

After the story of Batman and his enemies has been “alive” several years in collective consciousness it would be a truism to say that Tim Burton’s film version of the novel by Craig Shaw Gardner is a genuine fairytale about the struggle between good and evil as well as an up-to-date myth of the creation of the world in a carnival setting. The forces of good (albeit not consecrated by human, and thus highly imperfect, law) incessantly battle the forces of evil straight out of the infernal abyss. The latter are personified by the Joker, who emerges from an acid vat, and in *Batman Returns* – by Penguin, who lives in city sewers and canals. *Batman* – a work of popular culture from beginning to end – is full of mythological meanings, with all elements of its landscape and characters carrying a symbolic sense, starting with the name of the town in which the action takes place.

“Gotham” is a city cursed by God. A grim town where crime and sin reign; a city that lives by night in sordid bars, tattoo parlours, and porn movie theatres, full of dark alleys with lurking evil that men are helpless against. Years ago, on a hot and sultry night, destiny brought Bruce Wayne (future Batman) and Jack Napier (the future Joker) together in such a filthy backstreet. By murdering Bruce’s parents, Napier unwittingly creates Batman.

Burton’s film employs masks in the manner of the Japanese theatre. The Batman mask is black, and the Joker’s – particoloured, as if reversing conventional colour associations, which discern evil in black and tacky circus cheerfulness in the clown’s medley of colours. Moreover, there are three reasons why the Joker’s vibrant mask seems to be decisively more interesting than the black mask of his opponent: aesthetics, acting (Nicholson as the madman) and anthropology. It is the seemingly unambiguous assortment of colours, the Joker’s dance-like moves, and his face-mask with a frozen smile that hold the key to understanding this *dramatis persona* by referring to diverse symbolic connotations of the figure of the jester. In other words, the Joker’s mask seems to have many more anthropological meanings than the Batman mask. Now, take a closer look and try to see what is concealed under the mask.

Masca ridens

Years later, Jack Napier is the right hand of Grissom, the man in charge of Gotham on whom both the law and Batman declared war. Grissom regards Jack as inconvenient, albeit for different reasons, and decides to get rid of him using police action at the Axis Chemicals Company as a pretext. Surrounded by police functionaries and cornered by Batman, Napier does not discover the set-up until it is too late. A fight with Batman ends with Jack falling into a great vat of acid. This is how the Joker is born.

What’s Under the Mask. On the Motif of the Man Who Laughs: Several Remarks on Batman

Strictly speaking, the Joker comes to life in the illegal office of Dr. Davis, where he can hide all his shady dealings and illicit business from the prying police. This is where Dr. Davis – with the precision of a true *comprachico* – transforms Jack into the Joker, where the Joker’s new face-mask, *masca ridens*, is created by a present-day apprentice of the old art of disfiguring human bodies. A new Man Who Laughs is born – another embodiment of characters with a long and rich tradition, Victor Hugo granting it the best-known literary shape in his novel *The Man Who Laughs*.

The French author described the identity of the *comprachicos*, or *comprapequenos* as they were sometimes known: *They were a hideous and nondescript association of wanderers, famous in the 17th century, forgotten in the 18th, unheard of in the 19th.¹* For the amusement of the populace and kings the *comprachico* artists produced a permanent grin on the faces of purchased children, twisted their bodies into bizarre shapes, and disfigured their skulls, in this way creating dwarfs, jesters and all sorts of human monsters. Gwynplaine, the protagonist of Hugo’s novel, is also a victim of this “pseudo-surgery” whose outcome is a “masterpiece in retrogression”, a perfect parody of God’s creation. The dealings of Batman’s Dr. Davis are just as shady as those of the *comprachicos* in the period described by Hugo. *I’m laughing only on the outside / My smile is just skin deep / If you could see inside I’m really crying / You might join me for a weep*, says the Joker, and the same words could also come out of the mouth of Gwynplaine and the very similar protagonist of J.D. Salinger’s short story *The Laughing Man*. After all, the character of Canio from Leoncavalo’s *Pagliacci* with his famous aria: *Put on the Costume*, the ill-fated Professor Unrat from *The Blue Angel*, the protagonist of Thomas Mann’s *Lou Lou* and many others forced to wear the mask of a broadly smiling clown, which turns into their authentic face and with which they die, can also be recognised as a distant metaphorical transposition of this motif.

