

## Representing the Unrepresentable: Affect, Trauma and the Unsaid in Todd Philip's 'Joker'

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### Abstract

This article is concerned with the study of trauma as an evocative illustration of what remains beyond communication and how the role of affect that makes the protagonist surrender to inevitable danger. It defines the relation between traumatic silences and affective movements and how these silences are triggered by and through affect. It looks at how affect and trauma cannot be expressed in language through the analysis of the 2019 Todd Philips film *Joker* and how the protagonist's body language, gestures, jerks, grunts, whispers and emotions communicate more about trauma than verbal language itself. It also focuses on the affective mobilities of people suffering from trauma and how Affect plays an important role in movements and actions of such individuals.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Affect, PTSD, affective mobility, silences, mental illness.

“Traumatic Affect can be understood as the mode, substance and dynamics of relation through which trauma is experienced, transmitted, conveyed, and represented”.

Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson, *Traumatic Affect*

### Introduction

During the years of war, PTSD ( Post traumatic stress ) was merely described as ‘Battle exhaustion’, ‘Soldiers fatigue’, ‘thousand yard stare’, or ‘railway spine’, a reference to the repeated forays into battle by traumatised soldiers, resulting in exhaustion of the body’s adrenaline- charged responses, particularly during long engagements with daily fire, but later it came to be known as the ‘shell shock’, first used in 1980 by Vietnam veterans as it was found in soldiers who suffered from the war flashbacks, killings and deaths and it was included officially in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders (DSM) Third Edition. The most recent version of DSM i.e. DSM V states that, “ Individuals with PTSD may be very reactive to unexpected stimuli, displaying a heightened startle response, or jumpiness, to loud noises or unexpected movements - concentration difficulties, including difficulty remembering daily events or attending to focused tasks are commonly reported” (DSM V 276). It was soon determined that PTSD affects not only war veterans but anyone who has experienced a traumatic event. Other mental diseases, such as depression, memory issues, and substance abuse, are often co-occurring with PTSD. According to Cathy Caruth, Trauma is something that people are exposed to rather than something that they can control. Trauma, she claims, is uncontrollable and occurs against the choice of the individual. Caruth states that, “Trauma repeats itself, exactly and unwittingly through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very wish” (Caruth 2). She claims that PTSD provides the most direct link between the mind and violent events and it is not only by recognizing traumatic experience as a contradictory relation between destructiveness and survival but also by recognizing the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of the catastrophic experience. Lucy Bond and Stephen Craps in their book *Trauma: The New Critical Idiom* posit that, “Trauma, then, is slippery: blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence.” (Bond, Craps 5).

Sweat beads, flashes of light, excruciating pain all over the body, anxiety waves, Increase in the rate of respiration, blood pressure, explosive emotions and racing thoughts, is a moment in a life controlled

by PTSD, i.e. Post traumatic stress disorder. Difficulty controlling emotions, feeling very angry or distrustful towards the world, constant feelings of emptiness or loneliness, a negative self view, emotional regulation difficulties, suicidal feelings, is another moment in a life controlled by C-PTSD, i.e. Complex Post traumatic stress disorder. These deep and enduring changes in the physiological arousal show a deep connection of trauma with both the mind and body. Affect is a mental state, separate from belief and desire. Affect is the body acting on itself, free of cognition and emotion. As posited by Brian Massumi in his essay *Autonomy of affect*, “Affect is a nonconscious never - to - conscious autonomic remainder of bodily reactions” (Massumi 85). Affect or pre-individual bodily forces are linked to autonomic responses, which increase or decrease a body's ability to act or engage with others. Affect theorists aim to comprehend domains of experience that aren't represented in the mainstream paradigm like, rhetoric and semiotics. The role of affect as a shift in the bodily capacity for action is the major discussion of affect theorists. They put forward the fact that Affect is different from the cognitive ability of the human being, and it is unconscious and uncontrolled. They also state that particular actions of any human being are initially ignited by the affect system of their body and later then cognitively the brain gives the signal to the body to what to do, as stated by Eric Shouse in her article *Feeling, Emotion, Affect* that, “Affect is the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience” (Shouse). Affect theorists basically put forward the fact that the affect system of the individual is non conscious i.e. something that is not ownable or recognizable as it occurs in a matter of seconds, as stated by Massumi, “The conscious response is incapable of understanding the bodily reactions to external stimuli and that the autonomic response from the body is raised to become an activity of the mind” (Massumi 90)

