The Joker, The Blockbuster, and Mass Shootings: Watching the World Burn

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Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* was the most popular movie of 2008. It outsold the number-two film of the year, *Ironman*, (another highly anticipated superhero film) by over 200 million dollars, and earned a worldwide total of more than 1 billion dollars, making it the highest grossing Batman film ever created (*Box Office Mojo*). The phenomenal success of *The Dark Knight* is due in large measure to the character of the Joker. One reason that this character drew audiences to the theater in droves was that he is an embodied representation of the evil of mass shootings, something that petrified audiences in 2008.

It has been argued that the Joker is one of the largest causes of the wild popularity of *The Dark Knight*. Renowned critic Roger Ebert observes that “the key performance in the movie is by the late Heath Ledger, as the Joker” (Ebert). It would seem that Mr. Ebert’s assertion is correct, considering that Ledger was the only actor in the cast nominated for an Academy Award, and he won the 2008 award for best supporting actor (“Academy Award Database”). In addition, Ledger also won nearly every other award available for a supporting role, including a Golden Globe, a BAFTA award, and Screen Actors Guild Award,
along with numerous others, both American and international (“Heath Ledger: Awards”). One critic, Charles Bellinger, compared the film to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, saying that just as Satan is Milton’s “most interesting character, much more so than Adam, Eve, the angels, or Christ,” that the Joker is “clearly the most interesting character in *The Dark Knight*”. Moreover, Bellinger insists that not only do the two villains share their popularity; the Joker is a “figurative version of Satan” (Bellinger 4).

Calling the Joker Satanic is no stretch at all. The pure evil of the character is succinctly assessed in the film by Alfred, the wise old mentor character: “Some men just want to watch the world burn,” he asserts (*The Dark Knight*). Some critics have compared the Joker’s delight in depravity and destruction to 21st century terrorism, like the 9/11 attacks on New York City in 2001, and other similar incidents; for instance, publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, and *Variety* each published articles about *The Dark Knight* in which the Joker was categorized with post-9/11 terrorists (Klavan; Stevens; Chang). Because of his predilection toward causing panic and attacking citizens, such a comparison is certainly fair to a certain extent. However, a more analytical look at the Joker’s character reveals that the title of terrorist is insufficient. *The New York Times* got it right in their review, stating that the Joker “is not a terrorist,” because “he isn’t fighting for anything or anyone,” and therefore transcends such a label (Dargis).

Comparisons to terrorism are insufficient mostly because they indicate a lack of understanding concerning the Joker’s motives. Terrorism—for all of its irrationalities and cruelty—is slightly more reasonable than the Joker. *Slightly*. The al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, for instance, issued two *fatwas*, or declarations of war, in the late 90s leading up to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. The 1996 *fatwa* was a 30-page, structured declaration of grievances in which Bin Laden describes the United States as “iniquitous crusaders” and proclaims that “efforts should be concentrated on destroying, fighting and killing the enemy until, by the Grace of Allah, it is completely defeated” (“Bin Laden’s Fatwa”). He accuses the United States of the unwarranted arrests of prominent Sheikhs, invasions of holy lands, and numerous economic wrongdoings. However misguided and unreasonable the actions of al-Qaeda and other similar organizations may be judged to be, they at least have reasons behind their actions. They have a goal, and they are engaging in a fight that they believe will allow them to attain that goal. For Batman’s grinning nemesis, however, the fight is the goal. Destruction is the means and the end.
The Joker himself, in a moment of bone-chilling transparency, declares, “I’m a dog chasing cars . . . I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it, ya know? I just do things,” and later, to Batman, he says, “I don’t want to kill you. What would I do without you?” adding “I won’t kill you, because you’re just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.” In Alfred’s words, once again, the Joker isn’t “looking for anything logical, like money. [He] can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with” (The Dark Knight). The Joker scared audiences in 2008, but not because he was a terrorist. Rather, he was completely unreasonable. In this sense, the Joker finds his place in cultural mythos among such terrors as the zombies from Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, the shark from Jaws, and the titular whale of Moby Dick. These figures share the alarming characteristic of insatiability and ambivalence. As Alfred points out, no amount of money, persuasion, or intimidation can prevail against an utterly unreasonable foe.

