abstract

Joker, the commercially successful comic book movie that broke all records (Forbes, 2019), is set to release a sequel on October 4, 2024. Its profitability speaks to its popularity and unique ability to resonate with a broad audience, including the academic community. In a fictional Gotham, where Arthur Fleck works as a clown, Joker demonstrates the slow descent into madness of a man neglected by society. Arthur's mental condition, his social awkwardness, and his ineptitude in dealing with many problems in his personal life placed him on the outskirts of society, physically and emotionally. This article argues that, as depicted in the film, Arthur's journey aligns with the postmodernist philosophy developed by the French thinkers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

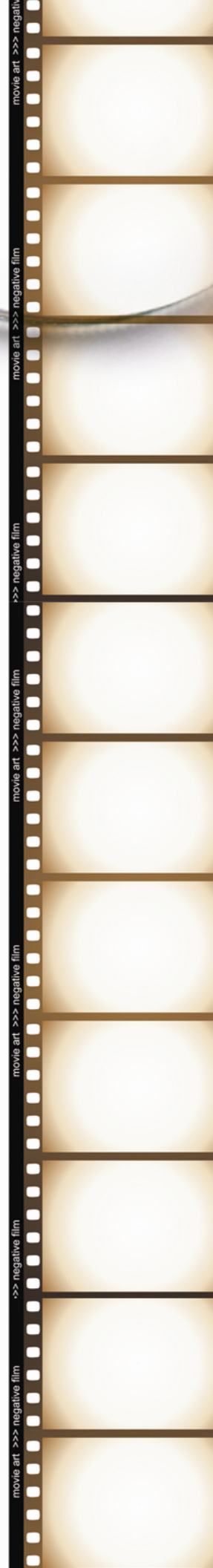
Keywords: Joker; postmodernism; French philosophy; American history; cinema



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Problem statement: The affirmation of postmodernism's central tenets

As a theory, postmodernism sought to deconstruct the concept of an objectively determined reality and the rationalism that permeated the philosophical discourse embedded in Western thought. It also highlighted society's cynical and unjust structures, underscoring the need for radical change and contestation of the status quo. In *Joker*, all the elements of failure in Arthur's life ultimately 'liberated' him from society's norms, allowing him to personify postmodernism's emancipatory project while presenting the dissenters' voices against the status quo. This paper argues that *Joker's* discourse is underpinned by a postmodern ethos that challenges the righteousness of today's social order, although it does not present any alternative in its place. In short, the film's message aims to influence people to protest the system, personifying the character of *Joker* itself.

Postmodernism's founding fathers, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, asserted that society's order and traditional norms are the product of power relations based on specific interests by those who control the mechanisms of knowledge and consensus. Therefore, one of the objectives of postmodernism is to 'unmask' the narratives hidden behind the established

patterns of society and investigate the contradictions within the mechanisms that help maintain social order. The movie *Joker*, we claim, as much as postmodernism, attacks the ‘certainty’ of our interpretations about the world, in which most of the time other non-standard ways of thinking are excluded from the equation.

This paper, therefore, contributes to academic thought by bridging film studies and philosophy, offering an interdisciplinary reading of *Joker* that positions the film not merely as social commentary or a cautionary tale about society’s ‘forgotten ones’, but as a cinematic embodiment of postmodernist spirit. By aligning Arthur Fleck’s narrative arc with the theoretical frameworks of Foucault and Derrida, our analysis demonstrates how popular cinema can function as a vehicle for philosophical discourse.

Background: A brief overview of postmodernism’s founding fathers

Postmodernism is part of a broader movement in the social sciences, derived mainly from the works of the French intellectuals Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. It represents an anti-foundationalist and anti-structuralist philosophical approach, challenging the existence of metanarratives—essentially, widely accepted stories—about our society. For Derrida, for instance, theories and realities are simply the products of the discourse, incapable of existing outside it and embedded with subjective meaning. On the other hand, Foucault discussed how power and knowledge are mutually constitutive, culminating in the understanding that

knowledge and worldviews are not neutral but a product of power relations within society. In one of his expositions, Foucault (2013) states that:

...the source of human freedom is never to accept anything as definitive, untouchable, obvious, or immobile. No aspect of reality should be allowed to become a definitive and inhuman law for us. We must revolt against all forms of power—but not just power in the narrow sense of the word, referring to the power of a government or one social group over another (...) Power is anything that tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good.

