

Dystopian matters and Todd Phillips' *Joker*

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A) Notes on dystopia

No sufras

El infierno crece
su salud fue anunciada
si no hay solución no hay problema
apenas alaridos que se cubren
como capas de piel sobre un latido.
(...)
estás solo
yerra lo cierto
nos desprecia
(ni verdad, ni alma ni infinito
gritan 3 asnos
en la fiesta)
pensar es equivocarse
la convicción no suda
el infierno crece.

Do not Suffer

Hell gets bigger!
Its good health was announced
If there is no solution there is no problem
Only screams that hide each other
Like layers of skin on a heartbeat.
(...)
You are on your own
What is certain fails
It disdains us
(Neither truth, nor soul nor infinite
Three donkeys shout
At the party)
To think is to make mistakes
Conviction does not sweat
Hell gets bigger.¹

It is tempting to start this essay that I have called “Dystopian matters and Todd Phillips' *Joker*” with these lines from the poem by A. Schmidt “Do not suffer”. Schmidt is a poet from Villa María in Argentina. In his book of poems *Verdad de lo evidente*, Schmidt reminds us of the state of darkness and uncertainty that pervades our life on earth. Even more, he states that not only are we not allowed to acquire complete knowledge about ourselves but we are also partly immersed in hell. Are we not after all? Dystopian works of art,

¹ My own translation.

whether it is a movie, the written page or the stage seem to insist that we are in hell indeed or are going to be there soon.

In “Utopías de la Posmodernidad”, Frederic Jameson states that “(...) our current political problem resides precisely in the weakening - even the complete atrophy - of the utopic imagination”. (25) The utopian imagination is exhausted. This would be probably why the past century came to be named the dystopian century. Events such as the two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the struggles against colonialism that only succeeded at very high costs, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. apparently justify the selected description (Vieira 10). Therefore, probably as a response to all this, authors and artists tend to produce dystopian representations of the world around them.

Dystopias are not a modern or contemporary invention. The word “dystopia” or “bad place” was coined in 1747 and although it was used from time to time, it did not catch on until well into the 20th century (Vieira 11).

In her book *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, professor Fatima Vieira from Porto University in Portugal, reunites the reflections of various specialists who contribute to our better understanding of dystopia and of dystopian matters.

One interesting point they all make refers to the fact that even though dystopia and utopia belong to two opposite ends, the links between them are almost correlative in their function. They say things like: “(...) “every utopia contains dystopia” (Ribeiro); (...) dystopia can well be seen as the “shadow of utopia” as it emerged in the shadow of the latter (Kumar); or we can think of it as the alter ego of utopia, always “pulling its dreamy companion back to earth” (Davis)” (Vieira 1).

Lyman Tower Sargent in his essay “Do Dystopias Matter” included in Vieira’s book reminds us that although there are different definitions of dystopia, the prevailing one is that of “critical dystopia”. This means that the objective of this type of works is fundamentally to exercise criticism of ongoing unfortunate or tragic situations and events, to open our eyes to an uncomfortable reality that might soon become true and widespread. In the

words of Aline Ferreira, dystopias are “a concerted, strategic and practically oriented reflection on a future” (Vieira 2).

Nevertheless, Vita Fortunati, in the same book, stresses the fact that critical dystopia prefigures a horizon of hope, “showing the reader or viewer a road that must start in the present, a dialectic that must begin from now-here” (Vieira 4). Because even if we need dystopia to remind us that our reality could get worse, we also need utopia to remind us that better, while difficult, is possible. Besides, Vieira herself states that although we know “how difficult it is to make progress, human beings will always find “ways of coping with (...) dystopia” (Blaim); “there will always be a tiny element of hope glimmering, that the forces of dystopia will inspire in some part of humanity” (Davidson 2).