Affect theorists also explain how affect is different from emotion and feeling. They bring ahead the idea that affect is something that is not recognizable as it is not conscious, feeling is something that brings in the individual the thought of what they are feeling and something that can be linguistically formulated where as emotion is something that is visible from the face, something that puts forward the feeling, for instance, emotion of being happy, sad, joyful, shameful, etc. As stated by Shouse that, “Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are pre-personal” (Shouse). Affect is a way of understanding un-speaking or unnarratable silences. Trauma and Affect both cannot be expressed in language and both are uncontrolled by the human being, as claimed by Michael Richardson in his essay *Torturous Affect*, “When trauma emerges it does so violently, not just on the body but in and on language. There is a tension here between the return of the event and the capacity of language to express it, since trauma is exactly that which refuses language in its occurrence.” (Richardson 163)

In regard to childhood trauma and adult bullying, this paper will be concerned with the study of trauma as an evocative picture of what remains beyond speech, as well as the role of affect in making the protagonist yield to impending danger. The first part will focus on the silences, gestures and non verbal expressions of the protagonist that make clearly evident the traumatic symptoms of the protagonist. By tracking their affective mobilities in creating regions of traumatic memory, the second part will focus on how affect functions as a shift in the bodily capacity for action. The paper highlights the screams and truths of the emotionally traumatized, emphasizing the importance of raising mental health awareness. Philips has created a movie that challenges us to question vital themes such as mental health by taking into consideration factors like disruption or loss of social relationships, financial distress, and intense humiliation (child abandonment and abuse).

### Todd Philips's Joker

Todd Philips in his film *Joker* beautifully portrays how society views and treats the mental health problems of certain individuals. It shows the tension between compassion and aversion and how an individual character is impacted and reacts to ongoing childhood trauma, bullying, and perceived parental abandonment. It accurately illustrates how a mix of heredity, early trauma, untreated mental illness, and societal provocation can lead an individual to perform extremely unsettling acts of violence. As stated by Julie Miller in her article *Leading Neuro-criminologist considers Joker 'a great educational tool'*, the words of British Neuro-criminologist, Adrian Raine, “Mentally ill people don't go around serial killing people, plotting a homicide or a bank robbery or a burglary. No, they react on impulse emotionally. It's impulsive and emotion driven” (Miller). The film depicts the life of Arthur Fleck, a mentally ill loner who aspires to become a world-famous stand-up comedian simply to be rec-

ognized and loved, something he has desired since childhood. He is a socially incompetent person who lives with his sick mother, Penny Fleck, in Gotham City, which is battling with Crime and unemployment. Arthur is portrayed as a middle aged man, notably underweight with pale skin, has poor social skills, uses abnormal facial expressions and misses important interpersonal cues, making others feel discomfort. Arthur is shown suffering from Pseudo-Bulbar Affect, a condition wherein an individual both laughs and cries uncontrollably at inappropriate times. PBA is linked to traumatic brain injuries, as evidenced by Arthur's character who was exposed to traumatic brain injuries as a child as a result of extreme childhood abuse and subsequent physical attacks throughout his life. The film shows how Arthur finds out a file in the Arkham Asylum, (where his mother has been admitted for having delusional Psychosis and Narcissistic personality disorder) which tells that his mother, Penny Fleck, had adopted him after he was found abandoned as a baby, and she abused him by tying him to a radiator and beating him alongside her abusive boyfriend. One part of the file mentions Arthur having a head injury, which is most likely what caused his laughing condition. As a result of coping up with the trauma and in order to receive his long desire of consideration and recognition, he indulges himself in violent acts like the murder of his mother and several of his bullies. As stated by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, "While the traces of the past are all around us, the memories that exert the deepest pull on our emotions are often those connected to violent histories." (Bond, Craps 2)