As such, both Foucault and Derrida fundamentally criticized the supposed rationality of modernism, which is derived as a philosophical inheritance of the Enlightenment and centered on the belief in a value-free (and scientifically based) understanding of reality. Postmodernism also went against Positivism, positing that society was governed by objective laws whose rational thinking methods could be identified¹. For Postmodernism, what is considered sane and taken for granted as an objective truth varies according to the dominant power of each era. With truth serving as an instrument for those in power, it is possible to construct alternative ‘truths’ that will function as a means of resistance to that power and favor the less privileged. In short, there is no absolute truth, only competing perspectives for interpreting the world.

Within a Postmodernist understanding, “practices might be resisted or disabled; boundaries might be put into doubt and transgressed; representations might be subverted, (and) deprived of the presumption of self-evidence” (Ashley, 1988, p. 254). The Joker movie highlights that the society in which Arthur Fleck lived was flawed, thus necessitating a radical

change. Ultimately, *Joker* challenged reality's varied 'fabric' while inciting audiences to question the beliefs, values, and views upon which the world is based. As a result, "Joker is a film that belongs to everyone and (to) no one, and as such contextually speaks to the collapse in grand narratives and to the moral and social uncertainty in contemporary life" (Redmond, 2021a, p. 3).

Methodology: Discourse analysis

In this paper, discourse analysis is applied by examining not only the explicit narrative elements of *Joker*, but also the implicit/interpretive ideological frameworks embedded within its visuals and writing. With that in mind, we don't claim that all of the movie's direct or indirect messages stemmed from Philipps's deliberate intent. Instead, we demonstrate that the film possesses sufficient elements to enable viewers to interpret it not just as a neutral cultural product, but as a work that promotes meanings associated with Postmodernist philosophies.

The analysis of the movie's discourse and dialogues, therefore, allows for the unpacking of how Arthur Fleck's transformation is narratively legitimized through social marginalization, how society's institutions are framed as mechanisms of control, and how chaos is linguistically and symbolically reframed as a form of personal agency. That being said, discourse analysis is the most suitable approach for our case study, precisely because *Joker* operates on multiple semiotic layers, inviting varying interpretations of its events, rather than fixed conclusions. In

more practical terms, our applied methodology interrelates specific plot points in the movie with interpretations from prominent works of Foucault and Derrida, the ‘founding fathers of Postmodernism’.

“Kill the rich”: Joker from the eyes of the less privileged

“Is it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?” This is one of the first phrases of the movie *Joker* (directed by Todd Phillips), when Arthur Fleck, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is having regular consultations with a therapist. To explain why the situation in Gotham seems to worsen over time, the therapist adds that “people are upset, they’re struggling, looking for work. These are tough times.” Right at the film's beginning, the radio announces that garbage is piling up in the city and that oil prices are skyrocketing. Dreariness is everywhere; different sirens can be heard, graffiti adorns the subways, buildings need renovation, and Gotham is infested by “super rats.” The film is set during the garbage strikes of the early 1980s, a socio-cultural period in American history marked by widespread poverty and inequality that became particularly pronounced following numerous economic and international energy crises. Still to this day, not only in America but also elsewhere, “tens of millions of people found themselves living below the poverty line (...) unable to afford basic food or healthcare” (Redmond, 2021a, p. 3).

Joker also touches upon the perils of black communities in the United States. The film's three notable characters were black women: the therapist who helped Arthur, the mother Arthur

met on the bus, and the woman who lived in Arthur's apartment building. In all three cases, the film implicitly highlights how these characters, who belonged to the black community, were struggling. The woman riding the bus was snappy and uncomprehending towards Arthur. The therapist felt disenchanted about her job, and Arthur's neighbor complained about her living standards, making a hand gesture that indicated, albeit jokingly, that she considered shooting herself in the head to end the suffering².

It seems that Todd Phillips (the film's director) aligned "Arthur's trials with those of working-class people of color who populate much of his world (...) and by aligning Fleck with these prominently featured and anonymous people of color, created a commentary that sympathizes with their plight" (Obenson, 2019).