Back to the Joker, now with a perpetual smile on his face or rather a smiling grimace. The mask of a

clown has become his face. He must put a lot of effort while putting on makeup to render chalk-white skin and yellow hair the colour of a normal human being. Focus for a minute on the motif of the wide-open laughing mouth responsible for the grotesque features of the Man Who Laughs and placing him in the realm of carnival reality. Mikhail Bakhtin saw the wide "gaping" mouth as an *open gate leading downwards into the bodily underworld (...).* This gaping mouth is related to the image of swallowing, the most ancient symbol of death and destruction.² Bakhtin also drew attention to the link between the smiling mask of a clown and the mask of a devil:

(...) the mouth (...the teeth and the gullet). These are some of the central images of the popular-festive system. The exaggeration of the mouth is the fundamental traditional method of rendering external comic features, as pictured by comic masks, various "gay monsters" (...) devils in diableries, and Lucifer himself.³ In other words, if we are to believe Bakhtin, the motif of an open, laughing, and glaringly enlarged mouth has to inspire associations with the motif of carnival death, and in the subtext of the clownish face-mask of the Man Who Laughs we should always see – following the rules of the symbolic world – the grotesquely contorted face of a representative of the netherworld, even if in an amusing version.

Murderous clown

I did not know bats came out in the daytime, the Joker cries out to Batman. Just when murderous clowns leave the circus, Batman replies. The Joker's mask conceals, in addition to declared anguish and sorrow, also contents referring to the significant cultural motif of the sinister clown, the image of a jester conceived as personified evil and a harbinger of death. The motif of the murderous clown, popular in the literature and films of mass culture, has a tradition of its own. According to W. Willeford⁴ the connection between jester/clown and death is not limited to the fact that this particular *dramatis persona* becomes the victim of a comic murder committed on stage (after which he is immediately resurrected, confirming the existence of a symbolic connection between the character of the jester and immortality). A jester is also someone who dispenses death, who nonchalantly distributes it, a supreme judge *à rebours* who passes final sentences and avenges injustice. As an ominous killer-avenger the jester is a figure of chaos, anarchy, and destruction toppling all sanctioned order; he is a reversal of the figure of God and His earthly representative, the king. Such was the titular character of P. Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf* or Barkilphedro, the evil jester, in *The Man Who Laughs*. Hop-Frog from E.A. Poe's short story is another punisher. Among modern examples mention is due, without searching too long, to Penguin in *Bat-*

man Returns, the legendary "man from the sewers" and boss of the criminal Red Triangle Circus Gang that operates only at night. In *It*, a novel by Stephen King adapted by Tommy Lee Wallace into a movie under the same title, evil inhabiting the city is personified by a circus clown with orange hair and a bright red and broadly smiling mouth, carrying a bunch of colourful balloons. Alex, the character in A. Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, whose film version was directed by Stanley Kubrick, also kills while wearing the mask of a circus clown and moves, similar to Joker, as if he were prancing.

The motifs to which the substance concealed by the Joker's *masca ridens* refers – the image of a jester as a figure of evil, mayhem, and ruin, together with the motif of his connection with death, resembling the relationship between the figure of the jester/clown and the demonic forces of the netherworld – are all worthy of a separate analysis. Here, I managed to sketch a pertinent outline.

Commence au Festival! or fragments of the myth of creation

Time for a deeper glance under the mask and for a search for the next stratum of the myth. The very essence of the activities of the Joker-the murderous clown involves staging a carnival, taking the world back to a state of the primal chaos that preceded its creation. Now begins the proper battle between Batman and his nemesis; a battle for the new order, which Batman ultimately wins. At this stage, without delving into the future, we shall remain in the carnival phase to analyse the nature of Joker's demiurgic deeds.

A creation himself, the Joker keeps on creating. Thanks to a product known as Smylex he makes new People Who Laugh; they are born and die at the same moment, but with a smile on their faces. He has merely replaced the craft of the *comprachicos* with advanced chemistry.

The carnival of death continues. The city, in its festive debauchery, becomes immersed in crime and anarchy; death, as if in a condensed memory of all plagues, coincides with laughter. It is finally time for the Joker's parade, when he appoints himself the new founding father of the city, which at that very moment becomes *imago mundi*, a symbolic image of the world. Spotlights are arranged on stage, followed by enormous deadly Smylex-filled balloons and, finally, a platform featuring a throne. *I am prepared to rule the world*, cries the Joker, a world that after that night was supposed to never stop laughing. A moment later the sky becomes filled with swirling dollar bills, millions of dollars, the greatest abundance the city has ever experienced. Gotham succumbs to chaos. New times are ahead.