### Trauma and Silence: Human survivals strange incomprehensibility

Foucault states that there are, "not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeates discourses" (Foucault 27). Silence resembles and functions as an absence where as this absence is perplexingly generally present alluding to what in particular isn't said, what is covered up or inferred and inside which meaning can emerge. Silence explores not only what is not said but also what cannot be said. The opening scene of the film, Joker, speaks a lot about the character, Arthur Fleck. Todd Philips creates such an intense setting in the opening scene that reveals almost everything about the character without saying a word. Arthur is seen sitting in the corner of a dingy room surrounded by clowns, in-front of a mirror, applying on his make-up for his day job as a rent-a-clown, though we can hear voices all around him, he is very much alone and much separated from everybody else. Despite the fact that he is desperately holding back tears, he is shown straining to plaster a smile on his face. As Arthur stretches his mouth into that uncomfortable-looking grin, a single tear falls from one of his eyes. This scene is so powerful in itself, it shows strongly how Arthur feels like he doesn't belong to this world, He is shown applying makeup but that too unwillingly, His hands are fumbling, He is seen trying to make a grin first and then smiling forcefully with the help of his hands to bring one, He is seen holding back tears which means a lot is going on inside him. Arthur is shown overwhelmed with feeling so powerful that doesn't need language to describe what's going on, His gestures and sad grunts show that it is impossible and vain for him to make understand what he feels as his trauma is unnarratable. Magdalena Zolkos in her essay *Un Petit Geste: Affect and Silence* states that, "silence coincides with a powerful re-enactment of traumatic memory. It marks a "return" of something that evades narrative language and individual capacity of enunciation." (Zolkos 70)



**Fig.1 Arthur Fleck, trying to hide his pain behind a forceful smile ( 0:31-01:34)**

The lack of communication or ‘silence’ among trauma patients should be viewed as a potent metaphor. It speaks a lot more than words about what an individual has been through or is going through. In another scene we can see Arthur, doing his day job which involves him dressed as a joker, twirling a sign board for passerby’s which says, ‘EVERYTHING MUST GO!!’, This scene reveals that Arthur is more comfortable when he’s pretending to be somebody else because it’s the only time when people don’t judge him and treat him like trash. Magdalena Zolkos in her essay, *Un Petit Geste: Affect and Silence* mentions that people suffering from trauma have, “two oppositional categories: “the ‘public’ speech and the ‘non-public’ silence and gesturality- incommunicable and incomprehensible - which are to be either ignored as insignificant or re-worked into meaningful forms of expression”. (Zolkos 74) Soon later, some teenage boys humiliate Arthur by taking his sign and fleeing; when Arthur chases them down, they smack him in the face with the same sign, shattering it. As soon as Arthur collapses to the ground, the boys rush over to him and begin pounding him as he is huddled in the foetal position. The boys run off, satisfied that Arthur has received a sufficient beating, and we see Arthur reach for the broken pieces of his sign before realizing that saving it is futile, then he rolls over onto his back, reaches inside his jacket, and presses a hidden button that causes water to squirt from the flower pinned to his lapel. This moment depicts Arthur attempting to reach for the sign in the hopes of still being able to repair it, and then when he pushes the concealed button that causes the water to squirt, it demonstrates that he still wants to make people laugh, that he still sees comedy in this moment of anguish. These silences of Arthur reveal how hard he is in need of love and affection. They unfold the feeling of how he wants to spread HAPPINESS in the world, something that has been lacking for him since his childhood, as posited by Michael Richardson, “It is as if something were occurring just beyond the limits of language, an event whose shape is recognizable but which cannot fully enter into words.” (Richardson 163).