Trustworthy, this sense of helplessness, social fracture, and community neglect was experienced by all these characters, a personification of America's poor and underprivileged. All of them were racially or socially disenfranchised people, in contrast with the wealthy and powerful social strata of Gotham, typically illustrated in the movie by white men who rose to the top of the city's economic hierarchy. Moreover, the woman on the bus and Arthur's neighbor are considered single mothers struggling to raise their children. It feels as if Todd Phillips was attempting to tell audiences that Gotham's society had failed black women, which

is also symptomatic of today's situation in America, according to many critics. Therefore, as a film, *Joker* "has that rare power to speak to and from different political registers, revealing (...) the very fractured nature of the world" (Redmond, 2021a, p. 5)

In terms of narrative, the opposition between different social classes is also highlighted in *Joker*, contributing to the main character's transformation from the harmless Arthur Fleck into the dangerous villain. This transformation starts when Fleck, after being fired from his job, encounters three of Thomas Wayne's well-off employees in the subway. Thomas Wayne - interpreted by Brett Cullen - is the arguable antagonist of the movie, who portrays the role of Gotham's self-made man and a prestigious member of the city's economic and social elite. Back to the subway scene, the three men start to act incredibly rudely towards a lone young female passenger; they are trying to engage her, but she is not interested, and in the process, a French fry is even thrown at her. Arthur laughs uncontrollably at this situation out of sheer distress. The men get annoyed and approach Fleck while he laughs uncontrollably, and then they beat him³. The situation culminates with Fleck, who carried a concealed handgun, shooting and killing the three men in an act of furious revenge.

In the aftermath, Arthur dances inside a public restroom to celebrate his deed. At that moment, he seems to feel a particular pleasure and liberation from killing those men in the

subway. As expressed by Derrida (2020c, p. 6), “the moment of decadence (...) is the period proper to all movement of consciousness”. When Arthur finds himself at the lowest point of his life, he finally ‘awakens’ to his true self the moment he achieves consciousness. Arthur then believes in his existence; he believes that people are starting to notice him. True “Arthur feels invisible in the world and wants to be noticed; he craves renown, hunger for fame or infamy since he imagines this will give him the prestige and the social connections he lacks” (Redmond, 2021b, p. 75). That could also conceal another message from the movie, indicating that meaning can only be found when one does what he wishes, without concern for moral restraints.

Moments later, commenting on the incident, an anchor on local television mentions that: “there seems to be a groundswell of anti-rich sentiment in the city. It is almost as if our less fortunate brethren are taking the side of the killer” (in this case, the side of Fleck). In response to the news, manifestations of people masked as clowns began to take place all around the city, with many holding signs that read, “Kill the Rich!” Indeed, one of *Joker’s* explicit social commentaries concern Gotham citizens’ discontentment with (and to a particular extent hatred towards) the “rich” or the privileged class. Regarding the killing in the subway and the protests that followed, Thomas Wayne, speaking as Gotham’s candidate for mayor, commented the following: “What kind of coward would do something that cold-blooded? Someone who hides behind a mask. Someone is envious of those more fortunate than themselves. Yet, they’re too

scared to show their face (*referring to the protesters*) (...) those of us who've made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't, as nothing but clowns".

In *Joker*, "the poor are disenfranchised and desperate (...) the rich are arrogant and self-righteous. Even Thomas Wayne, Bruce's father, who is usually romanticized as a socially responsible doctor, is reduced to an elitist who lives a pampered life behind iron gates and derides protestors" (Brown, 2021, p. 12) as insignificant. Within this context, later in the movie, during a dialogue between Arthur Fleck and his therapist, the latter mentions that the city is cutting funds to social services, expressing a feeling of abandonment and stating that the authorities in Gotham "don't give a s***" about people like Fleck and her. This topic is highlighted once more at the end of the film when Arthur Fleck replies to Murray Franklin: "Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy. You think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? They don't".



Figure 1: Joker after the bathroom dance scene. Source: Warner Bros Pictures

Joker's postmodern ethos

Postmodernism can be considered the central philosophical aspect of the movie *Joker*. Such an undertone is displayed in the interactions between Arthur Fleck and Thomas Wayne, portrayed as the film's villain. In these interactions, the viewers are presented with multiple interpretations of reality or alternative versions of the truth. For instance, according to Thomas Wayne, Fleck was abandoned by his biological father and adopted by Penny Fleck when he was young, whereas Arthur is convinced that he is Wayne's son⁴. The spectator then chooses what to believe, as the movie leaves some room for interpretation regarding Fleck's origins. Where does the truth lie? It does not matter for the movie's 'narrative' because each character has a particular version of the truth and believes in their interpretation of reality. Derrida, one of postmodernism's leading exponents, cast "doubt on truth and reality" because, for him, "no

sentence is true and there is no reality outside our subjective beliefs” (Stocker, 2020, p. 12).

