

## The Perfect Crime?

### Anthropology and Liminality in *Joker*

In introducing the recent *New Review of Film and Television Studies* special issue on *Joker* (Phillips 2019), Sean Redmond opens by identifying the schism in responses the film evokes. Most obviously this is evident in its critical reception, but extends to politics and social affairs. It is a film at once viewed as opening a dialogue on mental illness and accordant state underfunding on one hand and dismissed as unworthy of discussion on the other. It is simultaneously, contradictorily, perceived as a requiem for the abandonment of the underclass by the left of the political spectrum and by the right / alt-right as a hero for disenfranchised white males. In deviating from DC Comics' canon on Batman's alter-ego, it transgresses the limits of Joker's story, while to others revives a story that has been told and retold since Joker's first appearance in a comic book in 1940. Redmond is careful not to render *Joker* a dialectical enterprise, that the bipolarity in responses are as much a response to the society which garnered it, as the intentions of the auteur of Todd Phillips, instructing that the film is 'seeded on ambiguity or ambivalence' (Redmond 2021 p. 3).

The result is that *Joker* penlights our current world by drawing on the shadows of the past, politically, technologically, socially. 1980s Gotham heaves under skyscrapers of trash caused by a public sanitation strike. Television is the pre-eminent medium, relegating social interaction between sad individuals to liminal spaces of metros, elevators and buses, displaying the pathos, quotidian tragedy and occasional horror of the human condition. The film is positioned as a portent of what is to come: the 1980s society that produced *Joker* shows no sign of learning nearly 40 years later. The digital technologies founded during the long Cold War and repurposed for communication in the form of social media, become miserable, sometimes horrific liminal spaces of their own, fracturing groups – and even individuals – from one another and creating the schizoid split between left and right which blemishes debate in the public sphere. The hoisting of the economy in the 1980s and 2010s above all other priorities places a focus on the future, a 'better tomorrow' which – as *Joker* shows – is often an insipid imitation of the past. Ultimately, this fosters a permanent liminal existence which is 'nothing but immersion in the flux; and the flip side of the permanent wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is economic globalisation' (Horvath and Szokolczai 2020 p. 182), which shows little sign of abatement even in the post-pandemic societies of the early 2020s.

Given the identification of liminality in anthropological studies of human societies and the primacy of ambiguity in *Joker's* exposition (see also Moleux, 2019), compounded by its allohistorical 1980s setting and subsequent reception, liminality is the departure point and focus for this chapter. Drawing primarily on the work of Szokolczai and colleagues, it analyses how liminality plays a formative role in Arthur Fleck's (Joaquin Phoenix) trajectory as the narrative unfolds, in multiple senses of the word, especially in relation to the spaces and times occupied by the eventually eponymous character of the Joker. While the role of the trickster, an historical figure who is able to grasp the ambiguity found in situations for his or her own nefarious ends and to the detriment of those around them, is familiar to film and television studies and especially character studies of the Joker (see Bogar 2014; Harris 2008; Kanerva 2020), the function and importance of liminality in the emergence of these characters is often obviated. This is especially so in *Joker* as Fleck does not, unlike earlier superhero films *Batman* (Burton 1989) and *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008), appear as someone chiefly defined by his (dialectical) relationship with Batman, but instead becomes so through his origin story, adding further to the ambivalent crossover position of the supervillain identified as key to *Joker's* genre-bending evasiveness. Indeed, Fleck's rise, or fall, carries more pathos for the viewer as it is the narrative of an everyman whose tragedy could happen to anyone. Tainted by past relationships with his family, the safety nets in his present are withdrawn or used as

cruel comedy by his father figures, among them Murray Franklin (Robert DeNiro), while the future is poisoned by the Trumpian, perhaps even trickster figure, of Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen), believed by Fleck to be his actual father. While there are elements of Greek tragedy in *Joker*, Fleck's role in his mutation should not be dispelled as a person bent by solely forces beyond his control. Even with pathetic elements to his journey, Fleck cannot be seen as a victim shorn of his own design, with his pursuit of hubris through comedy seen as a typical failing of character in Greek philosophy.