Moving ahead we see Arthur, During his therapy session, asking his therapist, “Is it just me or is it getting crazier out there?”, Arthur seems to refer to the class of people of the city like him, who are impoverished, disenfranchised, angry, and those who are seen and treated as segmented. She responds to him by saying, ‘people are upset, these are tough times’, She appears to be more concerned with structured stages or mandated methodical checklists than with Arthur's direct and evolving mental health needs. Hearing her reaction, Arthur produces a small grin, showing neglect on the part of the therapist as well as indicating that his words are insufficient to express his sentiments, grief, and suffering. This unspeakability of pain, these silences, should be shaped into meanings as violent, caring, or etc as these silences create an intimate story and generate a sense of truthfulness that relies on the idea that the body is more truthful than speech. As Cathy Caruth implores in us to engage in, “a new mode of reading and listening ( or viewing) that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demands.” (Caruth 9)

**Fig. 2 Fleck after being attacked by the teenage bullies. (03:02 - 03:39)**

Arthur's silence represents how his Trauma is remembered, forgotten and re-remembered. His silences unfold how his trauma comes up and again in his practices of everyday life. In another scene, we see Arthur watching the Murray Franklin Show along with his mother, Arthur has a fantasy of appearing on the Murray Show where Murray welcomes him on the stage and tells him, in front of the cameras, "you see all this, the lights, the show, the audience, all that stuff? I would give it all up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you." This para-social relationship of Arthur with Murray is another kind of silence that Arthur does not express in words to any other character in the film including his mother, but only feels and imagines it to happen someday. Again this scene displays how Arthur's trauma of childhood is re-remembered in a simple ordinary event of everyday life, it exhibits Arthur's need for a sense of belonging and acceptance, something that he has been deprived of since childhood and which is in a way the reason for his poor mental health. There are various other scenes in the film that display Arthur's moments of silence and trauma. The next section of the paper will discuss these other scenes of silence and how affect plays an important role through these silences to build up the actions of an individual.

### **Affective Mobility: Role of Affects in producing meaningful silences and actions**

Affective mobility refers to the ability of people to move and perform actions on the basis of different moods, feelings and attitudes. It is an act of repositioning that is guided by affect. Trauma that is unspeakable and incomprehensible and which cannot be expressed through language is communicated through silences, gestures, jerks, grunts, whispers and, emotions. Affect plays an important role between these silences as they are difficult to be interpreted, these silences are put into meaning through non verbal expressions and all these non verbal expressions are triggered through affects. Eric Shouse states that, "affect is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realised in language and because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness." (Shouse). In reference to the above definition, Affective mobility means when an individual's movement or action is based on the signals his/her body brings or the affects that his/her body triggers unconsciously. As stated by Vlad P. Glaveanu and Gail Womersley in their article, *Affective mobilities: migration, emotion and (im)possibility* state that,

"Affective mobilities, as a field is concerned with how complex emotional experiences are triggered by prompt, accompany, change and stop movement, and, as a consequence, how the mobility of people, ideas, policies, et., can be advanced as a result of and through affect." (Glaveanu, Womersley 639).

Silences occur when an individual is unable to put into words or language what he/she is feeling. However, the body is never silent, the body always gives signals to the mind about what it is going through but the mind is unable to express it linguistically. An individual suffering from PTSD is at times unable to convey the horrors of the catastrophic event he/she has been through in words, yet, their emotions and non verbal intensities speak a lot. These non verbal intensities are activated through affects that are felt by the body but are not registered by the mind consciously. These affects further become visible through emotions, gestures, or "SILENCES", for instance, Goosebumps, tone of voice, a smile, a frown, a laugh, a smirk, body language etc. These so called 'SILENCES' or 'AFFECTS', further play an important role in deciding the perceptions, movements and actions of individuals. As stated by Michael Richardson in *Torturous Affect*,

"More than ambiguity, silence can be loaded with complexity - particularly when that silence is unspeakable, a silence of collision between bodies, and with power. Such un-speakability is hardly empty, hardly still - it has shape and content, relations of non relation. That it operates against language means it can be expressed obliquely in the effects of sedimented affect, in the changing of Bodies in the passing of time. In semblance" (Richardson 14).

