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## A tale of two masculinities: Joaquin Phoenix, Todd Phillips, and *Joker's* double can(n)on

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### ABSTRACT

Dancing on the thin edge between tragedy and comedy from the very first tear that rolls down Arthur Fleck's face into the painted creases of his clown smile, *Joker* revels in ambivalence. In fact, it exceeds its diegetic bounds to stage a clash between two kinds of masculinity: the conformist masculinity of director Todd Phillips, known for the alcohol-fuelled bonding and casual misogyny of numerous frathouse-*cum*-road trip films, and the deformist masculinity of star Joaquin Phoenix, whose loner roles have plumbed the depths of masculine alienation, rage, and malaise. While Phoenix's star persona is inseparable from his reflexive disassemblage of masculinity – to the extent of attempting to dismantle his own celebrity in the mock-documentary *I'm Still Here* – Phillips' canon celebrates the comic fortitude of the male ego, able to reassemble itself after each stab at self-destruction. This article examines the 'masculine indemnity' common to Phillips' films in contrast to Phoenix's celebrity, which has been built on the willingness to flout the indemnification of white male privilege. In the unresolved mash-up between Phoenix's and Phillips' star-brands of masculinity, both masculinities prevail, adding fodder to the male can(n)on.

**KEYWORDS** Joaquin Phoenix; Todd Phillips; masculinity; celebrity; *I'm Still Here*; *Joker*

As a performatively brilliant but arguably irresponsible film about troubled white masculinity, made during an upswell in troublesome white masculinity, *Joker* revels in self-aware ambivalence. Presented as an interpretive origin story for the Joker, the grinning villain of the DC Comics universe, the film rejects superhero powers and physics-defying antics for the darkly realistic tale of Arthur Fleck, a nobody beleaguered by poverty, mental illness, and marginalisation, not to mention a spasmodic howl-laugh that overtakes him whenever he is nervous. Arthur – whose surname means 'stain' in German<sup>1</sup> – is a blot on the fraying fabric of Gotham, but his violent arc is so mesmerically performed by Joaquin Phoenix that the film risks glorifying the damaged anti-hero whose psychology it sounds. This raises the question, as Phoenix has admitted, 'Well, why would we make something . . . where you sympathize or empathize with this villain?' Phoenix himself

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offered the answer: ‘that’s what we have to do’ in order to avoid ‘simple answers’ (as quoted in Hagan 2019). Audiences in turn have been either unconvinced or *too* convinced by this tactic.

While *Joker* has inspired impassioned debate about whether it proffers critical insight about or a rallying cry for the white male underclass, such ambivalence is already pre-figured in the trope of Arthur as sad clown, whose sob-inflected cackle tells us he is wailing on the inside while laughing on the outside. This is, however, a specifically gendered ambivalence, unapologetically bound to a masculinity which doesn’t quite add up. Dancing on the thin edge between tragedy and comedy from the very first tear that rolls into the painted creases of Arthur’s clown smile, *Joker* exceeds its diegetic bounds to stage a clash not just between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots,’ but between two kinds of masculinity: the conformist masculinity of director Todd Phillips, known for the alcohol-fuelled bonding and casual misogyny of numerous frathouse-*cum*-road trip films, and the deformatist masculinity of star Joaquin Phoenix, whose loner roles have plumbed the depths of masculine alienation, rage, and malaise in films like *The Master*, *Inherent Vice*, *You Were Never Really Here* and even the cyber-romcom *Her*. While Phoenix’s star persona is inseparable from his reflexive disassemblage and deformation of masculinity – to the extent of attempting to dismantle his own celebrity in the mock-doc *I’m Still Here* – Phillips’ canon by contrast celebrates the comic fortitude of the male ego, able to reassemble itself after each stab at self-destruction.

