

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/161384/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Tynan, Aidan 2024. Clown politics: history, populism, and tragic farce. *Textual Practice* 38 (8) , pp. 1258-1276. 10.1080/0950236X.2023.2243894

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2243894>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Clown Politics: History, Populism, and Tragic Farce

Aidan Tynan

Cardiff University

Senior Lecturer

School of English, Communication and Philosophy

TynanA@cardiff.ac.uk

Tel: 0044 (0)29208 74822 / 0044 (0)7596 743454

John Percival Building,

Room 1.23, Colum Drive,

Cardiff University,

Cardiff, CF10 3EU

Abstract

Contemporary right-wing populism mixes comic performance with authoritarian and reactionary sentiments in troubling ways, as much recent work has observed. We might thus be said to be living in an era of ‘tragic farce’ in which Marx’s famous distinction between genres of historical action has collapsed. To engage with these questions, this article focuses on the clown as a figure in which aesthetics and politics intersect in crucial ways. Through readings of Adorno, Deleuze, Agamben and Žižek, I show how the clown has been an enduring concern for theory. I also analyze Todd Phillips’s 2019 film *Joker*, including the furor that greeted its release, in order to argue for a mode of aesthetic populism in which the category of ‘people’ remains a virtual or potential category that can drive artistic practice. To describe this, I draw on what Deleuze, in his philosophy of cinema, termed fabulation.

Keywords: clown; *Joker*; populism; Marx; Deleuze; fabulation

Tragedy, farce, and what comes after

One of the effects of the era of Trump and Brexit has been to provoke widespread re-evaluation of the relation between politics and comedy.¹ Professional comedians, such as Beppe Grillo in Italy, have become politicians, while professional politicians, such as Boris Johnson in the UK, have used comedy as an effective path to leadership.² At the same time, a ‘new seriousness’ and a new ‘postironic’ sincerity have been discerned within contemporary

populist movements.³ The difference between the funny and the serious has never been so troublingly obscure, while the ‘actorliness’ of the political leader – a longstanding feature of political life – has aroused fresh concerns. Several notable commentators, in texts published in the months following Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, to recall Marx’s famous dictum that historical events tend to occur twice, ‘the first time as high tragedy, the second as low farce’.⁴ John Bellamy Foster’s *Trump in the White House*, a caustic analysis of Trumpism as an ecocidal and neo-fascist project, was subtitled ‘Tragedy and Farce’.⁵ Bruno Latour saw the Trump phenomenon, announced as it was with America’s withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, as the outcome of capitalism’s decades-long refusal to recognize climate change. In the absence of a shared horizon of meaning, Latour writes, consensus gives way to a farcical but catastrophic abdication of reality: ‘history does not go simply from tragedy to farce,’ Latour wrote, “it can repeat itself one more time in a tragic farce’.⁶ Hal Foster’s article ‘Père Trump’, which compared America’s forty-fifth president with Alfred Jarry’s obese clown-king Ubu, articulated a similar idea: ‘the old concepts seem inadequate in the face of Trumpism, voided not only by the sheer scale of the calamity but also by its weird mix of the buffoonish and the lethal. If farce comes after tragedy, what comes after farce?’.⁷ Echoing all of these sentiments, Mike Davis described the Trump supporters who stormed the US Capitol building in January of 2021 as ‘essentially a big biker gang dressed as circus performers,’ noting the spectacle’s atmosphere of surrealistic ‘dark comedy’.⁸

The point here goes beyond the suggestion that Trump and his authoritarian populist ilk seem a farcical repetition of twentieth-century fascism. Hitler and his supporters, we should not forget, already represented something of an inversion of Marx’s schema, a farce followed by tragedy, given how they seemed at first mere buffoons until their lethality became undeniable. The key issue raised in the above observations touches on something deeper: whether it is even possible any longer to distinguish meaningfully between tragedy

and farce as genres of historical experience. The distinction was simply taken for granted by Marx, who made his famous statement in the opening lines of his account of how Louis Napoleon – nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte – took power following the French revolution of 1848 to become Emperor Napoleon III in 1851. There was an element of the parodic, a ‘cartoon-quality’, as Marx put it, in how the coup of the nephew (the ‘fool’) restaged that of the uncle (the ‘genius’).⁹ The revolution of 1789-1814 had succeeded in sweeping away the *ancien régime*’s feudal institutions and establishing modern bourgeois society, but to do so it needed the ‘high historical tragedy’ of the past – ‘Roman costumes’ and ‘Roman phrases’ – to hide from itself the ‘dreary realism’ of its economic aims.¹⁰ If the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century were able to borrow their dramatic energy from the past in this way, Marx insisted, subsequent revolutions must generate their own historical rupture through the proletariat, or else succumb to a parodic repetition of repetition. The genuinely revolutionary task is not to transcend economic content through heroic ‘phrases’ but to transcend such phrases by means of a new historical content.¹¹ But if Marx’s prescription presumes an intelligibility of different genres, what happens in historical moments such as our own, in which this intelligibility has seemingly broken down? As Hal Foster observes, returning to the ideas first expressed in his 2017 article:

The pattern of tragedy followed by farce is still a logic of sorts: history retains a narrative even if it is a bathetic one. Yet perhaps this coherence was an illusion, and, again, what could come after farce anyway? Nothing necessarily ... Originally a farce (which derives from the French *farcir*, to stuff) was a comic interlude in a religious play. A farce might be understood, then, as an in-between moment, maybe along the lines of ‘the morbid interregnum’ between old and new political orders articulated by

Antonio Gramsci circa 1930. At the very least, an interlude does suggest that another time will arrive.¹²

Farce suggests a temporary suspension of the real drama, but the sense that farce may also be a mode of the tragic brings us to the very limits of the historical logic these terms were supposed to explicate.¹³ ‘Tragic farce’ would then be an antinomic hesitation between the action and its interruption. This would seem appropriate for a historical moment still slowly emerging from post-Cold War delusions about the end of history.