This very thought is entirely in line with the movie’s philosophy.

In *Joker*, Arthur’s difficulties in life are shown as representing the failures of the system and the inadequacy of Gotham’s social and hierarchical structures. The perils of Fleck’s experience include taking care of his sick mother, having a psychological condition that makes him laugh uncontrollably in situations of stress and anxiety, and being socially awkward. On top of that, very little empathy is shown towards Arthur’s mental condition. For example, early in the movie, the lady on the bus gets irritated when Arthur interacts with her child and pays little regard to Arthur’s condition, even after he gives her a card explaining his situation.

The scene shows moreover that “the bus carries numerous passengers each disengaged from the other: refusing eye contact or conversation, the commute is one of drudgery and social isolation Gotham manifests as a city where no one feels entirely at home and always alone” (Redmond, 2021b, p. 68). Husserl, a philosopher extensively quoted by Derrida in his work *Speech and Phenomena*, defends that another person cannot be acquainted with our inner thoughts and emotions by interpreting our involuntary manifestations; in fact, those manifestations - or “utterances” - only make sense to the person himself (Husserl apud Derrida 2020a).

Moreover, when Penny Fleck, Arthur's mother, is hospitalized, Arthur is followed by two detectives who suspect that his laughing condition is part of an act. Their suspicion also points to the lack of compassion people have for Fleck's health situation. The movie shows that Arthur's laugh is frequently filled with angst and emotional pain, but those around him never correctly interpret such an utterance.' Arthur wants to become a stand-up comic, a job that pokes fun at everyone and everything. Further in the movie, when Arthur – dressed as a clown - is entertaining some kids in a hospital, a handgun suddenly drops from his pocket, highlighting the depraved state of the protagonist's actions. The fact that Arthur felt the need to carry a gun on himself in a children's hospital produces a genuinely unsettling feeling, adding to the overall discomfort of the character's journey.

At different points in the movie, Arthur Fleck also indicates that he might commit suicide. The first indication happens right at the beginning of the film when the therapist reads Fleck's diary and discovers the following lines, "I hope my death makes more cents (sic) than my life." As Derrida (2020b) stated, writing is a form of communication "to those who are absent," expecting its content to produce effects beyond the writer's life. Fleck's diary, therefore, was a particular testament to posterity. Nevertheless, unlike what is implied by the movie, Arthur does not kill himself at the end; instead, he chooses to kill others; he views the world as rotten and

deserving of punishment. Arthur is the instrument to usher in a new world order, whatever that would be. As Joker, he changes the structure of things; he becomes an ‘agent of chaos.’

Notwithstanding, we also witness Arthur's failure to establish a healthy relationship with any of the film's female characters. He appears to be attracted to his neighbor and even stays with her in a particular scene. However, we promptly discover that it was all an illusion that only existed in Arthur's head. The relationship portrayed in the movie between Arthur and his neighbor was merely an imaginative creation, an interpretation of reality by Arthur. Fleck is beyond his prime in health and desirous of companionship, yet he realizes that the structure of the world around him needs to be torn down; he is unwanted, a failed man, and concludes that society has failed him. The woman Joker was closest to was, in fact, his mother⁵. How other people feel about that is shown when Fleck (in yet another of his imaginations) sees himself on the Murray Franklin show. The audience laughs when he says that he lives with his mother.

In his delusion, Fleck imagines himself being praised by the television host, with Murray confessing that he would give up everything to have a son like Arthur. It is interesting to note that both Arthur and Murray Franklin share a connection of growing up without a father. The future nemesis of Joker, Bruce Wayne, the Batman-to-be, will also grow up without a father. Perhaps the movie also hints at the complications brought upon many children who lack a father

figure. It could also suggest that the absence of a traditional family structure has created a challenging situation for many people in modern societies. Regarding Arthur's relationship with his mother, it appears that they were able to form a genuine connection. Still, Arthur eventually decides to kill her after knowing that she allowed him to be abused when he was a child. To end the life of his hospitalized mother was a radical decision undertaken by Arthur, but once again, he feels a sentiment of liberation after doing that. Fleck seems to find meaning only when destroying what is around him.