The indiscriminate and motiveless cruelty of the Joker finds its nearest analogue in reality in the figure of the mass shooter. It is both unfortunate and undeniable that by 2008 mass shootings had become a regular feature on the nightly news. Many consider 1999, the year of the Columbine High School shooting, to be the beginning of an era of similar mass shootings (“10 Years Later”). In the years between Columbine and opening night of The Dark Knight in 2008, there were at least fourteen instances of such tragedies in the United States (“Mass Shootings In America”). These attacks occurred in diverse locations including shopping centers, government buildings, places of worship, and schools. These locations reflect the general randomness of the shootings. Almost exclusively, the gunmen entered crowded locations and began killing indiscriminately, targeting anyone, everyone. Their murderous aggression was not focused on a supposed enemy or individuals who had done them any harm. For this reason, mass shootings were a particularly ominous form of violence. The victims were not in violent neighborhoods, military locales, or other settings where violence could predictably erupt. This meant that every person, no matter how innocuous their activity or peaceful their surroundings, could potentially find themselves staring down the barrel of a gun. This utterly senseless and morally unthinkable manifestation of violence is the reason why the Joker frightened audiences in 2008 in a way that he would not have fifty years earlier. Random, motiveless public slaughter was a looming threat to all Americans.

One additional way in which the Heath Ledger version of the Joker mirrors the real-life shooters familiar to the 2008 ticket-holder is his seemingly
magical appearance out of thin air. Other earlier versions of the Joker, in both film and comic books, were generally not as mysterious. An exhaustive review of the Joker’s 70-year history as a character is not to be attempted here, but concerning his backstory, there are two common patterns that are relevant to the discussion at hand. In some tellings of the story, the Joker is a recurring and familiar menace that returns frequently to raise mayhem in Gotham. In a 1980s comic, for instance, the Joker is chased away from the city, and Commissioner Gordon asks, “Do you think he’s gone this time, Batman?” Batman answers, “believe me, Commissioner; I’d like to think so. But in my heart of hearts, I doubt it” (Wein). Thus the Joker as an incessant menace is an unwelcome but not unexpected presence in Gotham City. Indeed, the nature of the Joker/Batman hostility is characterized by Michael Nichols as an eternal struggle, a primeval yin and yang dichotomy that follows the tradition of the ancient combat myth (Nichols). However, it is significant to note that in the Nolan incarnation the Joker is a complete mystery, a new and horrifying development that inexplicably bursts onto the scene. At the end of the precursor to The Dark Knight, the appropriately titled Batman Begins (also created by Nolan), in a scene of deliberate foreshadowing, Commissioner Gordon informs Batman of a new criminal presence in the city. Handing him an evidence bag containing a single joker playing card, Gordon says “He has a taste for the theatrical, like you; he leaves a calling card.” To which the caped crusader coolly replies, “I’ll look into it” (Batman Begins).

Thus the Joker is not a known and anticipated foe, but a new and mysterious nihilistic force. When he is finally apprehended by the police, an investigation on him yields “No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias” (The Dark Knight). In a similar fashion, shooters such as Adam Lanza, Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, and James Holmes became nationally recognizable names, rising from obscurity to infamy overnight. Of the 12 previously mentioned shootings that took place in the years before the release and success of The Dark Knight, none were perpetrated by career lawbreakers or famous crime figures. Each was an episode of murderous rage carried out by an unknown and heretofore non-threatening individual. This is part of the terror of the mass shooter; the person who was living life quietly yesterday is suddenly shooting up a church today. The Joker reflects that in his out-of-thin-air appearance in Gotham.

The second pattern of note in the Joker’s past is the presence or absence of his backstory. As has already been discussed, the Joker is alternatingly known
and mysterious in Gotham. In a similar way his past and transformation into an anarchic jester are sometimes explained in detail, and at other times are not. Occasionally in the Batman canon, the Joker’s transformation is depicted outright. For instance, in a 1988 comic book, it is explained that the Joker was once a normal man who fell into a river full of chemicals, which turned his skin green and his heart to stone (Moore). The 1989 film *Batman*—also the most popular film of its respective year—offers a similar origin; the audience sees a criminal fall into a vat of chemicals and emerge as the colorful, murderous Joker.

Significantly, the origins of the 2008 Joker are uncertain. In fact, he purposely muddies the waters of his past, telling conflicting stories about how he received his signature facial scars. In one version, his alcoholic father slits his cheeks after killing his mother, leaving the young Joker-to-be disfigured and motherless. In a second, contradictory account, he claims that he mutilated himself, in order to match the scars his wife earned from an attack by his loan sharks. Other than these obviously contradictory stories, the audience has no idea who the Joker is, where he came from, or what his motivations are for his actions.