What interests me here specifically is not the question of history *per se* but the relationships between art and politics entailed by approaching history as a matter of mythic performance, gesture, spectacle, and – crucially – mass desire. This article argues that the clown, in its various aspects, can be seen as a privileged figure in all of these respects. I show how figures of the clown, fool, and buffoon have cropped up repeatedly in theoretical discussions about the gestural body as a site of both the production and disappearance of history. In Beckett and Adorno, for example, clowns seem to manifest the absurdities of late-capitalist mechanization and temporal regulation, such that history becomes unendurable. Deleuze and Agamben, on the other hand, suggest the clown as a liberation from biopolitical capture and thus a mode of tragifarical rupture with the history of the West altogether. The clown’s embodiment of carnivalesque subversion has, furthermore, directly inspired the kinds of Left anti-capitalist protest associated with Hardt and Negri’s concept of the multitude. Clowns have been part of protest movements at least since the heyday of ACT UP in the late-1980s.¹⁴ But with the emergence of Trump and other neo-fascist leaders capable of performing what Bhattacharyya and her colleagues call ‘strongman buffoonery’, the figure of the clown has come to embody the dangers of a resurgent far-right populism.¹⁵ Todd Phillips’ 2019 film *Joker*, along with its febrile and panicked reception, is emblematic of how the

figure of the clown has been charged with these politically ambiguous forces.¹⁶ Chaplin and Fellini, the great clowns of twentieth-century cinema, ridiculed the clownishness of Hitler and Mussolini, of course, but the aestheticization of politics performed by the contemporary strongman buffoon demands renewed consideration. Following Deleuze, I argue that we can insist on a form of *aesthetic* populism, in which the ‘people’ remains a virtual category, a missing component, something that needs to be invented through what Deleuze calls the ‘fabulating’ or mythmaking functions of art (and cinema in particular).¹⁷ The clown can be regarded as a pure fabulator and cypher of a people, embodying both the dangers and liberatory possibilities of this political category.

Phillips’ film owes much to the ‘evil clown’ that has become a stock character in pop culture in recent decades.¹⁸ *Joker* is ostensibly a story about the origins of the Batman supervillain, with Joaquin Phoenix memorably playing the titular role. But when the film appeared in October 2019 it provoked a frenzy of responses from commentators who saw it as either glorifying the kinds of violence associated with alienated, white male rage,¹⁹ or as depicting a legitimate, left populist response to wealth inequality and social exclusion in the context of post-2008 America.²⁰ In the film, Phoenix’s Joker becomes the symbol of anti-rich protests following his murder of three Wall Street bankers.

But this was only the latest chapter of the Joker’s strange political career in recent American culture. Following the Joker’s previous incarnation by Heath Ledger from Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*, the right populist Tea Party Movement used an image of Obama’s face altered to resemble Ledger’s villain.²¹ ‘Obama-Joker’ came to represent racist, reactionary fears of a socialist plot against America.²² Longstanding features of American political culture (popular revolt, mistrust of government, McCarthyite paranoia, white supremacism) had thus been condensed unstably into the Joker persona, and by the time Phillips’ film appeared, Trump had already been cast by his critics on both the left and

the right as a grotesque clown-tyrant.²³ When Phoenix's Joker articulates, prior to murdering his mother, that 'I used to think my life was nothing but a tragedy, but now, now I realize it's all just a fucking comedy', he appeared an unsettling embodiment of how the generic confusion of tragic and comic might seek resolution through violence. Slavoj Žižek has analyzed the film in this way, as I show below.

But my argument moves beyond Žižek's long-standing and well-known hostility to populism to suggest that the film also manifests what Deleuze has called fabulation 'caught in the act', an attempt to generate a living myth and a people through the resources of art'.²⁴ The politics of Phillips' film might be seen to be superficial or opportunistic – a mere means to give heft and grit to a well-trodden comic book scenario – but through the effectiveness of its stylized atmospherics, it evokes the instabilities of post-2008 American politics, the utopianism of protest, and the specters of mob violence. By recasting Joker as a clown without an audience, it evokes the problem of a missing people through a politicization of the commercialized mythos of the Batman universe. This manifests what Deleuze calls the aesthetic invention or 'fabulation' of 'a people to come', an activity involving the redeployment of myths in the name of a potential collective subjectivity.²⁵ My work here joins that of Erin Manning, Tavia Nyong'o, and Érik Bordeleau and his colleagues in its attempts to explore a cultural politics of fabulation.²⁶ As Manning writes, 'fabulation attunes to the difference between those kinds of narratives that hold the event hostage and those that breed openings'.²⁷ If history can be regarded as a narrative or theatrical form, then the event to be played out is the emergence of 'a life lived in the singular plural', as Nyong'o puts it.²⁸ We can thus insist upon an artistic practice capable of resisting contemporary authoritarian populisms in a way that also refuses to give up on the collective social imaginary the populist impulse portends.

The Flight and Return of Crowds

The Joker of Phillips' film, in tune with contemporary late capitalist realities, subverts older functions of clown figure and represents a new one for our era. But these older functions were already a kind of subversion governing mass desires. What, then, is the relationship between clowns, including the 'bad' clowns of the Joker-type, and crowd phenomena? The

so-called 'clown panic' of 2016, in which sightings of menacing and sometimes violent clowns (or rather, individuals dressed as clowns) were reported in more than a dozen countries during the run-up to Halloween, was seen by some as part of the populist upsurge that marked that year. As one article in *The Guardian* put it, 'after Brexit and a Trump presidential candidacy, after all, why shouldn't clowns be on the rampage, too?'.²⁹ Such observations, however ironic, registered an unease with crowds. The incidents seemed a perfect example of mimetic contagion – each report led to more sightings and thus more reports – in which the scary or evil clown became the object of a more general fear of irrational crowd behavior propelled by the virality of digital media. The transformation of clowns into objects of fear is itself historically significant, as it is linked to their anachronism, the sense that they have lost the crowds that were once so easily theirs. The uncanny figure of the 'bad' clown marks a historical shift in mass desire, the flight and return of crowds.

