

Boundary between Reality and Fiction: Analysing Socio-political  
Influences of a Criminal Mind in the Film, *Joker* (2019)

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in English

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## **Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

**Student's Full Name & Signature:**

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## **Approval**

The thesis titled “The Boundary between Reality and Fiction: Analysing Socio-political Influences of a Criminal Mind in the Film, *Joker* (2019)” submitted by Afsana Anjum Anisha ID: 18103064 of Summer, 2021 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts on Date-Month-2021.

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## Abstract

For the last few decades, the advancements in visual media have enabled filmmakers to propagate their visions of postmodernist perplexities on the screen, reiterating and reinterpreting their predecessors' unresolved information to intrigue their audiences. While some aporetic genres are presiding over the Hollywood film industry, Todd Phillips' psychological thriller and post-neorealist cinema *Joker* (2019) enthralled both spectators and critics. This film illustrates the genesis of the Joker, the prominent arch-enemy of the DC Comics superhero Batman, by condemning late capitalist society. It depicts the gradual metamorphosis of a mentally unstable and sadistic loner turning into a nihilist and vicious serial murderer. The film uses outstanding cinematography and appealing biographical narratives to create an indistinguishable simulacrum of our dystopian and dysfunctional political and social systems.

Therefore, the research for this study is to analyse whether a fictional product of the visual media is influential enough in promoting non-conventional and unethical narratives like the delinquencies portrayed by the enigmatic protagonist of *Joker*, Arthur Fleck, in spectators' minds to act accordingly. This thesis seeks to resolve this issue by analysing socio-political influences on the construction of a criminal that resonates with reality in postmodernist films using simulated visual representations. Furthermore, this study aims to prove that acting according to a fictitious delinquent is not a notion conveyed by filmmakers, since it is the audiences' responsibility to preserve the fictional boundaries between reality and fiction.

## **Dedication**

Dear Baba and Mum, I am grateful for your continual encouragement in helping me pursue my desired academic path. This work is dedicated to you and my late grandmother, who has been the motivating force in reaching the end of my undergraduate journey.

## **Acknowledgement**

All praises to the Almighty Allah, The Most Gracious, for Whom I have been able to accomplish this dissertation. This whole journey has been an unbelievable rollercoaster ride of my emotional and physical health, and I frequently drowned in the deep darkness. But with the blessings of The Almighty, every time I have revived with full enthusiasm.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the introduction in the 1940's DC comic book series, the fictional character 'Joker' has been one of the most reinterpreted and revived characters in the history of the American entertainment industry. This aporetic figure has been reiterated numerous times in film sequels, reiterations, and prequels, mesmerising its audiences for decades. However, Todd Phillips' recent prequel film, *Joker* (2019), has broken the Box Office record for being nothing less than a masterpiece in cinematographic history. The ambiguous origin and unpredictability of Batman's supreme nemesis, the Joker, has been a point of convergence of media personnel in producing many aspiring supervillains. However, the film *Joker*, starring Joaquin Phoenix, conveys an inverse spectrum of the usual perspective that authors or filmmakers portray the character as a malevolent and vicious villain. The film illustrates the corrupted and ravaged Gotham City and violence committed upon a marginalized, outcast, and less fortunate man, Arthur Fleck, who reincarnates as the Joker, a schizophrenic clown, and the herald of destruction.

Over the last eighty years, the character of the Joker has been revised, altered in numerous forms in the media because of its charismatic persona and his psychopathically intense act of destructions. Originated from 1940's comic book series, the Joker was depicted in 1966s and 1989s films *Batman*, 2008s *The Dark Knight* portrayed by Heath Ledger, Jared Leto in 2016's *Suicide Squads* and animated picture *Batman: The Killing Joke* and ultimately in 2019's *Joker* as reported in Rolling Stone. Protagonists such as Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1982) are also influenced by the attributes of the fictional character, the Joker (Collins). For past few decades, movie cycles have become customary in the film industry, especially in Hollywood, where originals are rarely found. Postmodernist directors of Hollywood are more drawn to recreating and extending superhero



films that purportedly inspire people on multiple levels. Hence, initially, this study begins by discussing the practise of continuously reproducing and modifying movies and iconic characters in order to create blockbusters without diminishing the appeal of the identical plots. Under the explanations from the texts *Second Takes Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* by Carolyn Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis (editors) and *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-offs, Remakes, and Reboots* by Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (editors), the research is to highlight the motives and audiences' needs of remake movies and series in the Hollywood film industry.

The postmodernist literary movement emerged as a reaction to the preceding literary movement, culture, and, most significantly, the rejection of grand narratives, rather than as a result of political or social instabilities. Hence, it is presumable that the products of this movement are certainly aporetic in most of the disciplines. The postmodernist cinema offers a visual representation of narratives as satire, dark comedy, and critique, as well as a rejection of the belief systems, distress, and chaos that exist in our society. As previously stated, this era of cinematic movement is also influenced by reiterating and remaking movies by incorporating pastiche, transtextuality and intertextuality, and metafiction. Therefore, undeniably, *Joker* (2019) stands as an exceptional creation of the postmodernist cinematic movement of the twenty-first century. This film recreated the 1920's Italian social realism genre into post-neorealism by simulating our current social and political realities through fiction. Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation and simulacra in a postmodernist film in creating a realism genre is analysed in the following sections.

