

Todd Phillips's Joker: a laugh painful to watch

Phillips decided to infect his New-Yorkesque-looking Gotham with reality, and it never looked so uninhabitable.

Joker portrays the downward spiral that takes **Arthur Fleck** (Joaquin Phoenix), a mentally ill and impoverished stand-up comedian, on his way to a violent frenzy. □ Alienated by society, who only remembers his existence when it is time to beat him down to a pulp, he is desperate for human connection, which he tries to find in the gaze of every stranger; turned down by everyone he fantasises on meeting his hero **Murray Franklin** (Robert Deniro), a talk show host. □ Abandoned even by social-services, which are cut down by the state, he is left in total solitude and no medication with his deluded mother. Powerless, we witness the illness peeping out and exploding in the man's life, as the medical condition that has him painfully and uncontrollably laugh gets worse and worse: we feel the pain coming from his throat, as he tries to stop it unsuccessfully, his face turns into a mask of discomfort with tears at the corners of his eyes.

It is a slow and hard to watch fall down the rabbit hole, far from the aestheticization of mental-illness depicted by other representations of the Joker (**Jared Leto's** unbearable laugh comes to mind): this Joker will not provoke a collective hysteria, as there is nothing attractive in the character played by Phoenix, in fact the actor's skinny body, with bones sticking out, seems to cut the screen. The main actor successfully captures the metamorphosis of a mind in tumult, scene by scene he is able of always adding a little bit more to his character.

"What I liked about Arthur is his light" Joaquin Phoenix

This Joker is different from all the others we have seen before as it is the result of a distinct way of approaching the genre; director Phillips confirmed that it was hard to get DC's approval:

"It was a difficult movie, but in the end the studio accepted our version of the story" Todd Phillips

The screenplay, resulting from Phillips and Scott Silver joint effort, stars a criminal whose delusions shape him into a monster; whilst the script seemingly asks us to empathise with his protagonist, it is almost impossible: the brutality of the realness we are watching makes empathy unimaginable. Surprisingly real violence only explodes a few times during the narration, but when it does it floods the screen.

Gradually would be the word that depicts this movie at its best, as step by step, it takes the audience to a journey into madness: society's. A gigantic poster of **Chaplin's Modern Times** dominates the Gotham Theatre facade as Arthur looks for Wayne: whilst Phillips said there is nothing political with this movie, it is hard not comparing it to the current state of things, where the alienation of the weakest classes is globally spread and the cities are collapsing under the weight of a linear economy. This tale is definitely the product of its time, meaning that it raised various doubts on the depiction of "the Other", but during the movie there is no pointed finger, there is no hero, not a positive character either, just the mere observation of a cynical society infected to the core.

During the Venice International Film Festival Phillips and Phoenix had the theatre under a spell for hours; as Lawrence Sher's beautiful cinematography had the audience keeping their eyes really open. The film resulted in a well-deserved thunderous applause.

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