Arthur Fleck, suffers from a similar kind of condition or trauma or C-PTSD where he is unable to describe or put into words his pain. He is unable to explain how bad he is in need of help. His body goes on to give him signals continuously in terms of affects that trigger in him feelings of anger and resent-

ment. We see Arthur's mental state gradually deteriorate as he becomes increasingly violent due to the negative affects initiated by his body, because he doesn't get any help from his therapist, he is bullied and he sees the world as an unpleasant place. Arthur's state of Affective mobility goes to become from a simple man who wants to spread happiness to a man who takes the path of violence in order to protect himself and to gain recognition.

In a particular scene in the film, we see, Arthur being punished by his boss for being physically assaulted on his job by a bunch of teenage boys. He directs Arthur to return the sign that his assailants used to essentially beat him. Arthur protests by saying that, 'I got jumped', to which his boss responds, 'for a sign? That doesn't even make sense.' Arthur then says, 'why would I keep his sign?', to which his boss responds again, 'How do I know? Why does anybody do anything'. Unable to express his anger and growing resentment, Arthur keeps on smiling awkwardly at his un-empathetic boss who keeps on speaking uncomfortable things about him, another silence expressing thousands of emotions going inside him. Later, we find Arthur kicking trash bags and wailing in the alley while keeping his entire body close to him. At first glance, this outward expression of wrath appears to be innocuous, yet it is Arthur's "tryout" for future violence. As posited by Zolkos,

"The notion of a "powerful feeling" or a "violent feeling", suggests a close alignment of the subjective position of a "mute witness" with an affective shift. This affective shift seems to operate (in accordance with recent theorizations of affect) as a 'visceral force, other than conscious knowing' that drives the subject "toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend (the subject) (as if neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations" (Zolkos 70).

This scene shows how Arthur feels helpless, firstly by being beaten and secondly by being blamed himself for being beaten. This incident is so horrific in its depiction of how the world repeatedly punishes a person for something over which he has no control, It goes on to damage more of Arthur's mental health. Feeling sorry for him, Arthur's co-worker, Randy, hands him a pistol one day at his workplace. "I'm not supposed to have a gun," Arthur says cautiously (and, again, in compliance with his treatment plan). He is hesitant to take it, but agrees to keep the gun as self-protection. To him, the gun is a symbol of significance. In search of power and control, he begins to fantasize with the loaded gun in hand. The weapon is a representation of his desire to command other people's attention and praise. He's enthralled by the prospect of receiving the devotion he craves. Arthur becomes more at ease with the weapon. In one instance, while fantasizing that he's being interviewed on the Murray Franklin show, Arthur places the empty barrel of the gun under his chin, pulls the trigger, and throws his head back. Imagining an audience witness his suicide is exhilarating and uniquely satisfying – finally, momentary relief from his pain and suffering. Arthur comes to associate public violence with feelings of pleasure and happiness, while not knowing where to direct it. This scene of Arthur fantasizing about committing suicide in Murray Franklin's show, again, is one of his silences that is triggered by the affect of anger and self disappointment, and this silence again brings in him the idea of violence, either on himself or on others. As stated by Zolkos that, "As such, the non-verbal forms of testimonial expression are not conceived of as (volitional or non-volitional) properties of the individual subject, but as unfolding within the plan of affective mobility" (Zolkos 70).