Andrew Stott argues that a key example in the genealogy of the evil clown type is Joseph Grimaldi, the beloved pantomime performer of the Georgian period and inventor of the red-mouthed, colorfully attired, acrobatic clown of modern tradition. That Grimaldi was also a psychologically tortured man whose art put him in a state of premature physical decrepitude lent him a two-faced public persona. This was only accentuated by the decline in the mid-nineteenth century of the popular theatre in which he had excelled. Like Canio, the circus clown who murders his wife and her lover in Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci* (1892),

Grimaldi came to embody the uncanniness of a clown cut adrift from the popular arena that once sustained and contained him. As Stott writes, ‘all humor having fled, the object of spectatorship resents being watched, is unable to differentiate between the play world and the real world, and transposes his personal demons onto the supposed joviality of his mask’.³⁰

If traditionally clowns were subversive figures associated with carnivalesque periods of revelry, as shown in Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous analysis of the medieval ‘feast of fools’, then scary, evil, or melancholy clowns involve something like a *subversion of subversion*, a troubling of the social conventions governing the permissibility of transgression.³¹ This is behind Fellini’s association of clowns with fascism.³² Humor loses its normative bearings. As Adorno notes with respect to the strange clowning of Beckett’s characters,

the laughter it arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh. This is what has become of humor now that it has become obsolete as an aesthetic medium and repulsive, without a canon for what should be laughed about, without a place of reconciliation from which one could laugh, and without anything harmless on the face of the earth that would allow itself to be laughed at. ... Humor itself has become silly, ridiculous ... and Beckett carries out the sentence on it. Even the jokes of those who have been damaged are damaged.³³

The shambling, clownish characters of *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, trapped in their bizarre automatisms and trivial compulsions, embody an implicit condemnation of the abstract, empty temporalities of late capitalism. Before Beckett, both Bergson and Freud linked humor with automatism and mechanical repetition.³⁴ The relationship to temporality is important: the clown no longer provides a periodic, seasonal subversion of social and religious norms, as in the Easter and Christmas carnivals of the Middle Ages, but comes to be

identified with a general impoverishment of the shared reality we call history. Adorno notes how the clowns and jugglers of variety acts play a 'trick' on time by suspending the temporality of consummated action through a 'magical repetition' akin to 'the industrial procedure in which the selfsame is reproduced through time'.³⁵ Beckett's clowns are not the subjects of meaningful actions and completed narratives but the agents of mechanical reactions and victims of interminable waiting. In an age of nuclear weapons and high mass consumption, life is reduced to these voided temporalities which seem to emerge out of the ruins of history.

The clown is thus the surprising form in which history both ends and lives past its end, and in which temporality and history seem to diverge. Marx had discussed farce, even prior to the events of 1848-51, in terms of the limits of history being reached *within* history. The continued existence of the *ancien régime* into the nineteenth century, especially in Germany, struck him in 1843 as the farcical perpetuation of a historical form that had lost belief in its own reality: 'The present German regime ... only imagines that it still believes in itself and asks the world to share in its fantasy'.³⁶ Anticipating his remarks about the coup of Napoleon III, he wrote: 'The modern *ancien régime* is merely the *clown* of a world order whose *real heroes* are dead. History is thorough and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient form to its grave'.³⁷ In his book on the 2008 financial crisis, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009), Slavoj Žižek reads this passage in a way that positions early twenty-first century historical experience in directly Marxian terms. The financial crisis was the farce that followed the tragedy of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In this movement from tragedy to farce, the idea that liberal democratic, capitalist society somehow represented the 'end of history' (as Fukuyama notoriously put it in 1992) was forced to die twice over. Like the German *ancien régime*, those who see liberal capitalism as the final stage of world history are the comic remnants of what could once be seen in 'heroic' terms as the Cold War triumph

of the West. We can regard the tragifarcical spectacle of politics today as part of this same movement: it is not simply that the ‘end of history’ had to die twice, in tragic and farcical modes, but that these deaths have left a generic confusion in their wake, an uncertainty over *how history should be acted*.

This uncertainty relates to the crucial problem of belief raised by Marx and recast by Žižek in terms of ideological commitment:

Do today’s preachers and practitioners of liberal democracy not also ‘only imagine that they believe in themselves’, in their pronouncements? In fact, it would be more appropriate to describe contemporary cynicism as representing an exact inversion of Marx’s formula: today, we only imagine that we do not ‘really believe’ in our ideology—in spite of this imaginary distance, we continue to practise it.³⁸

The persistence of capitalism has more to do with our *practice* of it than in any genuine conscious ideological avowal. No one, especially after 2008’s revelation that much of the economy is run like a crooked casino, could honestly believe that capitalism is the final world-historical form, but at the level of our behaviors and our libidinal investments we act *as if* we do. Belief, in other words, is not only a matter of conscious avowals but the libidinal processes – which are to some extent automatic, technologically regulated – constituting the rituals of work and consumption that plug us into the economic system. Despite our ironic distance from and disavowals of capitalism’s ideological self-justifications, we continue to practise it and thus cannot produce a different society. Cynical irony is the very mechanism by which belief continues at the libidinal, economic or automatic level. In this way, it alleviates consciousness of the burden of *having* to believe. Capitalism thus demands a kind of bad faith. What this means, as Žižek has often argued, is that belief becomes reflexive: it is

not a matter of whether we believe or not but of how we believe in our beliefs. He notes, in passing, that Marx made his comments about the German *ancien régime* only imagining that it believed in itself around the same time as Kierkegaard was reconceptualising religious belief as reflexive: Žižek observes that for Kierkegaard, ‘we humans cannot ever be sure that we believe: ultimately, we only “believe that we believe.”’³⁹