Although it may seem telling that in *Joker* the grown-up frat boys reminiscent of the *Hangover* films are the first to be shot by Arthur Fleck, the film does not so easily declare the triumph of underdog masculinity. Rather, the deformatist violence of Phoenix as Arthur, which sparks a clown movement of alienated men, puts at risk what I will call the ‘masculine indemnity’ common to Phillips’ previous films – that is, the ability of his central male characters to indemnify, or protect themselves against, the loss of their bodies, their power, and their own male privilege. Phoenix’s star image, on the other hand, has been built on his willingness to flout such protection in his roles, or at least to test the limits of the indemnification of white male privilege. So how do these two masculinities come together in *Joker*? How could the star texts of Phillips and Phoenix, let alone the director and star as cinematic collaborators, meld into the ‘we’ that Phoenix asserts ‘should explore this villain’? The answer may be that, while they never mesh, they do orbit around the same issues, and expectations, of male entitlement. Thus, *Joker*’s discomfiting ambivalence lies not only in the question of what constitutes a socially (ir)responsible representation of downtrodden masculinity, but also in the way that it bleeds the good man into the bad, the redeemable into the deplorable, the pitifully damaged into the dangerously damaging. In the unlikely and unresolved mash-up between Phillips’ and Phoenix’s star-

brands of masculinity, the lesson may be that both masculinities prevail, adding fodder to the male can(n)on.

### Todd Phillips: the ‘raunch-com’ king

As a director and producer who has tended to stay behind the camera, Todd Phillips does not have a star ‘image’ as such, yet he has definitely developed a brand. Known for his raunchy comedies set within male-dominated spaces and narratives, Phillips has built a career out of training the camera on cringingly comedic attempts at masculine self-destruction, both wilful and accidental, while nonetheless keeping the white, male body and status intact. As a ‘raunch-com director’ (Fouriezos 2019) who admits to being ‘obsessed with’ gross-out comedies of the 1980s like *Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* (*The Charlie Rose Show* 1998), Phillips has crafted a certain kind of bromance in films that repeatedly set their dubious ‘dude-bro’ (Filipovic 2012) heroes free from social confines so as to school them in ‘the glorification of sex, booze and White male entitlement’ (Fouriezos 2019). This is conformist masculinity at its best/worst: on the principle that you would never ‘dick a brother’ (Lewis 2000), these American boys-will-be-boys perform ever more outrageous tests of their social and corporeal limits, engaging in transgressive trust-falls while protecting their own privilege through homophobic, misogynistic, and racist comedy. To belong to the ‘Wolf Pack,’ as it is dubbed in Phillips’ hit *The Hangover* (2009), is to be indemnified against damage(s) as much by the comedic film genre, which guarantees a happy ending, as by the privilege that pertains to being male, white, young, and unquestionably heterosexual. In the Wolf Pack, each member can push himself to the limits of abjection while assuring his safety in/by the group, so long as he takes the group’s natural superiority for granted. This makes Phillips’ brand of the raunchy bromance notably different from that of his brother-in-arms Judd Apatow, in whose ‘school of bromances ... the genre of the dominant Alpha Male has been rigorously excised from the plot’ (Alberti 2013, 34). Phillips, on the contrary, celebrates the alpha male, crediting Bradley Cooper’s success in *The Hangover* to the fact that ‘for the first time in a movie, [he] really looks like a man ... he’s really alpha male’ (Barna 2009).

There is, however, a degree of self-reflexivity at work. In Phillips’ early films, he makes a claim to interrogating the question of masculine belonging, particularly in sub/cultures where masculinity is both individually negotiated and collectively consolidated. He was drawn to the subject of his first film, *Hated* (1993) – a documentary about punk band frontman GG Allin, who was known for his aggressive obscenity and crudely sexual on-stage antics – by the spectacle of a man performing social transgression to appreciative cult crowds (Fouriezos 2019). Phillips’ subsequent