One of the most concerning symbols of the film *Joker* (2019) is the blatant delineation of the deteriorating city, Gotham, which is inspired by New York City, The United States of America. The corrupted city of exploitative socioeconomic brackets of the social hierarchy is ignorant and ambiguous about the majority of the sufferers of the society from which the

protagonist, Arthur Fleck, belongs. Predecessor films like *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) depicted New York City aka Gotham City from the perspective of rational-legal authorities like the police forces, billionaire Bruce Wayne, and the district attorney, Hervey Dent. However, in *Joker* (2019), Todd Phillips exhibits a metropolis through the eyes of Arthur Fleck, one of Gotham's most disadvantaged and disregarded residents. The subtle process of resurrecting as a vicious and ruthless criminal clown from the timid personality of Arthur is a by-product of the decayed society as shown in the film. The American Dream's illusion encounters sceptic views from the less fortunate who fail to achieve their dreams of success, leading them to criminal acts. Our real-world resembles the dystopian city of Gotham, where a criminal is born in every alley as a result of a dysfunctional system. Therefore, the study examines the violence generated in a society of broken systems from the root and the products as criminals. Slavoj Žižek, a political philosopher, elaborates on this concept as subjective, symbolic, and systematic violence in his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. These categories are vividly portrayed in the film by different classes and their actions.

As I approach the arena of violence in a deteriorating society, this study deals with the American sociologist Travis Hirschi's concept of the Theory of Delinquency from the text, *Causes of Delinquency*. According to Travis, the social bond between a citizen and his society is the reason for not engaging in criminal acts. This is discussed in light of the erratic relationship and rejection of the society that Arthur lives in (Hirschi). The insane criminal, the Joker, is not an uninfluenced creation of the mentally challenged Arthur but rather a very well-thought-out process of making a delinquent. Furthermore, the predecessor of the film *Joker* (2019) is *The Dark Knight* (2008) where the late actor Heath Ledger's Academy Award-winning portrayal of the Joker persona has sensationalised its audiences, creating a destructive, "pure, unadulterated evil" character (Boscaljon 52). This film exhibits the Joker's

extensive and meticulous violence which transcends malignancy. However, the prequel, *Joker* (2019), does not follow in the footsteps of the previous film. Arthur Fleck's ambiguous and unsure acts in most scenes resemble the gauche and ambiguous behaviour which was not present in Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker. Heath Ledger portrayed a well-varnished superhuman, Friedrich Nietzsche's "Übermensch" quality who opposed sanity, logic and morals. Thus, it is easily depicted that Arthur Fleck's clumsy persona of becoming "superhuman" will eventually culminate in *The Dark Knight*'s great nemesis of Batman. Todd Phillips charismatically constructed this reincarnation and complete metamorphosis of Arthur Fleck into the great Joker in the cinema.

Visual media inspires people in a very extensive manner where sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction. The Batman comic and its movie adaptations are some of the landmarks in the Hollywood media industry, both for the production companies and for its readers and audiences. The uncouth reiteration of the movie and its characters has significantly marked its audiences, influencing them not just to procrastinate and fantasise but also to incite American nationalism and self-preservation. People frequently tend to imitate iconic fictional characters, justifying their wrongdoings, and the *Joker* (2019) has been infected by that criticism as well. Scholars and film critics, on the other hand, are constantly assuring moviegoers of the film's and characters unrealistic and fictional portrayals. According to the FBI (Margolin and Katersky), this 2019s' psychological and postmodernist neorealism film has had a significant impact on the hearts of incel communities. The Joker's extreme violence against societal injustices and the broken system has an undeniable impact on people. Nevertheless, critics such as Michael Moore and Slavoj Žižek allegedly attempted to demonstrate the irrationality of acting according to a fictitious character and inflicting destruction like the past violent incident. Previously, on 20 July 2012, a mass shooting occurred in a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, killing 12 people and

injuring 58 others as the film *The Dark Knight* (2008) was being premiered (Margolin and Katersky). Therefore, this thesis looks in depth at the influence of the postmodernist neorealism genre, *Joker* (2019), on its spectators who perceive it as a threat. The study scrutinises how brilliantly the director depicted the systematic or hidden violence in the film as the banner of destruction for American fundamentalists and conservatives.

This research study focuses on a thorough analysis of the fictional character's cultural and contextual background, reflection of the society where he belongs as well as the portrayal of the psyche of the protagonist. *Joker* (2019) is one of the prominent films in the Hollywood entertainment world that has not only achieved enormous success but has also received controversial criticism from critics. Because of the transmitted influence of its viewers, film reviewers have been concerned about whether to sympathise with Arthur Fleck as a scapegoat of society or to legitimise his criminal activities. Based on the aforementioned concerns, researchers developed the research questions centred on the need to remake iconic films, particularly those featuring revolutionary characters such as the Joker. Is 2019's film *Joker* simply a reflection of modern society and the victims of it? Or via the protagonist, Todd Phillips exhibits the violence as an inevitable discovery of the breakthrough from the oppressive system?

This study's central objective is to determine whether a fictional product of mass media is influential enough to promote non-conventional and unethical activities like delinquencies, as portrayed by the enigmatic protagonist, the Joker into spectators' minds to commit accordingly. In order to answer the questions, the study begins by explaining the postmodernist film movement and its characteristics in movie cycles, its influences and audiences' demands. Then the paper focuses on the cultural and contextual background of the film and the character that influences people to seek more of it as a sequel. Subsequently, explaining the violence and delinquents' psyche as a social being, the study tries to evaluate

the demoralised society's influences on making a criminal. Finally, the paper delves to analyse the protagonist's relationship with his society and differentiate reality from fantasy for the spectators. In this way, I am demonstrating the irrationality of acting according to a fictitious character by the mesmerised audience, while postmodernist film develops simulations beyond reality, they nonetheless remain inside the realm of fantasy.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2. a. Remake, Sequel and Prequel in Visual Media

In visual media, adaptations, sequels, cycles, remakes, imitations, trilogies, reboots, series, and spin-offs are intriguing capitalist methods to keep spectators engaged for decades.

