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## **Book Review: Kyle A. Hammonds: Interpreting and Transmitting Kynicism in Joker: The Dark Side of Film Fandom**

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## Book Review

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#### KEYWORDS

Batman, Joker, film fandom, white supremacy, nationalism

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## Book Review

### **Kyle A. Hammonds: Interpreting and Transmitting Kynicism in *Joker: The Dark Side of Film Fandom***

**Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2024, 242 pp., ISBN 9781666930863, USD 110.-**

*Interpreting and Transmitting Kynicism in Joker: The Dark Side of Film Fandom* is a book by Kyle A. Hammonds that discusses the reception of Todd Phillips' film *Joker* (2019). Hammonds primarily discusses the discursive and technical elements in the production that foster a retrograde and particularly racist discourse, and he seeks to uncover whether this is intentional or not—a question that haunts the movie. Hammonds also explains that the reception of *Joker* worried him both on a personal level as a fan of Batman and as a researcher. In this way, the author reveals his surprise and strain about how the feature film won the devotion of white nationalists. The protagonist's suffering ended up being connected to the supposed suffering of white men, oppressed by society, as an argument on the Internet to justify violent acts both inside and outside of fiction. This is why Hammonds constantly wonders if *Joker* was heading in a different thematic direction, but white nationalists appropriate and subvert the story's logic, or if all the elements of staging, sound, and script make these WNMF (White Nationalist Movie Fandom) interpretations possible. To achieve this, the book is divided into three parts: "Theoretical Underpinnings of Malicious Movie Talks," "Understanding Fan Interpretations and Symbolism in *Joker*," and "Drawing Meaning from *Joker*: Bringing Philosophy to Fan Communication."

Within these parts, eight chapters are inserted, and the debate progressively deepens. To build his argument, Hammonds immerses the reader in the world of comics and all Batman adaptations. According to Hammonds, the use of the comic book universe is a poor 'excuse' to attract audiences to the movies. In this context, it may come as Hammonds' biggest hypothesis that Todd Phillips while targeting at a mainstream audience wanted to actually make a more controversial film and uses the *Joker* as a way to disguise his own malice in writing the script.

Another element highlighted by Hammonds is how film critics enter this debate, always employing subjectivity. Although criticism occupies the space of opinion production, Hammonds explains how the specialist space of journalism blurs the lines between intentions and assertions of film critics. This is why excerpts from these texts discussing *Joker* are included as illustrations in order to add them to the author's perception of the field.

Finally, within this logic of discourses made by interpretive communities, there are also the internal clashes among the WNMF, who fight over the film's meaning. Whereas some fans see *Joker* as a left-wing production, some oppose this assumption. In this argumentative battle, there is an indecision among this audience as to whether the work is on 'their side' or not. However, Hammonds' biggest indication is that the WNMF's affection for *Joker* reveals that the film may be more overt in its defense of the white American male than critics and fans are able to see or admit.

This is why in *Interpreting and Transmitting Kynicism in Joker: The Dark Side of Film Fandom* the author's fear is palpable that the far right will dominate a space that, for him, is one of love and adora-

tion. The book is filled with warnings that become even stronger in its conclusion when asking readers to pay attention to the political landscape and the intentions of directors. And Hammonds makes it clear that this attention should be present not only in the consumption of comics or films, but in everything surrounding these productions, be it film reviews or interviews, for example. One of the biggest debates among researchers, filmmakers, audiences, and film critics has always been whether it is more relevant to examine discourse or aesthetics. However, it is in its formal aspects that the far right has always hidden itself; and Hammonds concludes his work by asserting that this entire universe is extremely complex. Although the author presents passages that sound certain that *Joker* is a film intended to advocate racism and the idea of white supremacy, at times he questions this intentionality.