documentary, *Frat House* (1998; co-directed with Andrew Gurland), was successfully pitched to HBO producers as a 'darker' version of *Animal House*, focusing on the iniquities of secretive hazing culture (*The Charlie Rose Show* 1998). While the film was never aired (due to a legal battle with ATO National, a large fraternity conglomerate, [Various Folks n.d.]), it shared the 1998 Sundance Grand Jury Prize, which lauded its insider footage of the brutal boundary-testing demanded of white masculinity's denizens (the documentary dutifully shows Phillips caged and being vomited upon). More notable than the brutality itself, however, is the notion that this is all a necessary part of 'the things men go through to belong'; as Phillips says about frathouse culture, '[e]verybody's so afraid of standing out in this world that they will even get beat up and peed on and thrown up on just to be part of a group' (as quoted in Godfrey 2010). As with *Hated*, the focus here is on male transgressive behaviour which tests the limits of social belonging in order to secure that very belonging through limit-testing. This is the masculine conformist ethos that Phillips – from the position of an inside-outsider – would continue to plumb in his filmography.

After *Frat House*, Phillips devoted himself to fiction films but without swerving from the fraternity project, sending it first on the road in the comparatively sweet *Road Trip* (2000) – where three bros drive cross-country to waylay a mis-sent sex tape – and then back to school in *Old School* (2003), where a trio of bros in their 30s found a frathouse as a way of navigating the failures of their adult relationships (read: with women). Unlike the obscene spectacle in *Hated* and *Frat House* of men having to petition for belonging, the Phillips raunch-com replaces brutality with the warm fuzzies of bromantic impunity, a.k.a. 'the glorification of booze, sex and White male entitlement' (Fouriezos 2019). Belonging is now the starting point, not the goal, as confirmed by Phillips' most successful films, the *Hangover* trilogy, which revolve around the wild adventures of Phil (Bradley Cooper), Stu (Ed Helms), and Alan (Zach Galifianakis), the tightly bonded Wolf Pack. To say that the *Hangover* trilogy resounded with national and international audiences is an understatement. On its release in 2009, *The Hangover* was the highest-earning R-rated film in history, to be knocked off its perch two years later by *The Hangover II* (2011) and finally achieving a profit margin of over 1 billion USD from global box office returns by the close of the cycle (*The Hangover III*, 2013). Reviews marvelled at the first film's ability to deliver comedic punches and punchlines as well as its back-to-front narrative structure, following the three hungover friends as they attempt to piece together their wild night in Vegas, which they cannot remember because they had been slipped Rofalin (commonly known as the 'date rape' drug). Despite a handful of reviews that angrily denounce the misogyny and 'rape culture' (Carney 2011) of the films, most critics seem

willing to overlook the fact that the few female characters are either ball-breakers, sluts, or decorative wallpaper, for the sake of appreciating its raunchy ‘screwball’ comedy (Harbridge 2012).

Even taking this misogyny as a given of the raunch-com genre, however, what is striking about frat masculinity is the immunity of the bros’ bodies from harm, despite the fact that they are constantly subject to physical violence: from crowbars to guns to hungry tigers and ramming cars, not to mention Mike Tyson’s right hook. In a particularly brutal scene in *The Hangover*, played entirely for laughs, the three bros wriggle out of an arrest for stealing a cop car by subjecting themselves to being tasered at close range by gleeful schoolchildren on an ‘educational’ visit to the precinct. As in *Frat House*, the male body is pushed to the limit, abject and humiliated, while nonetheless being indemnified against any lasting damage. We laugh both at and with the boys, mocking their humiliation yet thrilled by their impunity. This is both comic-strip violence and, more seriously, a recursive mortification of the flesh that Phillips uncovers at the heart of masculine group-belonging. Unlike in Christianity, however, where the flesh must be put to death in order to sanctify the spirit, in Phillips’ brand of conformist masculinity it is fleshly mortification itself that provides indemnity and guarantees bro-belonging, even – or especially – for an overweight, uncool, no-restraints social outsider like Alan. Phillips may be willing to push his bromances to the dark side (‘Honestly, you can talk to any of these guys, I think I’m darker than any of them’ [Barna 2009]), but he also knows that the power of the bro-group resides in surviving self-destruction for the sake of a good laugh.