In his reading of *Joker*, Žižek regards the film’s central character as a figure who engages with this self-reflexivity to its most extreme point. Arthur Fleck, a citizen of Gotham/New York and aspiring comedian who works as a party clown named Carnival but goes on to invent the Joker persona, is first presented to us in the film applying his mask before a theatre mirror in a grim, penumbral backstage setting. The mask is that of a crudely painted, red-white-and-blue Auguste, though in a later scene Fleck appears more like a sad, white-faced Pierrot. He is also depicted dancing in the bright colors of a Harlequin. For Žižek, Fleck’s identification with the superficiality of the mask suggests the force of a desire reduced to pure drive or mechanical compulsivity, a desire that no longer believes in its beliefs and attempts to inhabit a nihilistic ‘zero-point’.⁴⁰ As Anna-Sophie Jürgens argues, Fleck’s dancing is ‘convulsive and eccentric’.⁴¹ But we should note here how the political problem of belief is related to the aesthetics of the false or superficial. Indeed, for Deleuze this is the central political problem of post-War cinema, as manifested principally in Neorealism and the New Wave, which addressed itself to a fundamental loss of belief in the world.⁴² Such cinema does not offer a different or better world, or a more authentic one, but mobilized the ‘powers of the false’ that the cinematographic apparatus unleashed in unprecedented ways.⁴³ The problem, both political and aesthetic at once, is thus much less the recovery of lost belief than a transformation of belief through an aesthetics liberated from the ‘form of the true’. This, Deleuze tells us, is Nietzschean will to power at the level of the production of images.⁴⁴

Interestingly, and in ways which lead us back both to the figure of the clown and the Marxian problem of history, the links between Marx and Kierkegaard suggested by Žižek were made by Deleuze himself some forty years prior in *Difference and Repetition*. There, Deleuze considered Kierkegaard's counterintuitive suggestion of a repetition oriented towards the future, functioning as an inversion of the mechanism of memory: 'what is recollected', Kierkegaard argued, 'has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward'.⁴⁵ In Deleuze's interpretation, this involves making repetition its own object. Repetition thus becomes a means of bringing something genuinely new into being; it is the 'thought of the future' itself.⁴⁶ The affirmative strategy of Nietzsche's eternal return is much the same, even if the latter's atheism sits strangely alongside Kierkegaard's faith.⁴⁷ But the crucial point is that the problem of reflexive belief is reframed through repetition. For Deleuze, 'believing that we believe' becomes a kind of self-mimicry capable of transforming human thought and action into a theatre without tragic heroes, a theatre of gesture and surfaces.⁴⁸ Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith becomes a comic actor: 'there is an adventure of faith, according to which one is always the clown of one's own faith, the comedian of one's ideal. ... the believer does not lead his life only as a tragic sinner ... but as a comedian and clown, a simulacrum of himself'.⁴⁹ Following these Kierkegaardian (and Nietzschean) insights, it is possible to maintain that there is something beyond tragedy and farce in Marx's account of historical repetition. Deleuze argues that in the farcical repetition a subject fails before the task of transposing a past content into a present action. In the tragic repetition, by contrast, the past is made present by the heroes who repeat it successfully. But we must insist on a *third* repetition if we are to be saved from an endless cycling of tragedy and farce: 'these two moments are not independent, existing as they do only for the third moment beyond the comic and the tragic: the production of something new entails a dramatic repetition which excludes even the hero'.⁵⁰ This third

repetition returns us to the comic but in a totally new key, no longer as the failure contrasted with the success but as a repetition freed from past contents and individual actors altogether.

Marx sought in the proletariat a revolutionary content capable of transcending the tired phrases and costumes of the past. But perhaps we first need to liberate the theatrical, inventive, fabulatory power of repetition itself, its delight in the superficiality of masks and costumes, before such a collective actor (a people) can take the stage. There is something irreducibly comic in this, a joy that comes from identifying so fully with the mask that identity disappears into it: 'the mask, the costume, the covered is everywhere the truth of the uncovered. The mask is the true subject of repetition'.⁵¹ There is something terrible in this too, a dissolution of 'uncovered' identities and individuals. The mask here does not serve the ironic distance of a subject separated from its avowals but, on the contrary, a direct acting of commitment in which the subject merges with the mask. As I show below, for Agamben (who seems directly inspired by Deleuze in this respect) the clown's mask entails nothing less than the liberation of life from the long history of biopolitical capture.

But today's strongman buffoonery, as Bhattacharyya and their colleagues write, 'has become part of the new legend of power' in ways which suggest that it is today's neofascist formations that are most profitably taking advantage of this fabulatory political aesthetics.⁵² If our tragifarcical moment has produced a confusion over how history should be acted, then such legends of power have now taken to the stage in the form of what Alexander Dent calls 'ludic authoritarianism'.⁵³ How, then, should we regard a film such as *Joker*, a darkly stylized and meta-cinematically self-aware reworking of comic book iconography, whose politics, striking and evasive, were seen by many upon its release as ironically fascist?⁵⁴