Let us repeat: for all cultural anthropologists, everyone interested in myths, it is clear that the carnival

fashioned by the Joker – a riot of lights, debauchery, anarchy, laughter and death – symbolically reverts the world to the time of its beginnings, after which a new order, a new creation has to follow.

What precisely is this creation? The Joker, with Luciferian pride, dreams about divine prerogatives, which deprive all his gestures of meaning and render them mere parodies of God's demiurgic gestures. After all, the Man Who Laughs is nothing more than a parody of God's creation. *It was quite a science – what one can image as the antithesis of orthopedy*, wrote Hugo. *Where God had put a look, their art put a squint; where God had made harmony, they made discord; where God had made the perfect picture, they re-established the sketch.*⁵ What kind of demiurgic creation is this supposed to be if an unsuccessful, grotesque "sketch" becomes the demiurge? The demiurgic powers of the Joker, a monstrous *masterpiece in retrogression*, as the French writer called this form of creation, would be creation *à rebours* and his every creative gesture – a parody of creation. A characteristic quality of the clownish dissonance of Batman's opponent, expressed primarily by his gaudy attire and deformed features, also involves an element of "curvature" present in the very etymology of the term "jester" in Indo-European languages. Obviously the figure of the jester is connected with the motif of straying, erring, lunacy, temptation, traversing the wrong paths along the by-ways of truth, norms, and rules. By way of contrast, in the myth of the ruler as a demiurge the particularly striking motif is that of simplicity conceived as the foundation of both physical and ethical order. After all, it was not without reason that when discussing how Peter I designed his town Josif Brodski drew attention to the fact that the English word "ruler" describes both a person who governs and a tool used for measuring and drawing straight lines. Rulers, as God's appointed on Earth, always create by using straight lines. The demiurgic creation of a clown, on the other hand, is a derivative of shadiness, lies, and perfidy; in the sphere of symbols it is synonymous with losing one's way. Krzysztof Dorosz, following the example of Denis de Rougement, described such creation steered by the urge to gain divine prerogatives as: *a metaphysical "shortcut" on the road to divinity.*⁶ It is common knowledge that those who take short cuts usually get lost.

At this point we should move on to the last mythical theme found under the Joker's mask; the Prometheus myth, whose distant transposition is to be discovered in the story of the Man Who Laughs.

The Joker as Prometheus

The drama of divine creation has always included attempts at bringing down the established order, and members of this *enormous opposition*, to quote Maria Janion, i.e. Prometheus, Tantalus, Ixion, and Sisyphus

in Greek culture or fallen angels in the Cabalistic tradition often appear to be civilisers. Nevertheless, only in the ancient account – in the lost ending of Aeschylus' tragedy and in Hesiod – did the Prometheus myth feature a final reconciliation between the hero and the gods. In all cases, attempts at demiurgic creation after creation, even if inspired by the welfare of humanity, generate a mythological scenario of questioning divine decrees; at a certain level this is a scenario analogous to the one of *Batman*, a contemporary mythical tale of creation. Even if the wellbeing of men, cited both by Prometheus and fallen angels to justify their actions (*There is a surprising similarity between rebellious angels and Prometheus, the Greek contestor of the gods*⁷), is a relative concept, the Joker's ironic declarations are even more dubious. In his essay: *Faust współczesny czyli de pacto hominis politici cum diabolo*, Krzysztof Dorosz situated the Prometheus myth among the sources of the myth of Faust – from the Renaissance Faust, who sold his soul to the devil, to the contemporary Faust, the social activist in communist mythology. The *humanistic Marxist myth does not leave any doubts about the saviour-like powers of the Greek titan. From a Christian perspective, on the other hand, Prometheus has to be ultimately considered some sort of a fallen angel and not a saviour.*⁸ In other words, regardless of his intentions Prometheus becomes a usurper trying to breach gods' contract with humans. Similarly to rebellious angels – and the Joker – he personifies the mythological figure of the Enemy. The pride and disobedience of the fallen angels were punished by locking them within a circle of darkness, chaining them to a black mountain, and pronouncing eternal damnation. Prometheus was sentenced to being chained to a rock in the Caucasus and finally, as in Kafka's short story, to merging with the rock, forgotten and losing the very reason for his existence. Salinger's Laughing Man dies in a comparable way, tied with barbed wire to a tree, while the Joker – another fallen angel – ends his life after one more fall.