### **Joaquin Phoenix: the unpredictable loner**

Joaquin Phoenix proffers a much more insecure and fraught masculinity, weighted by its vulnerability to being broken, whether by external circumstances or internal demons. It is these demons in particular – seemingly carved into the very sinews of the male body – that have been irrevocably tied to Phoenix’s star diegesis in his recent films. As summed up by David Itzkoff in a *Joker* preview article, Phoenix is ‘the unpredictable star known for loners and killers’ (2019). Despite his 2006 Oscar nomination for playing Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line*, Phoenix then ‘settled into a string of movies about loners (*The Master*, *Her*, *Inherent Vice*), killers (*The Sisters Brothers*), and lonesome killers (*You Were Never Really Here*) that have let him plumb the depths of human experience’ (Itzkoff 2019). In the hands of the *Hangover* director, however, what *Joker* makes clear is that it is not just human experience, but masculinity itself whose depths Phoenix has learned how to limn.

The element of danger posed by this mutually damaged and damaging masculinity – enacted, according to director James Gray, by an actor who has

become ‘fearless’ (as quoted in Gilbey 2019) – drives the highly physicalised deformations that we associate with Phoenix’s star image. Phoenix, too, engages in the mortification of the flesh, sacrificially sculpting his body for each role through transformations of size, posture, movement, and even hairiness, and yet the aim is not, as with Phillips’ brand of masculinity, to secure masculine empowerment. On the contrary, Phoenix’s performances risk male power, exposing the vulnerability that comes with revelling in fleshly mortification. This is a deformatist masculinity which carefully disassembles the conventions of manhood with no guarantee that it can ever be put back together again. Wearing their hurt on and through the body, always at risk of ‘outright and cataclysmic failure’ (Gilbey 2019), the characters in Phoenix’s repertoire place masculine indemnity in the firing line.

If refusing the privilege of masculine indemnity marks a major distinction between conformist and deformatist masculinity, another notable difference is that Joaquin Phoenix seems always to work alone, both on set and off. Rejecting the frathouse aspect of Phillips’ masculine brand, Phoenix operates as an unpredictable loner. Like the hair-trigger jumpiness of his characters, Phoenix is known for walking off film sets, including the set of *Joker* (Itzkoff 2019), as well as walking out of interviews (notoriously with *The Telegraph*, when asked whether *Joker* could inspire actual violence). This seems not to be the diva behaviour of a classical star, but rather a recalcitrance to ‘succumb to stardom’ itself (Gilbey 2019), presented as an insistence on dancing to his own beat – an apt metaphor, given the graceful yet excruciating slow-pose dances that Arthur Fleck performs by himself, and in isolation, before or after committing murder. This recalcitrance of Phoenix the star dovetails neatly with the ‘unpredictable loner’ characters in his corpus: all, in one sense or another, are socially marginal, insistently alone, and performatively self-alienating (Peberdy 2019). In Phoenix’s deformation of masculinity, there is no belonging to a Wolf Pack. Indeed, it is worth recalling that even in *Joker*, where Arthur treads a path from lone killer to accidental leader of a ‘have-nots’ movement, the shallow cinematography and framing in the closing scene of triumph hold him separate from the masked crowds who cheer him, while the epilogue ends with Arthur alone, leaving bloody footprints in a gleamingly white, empty institutional corridor, possibly having hallucinated the entire rise-to-fame narrative.

### **Joaquin’s own hangover: from J-P to the Joker**

There is one notable exception to the anti-Pack stance of Phoenix’s masculine loner. Before *Joker*, there was *I’m Still Here* (Affleck, 2010), the only part of Phoenix’s filmography to have received academic attention to date in relation to his star image (Martin 2015; Peberdy 2019). There were, of course, a number of highly successful films made by Phoenix between



these two, including Academy Award-nominated *The Master* (2012) and Cannes-recognised *You Were Never Really Here* (2017). What makes *I'm Still Here* different is both the genre – a mockumentary initially presented as documentary – and the fact that Phoenix plays himself as a slovenly, mumbling, increasingly alienated star who has rejected acting (in an actual October 2008 interview for celebrity magazine *Extra*) in order to become a rapper. While the film's opening presents a prowling Phoenix engulfed in a hoodie intoning, 'I don't want to play the character of Joaquin anymore,' it is precisely the line between the star and the person/a, between fiction and reality that threatened to become irreparably blurred in this 'high wire act of long-form public embarrassment' (Singer 2012).