In another scene, Arthur notices three Wayne Enterprises executives harassing a woman on the subway. Arthur's neurological condition is triggered as he feels uncomfortable and vicariously shamed, and he begins laughing uncontrollably. The men turn their gaze to him and begin to insult him. When they start beating him, Arthur instinctively pulls out his gun and shoots one of them. The other two men, however, he shoots at close range. During his third killing, Arthur is not impulsive or acting in a defensive manner. He is deliberate, Calm and Confident. He identifies as a killer. These actions of Arthur, of him identifying as a killer, of him defending himself against his bullies, of him asserting his importance in society, are all reactions to the effects of anger and self-dissatisfaction that his society repeatedly triggers.

Near the end of the film, Arthur receives a phone call from the Murray Franklin show, inviting him to appear as a guest. Arthur's appearance on Murray Franklin's show is fraught with uneasy tension. As he sits on the very couch he used to fantasize about, Arthur's guard is actually down. He expresses himself freely and openly. "It's been a rough few weeks since I killed those three guys," Arthur says smugly to Murray. Arthur's smiles take on a whole new meaning as it becomes evident that he isn't joking, and

the tension rises. Murray tries to maintain his composure and joins in the conversation, which is still being broadcasted to Gotham viewers. Arthur then goes on to essentially deliver his verbal manifesto, starting with, “Everyone is awful these days...” Murray, now enraged, reminds Arthur that the city is in disorder, and that one of the reasons the citizens of Gotham are being terrorised is because of Arthur's killings. At the peak of his speech, Arthur asks Murray directly, in a raised and threatening voice, “What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash?” Murray, now terrified, orders his staff to call the cops, but Arthur persists, worsening the situation: “I’ll tell you what you get – you get what you fucking deserve!” He then pulls out his gun shoots Murray in the forehead, killing him instantly.

Arthur develops these negative affects of anger, rage, self disappointment, irritation and anxiety as an experience to numerous additional environmental risk factors like disruption or loss of social relationships (his mother), financial distress (loss of a job), and intense humiliation (child abandonment and abuse). He desires to suffocate himself after learning that he was adopted by his mother, Penny Fleck, which is a fresh indicator of self-destruction. The fact that he was adopted provoked strong feelings that he had no true place in the world, that he had no recognised origins other than abandonment and violence. The incidents discussed above portray how Arthur’s silences are triggered by and through affects and how Arthur goes on to do violent actions which are uncontrollable as they are the only means for his mental peace and satisfaction. As claimed by Karyn Ball in his book *Disciplining the Holocaust* that, “such an event not only drastically wounds those witnesses it did not physically destroy, but also remains in abeyance—in spaces where inadequate responses, disbelief, or prurient fascination exacerbate the isolating experience of traumatic degradation and loss” (Ball 140).

## Conclusion

The film brings out clearly the need to bring into attention the sufferings of the mentally ill. In terms of trauma and mental illness, it serves two purposes. It includes a discussion on how the silences of the mentally ill should be better understood and handled, as silences disclose more about the suffering than language. Second, it focuses on how an individual's affects, or body, play a significant influence in their movements and behaviours. These affects send signals to the body that the mind does not consciously recognise and that, like trauma, cannot be explained linguistically. As posited by Michael Richardson in *Torturous Affect*,

“When negative affects occur at radical intensities their encounter with the body wreaks lasting violence. Such trauma, “does not fade (...) with time or distance (...) it is as if the psyche has incorporated the very structure of abuse in some malformation, which keeps the trauma current by repeating it in the imagination” (Richardson 162).

The answer to the question that “Does Philip misrepresent connecting mental illness with violence? lies in the fact that Both mental illness and violence are unquestionably induced by an individual's social, interpersonal, and environmental variables, which means that trauma and violence are not diametrically opposed. People may not be able to fully comprehend mental illness, but the very least they can do is stop bullying them and try to assist them whenever possible. Mentally ill people want to be heard, loud and clear, and to express their presence, in a way that is as genuine as it gets.

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