Notes for the Joker displays for Portico Gothic Exhibition

Tim Burton’s and Christopher Nolan’s different Joker designs – make up and meaning.

There are very different uses of clown make-up for the Joker in both Tim Burton’s Batman and Christopher Nolan’s Dark Knight trilogy. In Burton’s 1989 film, the Joker (played by Jack Nicholson) relies on make-up and plastic surgery to undergo his physical transformation after his fall into a vat of acid early in the film. He is consistently seen either covering up or revealing his chemical pallor in the film. His dastardly plans include poisoning make-up products to use on the hapless citizens of Gotham, with each victim in turn bearing their own eerie Joker smile. The distinctive symmetry of the make-up is very deliberate in Burton’s film too – the Joker’s own precision-painted smile distinctly echoes and mocks Batman’s bat logo.

Christopher Nolan’s own distinctive take on the Joker (played by Heath Ledger) in The Dark Knight (2008) contrasts completely with Burton’s precise, rictus –grinning villain. The Glasgow smile scars that are carved into the Joker’s face demonstrate his own flesh-and-blood commitment to his destructive cause, only to be ghoulishly amplified by his messy and patchy make-up. Here, the make-up and scars (most likely self-inflicted) are used for intimidation and to instil fear rather than feel uncanny or strange, as it does in Burton’s film. For Nolan, the ‘war paint’ make-up neither reveals nor conceals the Joker’s true identity – usually greasepaint (or a mask) is used to conceal a person’s identity beneath a painted visage. Representing disarray and confusion, and heavily contrasting with Batman’s streamlined batsuit and physically rigid cowl, Nolan’s Joker make-up should be read as a visual extension of the character’s chaotic and violent mind, a flow of colours and contours against Batman’s fixed mask.

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