In his essay “Another kind of Hell: Fundamentals of the Dystopian Short Story”, from the “Journal of the Short Story in English”, Iowa author Charles Holdefer declares that the dystopian novel presents us with an infernal state of affairs that affects the autonomy of the self and human relations thus allowing authors to make a criticism of a given society² (Holdefer 1).

He argues that in these novels the autonomous self is at risk and that they share a common view of a besieged self which once deprived of autonomy on its own behalf and in relation to others enters a metaphorically hellish state (Holdefer 25). He also asserts that in dystopian novels, there is an emphasis on an alternative place which is central to dystopian writing. Authors elaborate taxonomies of imaginary worlds, particular and utterly grotesque “theres” where probably none of us would like to go or to be (Holdefer 1).

It is unnecessary to remind us of the number of novels, TV series, theatre plays and movies that deal with dystopian matters and situations. One of these examples is *Joker*, the film directed, produced and written by Todd Phillips. Released in 2019, the film polarized critics and caused concern about the possibility that it might inspire acts of violence.

² My own translation

B) *Todd Phillips' Joker*

Dystopian literature has a long history and a secure place in the literary canon. The widely read holy trinity of dystopian literature: *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932), *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1953) and *1984* by James Orwell (1949) gives proof of it.

The three novels belong to the first half of the previous century; nowadays, in 2020, the feeling is that a number of serious problems and possible catastrophes might take place on earth and this plunges us all in the fear that a dystopian world might soon be our reality. Testimonies of this underlying fear are the numerous T.V. series, films, novels and works for the stage that have to do with dystopian matters.

The speed in which news enters our homes and minds, the *infotainment* we allow ourselves to get involved with, provokes in us a state of constant alert which, if it is not wisely managed, can contribute to a general loss of balance and to mental distress.

Joker or *Guasón* was directed by Todd Phillips, it was released in 2019 and starred Joaquin Phoenix. It has been described by critics as a psychological thriller but I argue that it can also be taken as an example of dystopian fiction. Why? Because of the infernal spirit that prevails during the entire two hours that the film lasts. Immersed in an appalling milieu, Arthur Fleck, the protagonist, finds that everything that could go wrong in his life did go wrong. As the film develops, we are presented with the portrait of a nightmare society whose members put Arthur under great pressure; his self is assaulted in such a way that he can't survive and he gradually loses his mental balance. He suffers from a form of pathology that forces him to laugh loudly at inappropriate times and nothing seems to help him out of that condition just the opposite; the character is constantly laughed at and left aside because of his neurological disorder. In the *Guasón's* obscure and fragile life, circumstances have been tragic from the very beginning: his mother Penny is not his biological mother, she adopted him and because of her negligence and mental fragility, the boy was

frequently abused by her partner. Eventually, Arthur finds this out and his reaction is a violent one: he kills Penny in her hospital bed. He would like to make people laugh and works as a clown but he is unsuccessful at this too. He is unable to maintain a regular job, and none of his casual workmates shows any compassion or desire to help him. He would probably like to enter into a relationship with a woman but hasn't been able to do it so far. He is bullied by young people on the street. He is mocked in the subway by a trio of vicious thugs so what does he do? He kills his abusers in an outburst of rage. The social worker who provides him with counselling and medication stops doing it due to lack of state funds. He kills the TV entertainer who invites him to his show but who had taunted him on an occasion previous to the show. He finally manages to get the mob in town take his side and complete chaos is set up with Guasón in the middle of it lionized as a hero. The crowd channels their own discontent setting fire to cars and public facilities. A hellish and extended scene of screaming, sick laughter and chaos is planted before the eyes of the viewer towards the end of the movie. The idea of class struggle and hatred between the rich and the poor is also highlighted. Guasón ends up committed to an asylum for the mentally disturbed

The locus the director chooses to set the story is a dirty city plagued with rats where people are violent and do not care for others. We see this grotesque "there" or imaginary world created by Phillips through the eyes of a person who unfortunately has a fragile and disturbed mind. The picture we will get from the unreliable narrator will obviously be a biased, fragile, unbalanced, sick and incomplete one. During the entire two hours that the movie lasts, there is never any movement towards hope or balance, on the contrary, utter dissolution and disorder prevail.