In *Joker*, color and music also serve to convey the film's message. Regarding color, we notice the stark contrast between Arthur and the Joker. As Arthur, there is a significant lack of color in his clothing, except when he is dressed as a clown for work. Yet when he becomes the Joker, he dresses in exceptionally colorful attire. The potential message behind this is to demonstrate that deconstruction is beautiful, fun, and desirable. On the contrary, the current structure of society is the realm of the ugly, dull, and depressing. When it comes to music, we notice the absolute joy experienced by Arthur as Joker puffs away on his cigarette while dancing down the stairs to the tune of Gary Glitter's upbeat Rock and Roll Part 2. This music, coupled with Joker's carefree attitude, illustrates the pleasure he finds in smashing the norms constructed by society.

A final thought to explore here concerns the fact that, of all the jobs Arthur could do, he is the most comfortable being a clown. In English, being a clown can also mean being a silly fool, essentially a loser. But a clown is also a character who pokes fun at people and things, a bearer of chaos. At the same time, “beneath the Joker’s clown make-up is a symbol of chaos and destruction, an embodiment of anarchy and total disregard for social regulations” (Brown, 2021, p. 9).

In the Internet world, Pepe the Frog, a meme that gained popularity in the mid-2010s, is often depicted wearing clownish attire. In this form, Pepe is an animal representing the fictional State of Kekistan, based on the Ancient Egyptian frog deity Kek, who is the god of chaos and darkness. Pepe the Frog, dressed as a clown, is associated with popular YouTube videos criticizing the current state of the world, especially in the West, where excessive political correctness has become a norm in recent years. These videos argue that we live under a “clown world order,” from which no one can escape.

A postmodern reading of the final act

During his interview with Murray Franklin at the end of the movie, Joker denies any political involvement with or support for the protests in the city, saying that he does not “believe in anything.” Fleck intended to expose the city’s moral decay without resorting to any political reasoning. According to Willmore (2019), Joker “is a comedy in the shape of a tragedy; the

grand joke of it is that people keep trying to project (political) meaning onto him when his actions are meaningless.”

On the other hand, by its nature, postmodernism also denies any usual and traditional classifications. It stands for defying the recognizable order of society while proposing alternative perspectives on topics previously considered indisputable (Souza, 2018). Joker implies precisely that when he makes the following statement during the interview: “All of you, the system that knows so much, you decide what is right or wrong; the same way you decide what is funny or not.” While exposing the system to imperfections, Joker indirectly fulfills Foucault’s predicament. According to the French thinker:

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them (Foucault, 2006).

Joker and postmodernism are about deconstruction and turning “the value judgment upside down so that the inferior one comes first. The goal is not to assert a new hierarchy but to undermine the old (one)” (Stocker, 2020, p. 107). Further on in his interview, Joker publicly reprimands Murray for previously making fun of his performance at a stand-up club earlier in the movie. Let down and upset, Joker bursts out, “What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash?” to which Joker himself

answers, shooting Murray Franklin in the head: “You get what you f***ng deserve!” The interview ends in a shockingly unexpected twist of events.

The police arrest Joker, while Thomas Wayne and his wife are killed by one of the protesting clowns, symbolic of the destruction of the wealthy by the less privileged in Gotham’s society. In the comics, it should be noted that the man who murdered Bruce Wayne’s parents is called “Joe Chill,” a petty thug. In one of the movie’s final scenes, the Joker is rescued by his followers, who are participants in a raging mob that has been protesting throughout the city. As he regains consciousness, Joker, who represents the neglected and downtrodden, dances on top of the police car while being acclaimed by the surrounding crowds. Meanwhile, “protesters wearing Joker masks raze buildings and loot shops, collectively rage against the melancholy of the machine. These protesters who had moved like specters now find *jouissance* in their actions; they are all Jokers now” (Redmond, 2021b, p. 75). Gotham is in flames, the previous order is being challenged, and the protagonist, a representative of postmodernism, the bearer of chaos, rises triumphant.