Postirony and the biopolitics of the clown

It is less irony that dominates the tone of *Joker*, however, than an aborted or failed sincerity. Phoenix performs Fleck, who cares for his ailing mother and imagines himself as ‘the man of the house’, a naïve believer in the limited social roles afforded to him by his impoverished environment. He fantasizes about a relationship with a female neighbor, a single mother, so that he may play the desired role of father and husband. His mother’s nickname for him is ‘Happy’, but as Žižek points out, it is precisely the struggle and failure to identify with this ‘happy’ image of himself as functional participant in his social world that brings about an ‘overidentification’ with the Joker mask.⁵⁵ This is how the film dramatizes the reversal of tragedy into comedy, which presages the Joker’s emergence, the eventual point at which Fleck, both joker and joke, becomes *the* Joker of the Batman mythos. As Milburn writes, in his discussion of comedians as populist politicians, we are moving from a cultural moment dominated by ‘post-political cynical irony’ to one of ‘postironic political commitment’.⁵⁶ *Joker* captures this shift in its deployment of the iconography of the malign clown-fool whose mask manifests the very instability of a belief that tries to escape the cynical or ironic distance that had once sustained it as bad faith. When he finally meets Murray Franklin, his one-time comedy idol and host of an insipid late night talk show, Fleck in Joker regalia asserts, in reference to the violent protest movement he has inadvertently instigated, that ‘I don’t believe in any of that, I don’t believe in anything’. We get the sense that this is not an ironic gesture of disavowal but a dangerous kind of commitment in itself, as the masked protestors on the streets show.

It is true the film’s imagery might be seen as of a piece with the online political cultures of the alt-right, whose use of memes have facilitated a comic but postironic assertion of fascist sentiments in ways which gleefully break liberal taboos. As Žižek and Milburn suggest, however, this shift beyond cynical irony is also crucial for any new Left politics since, as Žižek in particular has explained so often, the problem of belief is also the problem

of any materialist political commitment. We should not forget that Left politicians such as Sanders and Corbyn have been criticized, indeed ridiculed, for the naivete of their sincerity.⁵⁷ Denunciations of the film's supposed fascism or alt-right elements thus do not do full justice to the seriousness of its politics or the way it frames problems of commitment. This is not to say that the film *itself* is entirely naïve or sincere. Indeed, it wraps itself in layers of metacinematic awareness. Its grim, crumbling New York/Gotham streets, complete with adult movie houses and rusted shopfronts, bring to mind the urban dystopias of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Winner's *Death Wish* (1974), both violent vigilante narratives and documents of white male rage. There is a deliberate pastiche of (and nostalgia for) hard-edged, New Hollywood-era filmmaking that puts the film at an immediate aesthetic distance from the slick, high-tech sheen of most recent comic book adaptations. But this also functions to make a historical comment rendered at the level of film's visual style. The late-70s/early-80s setting depicts a period of social and economic crisis that would lead to the emergence of neoliberalism. The film's aesthetic choices thus provide a historical frame which gives the explosion of populist revolt and ultimately mob violence in the film's finale a seriousness that goes beyond the ostensible aim of showing the Joker's rise as a supervillain.

If there is an ironic tension between visual surface and sociohistorical depth here, it is not that of a cynical disavowal which creates a distance from the social and political content. In an important sense, the film is *reversing* the cynicism of the fundamental Batman mythos, which invites us to enjoy spectacles of vigilantism perpetrated by an all-powerful billionaire while using heightened visual styles to distance us from this scenario's troubling political meanings. Furthermore, the authenticity of Fleck/Joker is maintained at all times, in ways departing from the character's prior portrayals by Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger. A key aspect of this is the theme of mental health and what we might call the *biopolitical* staging of the figure of the clown as avatar of mass desire. Much of this is rendered via Phoenix's

captivating performance and the way the camera, at key points, emphasizes his emaciated body. Fleck's 'joke diary' is also a journal of his mental illness and social isolation. He is portrayed as having a condition causing involuntary laughter, which manifests in stressful situations. At the same time, he is unable to laugh 'naturally' – or rather, for him the sincerest laughter is the mechanical, pathological or compulsive kind. He longs nevertheless for a career in stand-up comedy and idolizes Murray Franklin, flatly played by Robert De Niro, whose vacuous monologues he avidly consumes. Sitting on his mother's bed in an early scene, he fantasizes that he is a member of Murray's audience, guffawing mechanically. When he comes to the attention of the host, he says of his mother that 'she always tells me to smile and put on a happy face. She says that I was put here to spread joy and laughter'. Arthur's fantasy ends with Murray hugging him and telling him he wished he were his son.

As Žižek explains, Fleck's response to this oedipal fantasy of 'happiness' is an *overidentification* with the mask, a total submission to the pure artificiality of the painted smile, which brings us to an impossible limit of specular self-reflexivity. The Joker mask is less an identity than an *identification* with the pure self-destructive, repetitive mechanism of desire as drive: 'Drive is compulsively-repetitive ... Joker remains a being of drive: at the film's end, he is powerless, and his violent outbursts are just impotent explosions of rage, acting-out of his basic powerlessness'.⁵⁸ The film does *not* encourage physical violence, Žižek stresses, but rather a violence aimed at the symbolic order sustaining identity. Identification with the mask involves the ceding of identity and agency to it. This, we will recall, is exactly how Deleuze defines futural repetition, which does not replay the past but liberates the biopolitics of repetition from historical contents and heroic identities.

What plays out in the film is thus a shattering of the oedipal fantasy, whose role is to domesticate and privatize biopsychic life. The pivotal scene is the one in which Fleck kills his

mother, having discovered that she neglected him as a child. As he commits the murder, he asserts the reversal of his life's tragedy into comedy:

You used to tell me that my laugh was a condition, that there was something wrong with me. There isn't. That's the real me. Happy! I haven't been happy one minute of my entire fucking life. ... You know what really makes me laugh? I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize, it's a fucking comedy.

In the film's final reel, Joker kills Murray in front of his audience, which further propels the violence on the streets, where Thomas Wayne – billionaire financier and father to Bruce, the future Batman – is killed by anti-rich protestors. This is the symbolic violence that eliminates the parental coordinates of Fleck's fantasy. But Žižek's insistence on both the impotence of the violence and the oedipal framework should lead us to a closer consideration of how the film stages the desire of mass protest, which I will tackle in the next section. What we can insist on here is how the clown mask, as the key mimetic or viral element in the protests, triggers a dangerous deregulation of mass desire.