Although a literary work demands its distinctiveness, it is quite impossible to avoid the multiplicities and textual bonds with other works. Hollywood visual media, specifically, cinemas, series and television programs are more drawn to adapting and recontextualizing previous works for "financial safety" as well as spectators' demand (Scahill 316).

"Transtextuality", a term coined by Gérard Genette in his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, explains the textual transcendence of the text, "...is defined as all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts, is the prior understanding of media remake" (1). Transtextuality is the umbrella term for all the texts that refer to, surround, comment on, and influence other texts that are unavoidably used in the literary world. Similarly, in cinematic works, transtextuality is more visible due to the repeated use of symbols, quotations, plots, and stories. Most films are intertextual to some degree, as Susan Hayward states in *Cinema Studies: Key Concepts* in explaining, "a text referring to other texts, an intertext in whose presence other texts reside" (201).

Transmedia is a subsector of transtextuality that describes as a process of systematic disperse of the integral elements of a fiction, "across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" as noted by Henry Jenkins. According to the author, transmedia serves in providing insight into the characters and their motivations which may reveals the fictional universe or may bridge between events depicted in a series. He says, "The extension may add a greater sense of realism to the fiction as a whole"

(Jenkins). Hence, the use of transmedia is more compelling than monotonous, because, as states,

"...it encourages an encyclopaedic impulse in both readers and writers. We (spectators) are drawn to mastering what can be known about a world that always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story" (Jenkins).

Therefore, the extension of a story or character from already successful works is customary in the visual media.

## 2. a. i Film Sequel

The need to sequelize or extend a film is motivated not only by financial security for the production company, but also by the desire to provide meaning to the enigmatic knots left behind by the original film. In the cinema, certain actions, characters, plots, and twists always remain ambiguous to the spectators, which are later used to recreate, reboot, and continue the original film. These incomprehensible experiences are explained as "afterwardsness" in *Second Takes Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel*, described as, "a temporal structure that involves the rewriting of past events in the light of subsequent experience (Sutton 143). Afterwardsness, a term labelled by Jean Laplanche, is the aftereffect of a traumatic event that is not immediately evident but stays in the unconsciousness of the victim. Paul Sutton explains afterwardsness as the sole purpose of the spectators to thrive for more after the film ends, as the trauma is left unresolved (145). Traumas here are captured by the intense visual charismatic actions and characters which are partially shown, leaving a vast sphere of information enclosed. Hence, to decode such experiences, which stay in the unconscious

mind after watching the original film, sequels and prequels become extensively pleasurable. According to the author, as he further explains Laplanche's notion of 'Afterwardsness',

"Identity comes from the other, results from a primal 'communication situation' between adult and child; it is an ongoing encounter in which the child receives messages (or signifiers) from the adult other which it is unable to decode or translate. ... These untranslated elements are, however, 'endlessly retranslated as they enter into new contexts of significance, encounter new signifiers'; they are in effect subject to the temporal logic of 'afterwardsness'" (Sutton 145).

Similarly, unresolved information from original films such as *The Dark Knight* (2008), in which Heath Ledger plays the Joker, an enigmatic character who is beyond irrationality and self-destructiveness in nature, has provided viewers with profound traumas that have compelled them to delve deeper into the character. Therefore, in 2019, the genesis of the character Joker, is so intriguing for the audience because the film attempts to provide answers to the predecessors' traumatic intensities of the visual and aural stimulus actions to some extent. Therefore, the need for remakes, sequels, and prequels vastly depends on the initial film's complex, incomprehensible expressions that left the spectators engaged for further production.

#### 2. a. ii. Film Prequel and Preboot

In the sequel, it sticks to echoing the original film's narrative as its ground and extends its story, whereas, in the prequel, the cinema shows the origin of an event or the character of the primary film. The prequel is defined as, "a film, book, or play that develops the story of an earlier film, etc. by telling you what happened before the events in the first film" (Cambridge Dictionary). Prequels are more complex and multidimensional because these need to capture the prior influences of the plots that the sequels have already portrayed



and reach out to those ultimate points chronologically. The prequel of a film is the literal example of 'afterwardsness' in cinematic context as it reveals the inexplicable traumas to its spectators from the original film. According to Paul Sutton, the prequel is constructed by the logic of 'afterwardsness,' which has a remarkable dual temporality that facilitates it to both precede and follow the film or films to which it is a prequel (141). Reboots and prequels have close connections as both of the film categories try to reorganize, recreate, and re-establish new stories within a film. Hence, Professor Andrew Scahill combines these categories as 'prebooting cinema' which perfectly fits with the film, *Joker* (2019) (318). He further explains this process as an alternative perspective, "...that rewrites the audience's understanding of the original, and one sees the preboot as a first draft of the cinematic texts, which confirms the original as complete and coherent" (319). Like connecting dots, prequels are, "...everything that brings [one text] into relation (manifest or concealed) with other texts" as stated by Gérard Genette (3).

#### 2. a. iii. Remaking Film: Superhero versus Realism

Hollywood's superhero films have created sensations worldwide with their commercial successes in the post-millennial era. The extensive and exceptional use of graphics and the common theme of the fight against destruction for utilitarian causes engage spectators, surpassing cultural and language barriers. Thus, the most demandable remakes, sequels, and recreated cinemas are in this genre. Film critic and director Simon McEnteggart scrutinises the superhero film genre and its purposes in society as such, "Superhero narratives are concerned with the perpetuation of American frontier cultural rhetoric, engaging in ideologically motivated adventures to "tame" civilization with morality tales in conjunction with righteous powers" (171). These films provide ideological support to their viewers, who use false consciousness to create identity, values, memory, culture, and belief systems (172).