The problem was not only that the 'J-P' on screen was boorish, arrogant, and bad at rapping, but that this performance leaked off the film set and into public life through Phoenix's celebrity appearances in character. The most memorable such appearance was on *The David Letterman Show*, where a monosyllabic Phoenix – complete with dreaded hair, unruly beard, and defensive sunglasses – squirmed, muttered, stuck his chewing gum under Dave's desk, and refused any connection with the film he was meant to be promoting (*Two Lovers*). In retrospect *I'm Still Here* has met with new appreciation, although most critics do not buy Phoenix and Affleck's claim that the film is meant to send up Hollywood celebrity culture and its gullible audiences (Martin 2015). Rather, the film has been appreciated for its 'demented brilliance' (Singer 2012) in laying the groundwork for what would become Phoenix's most fearless roles of masculine deformation. Without *I'm Still Here*, critics have noted, there would have been no Freddie Quell from *The Master* (Singer 2012).

I would add that there would also have been no Arthur Fleck from *Joker*, not only because Freddie and Arthur represent similarly exacting performances of alienated, damaged men, but also because J-P from *I'm Still Here* provides the bridge to the conformist masculinity of clown-masked adherents who coalesce around the Joker. J-P is the Phoenix persona that comes closest to being a Phillipsian dude-bro, engaging – however mumblingly – in the raunch-com triumvirate of booze, drugs, and hookers, especially during a night in a Las Vegas hotel room that echoes uncomfortably with the diegesis of *The Hangover*. There is, moreover, a Wolf Pack in *I'm Still Here*, consisting of male assistants who live, travel, and party with J-P. Although paid, they refer to each other as 'friends,' taking part in an itinerant rhythm of male camaraderie consisting of alcohol-fuelled road trips, clubs, and hotels, albeit in an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and despair. Further confusing the demarcation between 'real' and 'fake,' there is the invisible friend who really is a friend: Casey Affleck, positioned behind the camera, who at the time was Phoenix's director, long-time pal, and brother-in-law (then married to Summer Phoenix).



The blurring between reality and fiction thus operates not only at the level of Phoenix's celebrity – which he is attempting in this film to deconstruct or consolidate or both – but also at the level of a certain kind of masculinity, the boys-will-be-boys culture redolent of Phillips' films. As Martin notes in her feminist reading of *I'm Still Here*, the 'scenes with his male assistants, who often find reason to take their pants off, emphasize both a homosocial and homoerotic atmosphere almost entirely devoid of, and uninterested in, women' (2015, 40–41). In this context, it becomes particularly relevant that two senior women from the film crew filed a lawsuit against Affleck for sexual harassment (cinematographer Magdalena Gorka's complaint cites 'a near daily barrage of sexual comments, innuendo and unwelcome advances by crew members, within the presence and with the active encouragement of Affleck' [Gorka v. Affleck]). Although the case was settled out of court, pressure brought to bear on Affleck in light of the #MeToo movement resulted in his admission that 'it was an unprofessional environment,' exacerbated by the fact that '[t]he cast was the crew and the crew was kind of the cast' (as quoted in Dockerman 2018). The Wolf Pack mentality, in other words, seeped between on-set and off, so it is perhaps no surprise that Martin finds in the film 'a misogynist bent' (2015, 41) that is not strictly attached to Phoenix but coalesces around his masculine performance.