These points relate to Giorgio Agamben's arguments about Pulcinella, the masked Commedia dell'Arte clown on whom the puppet Punch, of the Punch and Judy show of Anglophone popular theatre traditions, was based. In a richly philosophical study, Agamben notes how Pulcinella was the theme of drawings begun by Giandomenico Tiepolo immediately after the surrender of the Republic of Venice to Bonaparte in 1797. Through analysis of these drawings, Agamben insists on comedy's 'metahistorical' quality, its ability to deliver a judgment on history.⁵⁹ Giandomenico's Pulcinella was the tragicomic, eschatological figure in which the farcical end of the Republic, which effectively voted to abolish itself, was to be embodied. If Pulcinella appears at the end of history (or, of a certain

narrative of history) it is because his farce inheres in the raucous break up of plot and moral action; in him, action becomes pure deviation, or what the Greeks called ‘parabasis’, meaning to walk sideways: ‘Pulcinella does not act in a play; he has always already interrupted it ... he is pure parabasis: an exit from the scene, from history’.⁶⁰ Action, here, is pure character, repetition without an original ‘lived’ instance.⁶¹ Agamben, echoing Deleuze, sees in this the possibility of a life ‘beyond tragedy and comedy’.⁶² If in tragedy, according to the Aristotelian definition, the character of the hero stems from action, the latter being primary, in comedy actions stem automatically from the primary element of character. Interruption of the action *is* the action, which frees the comic character from the responsibility that destines the tragic hero to guilt.⁶³ Pulcinella’s antics are those of an unrepentant sinner who comes to grief – like Punch in his puppet show farces, where he is often hanged – but who remains curiously invulnerable to the repressions he suffers.

The clown’s evasion of the law’s finality is built into the innocence of actions that arise directly from his character, from what he inescapably *is*. Agamben sees in Pulcinella the utopian possibility of escaping the entire biopolitical apparatus by which ‘bare’ or purely bodily life and life’s public, political forms – *zōē* and *bios* – are separated out only to be ‘tragically’ blurred back together within those spaces of modern sovereignty where life itself is made the object of power.⁶⁴ Pulcinella takes us beyond this splitting of life and beyond the techniques of control that have come to define modern governance. His masquerade evades biopolitical authority because he takes his bare bodily life, his *zōē*, for his social and public life, his *bios*, abolishing the whole *zōē/bios* distinction on which the tragedy of modern politics rests.

Populism for a Missing People

Such emphasis on the utopianism of the clown may strike us as woefully mistaken in the face of the neofascist buffoonery we face today. Do not Trumpism and the wider phenomena of contemporary populism signify a carnivalesque overturning of democratic norms and shared truths? Certainly. Nevertheless, not so long ago, much of the anti-capitalist left put its faith in a carnivalesque politics of protest. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri elaborated their famous concept of a biopolitical ‘multitude’, a collective social body on which capital accumulation depends but which capitalism itself cannot fully contain, in terms of the carnivalesque, especially as this was developed in Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoyevsky’s ‘polyphonic’ narratives.⁶⁵ Anti-globalization protests, with their strident theatricality, their puppets, dances, songs, and of course clowns,⁶⁶ manifest a carnivalesque, *fabulatory* movement capable of challenging the narrative stability of history and producing a new, more democratic reality. But as Hardt and Negri themselves point out in a 2017 book, right populism in recent years has grown by appropriating key elements from such left-wing protest movements, notably its hatred of elites.⁶⁷ We can thus insist on a certain aesthetics of the carnivalesque against its cooptation by authoritarian and neofascist forces while also recognizing the dangerous ambiguity often entailed by populist movements.

Deleuze’s notion of the ‘missing people’ or ‘people to come’ is useful in this respect, as it entails a *virtualization* of the people as political and aesthetic category. This means that, beyond any actual social or ethnic community, a people also always relates to a component lacking from history per se, a horizontal possibility always in excess of any possible actualization of group subjectivities. This virtuality is what relates it to the fabulatory functions of both art and politics. Both domains entail acts of creation, ‘fictioning’ or ‘legending’ that necessarily break with the ‘form of the true’. Deleuze, in an interview with Negri, insists on how the missing people suggests a convergence of art and politics:

How is a people created, through what terrible suffering? When a people's created, it's through its own resources, but in a way that links up with something in art ... or links up art to what it lacked. Utopia isn't the right concept: it's more a question of a 'fabulation'.⁶⁸

Art engages in a politics of fabulation once it recognizes the lack of a people, not in order to fill in this lack but to envision it beyond the limits of existing history. The lack of a people may be most acutely felt by filmmakers in the decolonizing world and the Global South, such as Glauber Rocha⁶⁹ or Apichatpong Weerasethakul,⁷⁰ who confront the violent extirpations of peoples and cultures. But when regarding a film such as *Joker*, we may also sense this element of a missing people through an atmospherics of crowds and collective agencies who remain masked or presented under erasure.

While dressed in clown costume, Fleck inadvertently triggers a protest movement by shooting dead three young Wall Street bankers on a subway train while dressed in full clown suit and make-up. The victims of the shooting were employees of Thomas Wayne, who reacts to the incident by launching his candidacy for Mayor. This is accompanied by an anti-rich popular movement, whose participants wear clown masks in violent street protests. In a television interview, Wayne remarks that the killer of his employees is a coward who 'hides behind a mask,' is 'envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet too scared to show their own face,' and adds that 'until those kinds of people change for the better, those of us who've made a good life for ourselves will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns'. Following the shooting, Fleck is shown slowly performing a series of balletic dance moves beneath the flickering fluorescent lights of a public bathroom, suggesting the ballet of Pierrot, the white clown, or the parabasis of Pulcinella. The figure of Joker thus emerges not, initially, as Batman's nemesis but as the figurehead of a movement in which protestors adopt

the position of a gestural multitude. The themes of financial oligarchy, populist protest and billionaire politicians clearly indicate the post-2008 context, and so the missing people can be directly related to Occupy and its aftermath. Our politics are haunted by mass agencies, such as those of Occupy but also Trumpism, which nevertheless remain offstage or peripheral in ways that may be threateningly ambiguous.