However, alongside the mystification of superheroes, viewers have craved authentic and social representations of society in cinema since the beginning of the cinematic movement. Poetic realism is so exemplary of the French expressionist film movement, led by filmmakers Jean Vigo, Julien Duvivier, and Jean Renoir, and Marcel Carné, the pioneers who tried to capture the raw city life and the struggles of working-class people (Hayward 150). This movement emerged in France during the 1930s which portrays the amalgamation of working-class milieus with moody, proto-noir art direction of contemporary social conditions (The Criterion Collection). However, realism is not an accurate and duplicated portrayal of the real world, rather "a recreated realism, not the socio-realism of the documentary. In this respect, the realism is very studio-bound and stylized," as noted by the author of *Cinema Studies: Key Concepts* (178). The screenplays of these cinemas are set in the deteriorated urban zone of the busy city. Characters are victimised by the malicious capitalist bourgeoisie class. The characters are authentic in the most plausible way because the films depict some impressive psychological narratives about fictional anti-heroes. Nevertheless, this cinematic movement was dimmed soon before World War II began due to its blatant representation of the fascist and anti-Semitic constructions of society.

This genre of cinematography got high attention from the American New Wave or the renaissance filmmakers of the 1970s and they started to recontextualize the genre, displaying a pessimistic view of city life. Henceforth, the postmodernist film genre started to spread, inspired by the French expressionist cinematic movement. Visual media frequently builds bridges with current issues based on their topicality and employs cinematic techniques that not only entertain but also communicate ideas and arguments (Steven Doles). Therefore, the authentic portrayal of economic and social turmoil, psychological realism, and the anti-hero as the protagonist with derogatory characteristics in postmodern cinema have been popular ever since. As stated in the article, "Joker, the Laughing Christ of Postmodernity" that

postmodernism is a period, "When a new world is seen through the eyes of ordinary folks when the moral world is not unified by rationality when piety turns to politics, and saints become scoundrels" while these "postmodern saints are a scandal to modern universalism, rationality, democracy, and immanence" (Akhtar 5).

#### 2. a. iv. Sequelizing Nemesis of the Superhero Cinema

The aforementioned concern about remaking and sequelizing postmillennial superheroes in cinema and series, in the essay, "Sequelizing the Superhero Postmillennial Anxiety and Cultural 'Need'", the author further discusses the issue. He affirms,

"American postmillennial superhero sequels portray paranoia, predominantly aligning the angst with the villains that perpetuate the narratives, serving to connote the erosions as evil. In associating postmodern motives with the nemesis, villains become iconic in status and can be continually used through further sequelization due to their popularity, and as such, superheroes can repeatedly battle with the evolving sociocultural fears these threats embody" (McEnteggart 155).

Hence, as equal to superhero sequels, the need for further recreation of the nemesis serves a greater purpose of establishing grand narratives of ideologies and preserve the "mystified ideologies" of patriotism to its spectators' sentiments (Žižek 14).

## 2. b. Social Context and Violence of *Joker* (2019)

### 2. b. i. Socio-political Turmoil

Social context and the setting of a film play big roles in constructing a masterpiece; for the audience, they relive the location. The movie *Joker* (2019) is set in 1981, as written in the film script,

"This story takes place in the past. Let's call it 1981. It's a troubling time. The crime rate in Gotham is at record highs. A garbage strike has crippled the city for the past six weeks. Dreams are beyond reach, slipping into delusions" (Phillips and Silver 1).

The setting is not real, but an alteration of reality; realism. Looking back at the 1980s, Republican Ronald Reagan, stepped into the presidential seat and started making substantial political, social, and especially economic reformations straightaway. One of his most effective reformations was lowering taxes and lessening the federal investment in the public sphere, which are still subsisting in present-day America (Green 5:07- 5:24). According to John Green, an educator and writer, Reagan in his first presidency lowered government taxes from 70% to 50%, which was again reduced in his second presidency in 1986 to 28% (7:15- 7:30). The most devastating change Reagan made that drastically altered American society was the closing of the hospitals for the mentally ill. The rapid closure of the care and the closure of the asylums left thousands of mentally unstable patients on the streets, dramatically increasing unemployment and homelessness (Moore 3). This government outlawed unions and communist acts, so any strikes or social movements were violently suppressed by the authorities. Although tax reduction, the free-markets, and a booming stock market inflamed the economy for the first two years, by the mid-80s, the richest 1% controlled 40% of the nation's wealth. John states, "The middle-class families' income stagnated and that of the poorest 20% began to decline" (9:44 – 9:53). This era saw deleterious social changes,

especially for the below-poverty working class and unemployed people of America. The film *Joker* is set during this time period in New York City, also known as the fictional Gotham City.

## 2. b. ii. Violence in a Deteriorated Society

Society creates criminals is a common phrase that lingers in everyone's mouth for eternity. But in reality, social inequality and the negligence of inequalities by those in authority are the chief causes of crime and violence. Movies, especially in the aforementioned realism genre, illustrate raw pictures of society and the struggles of the people living in it and exhibit violence in multidimensional manners. No state exists without violence, whether it is ideological or political. In his book, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher, political activist, and author of some of the most revolutionary ideological and political books, elaborates on the categories and effects of violence. According to him, "Violence takes three forms: subjective (crime, terror), objective (racism, hate-speech, discrimination), and systemic (the catastrophic effects of economic and political systems)" (1). Subjective violence is symbolic or visible violence consisting of two types. As mentioned in the text, "First, there is a 'symbolic' violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call 'our house of being'... Second, there is what I call 'systemic' violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (2). This systematic violence is expressed by objective violence, which stands as an invisible force yet the core of destructive violence.