Positioning liminality at the forefront of the analysis, this chapter is split into three separate, overlapping sections. The first examines the role of liminality in *Joker* and particularly how it offers deliberately ambiguous narrative threads which leave both Fleck and the viewer in a 'non-place' (Auge 1995) and unsure of characters' position within the film. The second section focuses on the role of theatricality in the film and especially the liminal spaces where Fleck is front and centre of his own tragic rise/fall: his identification with the professional performance of a clown, the murder on the metro and his appearance – and the audience's disappearance – on the *Murray Franklin Show*. Finally, the chapter examines the role of good and evil in the film, arguing through the anthropological literature that the imposition of 'good' within society leads to paradoxical, often evil outcomes, especially where humans are not able to exercise their norms, but are subject to technological and technical forces at the level of economy and society which are nominally beyond their control.

### **Liminality of Place**

Early 1980s Gotham is a city under siege. The loosening grip of organised labour, explicated in the radio voiceover detailing the last stand of striking public sanitation workers is amplified by Fleck's introduction as a clown for hire. Situated on pavements next to the roads and underneath the metro system, these are non-places of transit 'a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces' (Auge 1995 p. 78), where Fleck showcases his ambidextrous talents and lurid make-up to commuters in promotion of an 'everything must go' fire sale. While the economy signifies immediate danger to a society that cannot pay its workers or its bills it is the liminal spaces of transport which are of real concern to Fleck, 'stations and roads, transits and transportations, liminal spaces constitutionally render evil possible by accumulating and accelerating' (Horvath and Szokolzai, 2020 p. 184). This is played out immediately in *Joker's* opening exposition. In a transparent display of a culture which knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, Fleck's sign is stolen by a rogue group of young people. Pursuing the gang he is ambushed and beaten in an alley and, to add insult to injury, is expected to pay the employer for the loss of the sign as his boss, Hoyt Vaughn (Josh Pais) refuses to believe the sign was stolen. The non-places of transport play a significant part in underscoring Fleck's story-arc, introducing him to increasingly challenging situations ranging from an inadvertent multiple murder of the 'Wall Street Boys' (Kavka, 2021) on the metro, culminating in being driven around a burning city in a police car.

It is in Fleck's initial attempts to befriend a young child on a bus that reveal the pathological laughter which is one of the most explicit and uncomfortable signs of Fleck's mental illness. While laughter is generally seen as a sign of happiness in the human condition, it is also a response to something unexpected or unforeseen: a liminal space and time of human interaction. For Fleck laughter is a rejoinder to liminal situations which are not happy, but socially challenging (Kanerva, 2020) and there is no way for the viewer, nor seemingly Fleck, to predict when he will start laughing, hence his use of a card explaining his condition. In its liminality, laughter is also used in a mocking way and *in extremis*, 'laughing is a way of killing . . . laughter is outright satanic' (Horvath and Szokolzai 2020 p. 116), perhaps underscoring the killing joke and how laughter is ultimately a predicate used by the Joker to manipulate situations to his own ends by making those around him feel uncomfortable, a

situational and psychological response to situations that used to make him feel awkward. While Fleck's embodiment of this predicate as part of his mental illness does not justify this characteristic, its presentation in *Joker* provides an explanation to its origins rather than filing or locking it away under 'insanity' at Arkham Asylum, bringing a more nuanced view of the film, which in its ambiguity begins to place the audience in a non-place of their own.

While Fleck encounters liminal situations in his day-to-day, he does have roots which are initially presented as safety nets, but are progressively removed either through his own design or by providence as the narrative progresses, making the nets less supportive and more entangling. Early in the film, the stretched, but still benevolent face of the welfare state is presented by the black social worker (Sharon Washington), who, although clearly perturbed by the musings in Fleck's notebook 'I hope that my death makes more cents than my life', listens and agrees with Fleck as he observes that 'Is it just me or is it getting crazier out there?', before Fleck laments for a removal from his own liminal state in society, to being given a permanent anchor by the state 'I think I preferred it when I was locked up in hospital'.