Like other critical dystopias, this particular one has the merit to warn us of a possible future when, if measures are not taken to change the current state of affairs, there will be many more Guasones around. Unattended, unloved, violent people, ready to kill,

abused, overwhelmed by circumstances. The warning is there and I would say that that is the one and only positive aspect the movie has.

The movie can be and has been labelled as a dystopia referred to the life of an individual where, in the words of Frederic Jameson, “sinister aspects or traits of our own present are isolated and the story of an imminent disaster already expected by all of us is told” (Jameson 26).

Arthur Fleck’s story illustrates an obscure and despondent world where human beings have collapsed. The movie brings out strong emotions and that is probably why people turned up in big numbers to see it. This also explains why critics reviewed it in highly opposite manners. For example, Diego Batlle, from Argentina, in his review for “otros-cines.com”, accepts the work of art as a critical dystopia. Even though he himself does not use the term dystopia, he is prepared to admit that the film has a warning aspect and that it plays the role of questioning an order of things that can bring about situations like the ones *Guason* lives through. Batlle takes it as a criticism and a warning illustrated by a story of maximum future; a dystopian piece of fiction where, in the words of Holdefer, a besieged self once deprived of autonomy on its own behalf and in relation to others enters a metaphorically hellish state (Holdefer 25).

Batlle values the denunciation characteristic of the film regarding social conditioning, the abandonment of the individual on the part of the state, the lack of assistance to underprivileged groups, the hatred for those who are different and he makes us reflect on how easy it is, under those conditions, to be tempted to get hold of a gun and embark yourself in an eye for an eye attitude.

At the other end, Stephanie Zacharech in “*Time*” magazine from the United States refuses to see any good in the film. She affirms that:

...the movie’s cracks – and it’s practically all cracks – are stuffed with phony philosophy. *Joker* is dark only in a stupidly adolescent way, but it wants to think it’s imparting subtle political or cultural wisdom. Just before one of his more violent tirades, Arthur muses,

“Everybody just screams at each other. Nobody’s civil anymore.” Who doesn’t feel that way in our terrible modern times? But Arthur’s observation is one of those truisms that’s so true it just slides off the wall, (...) it means nothing. (Zacharech 1)

She concludes:

Arthur is a mess, but we are also supposed to think he’s kind of great -a misunderstood savant. (...) Arthur inspires chaos and anarchy, but the movie makes it look like he’s starting a revolution, where the rich are taken down, the poor get everything they need and deserve and the sad guys who can’t get a date become killer heroes. There’s a sick joke in there somewhere. Unfortunately, it’s on us. (Zacharech 2)

Zacharech does not see the movie as an example of dystopian fiction. She can’t because the film is all too real for someone like her who lives in the United States. She reminds us that they see this kind of characters on the news more than frequently, unfortunately. Dystopia is already there. Therefore, she asserts that if Phillips tried to speak about the emptiness of their society, what he really managed was to give a prime example of it (Zacharech 1).

For some people like Stephanie Zacharech, this alternative universe created by Todd Phillips for Arthur Fleck is more real than they would like to admit and for others, it functions as a device for embarrassing our present.

Briefly, dystopias are here to stay. Whether they play any role to help audiences to foresee and prevent an unpleasant and unwanted future, it remains to be seen and I would like to finish this article making reference to this possibility that we have as a society to influence or act upon our own futures. It seems appropriate and it would bring some amount of hope to finish this analysis. Terry Eagleton in his article “Utopias past and present: why Thomas More remains astonishingly radical” states: “To expect the future to be different is not of course to maintain it will be better. It might be a great deal worse. The point is that history is malleable enough for us to choose” (Eagleton 4).

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Webgraphy

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