Žižek's antipathy to both populism and the Deleuzian politics of the multitude is well known, but when he argues that the depiction of the revolt with which *Joker* culminates is deliberately 'content-less', shallow and superficial, he is recognizing both the lack of an actual people and the virtual presence of a populist urge rendered through the film's aesthetic strategies.⁷¹ That is to say, the film's politics are not those of actualizable political demands and thus are superficial by this metric. But this superficiality designates what we might call a fabulatory rupture in the narrative, where the gritty realism, the 70s pastiche, and the supervillain backstory all give way to a kind of pantomime. The cheap plastic clown masks that the protestors wear suggest this: the mask is a cypher for the 'zero-point' of a superficial gesture, the impossible identification by a subject that has become a simulacrum of itself. Žižek writes that 'this zero-point is today's version of what was once called a proletarian position, the experience of those who have nothing to lose'.⁷² As the protests increase and Bruce Wayne sees his parents gunned down in an alleyway, Joker, pirouetting atop a smashed police car, receives the adulation of the rioters as the city burns. As the final scene plays out, however, we see him laughing uncontrollably in Arkham asylum.

Joker is a film about the intersections of comedy and politics that speaks to our cultural moment. Its political content should be taken seriously and not dismissed as ironic posturing. What is provocative about the film is the way it frames not only the politics of populism as such but the popular itself. By intervening into the popular, commercial forms of the Batman mythos, it subverts a certain legend or myth of power, that of the all-powerful

billionaire savior. It both questions and exploits the popular appeal of such myths in ways that are cinematically interesting. It also considers how collective agencies are to be aestheticized, which is why it has been seen by some as redolent of fascism. But we should resist the temptation to relinquish the fabulatory politics of mask and costume to the right and the forces of reaction. Simplistic denunciations of post-truth discourse, furthermore, do nothing to tell us about how we should conceive the relationships between art and politics today. *Joker* can thus be seen as offering us one variety, at least, of an aesthetic populism in which the people, as collective agent of revolutionary social change, are shown as historically lacking but virtually present. This lack is not negative, or at least not purely so, because the people's virtuality is a function of the clown as fabulator, as avatar of a biopolitical life that ruptures historical plots and capers at the very limits of historical coherence.

Notes

1. See, for example: Julie A. Webber (ed.), *The Joke Is on Us: Political Comedy in (Late) Neoliberal Times* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019); Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter (eds.), *Late Night with Trump: Political Humor and the American Presidency* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Simon Weaver, 'Brexit Tricksters and the Reconstruction of Taboo: Populism, Irony and Satire in Post-Referendum Britain', *Comedy Studies*, 10.2 (2019), pp. 154-166.
2. For analyses of Boris Johnson's use of humour, see: Jonathan Coe, 'Sinking Giggling into the Sea', *London Review of Books*, 35 (2013), pp. 30-31; Will Davies, 'Only Joking?', *Sidecar*, 29 Dec. 2020, <http://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/only-joking> [Date accessed: 15 May 2023]; Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018). For an account of Grillo and other comedians-turned-politicians, see Keir Milburn, 'The Comedian as Populist Leader: Postironic Narratives in an Age of Cynical Irony', *Leadership*, 15.2 (2019), pp. 226-244. The role of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, originally a comedian and actor, is admittedly more complex and goes beyond the scope of this article.
3. On the former term, see Joe Kennedy, *Authentocrats: Culture, Politics and the New Seriousness* (London: Repeater, 2018) and on the latter, see Milburn.

- 4 Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', trans. Terrell Carver, in Mark Cowling and James Martin (eds), *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)modern Interpretations*, (London: Pluto, 2002), pp. 19-109, p. 19.
5. John Bellamy Foster, *Trump in the White House: Tragedy and Farce* (New York: Monthly Review, 2017).
6. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), p. 38.
7. Hal Foster, 'Père Trump', *October*, 159 (Winter 2017), pp. 3-6, p. 3.
8. Mike Davis, 'Riot Riot on the Hill', *Sidecar*, 7 Jan. 2021, <http://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/riot-on-the-hill>. [Date accessed: 15 May 2023].
9. Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire', p. 19.
10. Ibid., pp. 20-1.
11. Ibid. p. 22.
12. Hal Foster, *What Comes After Farce?* (New York: Verso, 2020), p. ix.
13. On the distinction between farce and comedy in their Marxian usage, see Asma Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Abbas writes that 'farce ... is connected with laughter rather than with pleasantness or happiness. ... Farce is liberated from ends and plots, and from narratives that unfold in a certain way' (p. 153). Tragedy followed by farce suggests a narrative coherence that is periodically disrupted. But tragic farce would itself be a disruption of farce's disruptive effects.
14. Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest: Play, Pleasure and Social Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 110.
15. Gargi Bhattacharyya, et al, *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State* (London: Polity, 2021) p. 16.
16. *Joker* (2019), dir. Todd Phillips (USA: Warner Bros. Pictures).
17. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). p. 150.
18. For discussions of the figure of the evil clown, see Noël Carroll, 'Horror and Humor', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57.2 (Spring 1999), pp. 145-160; Andrew Stott McConnell, 'Clowns on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown: Dickens, Coulrophobia, and the Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 12.4 (Fall 2012), pp. 3-25; Benjamin Radford, *Bad Clowns* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016); Moritz Fink, 'Phallic Noses, Blood-Filled Balloons, Exploding Popcorn, and Laughing-Gas-Squirting Flowers: Reading Images of the Evil Clown', in John A. Dowell and

Cynthia J. Miller (eds), *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Griminess in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), pp. 29-42.