Figure 2: Joker stands on top of a police car while acclaimed by the crowds. Source: Warner Bros Pictures

Research results

The Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum in the country's streets sometime after *Joker* hit U.S. box offices. Ignited by an egregious act of police brutality against a black citizen named George Floyd in Minneapolis, the protests of Spring 2020 seemed to reflect part of the chaos displayed at the end of *Joker*. With the movie still fresh in the collective memory, *Joker*'s imagery might have motivated people to take to the streets more aggressively to demand justice. Moreover, many people during protests used the *Joker* as a symbol (CNN, 2019). For some, "it was inevitable that (...) *Joker* would become a common image evoked through the real-world protests in America (and internationally), demanding to have the powers-that-be held accountable" (Brown, 2021, p. 8) for the problems of our world.

The Joker costume, according to some, represented how “insignificant people feel and the rebellion that those feelings have awakened (...) presenting a cautionary tale about how neglecting society's most vulnerable can result in horrific consequences” (CNN 2019). Referencing the Joker helped protesters “attract attention and generate support on a wider scale” (CNN 2019).

High unemployment rates, economic perils, and disregard for those less privileged in society may all lead to a situation in which movies like *Joker* can have a real influence and impact on the minds of many. As Brown (2021, p. 13-14) points out, “the film establishes the Joker as an icon of disaffected uprisings (...) a symbol of social unrest and political rebellion that exceeded the fictional Gotham City”. In many nations worldwide, “Joker started to appear en masse among protestors challenging everything” (Brown, 2021, p. 14), much like postmodernism itself challenges the mechanisms that help sustain the status quo.

Conclusions

Derrida (2020c, p. 5) once wrote, “The force of our weakness is that impotence separates, disengages, and emancipates.” Indeed, rather than treating the Joker as just a cultural symptom, this paper argues that the film, through its narrative ambiguities, refusal of moral resolution, and mobilization of chaos, acts as an element that fosters emancipatory thought. In doing so, it demonstrates how commercial cinema can materially participate in the dissemination—and

normalization—of postmodern ideology, inviting audiences not only to interpret but to inhabit its philosophical presuppositions.

In *Joker*, opposition to society's established order is presented through the actions of an impotent, separated, and disengaged Arthur in his journey to become the 'emancipated' version of himself. In the contemporary world, as well as in Gotham, there has been a significant attempt to change how things are being done by both the left and the right wings of the political spectrum. Modern Western societies seem to have an enormous appetite for postmodern ideas of deconstruction. We now witness news about the removal of statues of controversial figures in the United States, calls for the regulation of speech in Canada, commercials denying the existence of a Scandinavian culture, and so on. Emmanuel Macron in France is having a hard time containing the protests in his country, and events surrounding the US Capitol breach in 2021, as well as the BLM riots, demonstrate that many constituencies around the world are not satisfied with the current situation. In *Joker*, we see precisely authorities being challenged by the crowds, a problem that is repeating in many Western and non-Western capitals.

In *Joker*, the prevailing idea is that "Everything Must Go," without specifying what should take its place. True, it identifies a broken system, but does not propose any alternatives as solutions beyond mayhem and chaos. What rises from the ashes of destruction? The movie

also does not answer that. Postmodernists, in turn, believe that society is filled with oppressive structures; however, they suggest that the solution lies in deconstructing the established order.

In this sense, *Joker* and postmodernism are very much alike.

The paper contends that this message is indeed welcomed by many, especially in Western societies. Nowadays, people seem to believe that things do need to change radically. As *the Joker has demonstrated, this postmodernist philosophy remains relevant today, when many governments worldwide struggle to meet the social and economic expectations of their constituencies. True, something is appealing in telling people they are all victims of a corrupt society. For those people, messages such as “Everything Must Go” (a slogan that fits well with postmodernism) will sound exactly right.*

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Weber, in the 19th century, had already criticized this understanding of Positivism, affirming that we, as cultural beings, can build the world around us by our own beliefs and prejudices.

² Sophie's (Arthur's neighbor) hand-gun gesture also "foreshadows the bloodshed that will follow in *Joker*" (Redmond 2021b:69)

³ Later in the movie Thomas Wayne labels them "good, decent and educated men".

⁴ Much because Arthur Fleck opens a letter of his mother to Thomas Wayne, in which she pleads him to help her and 'his son'.

⁵ Arthur is a fully grown man but still living with his mother, a sign in the US that a person is struggling in life and not doing very well for himself.

⁶ [Editors Note]: *CINEJ* is happy to include ongoing academic debate around films with signification cultural impact like *Joker*. Previously contributions to our journal include Dalkılıç (2023) and Uysal (2023).