Differentiating subjective and objective violence, Slavoj notes,

"... subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things.

However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systematic violence is thus something like the notorious 'dark matter' of physics, the counterpart to the all-too visible "subjective violence" (Žižek).

Living in a society, confronting continuous crimes and violence of murder, robbery, corruption, rape, self-destructive acts, communal wars, terrorism et cetera are comprehended as the society's social and political standards. But behind all this violence, recline the mastermind, systematic violence. Criminal activities do not come out of the blue if there are no psychological, political, philosophical, or social influences. The author believes that violence is incorporated in a system, involving not just overt physical violence, but also far more subtle forms of coercion, including the threat of violence, that the patterns of superiority and exploitation (System Deadlock).

### 2. b. iii. Systematic Violence vs. Subjective Violence

The resentments against subjective or visible violence and criminals are created by the political system, which tries to cover its inherited defaults. We, as social beings, tend to focus more on criminals than on the forces that create them. And this focus is completely constructed and psychologically embedded in our mind by the notorious political system, media coverage (propaganda), social practices, norms and values. In describing this idea, Slavoj Žižek asks, "Is there not something suspicious, about this focus on subjective violence—that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn't it desperately try to divert our attention away from the true source of the problem by obscuring other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them"(10)? Giving an example, we see the protagonist of the

film, *Joker*, Arthur Fleck, belonging to the poverty line of America. From his childhood, he has been forcefully trained to act happy and joyous just to fit into society. A society that outcasted him, for being sick with neurological disease, Pseudobulbar affect, antisocial behaviour, and a deficit in psychological development (Moore 2). That society did not let people like Arthur grow and achieve the dream of living a decent life, rather labelling him as the cause of social deterioration, a scapegoat.

To hide the deficiency in political systems, like shutting down asylums and cutting down the mentally ill people's welfare which led to millions in the street and the rise of crimes in 80s America, the media illustrates people like Arthur as the herald of destruction. His killing in defence of three bankers and the intentional or revenge killing of his mother and the television show host Murray Franklin, as acted by Robert De Niro, became the symbol of violence and inhumanity, masking all the system failures that led to this mayhem (Moore 3). Slavoj mentions in this concept, "There is something inherently mystifying in a direct confrontation with it: the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking. A dispassionate conceptual development of the typology of violence must by definition ignore its traumatic impact" (14). The people in power, who create societal norms and regenerate systems, constantly muddy the water to hide their deficiencies in peacekeeping and blaming the victimised individuals as defaults on society.

#### 2. b. iv. Breakage in Social Bond and Creation of Deviants

While considering the influences behind a criminal act, the systematic delinquencies committed by institutionalised powers are the core sources. Sociologically, a criminal tends towards violence due to dissociation from societal bonds. American sociologist Travis Hirschi describes in detail regarding lawlessness and delinquencies in his book *Causes of*

Delinquency (1969) where he confronts the question of man's motivation behind committing harmful acts. "There is no reason to assume that only those who commit a deviant act usually have the impulse to do so, as it is only an epiphenomenal action," he says, "as it is only an epiphenomenal action; it is much more likely that most people experience deviances frequently" (33). According to him, a man tending to commit crime comes from a long process of discriminatory and self-derivative habits from the society where he belongs. He constructed the Theory of Delinquency as, "The weaker the groups to which (the individual) belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognises no other rules of conduct than those founded on his private interests" (11). Delinquent behaviour develops when an individual's attachments to the community are frayed or severed. Control theorists of delinquency establish the fact that a man is inherently amoral; the more he is attached and committed to society, the more he is involved and contributes as proof of his belief in it. This attachment creates the morality of a person. As the author mentions, "Attachment to any object outside one's self, whether it be the home town, the starry heavens, or the family dog, promotes moral behaviour" (17). Morality brings about all the social characteristics of a person to live adequately in society, possessing rational judgement ability.

In explaining delinquency, the author elaborates it under two different theories, strain or motivational theory and control or bond theory. According to the motivation theory, behind delinquency, it is presumed that men are inherently and equally conscious, which binds them into conventional conformity. Travis Hirschi notes, "Since others almost by definition expect one to conform, the deviation can occur only at great cost to the deviator. ... Everyone tells him he should, but he cannot attain success by conforming to the rules; consequently, in desperation, he turns to deviant behaviour or crime to attain that which he considers rightfully his" (18). However, the default in this theory is that the only motivation



behind committing a crime is nothing but intense frustration which is merely alluded to. But in control or bond theory, motivation is described as the breaking of the social bond with the man which leads him to act against conventional conformity. Control theorists see deviant behaviours as a set of standards which are not accepted by the larger society. Travis says, "A person simply learns to become a criminal in much the same way he learns to play the violin. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violations of the law over definitions unfavourable to violations of the law" (21). The author explains that the legally accepted and practised delinquencies or systematic violence are connected to the unaccepted criminal behaviours of nonconventional conformists.