As the welfare state prescribes, prevention is better than cure, certainly in the monetary sense and, by extension of the utilitarian principle, for the treatable individual. The problem with contemporary societies is that they themselves are in a pathological state of sickness and extend this to their citizens through their constant pursuit of pushing beyond their limits (Szakolczai 2010) in a political economy of organising and reorganising of the synthetic thesis / antithesis dialectic on the progressive 'left' or Schumpeterian creative destruction on the neoliberal 'right'. Continually challenging individuals, groups and institutions by positioning them at the limits (the 'liminal') and repeatedly questioning foundational norms and values (e.g. family, home, identity) ultimately generates a society operating *beyond* its limits. A paradoxical situation generates concurrently worrying symptoms, singularly seen in the force multiplication of mental illness in 'advanced' societies. Fleck is emblematic of this, but the seven different medications he imbibes acts as a prophylaxis against his proclivity to harm himself and others. Yet these values are as artificial and liminal as any other: his utilitarian support is icily removed by the state later in the film, when the social worker, now presented as a harbinger of cruel welfare cuts to the safety net declares 'They don't give a shit about people like you Arthur and they really don't give a shit about people like me either'. The emphasis on her position 'really' in the nexus of a pathological society which has been pushed beyond its limits is instructive of the role of race in the film, with Fleck's travelling on public transport with people of colour drawing attention to the obscurity of their plight (Obenson 2019). This anonymity is compounded by the nameless, in the form of his social worker and ethereal, in the case of his girlfriend Sophie (Zazie Beetz). With black characters generally representing a positive influence on Fleck before they are removed, again by providence or chance, they are equally drawn to his level, characters at the behest of a society that is liminal and limitless. In Gotham's political economy the pursuit of the utility of goods and services only appears to create victims drawn from its weakest and less-status orientated members occupying non-places in tenement buildings, buses and increasingly rare workplaces.

The liminal spaces Fleck occupies are generated at both the sociological and psychological level. Powerful drugs provided by society maintain a general status quo in the population which permits Fleck to function at an acceptable level individually. However, as his pathological laughter indicates, these mechanisms do not fully suppress his own liminal characteristics, seen most explicitly in his relationship with Sophie, a young black woman who immediately sympathises with Fleck's plight. Living in the same block of flats, they meet in a lift and she imitates blowing her head off with a gun, frustrated following an inane comment from her daughter. Imitation is a key element of Fleck's own

repertoire and character: as a clown-for-hire there are expectations that he will mimic real-world situations poorly. In the same way as the punchline of a joke is contingent on timing, the real skill of the showman is simultaneously displayed and hidden. It is tough to make a habitual act, such as walking, appear difficult. Mastery of the technique lies in suppressing the skill while executing it, with 'making it look easy' the very aptitude that ensures the comedy of the moment, with the 'you line 'em up and I'll knock 'em down', corporate slickness of Murray Franklin its embodied apogee. When Fleck himself attempts professional imitation - most profoundly in hospital on a children's cancer ward - it quickly becomes an act of substitution, which 'literally annihilates [something], kills it, sometimes to discover its functioning' (Calasso 1983, cited in Horvath and Szokolczai 2020 p. 95).

In a display of transparency through repetition, the more Fleck plays the clown, the more the clown's function is revealed. First, he becomes aware that as part of the wider gig-economy, clown imitation has its limits: he cannot retreat behind the terrible jokes and cruel send-ups that Murray subjects him to later in the film, he is simply not of that status. Second, he physically annihilates the mimicry of being a clown: as the gun clatters across the floor he has actually corpsed the part so that his audience no longer believe in his skillset, manifest in the deliberately suppressed ability to make the familiar funny. Third, in the realisation of discovering the function of being a clown, he is concurrently aware that he is not one: a professional might have been able to cover the faux pas with sleight of hand or quick quip, but a clown – or any type of actor, be that stand-up comic or trickster – should never have to explain their part ('it was just a prop' as he explains to his exasperated boss) as this symbolically kills the part.

The yawning, dawning recognition that Fleck is incapable points towards the whole film existing in the liminal place of Fleck's own mind: if he fails as a clown could he ever be skilled at anything other than being an inmate in an asylum for the criminally insane? The corpsing of the role of the clown seems especially difficult to do in contemporary times when it could be mitigated by postmodern ambivalence through a scheming Jack Nicholson-esque wink of the eye to the astounded young people: it is never easier to play the clown than when people are in on the joke. Instead, the whole film is wrapped in imitative fantasy. First at the sociological level, in the form of clowns in Fleck's likeness taking over the city and second at the psychological level in the matter of Fleck pretending – or imitating – being well enough to live a prescribed quasi-normal life outside Arkham Asylum.

Fleck's incompetence in all areas of socialisation suggests that this can never be the case. Ultimately, this places *Joker's* audience in a non-place not of their own choosing with the result that, as the last spoken words of the film indicate, the joke is on them, as Fleck reveals, again to a black character 'You wouldn't get it [the joke]', seemingly making the empathy between lead actor and viewer as liminal, ethereal and unreal as Fleck's entanglement with Sophie. This is the killing joke of the Joker, but not the perfect crime of *Joker*.