The fire stolen from the gods by the Greek hero is essentially the same as the teachings passed on to men by archons: the manufacture of gold and silver artefacts, knowledge about stars and the moon, the art of predicting the future; it is thus identical to the ironic promise of eternal happiness and smile made by the Joker to the residents of Gotham. Denis de Rougement called these gifts and promises *a "short-cut" on the road to divinity*, inspired by the desire to equal the gods and idolize man. According to Dorosz, *this is why fire stolen from the gods, the apple picked from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the mystery of creation seized by the fallen angels in a Cabalistic legend, the Tower of Babel and the magic revealed by Faust in return for renouncing faith are all examples of a metaphysical utopia, a perpetually repeated attempt at circumventing the human condi-*

tion, storming the heavens and taking possession of God. It follows from our reasoning that such an endeavour cannot succeed without the help of demonic forces providing man with a specific means of elevation – magic.⁹ The Promethean fire, Dorosz concluded, is an attribute of *homo magus* and not of Providence, while black magic, the attribute of both the Greek hero and the fallen angels from the *Book of Enoch*, is the prevailing feature and mechanism of Promethean and angelic gifts intended or mankind. Dorosz believes that the rebellious black magic practitioners from Atlantis can be the acknowledged prototype of Prometheus, whose descendant is the Renaissance figure of Doctor Faustus, whose story brought forth the pact with the dark forces, implicite included in the Prometheus myth.¹⁰ *Homo magus*, a contemporary alchemist – how else would you describe the Joker, the chemist-inventor, whose amazing products are to make people die smiling and guarantee him the highest, divine prerogatives in this paradise à rebours?

To avoid rendering references to the Prometheus myth overly arbitrary here is a fragment of Maria Janion's reflections on Gwynplaine. In the essay: *Maska Maski. Ontologiczne nieszczęście Człowieka Śmiechu* she too compared the protagonist of Hugo's novel to the Greek titan. He is – in the symbolical sphere of the novel – a titanic figure, a fallen giant, a God of not what is above but what is below, a God of the abyss of poverty.¹¹ Naturally, there are certain differences. Contrary to the Joker, Gwynplaine is good and feels authentic pain under his mask-face of a Monster. His face disguises (or rather expresses) suffering, while the Joker's smile reveals madness and evil. Nevertheless, remaining, as Janion did, at the symbolic level of the film and novel, the Joker – in all his monstrosity – also has to be considered God's creature in reverse, the reverse of beauty and, taking into consideration his Luciferian intentions, the reverse of God. Since the Prometheus myth is extensive, ambiguous and interpreted in different ways it should not come as a surprise that various aspects may be stressed when comparing it to the myth of the Man Who Laughs. Janion emphasised the titanic character of Gwynplaine branded with the suffering of horrible ugliness,¹² his fate that of a cursed creature. The link between Prometheus, his distant descendant, Faustus, and the Joker – the feature in the latter's story that makes it possible to hear the distant echoes of the Prometheus myth, is predominantly their opposition against the order sanctioned by God and straying, taking a mistaken "shortcut" on the path to divinity, reflecting the negation of an established canon of values. The second tie is contact with the dark forces (to which the clownish demonology of the Joker *persona dramatis* acts as a symbolic key) and the application of magic (or science in service of magic) for the purpose of creating a new order, a new philosophy, and a new art.

Fortuitously, Batman had better gadgets.

Endnotes

- 1 V. Hugo, *Człowiek śmiechu*, Warszawa 1955, vol. I, p. 38.
- 2 M. Bakhtin, *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais'ego a kultura ludowa średniowiecza i renesansu*, Kraków 1975, p. 446.
- 3 Ibidem.
- 4 Cf. W. Willeford, *The Fool and his Sceptre. A Study in Clowns and Their Audience*, Northwestern University Press 1969.
- 5 V. Hugo, op. cit., p. 39.
- 6 K. Dorosz, *Faust współczesny czyli de pacto homini politici cum diabolo*, in: *Maski Prometeusza. Eseje konserwatywne*, London 1989, p. 28.
- 7 Ibidem, p. 27.
- 8 Ibidem, p. 22.
- 9 Ibidem, p. 28.
- 10 Ibidem, p. 29.
- 11 M. Janion, *Maska Maski. Ontologiczne nieszczęście Człowieka Śmiechu*, (in:) *Maski*, Gdańsk 1986, vol. II, p. 406.
- 12 Ibidem, p. 407.