Once Todd Phillips takes the helm of this Phoenix persona, the troubling performance of deconstructed celebrity masculinity in *I'm Still Here* is (re)attached to and compounded by Phillips' commitment to conformist masculinity, causing many female reviewers (as noted in a synopsis by Ritzel 2019) to express disapprobation of Phoenix and alarm at the misogyny of *Joker*. On the one hand, this is not surprising, given the indications that Arthur murders his mother, his love interest, and even his therapist at the end. On the other hand, the yoking of deformist and conformist masculinities feeds into an ambivalent gender messaging, manifested at the level of film technique as well as in Arthur's murderous vulnerability. For a start, as opposed to the graphic, drawn-out killings of the male characters, the murders of women are kept off-screen, either due to a reframing of the camera (the mother's murder) or to a temporal ellipsis (as with the neighbour-cum-hallucinatory girlfriend and the therapist). It is striking, moreover, that the scene which results in the gruesome killing of the Wall Street boys – themselves the residue of a Wolf Pack from a Phillips' film – begins with their harassment and humiliation of a woman in a subway car. As the drunken dude-bros lurch from hilarity to near-rape menace, it is Arthur's involuntary, conspicuously alarmed laughter that draws their attention away from the would-be victim. It is possible, then, to read Arthur here as a defender of vulnerable women, rather than as a Bernhard Goetz-type subway vigilante, when he then kills the Wolf Pack bros one by one. Even as he becomes more menacing, he

remains a devoted son; indeed, the film narrative revolves around Arthur's vulnerability as the abused, traumatised child of a mother who herself was abused and institutionalised – and who may have been telling the truth about Arthur's paternal parentage and her subsequent rejection by the powerful Thomas Wayne of Gotham. There is thus a 'shadow' storyline in *Joker* that links the social inequalities of Gotham to a critical awareness of violence against women – yet Ritzel's (2019) overview of female critics' negative responses suggests that this shadow reading is largely inaccessible.

So why, if Phoenix plays a vulnerable Arthur whose vengeance is aimed at dude-bros and powerful men, does *Joker* resist a feminist reading? The answer seems to be that Phoenix's deformist masculine performance does not work in the service of women, but is rather contained and even amplified by conformist masculinity under Phillips' direction. Ultimately, the film is not about the harassed, institutionalised, or murdered women, who have been forgotten by its triumphalist end. Rather, any reading that aims to counter Phillips' conformist masculinity is simply forced into a back-and-forth relay with the 'other' masculinity on offer, the self-abnegation of Arthur Fleck. This deformist figure, however, ends up making very similar claims on masculine entitlement: even though the loser-loner is marked by his failure, he has set his sights on the same just desserts of male valorization, as in much of Phoenix's corpus of alienated characters. Phoenix as Arthur seemingly offers the obverse of masculine indemnity but at the same time assures us, through the echoes of his star text, that the male outsider has a key role to play, resulting in a double indemnity of masculine immiseration which is disinterested in, if not outright violent towards, women. There is no room in this tale of two masculinities for anyone else.

The double indemnity of Phoenix's performance thus does two things: it refuses conformist masculinity and hence opens up the possibility of plumbing vulnerability, but it also nods to the very basis of the fame contract in masculine celebrity. At the hinge between deformist (loner) and conformist (brother) masculinities stands the male insider-outsider, himself prefigured by Robert De Niro under the direction of Martin Scorsese in two films that are quoted obsessively and self-reflexively in *Joker: Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1986). White male entitlement, whether providing the basis for high-jinks privilege or disaffected rage, supports a star system in which the badly behaved boy secures the group; the rat pack, brat pack, or meltdown celeb (Gibson, Sheen, Depp) is no aberration, but is necessary to bankability. The 'sacrifice' of self-destruction is what any male actor must be prepared to make for the group's and the star system's sake. Through willing mortification of the male celebrity body – whether as tragedy, comedy, or both – a star is born again, and the system renewed.

## Note

1. The fact that Arthur Fleck's surname has a German meaning could be considered a coincidence, were it not for the fact that the original Joker in DC comics was inspired by German expressionist darling Conrad Veidt in the 1928 film *Der Mann der lacht* [*The Man Who Laughs*] (dir. Paul Leni) (Newby 2019).

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

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