### **Theatricality**

The skilled incompetence of a clown on a children's cancer ward falls under the use of 'theatrical performance to enchant children', partly undertaken for the 'legitimation of practice and for providing new recruits'. Fleck appears as harmless, he wants to be a 'good' clown and a proficient stand-up comedian, but the anterior, covert – and arguably most vital - role of theatrical performances is to make others accept a 'sorcerer vision of the world' (Horvath and Szokolczai 2020 p. 38). Children, in their play, attempt to emulate those that they have seen perform tricks: influencers, pop stars, football players and Fleck's incompetence in front of children bristles the audience for the subsequent tragicomic trajectory of Fleck. The justification offered for his actions and eventual revealing as the Joker is not one of Cyclopic megalomania unambiguously directed

towards supervillain and nemesis, but, like watching a football player protest against a penalty, one that appears as accident and unfortunate luck, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This is a mistake because Fleck in his actions is also clearly mimicking the sorcery of those in liminal spaces of technological magic around and between him. Most obviously this occurs when he imitates the famous mirror scene from *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976) drawing on the magical reflection of DeNiro's Travis Bickle and the theatrical enchantment of cinema as an art form to powerfully convey amoral nihilism as competently as the stage in any Roman or Greek Shakespearean tragedy. There is no accident then, when a loaded gun goes off in Fleck's hand while pointing it at his mother's chair, premediating the death of Penny (Frances Conroy) and sending up the scene which was its inspiration. By using the television to mask the noise of the shot when a neighbour complains, the replacement of the big screen by the small screen is surely achieved. The reproduction of sorcery, through the medium - in both the spiritual and technological meaning of the word - of television is assured. Where cinema makes the world larger than life itself, television is 'set on inserting the void into the body since early childhood' (Horvath and Szakolczai 2020 p. 29), transforming personal relationships into a system of objects, replacing bedtime fairy tales with *In the Night Garden*. The audience sees Fleck's life revolving and evolving less from his quotidian interactions with humans than with the *Murray Franklin* TV show. Modifying his environment into a series of non-places, he turns chairs in his apartment towards the TV when watching with his mum; mouth agape, he views the compounding of injury by insult when he sees himself on television while in hospital and ultimately marks his date with destiny not with the pale imitators of the clown revolution on the streets of Gotham, but in the closed, artificial and therefore maximally liminal space of the television studio. It is in the TV studio where the guns no longer go off by accident, but by being broadcast to the wider world, replicate sorcery across and between generations. As soon as an event is committed to the limonoid celluloid of videotape, it becomes a magic that is attainable because of its ambience and ubiquity. It can be viewed anywhere at any time and is available in infinite circular loops, watched over and over again with forensic fascination like a proto-GIF. As anthropology attests there is no real discernment between science and magic both are 'a spiritual form behind which lurks the evil genius of technology' (Baudrillard 2008 p. 75). After all, it is not only Fleck's desire to be on television, but as the multitude of chat and reality shows spotlights, a late-night fairy tale shared by all.

Before attaining magical televisual status, Fleck must validate a persona that society can consume, like the Rubik's cube of adverts that the station cuts to at the end of the *Murray Franklin Show*, in self-contained boxes. The first public evidence of this is on the metro, when the non-place of the subway, usually a place of safety when inhabited, is evil not due to its accumulation of people, but, recalling the binaries of political economy, in its lack of people to watch over weaker members of society. The subway, in its flickering fluorescents and garish graffiti, spotlights the looming danger of possibility in an unknown, underground situation, with a group of drunk, immature yuppies confronting a young woman who looks desperately towards Fleck for assistance. Typically, Fleck looks on and looks away, before extravasating laughter in response. Losing interest in the woman, the men, like those at the beginning of the film, pile into Fleck, but on this occasion he fights back, first by kicking, then by shooting them with the gun.

It is crucial to see in this scene that Fleck is not acting. Instead, he is in that intermediate state familiar to all commuters, still dressed in work attire, in this case his clown suit, but not subject to its rules and norms, transitioning between the workplace and domesticity, wanting to be left alone as much as possible, before being drawn into a situation, like all liminal spaces, that is not entirely of his own choosing. Even if self-defence can be justified in the case of diminished responsibility due to

mental illness, Fleck is self-aware enough to realise that he cannot leave any witnesses. Having wounded one of the fleeing men, he follows him up to a staircase before repeatedly pulling the trigger at close range.