19. These fears had a lot to do with the false rumour that the gunman who killed twelve people in a shooting at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Colorado in July 2012 had identified himself as the Joker.

20. See, for example, Michael Moore's defence of the film: 'Joker', *Variety*, 18 Dec. 2019, <http://variety.com/2019/film/awards/michael-moore-todd-phillips-joker-1203446280>. [Date accessed: 15 May 2023].

21. *The Dark Knight* (2008), dir. Christopher Nolan (USA: Warner Bros. Pictures).

22. See Emannuelle Wessels and Mark Martinez, 'The Obama-Joker: Assembling a Populist Monster', in Robert Moses Peaslee and Robert G. Weiner (eds), *Joker: A Serious Study of the Clown Prince of Crime* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2015), pp. 65-81.

23. This was the case even before Trump won the election. In March 2016, the anti-Trump conservative publication *National Review* featured a caricature of Trump as a jester, with the caption: 'The Clown-Prince: Donald Trump & the 2016 Race'. The Clown Prince of Crime is, of course, one of the Joker's well-known nicknames. See Trischa Goodnow, 'Signs of the Apocalypse: An Analysis of Trump Magazine Covers During the 2016 Presidential Campaign', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 63.7 (2019), pp. 826-835, p. 831.

24. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 125.

25. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 223.

26. Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Érik Bordeleau et al, *Nocturnal Fabulations: Ecology, Vitality and Opacity in the Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017).

27. Manning, p. 131.

28. Nyong'o, p. 18.

29. Steven Poole, 'The Great Clown Panic of 2016: "a volatile mix of fear and contagion"', *The Guardian*, 31 Oct. 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/oct/31/the-great-clown-panic-of-2016-a-volatile-mix-of-fear-and-contagion>. [Date accessed: 15 May 2023].

30. Stott, p. 15.

31. As Bakhtin's study of medieval carnivalesque shows, there was a crucial division of the serious and comic in the calendrical time of festivals and feasts:

the medieval feast had, as it were, the two faces of Janus. Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the

people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present. ... The material bodily lower stratum and the entire system of degradation, turnovers, and travesties presented this essential relation to time and to social and historical transformation.

Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 81.

32. Federico Fellini, *Fellini on Fellini*, trans. Isabel Quigly, eds. Anna Keel and Christian Strich (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976) pp. 128-30.

33. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 251-2.

34. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 33; Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960), Vol. 8, pp. 1-236, p. 209.

35. Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Schema of Mass Culture', trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, in J. M. Bernstein (ed.), *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 61-97, p. 70. For a more general discussion of Adorno in relation to historical narrative and the Marxian repetition of tragedy and farce, see Stephen Helmling, *Adorno's Poetics of Critique* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 150.

36. Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction (1843-4)', trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, in Lucio Colletti (ed.), *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 243-57, p. 247.

37. Ibid.; emphasis in original.

38. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London, Verso, 2009), p. 3.

39. Ibid.

40. Slavoj Žižek, 'More on Joker: From Political Nihilism to the New Left, or Why Trump is no Joker', *The Philosophical Salon*, 11 Nov. 2019, <http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/more-on-joker-from-apolitical-nihilism-to-a-new-left-or-why-trump-is-no-joker>. [Date accessed: 15 May 2023]. The role of the mask relates, of course, to a long and complex history – from Greek tragedy to Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and beyond – that intersects with my topic in ways that go beyond the scope of this article.

41. Anna-Sophie Jürgens, 'The Pathology of Joker's Dance: The Origins of Arthur Fleck's Body Aesthetics in Todd Phillips's 2019 *Joker* Film', *Dance Chronicle*, 43.3 (2020), pp. 321-337, p. 321.

42. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, pp. 171-2.

43. Ibid., p. 126.

44. Ibid., p. 131.

45. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition: Kierkegaard's Writings, VI*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 131.

46. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 7.

47. Ibid., p. 8.

48. Ibid., pp. 8-11.

49. Ibid., p. 95.

50. Ibid., p. 92.

51. Ibid., p. 18.

52. Bhattacharyya, et al, p. 130.

53. Alexander S. Dent, 'Ludic Authoritarianism', *American Anthropologist*, 121.1 (2019), pp. 193-6, p.194.

54. Harrison Fluss and Sam Miller in a blog post titled 'First as Farce, Then as Tragedy' warned that *Joker* manifested the 'ironic fascism' of the alt-right. *Left Voice*, 13 Oct. 2019, <https://www.leftvoice.org/first-as-farce-then-as-tragedy>. [Date accessed: 15 May 2023].

55. Žižek, 'More on Joker'.

56. Milburn, p. 227.

57. Ibid., p. 239.

58. Žižek, 'More on Joker'.

59. Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella or, Entertainment for Kids*, trans. Kevin Attell (London: Seagull, 2018), p. 11.

60. Ibid., p. 43.

61. Ibid., p. 104.

62. Ibid., p. 106.

63. Ibid., pp. 47-8.

64. Ibid., p. 127.

65. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 210.

66. Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: the New Press, 2007), p. 132. Left protest movements have long featured people dressed as clowns. The ACT UP protests during the height of the AIDS epidemic, for example, often used clowning as a deliberate strategy. See Shepard, p. 111. The centrality of clowning to this conception of leftist protest is perhaps best exemplified by the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), a group founded in the early 2000s to protest globalization and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, See Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall, 'The Clown at the Gates of the Camp: Sovereignty, Resistance and the Figure of the Fool', *Security Dialogue*, 44.2 (2013), pp. 93–110.

67. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 51-2.

68. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 174.

69. Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 218.

70. Bordeleau et al.

71. Žižek, 'More on Joker'.

72. Ibid.