The 2008 Joker wears white makeup and a painted-on, sloppy red grin. He cannot have the colorful face as a result of falling into a vat of chemicals. Such an explanation would have been too fantastic to frighten the mass-shooting plagued audience for whom Nolan made the film. Such a story of origin would have alternatingly humanized the Joker as a man with a burden and caricatured him as a fantasy villain. This Joker paints his own face, purposely decorating himself in the macabre grimace, and he is angry and violent for no explained reason.

For these reasons, the Joker in *The Dark Knight* fascinated audiences, and continues to do so today, considering that the wave of public shootings has not slowed since the appearance of the most recent Joker incarnation. If in 20 years such horrific acts of senseless violence are no longer a source of public fear, the Heath Ledger Joker will cease to frighten and compel audiences in the same way. It should be noted, however, that the Joker manages to be compelling in terms of his similarities to mass shooters without being distasteful. Had this film depicted the Joker as actually entering a school and firing at random, or anything quite that concretely connected with mass shootings, it would have been too close to home. Thus, this film found the razor’s edge between realism and repugnance. This is mainly accomplished through the chronotopic nature of the Joker’s character. A chronotope is a “fundamental organizing metaphor” in
which “basic conceptions of time and space get translated into narrative terms” (Dentith). In this case, the concept of mindless, senseless violence has been given a foul cackle and a purple suit and has been sent into the city of Gotham. He is an embodiment, a living, breathing evil, a metaphor ambulant. The use of a chronotope allows the film to directly address the evil and heartlessness taking the form of mass shootings without becoming heavy handed or crass.

Seeing that this chronotopic representation of evil comes just short of being too close for comfort, Batman’s reaction to the chronotopic Joker is one of the most satisfying parts of the film. If his rival is absolute evil, Batman must be absolutely vicious in his attack. Much has been said concerning the clandestine nature of Batman’s tactics, many seeing them as a thinly veiled metaphor for Patriot Act-style political intrusion. One critic goes as far as to say that the entire film is “a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war” (Klavan). Others, however, are quick to point out that the pendulum swings both ways, and that the depiction of rogue tactics is as much a condemnation as a celebration. Either way, as has already been put forth, terrorism and Bush-era international politics are not as useful an analogy for the Joker as are the mass shooters of the same period. That being the case, the extreme tactics that Batman, his corporation, and the city officials resort to in order to stop the maniacal Joker can be seen as the national outcry and rage directed toward the perpetrators of violent public shootings.

For example, accused mass shooter James Holmes may face the death penalty for his alleged attack on a movie theater in Colorado in 2012. He is one of the few mass shooters to stand trial for his actions. One man who lost a friend in the massacre shockingly told reporters “I want [James Holmes] dead. I just want to be there in the room when he dies” (“James Holmes Death Penalty”). This dramatic desire may not be communal among all Americans, but surely the heartache and desire for retribution is not isolated to one person. That is why Batman’s tactics and tough-guy demeanor are so satisfying in the film. If the Joker is the embodiment of ultimate Evil, movie logic dictates that Batman is justified in using ultimate force to stop him.

In an iconic scene, Batman dangles one of the Joker’s henchmen, Salvatore Maroni, over a ledge. Maroni sneers “If you’re trying to scare somebody, pick a better spot. From this height, the fall wouldn’t kill me,” to which Batman responds “I’m counting on it,” just before releasing the mobster and watching his legs break as a result of the fall. Later, when the Joker will not give the
police the information that they want, he is left alone with Batman, who does not have the ethical obligations that the police do. Once the door is closed, Batman unleashes a storm of physical violence against his nemesis, in what would be considered highly questionable interrogation techniques. Batman is performing a catharsis for the entire culture. He is punishing the unpunishable, considering that all but one of the 14 shooters previously mentioned committed suicide after carrying out their murderous rampages. When viewed in the light of national anger, Batman's brutality becomes satisfying, even appropriate and desired.

While no one aspect of a film can be credited with the film's success, the audience's abhorrence for and fear of mass shooters was certainly a psychological factor in the success of the 2008 blockbuster *The Dark Knight*. It had what every superhero film needs: a villain. Not just a “good” villain, but also one that terrified audiences in a way that struck home. Because of the sly way in which he was presented, the Joker was simultaneously compelling and repulsive without ever becoming too uncomfortably realistic. Like the feared shooter that haunted the national psyche, he appeared from nowhere, performed his foul deeds with no remorse, and could not be influenced, persuaded, or bargained with. In addition, Batman handled him in a way that was supremely satisfying, giving the audience a sense of perverse satisfaction. *The Dark Knight* came to the box office at a dark time in America's history. It was a dark film with dark heroes and villains, and it was gratifying enough to become the most popular film in the country.
Works Cited