Unlike previous events with the gun, this encounter has the 'performative character' of a ritual which is 'emphasised by the wearing of masks, but particularly so for divination rituals where it became intrinsically and inseparably intermingled with truth' (Horvath and Szokolczai, 2020 p. 38). The wearing of the mask out of character, away from the forced incompetence of the clown economy transforms Fleck into something that he was not before. He can now undertake vengeful, professional acts, in this case killings, with no little fear, but little remorse and is similarly able to escape by cunning into the shadows of Gotham. Unlike the showman's preference for exuberance, proficiency in murder is derived from not being seen, rather than being the centre of attention, a predicate that, as seen in Fleck's positioning in relation to the black characters in the film, he excels at, beginning to turn the killing joke into the perfect crime. Importantly, Fleck's position in Gotham, first in the concrete act of the murder and then with the symbolism of the clown mask add another layer to the spiritualisation of the media as they divine his actions and character via television and newspapers.

Perceived as a hero by working class masses of all colours and creeds the symbols and acts eventually become the 'truth' that the film relies on so much in its exposition, especially in its denouement, eventually providing the vaunted ambivalence between left and right. In a city riven by economic, social and racial inequality, all colours and creeds can unify in agreement that the individual horror of their existence in super-rat infested Gotham is better conveyed to the indifferent rich corporate leaders *en masse* in the form of riotous assembly. Even as a wanted serial killer, Fleck finds it easy to disappear into these masses, even removing his mask to show that he is the one 'true' Joker when pursued by the police through Gotham who are gobbled up and assaulted by a 'bunch of jokers' on the metro, which is both the non-place where Fleck's first heinous crime took place and refers back to Fleck's now proficient use of a clown outfit to attain his aims as revolutionary vigilante who will ultimately be divined as a supervillain.

Having outwitted the no-longer-benevolent state to arrive at the TV studios to appear on the *Murray Franklin Show*, Fleck is making a twin date with destiny. Firstly in appearing on the show he hopes to emulate his idol, the consummate showman, Murray Franklin. Although Murray is an original in Gotham with his bad puns and exceptional comic timing, his character is a pastiche of any given talk show host from Conan to Carson to Corden. With that he pays homage to another late 20<sup>th</sup> century Scorsese / DeNiro social commentary, *The King of Comedy* (Scorsese 1983), where DeNiro has accomplished his aim of being a late-night talk show host, again showing, for *Joker's* director at least, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Secondly, having physically smothered Penny, his mother, following the reveal that he is not as feared (or hoped) Thomas Wayne's son, Fleck has the opportunity to meet with a father figure who has always existed in a liminal state as a figure on a flickering cathode ray tube. The classic Oedipal tale has been achieved through the medium of television. With Penny dead and his father never alive, Franklin, in his sour, soporific insults becomes the next hate father figure in a line of imitative fantasies for Fleck to eradicate. At this point, Fleck confronts a reality that is borne from his own creative destruction, where he must destroy others in order to live or be reborn himself, in this case as metamorphosis from Fleck to the Joker: 'when I walk out there, could you introduce me as Joker, Murray?'. The creative destruction is unleashed by events that are under his control in the narrative, showing that Fleck is not only a victim of circumstance, but is able to place in motion processes, such as killing his mother, which are unnatural in their outcomes.

Unfortunately this aberrance in nature transforms time and space from 'linearity into circularity' so that Philips' insistence on intertextuality across and between films of the past becomes a symptom of 'unreality' (Horvath and Szokolczai, 2020: 123). This self-awareness to a film-literate audience is a substitution for something that is concrete and believable in its proclivity for originality and pushing the cinematic medium forwards. Although the broadcast slaughter of innocent individuals on television is so awful that it should never be able to be imagined, it is the derivative on which sacrifice, in the form of Murray Franklin's murder and the matter of Robert DeNiro's own role in making films of this type popular, is moored. A sacrifice 'is an act in which one who acts contemplates oneself while acting' (Horvath and Szokolczai 2020 p. 88), the resolute self-referentiality of which is explicit in the repeated appearance of DeNiro in 'character study' (e.g. *Raging Bull*, *Deer Hunter*, *Heat*) type of films which are subsequently viewed as worthy, almost as a form of quality control, of receiving critical, as well as commercial acclaim. Murray Franklin's graphic death can be seen as metaphorical killing - a sacrifice - that DeNiro, Philips and all film aficionados will be aware of, if not complicit in, carrying even greater irony in DeNiro's late-career shift towards parodying the serious roles that made his name and earned him acclaim. That *Joker* is a film self-consciously set in the 1980s is as much a statement about the fact that films like this aren't made anymore as it is to highlight the abrasive politics of past and the present. This is partly because studios don't greenlight them due their lack of blockbuster potential, and partly because there simply aren't the actors to carry them off with the necessary gravitas anymore. Actors such as DeNiro pushed beyond the limits of plausibility as soon as they moved from satire to slapstick. Therefore, they exist in a liminal space all of their own on 9mm celluloid with the left and right in-betweenness in their own - and especially *Joker's* - politics arguably as much of a storytelling device as a rhetorical one.