The weakened bond between a man and his society results in deviances, which are divided into four interrelated segments, which are, attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. A man who lacks attachment to his surroundings, other than himself, becomes accustomed to a lack of conscience and superego control, or moral deficiency. Travis notes, "The process of becoming alienated from others often involves or is based on active interpersonal conflict. Such conflict could easily supply a reservoir of socially derived hostility sufficient to account for the aggressiveness of those whose attachments to others have been weakened" (16). This lack of moral judgement or conscience results in not being committed to his society and laws imposed by the superior power. The reason is that the fear of delinquent acts' consequences is absent in this kind of socially detached person. If a man is unaffiliated and detached from society, he will never bother to get involved in welfare and conventional activities, even if he tries. Finally, comes the belief of a person that prevents him from committing crimes. A socially and emotionally detached man, uncommitted and uninvolved, suffers from cognitive dissonance, a mental conflict where a man struggles to differentiate reality from his beliefs. They cannot comprehend what is right according to the law and humanity, and what is not. The world seems absurd to them. As Nelson Mandela

said, "When a man is denied the right to live the life he believes in, he has no choice but to become an outlaw" (The Africa Report). Therefore, according to Travis, "The deviant rationalises his behaviour so that he can at once violate the rule and maintain his belief in it" (Hirschi 22).

## 2. c. *Joker* (2019) and Violence

### 2. c. i. *Joker* (2019): A Psychological Realism Cinema

Postmillennial movies, especially the sequelized ones, have kept engaging their audiences for decades, and as discussed before, their influences are immense. But whether audiences are influenced by movies to act accordingly, which it illustrates, is a concern for movie critics, especially in the era of postmodern filmmaking. This cinematic movement simulates a dystopian society and psychological escapees, reality beyond real and the most distorted psyche of humanity. *Joker* is a sensational, Oscar-winning film that has received a great deal of criticism for depicting violence as the sole means of overcoming social and economic turmoil. The film is set in the late '70s in Gotham City without disguising the near authentic picture of New York City. The film's settings, according to film critic Michael Moore, are "the headquarters of most real-life villainy: the rich who rule us, the banks and corporations for whom we toil, and the media, which feeds us a daily diet of 'news' they think we should absorb." A semblance city, carrying a façade of economic boom behind which the grimy, "bleak world and leached out of colour and joy" is exposed as cited in *Time Out* (Semlyen). It is essential to remember that this is an altered version of a fictional character, 'Joker', the ultimate arch enemy of Batman and the movie is absolutely nothing else but a psychological realism genre; not a documentary. According to the researcher, "The 'divergence between so-called reality and our distorted representation' (28) is indeed problematic concerning the use of signs as simulacra of the real, using re-presentations within the sequels to allay social unrest and simultaneously construct a new collective 'memory' and by extension a new cultural equilibrium" ( McEnteggart 189).

The aforementioned details on realism explain the altered portrayal of "real" in movies, not the mirror image, as painted in *Joker* (2019). According to Isra Daraiseh and M.

Keith Booker, "Depicting an early 1980s world that looks all too familiar in the age of Trump, complete with billionaires attempting to buy elections and a general population that is fuelled by an incoherent political rage" does the reality check for the audience. *Joker*, along with its dismal or dystopian nostalgia, inadvertently indicates that the bitter fruits of today were first plucked under the putrid politics of the 1980s: the decade wherein Reaganism and the forces of neoliberalism evolved. A similar social turmoil has occurred and intertextualized in the film, altering it to give a meta-fictional aura. The complex reality creates challenges to be accepted by a variety of audiences, especially social and political critics.

#### 2. c. ii. A Threat of Violence

Most reviewers accuse the film of being influential enough to create destruction and violence after its release, as declared by the FBI on ABC News that they received tips of threatening posts on social media calling for 'unspecified mass shootings' linked to the release of the new psychological thriller, *Joker* (Margolin and Katersky). Sohrab accounts for the online group called the involuntary celibate community, or "incels", being inspired; saying,

"In today's liberal societies, people cry out for fellow-feeling... only to be confronted with a system that reduces every relationship to the transactional, promotes alienation and hyper-competitiveness, and cocoons them in virtual worlds offering simulacra of communion. No wonder the *Joker* has achieved near-instant cult status, with its antihero emerging as an avatar for the armies of angry young men online. Phoenix's character inspires an uprising of sorts by fellow incels and angries and loneliness" (Ahmari).

"People striving to see a version of themselves will see a version of themselves on screen," says film critic Glen Weldon, "whether that will incite violence, whether that will do anything other than giving them some kind of comfort". However, it is undeniable that the

movie evokes "passive experiences in its viewers," but it would be "absolutely stupid" to act accordingly even if we live in a similar situation, following a psychologically distorted nihilist path, as noted in the article "More on Joker: From Apolitical Nihilism to a New Left, or Why Trump is no Joker" (Žižek).

### 2. c. iii. Arthur Fleck: Amoral and Nihilistic Societal Product

As a portrayal of discriminatory systematic violence, Joaquin Rafael Phoenix creates the invincible heroic character of Arthur, an abject hero. *Joker* (2019) shows the resurrection of the protagonist, Arthur Fleck, into an insensitive and nihilistic super-ego who is only fostered by drive, not desire (Žižek). The "urban inferno" recreated by film cinematographer Lawrence Sher, has such a realistic visual and sensational aura that the audience finds themselves "sympathizing and reliving it"; a true cinematic success.

Arthur is a living specimen of the product of social squeeze and destruction states by Rafael Cereceda. Even his name reflects his existence, as Slavoj mentions, "Fleck, which in German means stain/spot. Arthur is a disharmonious stain on the social edifice, something with no proper place in it" (Žižek). His lifelong Pseudobulbar effect of laughing morbidly shapes his life in a disconnected way with his surroundings and people. Hence, his growth of morality never expanded like a 'normal being' to live consciously and make decisions as such. The film certainly plays with the protagonists' hallucinations and reality, taking the audience as a part of this play. This is a postmodernist performance that breaks the fourth wall; engaging the audience in a whole different level of judgement about reality. This "psychic fragmentation" invokes Arthur to make irrational and self-destructive decisions that can never be a homage to the audience (Margolin and Katersky).

The Joker turns into a pure nihilist and apolitical being, not a pure depiction of the *Batman* comic or *The Dark Knight's* Joker, and fails to create any productive revolution. As

Slavoj notes, "There is a subjective act in the Joker's move, but no new political subjectivity arises through it: at the film's end, we get the Joker as a new tribal leader, but with no political program, just an explosion of negativity" (Žižek). Though he carries clown makeup, fully identifying himself wearing it, the way Gotham citizens adopt the mask, similar to Guy Fawkes's mask in *V for Vendetta*, is an utter irrationality. Owen Gleiberman says in counter of the self-identifying incels, "The fact that we relish a villain doesn't mean that we're on his side; getting off on the catchy, scary spectacle of bad behaviour isn't the same as identifying with it".

#### 2. c. iv. Protagonist's Deviance as the Scapegoat for Gotham's Disguised Systematic Violence

The social reality in the film promotes the equal systematic violence that has been going on for decades in America. The same systematic violence is camouflaged by the visible delinquencies like strikes and self-destructive violence portrayed in the film. In the blog "How Joker Became the Most Hated, Loved, Obsessed-Over Movie of 2019", Vulture projects the character Joker as the scapegoat, claiming that neither the film nor the character condone any form of real-world violence. Nevertheless, the violence shown in the film is a mask to hide the real violence (systematic) that has been going on in the film by the authorities (Lee). The film critic of Firstpost raises the question of whether the incels should look on the surface level of the film that illustrates physical violence or they should ask "'why' the inherited crime of Gotham city, underlying the Wayne agenda, is not being discussed" (Adlakha).

Despite all the criticisms, political activist Slavoj Žižek proposes a hypothetical counter resolution for the people who, living in similar circumstances, want to bring change in the system. Whereas Michael Moore asks his readers to search for a non-violent way to

defeat the social turmoil, Slavoj, as a communist, presents a violent, zero-level revolution that breaks the existing system from its core, for the benefit of the masses. According to him,

"The lesson of *Joker* is that we have to go through this zero-point to get rid of the illusions that pertain to the existing order. ...One has to experience it as a threat, as a possibility. Only in this way can one break out of the coordinates of the existing system and envisage something new. When a movement questions the fundamentals of the existing order, its basic normative foundations, it is almost impossible to have just peaceful protests without violent excesses" (Žižek).

He despises the acceptance of violence and the effect that the film *Joker* may have on its audience since, to him, *Joker's* responses are radical nihilism, a blind alley, a total stalemate, and counterproductive.

The film created the record for the highest R-rated grossing film in cinematic history. Spectators are mesmerized as well as tormented by the beauty of the film. The Counteract blog "*Joker Proves the Last Laugh Is on Audiences Expecting More*" mentions,

"One of the beauties of cinema is that it doesn't require you to like the people you see on screen. They can be contemptuous, money-grubbing, dog-hating, tax collectors, and still have a depth that forces you to reconcile your dislike with an understanding of their existential viewpoint. You don't even need to agree with the director themselves, assuming a further separation of art and artist" (Radley).

The film ends inclusively, leaving the interpretation to its readers, which is blatantly cherished by every film critic. *Joker* (2019) plays with postmodern art at its best, defeating the ultimate interpretation and produces an impressive entertaining pleasure for its consumers.

## **2. d. The Point of Departure**

While the Hollywood film industry has produced visual masterpieces in most genres that exist, particularly superhero-villain and psychological thrillers, very few films are sensationalized like *Joker* (2019). Following the release of *The Dark Knight* (2008) and the unexpected death of the protagonist of the film, Heath Ledger, the audience was stunned. Stirring up the trauma, the Colorado shooting and massacre of the film audience has sparked global interest in what this 2019 film would produce in justifying the past horrible incidents. Despite adhering to the comic narrative, the film did not allow fantasy to stand in the way of connecting with the reality of the American people. Hence, people became furious at the credibility and the outrageous redemption that the film depicted. In the face of criticism and threats, filmmakers and audiences needed convincing evidence that a film cannot contribute to crime or generate criminals. Criminal activities are highly dependent on the social and political context in which the deviant lives, rather than some fictitious commodity. Therefore, in this study, I attempt to justify the notion of the boundaries between fiction and reality for deviant minds in resisting their lust for committing crimes while being influenced by a ground-breaking film.



## Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

### I) Postmodernism and Film

In the late nineteenth century's literary, art, philosophical, and architectural movements, postmodernism is inevitably considered as a reaction to the modernist approaches towards grand narratives and hierarchical distinctions among consumers. But it is believed that this movement stands in a liminal space of transition from questioning and challenging rigid beliefs in grand and metanarratives to objective truths. According to Bruce stated on LinkedIn, "Postmodernism stands to revolt against the traditions and views and cultures offered by modernist theories and aims to replace existent innovation with a fresh new one that is more revolutionary and refined, and an extra-ordinary version of the old; bolder and larger than it is, on par with the cutting edge" (Bisbey). Postmodernism is a philosophy of resistance and negation. It confronts the tradition of modern science, ethics, and politics that are legitimised by their predecessors as the sole purpose of living. Philosophers of postmodernism like Jean-François Lyotard initiated the notion of postmodernity as a theoretical term in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). He believes that postmodernism is a recurrence of the Enlightenment in the twenty-first century, sceptical towards modernity, built with systematic suspicion and distrust, and tries to reconstruct and refurbish the established ideas. Along with Lyotard, pioneers like Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Brian McHale, and many more established this fragmented and individualistic literary theory that covers the widest range of human existence for the past few decades.