### **The Problem of Good and Evil**

As the broadcast stream cuts away from the massacre on the *Murray Franklin Show*, it is not to one commercial break, but to a multiplicity of commercials, all displaying their wares in a bizarre bazar of goods and services that are held in liminal abeyance, transmitted at their transparently lurid best, waiting to be sold, desiring to be bought. The cut to televisions from a television studio may appear antiquated to a viewer from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, inured to the immediate circularity of Internet feedback loops of likes and links. This is because at one level the message itself appears transparent, that consumption and the consumption of images relating to buying stuff will carry on regardless of the act - even if this is presented as divine sacrifice - that takes place on air and is therefore portrayed and perceived as 'evil'. Yet at another level, the commercial break in its very transparency of evil is the real and original message in *Joker*, that the 'well-known technological miracle, which then became one of the cornerstones of European culture' is enshrined in the 'modern, rationalistic effort to attain a pure transparency of commerce, health or communication' (Horvath and Szokolczai 2020 p. 160), social and cultural elements essential to *Joker's* narrative discourse. It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions and it is these intentions, sited as acts of goodness within the film that reveal evil within. The public good of health sanitation is inverted when underpaid workers refuse to immerse themselves in waste anymore; the diagnosis and treatment of Fleck's mental illness is a placebo effect, perhaps even a benevolent response, to a pathologically sick society; rapid and mass transit systems on roads and rails zoom people from one mode of economic exchange to another, allowing the routine sociability of work and travel, but often availing them to danger, either in their crushing capacity or looming loneliness. That these are all phenomena intended to make lives better, by enabling a certain mode of living, is the central contradiction of contemporary life. Technologies that enable connection to liminal spaces, worlds beyond human ken and imagination lead to paradoxical outcomes, not least the instruction that to stay mentally well

requires the individual to 'stay active', to maintain a permanent state of transformation, unrested, unyielded. Fleck in the *Joker* is the embodiment of this constant hyperactive need to stay active all the time as he dances, smokes and laughs his way through the film.

It is no coincidence then that Fleck's transformation into Joker takes place on television. This is a world that is distant and yet embedded in the everyday. Bringing the far into the near, making the extraordinary the everyday and rearranging the everyday in extraordinary ways so that living areas, even entire dwellings are arranged around screens. It is the archetype of the liminal, magical world of technology, widely enabled through 'modern media which has a fatal catalytic role, in orchestrating such transformative operations'. Far beyond the larger than life cinematic of the silver screen, television pleats space and time to become 'infinite like any god, thus becoming our god . . . [i]t has an explosive dynamism to propagate itself and exterminate others (Horvath and Szokolczai 2020 p. 169), evident in its Cyclopean moniker 'the one-eyed god'.

The alchemical, even impossible, alteration of a meek, mentally ill Fleck into a pathological supervillain can *only* be accomplished through television and the inherent, implicit and transparent evil it broadcasts as part of its theatre of operations, where it hides its excesses of consumption, of murder, in plain sight. While a watching audience would assent that real homicide would never happen on TV, the Vietnam war that inspires 'quality character-study' films such as *Deer Hunter* and *Taxi Driver* and eventually *Joker* brought state sanctioned homicide into the living room as part of the first 'television war' (King 2012) transforming politics and entertainment forever. *Joker's* trapping of the audience in a non-place perhaps remains the point of the film. Yet it is in illuminating the traps, techniques and technologies of the liminal, rather than being stuck in an imitative fantasy, which is the perfect crime that *Joker* hoped the audience wouldn't get.



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