The postmodernist film follows the path of refusal and criticism of grand and Meta-narratives and structures, unlike the modernist films that preceded it. As noted by Carl in his essay "Postmodernism the Movie", postmodernist cinema often, "... questions established

social hierarchies and discourses while at the same time depicting a society in the midst of turmoil, chaos, fragmentation, and violence - a social order that gives rise to and sustains a popular mood of anxiety, cynicism, and powerlessness" (Boggs). These films thrive on conveying the truth and reality behind every fabricated narrative that guards spectators' right to think freely. For the past few decades, postmodernist films have been predominating in the media industry of Hollywood. Started with *Alphaville* (1965), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), *Solaris* (1972), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), the American Renaissance of cinema arrived in the latter part of the 80s, when postmodern masterpieces like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Matrix* (1999), and *American Psycho* (2000) films were dominating the media industry and American culture.

The postmodernist films try to subvert, resist, and differ from the "mainstream conventions of narrative structure and characterization, and to test the audience's suspension of disbelief" as noted by Bruce (Bisbey). This movement combines a complex paradigm of various approaches to styles and philosophies. Unlike other literary movements, postmodernism emerged in a time that can only be described by media culture, not wars or societal transition. Quoted in the new research, "Postmodernism does not have faith in master narratives of history or culture or even the self as an autonomous subject. Rather, postmodernism is interested in contradiction, fragmentation, and instability". Similarly, movies in this category do not seek resolution or conclusive structure, but rather a deconstruction and fragmented theories. It tends to leave the spectators at stray and disoriented, forcing them to procrastinate and put forward distinct subjective meanings. Taking a subjective view of certain things, the postmodernist film tries to position them in "an endless process of signification and signs, where any 'meaning' lies" (Wikipedia Contributor). The Postmodernist filmmakers use multiple genres and tones, combining them in a single molded approach to recreate meanings out of the camouflaged curtains created by

their predecessors, the modernist filmmakers. There are barely any obligatory conventional elements to follow in postmodernist cinema. Thus, some characteristics of this type of film are pastiche, or the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions, transtextuality (intertextuality) or meta-reference, self-reflexivity, hyperreality using high technology to create simulacrum, altered states, flattening of affect, et cetera.

## **II) Simulacrum in Postmodernist Film**

Postmodernist cinema tends to challenge previous cinematic movements by self-referencing their characteristics in such a way that spectators face a distinction between reality and a real conundrum. Simulacrum is one of the many essential elements of media culture that recreates reality by imitating things, events, ideas, or historic incidents. Although the term conveys a neutral and explanatory idea, it depicts a pessimistic narrative as described by the French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard. In his book, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), he exemplifies the meaning of simulacrum and simulation that creates a hyperreal vision. He says, "(Simulacrum) is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real..." (3). Visual media, especially cinema, adhere strictly to this notion of representing reality that is neither real nor a hoax, but somewhere in between, an imitation influenced by desire, nostalgia, and angst. The realism genre of movies, as described before, is a pure representation of a simulacrum that neither illustrates the reality of the real nor forges authenticity. The Postmodernist film culture deviates from grand narratives but criticises the narratives in a complex yet comprehensible manner for the audience to grasp.

## **III) Metafiction**

Conferring on creating simulacrum via visual media, metafiction is another element of the postmodernist film movement when plots and stories adapt, challenge, and criticise

previous works of art. In the online blog, "When Fiction Points the Finger" by Rune Bruun, he defines the term as, "... a narrative modus operandi that thematizes the construction of work and the relationship between fiction and critique through the concurrent presence of illusory and reflexive elements" (Madsen). The concept of metafiction, to be incorporated into films, is discussed elaborately by the critic and philosophy professor William H. Gass in his book *Philosophy and the Form of Fiction* (1970). This characteristic of cinema forces the audience to relate, to experience, to question and anticipate what is reality and fiction. Meta-reference is a subterm under metafiction wherein cinema engages the audience by directly addressing them, similar to the rhetoric used in literature. Here, performers directly look at the camera to communicate with the audience or ask questions of the spectators.

Meta-reference breaks down the fourth wall between the cinema, the made-up space of the narrative, and the audience, the reality where both parties can play roles. This type of trick is often used by postmodernist films, which were unthinkable in the modernist genre. Breaking the fourth wall does not always occur by looking directly at the screen or communicating with dialogue. It can also occur through the actions played by the characters. This form is called "Addressee Meta". Violence, criminal activities, punishments, chaos and social turmoil portrayed on the screen address the audience differently. Sometimes, as noted by Rune, "... the fourth wall is broken to give the audience a guilty conscience about enjoying senseless violence in the media (Madsen)". Here, communication takes the form of moral judgement and critique".

#### **IV) Intertextuality**

The term is popularised by Julia Kristeva in her book *The Kristeva Reader*, in an analysis of Bakhtin's concepts of Dialogism and Carnival. She says,

"There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text. The concept of intertextuality requires, therefore, that we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of textual structures. The theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so that it does not function as a closed system" (Kristeva 4).

Noted in "Julia Kristeva: Intertextuality", it is the concept of inescapable relation to other texts in a matrix of irreducible plural and provisional meanings (Mambrol). In postmodernist film culture, filmmakers are interested in remakes, sequels, and reintering films where intertextuality plays a vital role. Films are believed to have zero originality nowadays and are considered to be interpretations and reinterpretations of other literary pieces. This is supported by Julia's argument quoted by V. M. Simandan in his blog "Julia Kristeva's Concepts of Intertextuality", where she says, "...authors do not create their texts from their minds, but rather compile them from pre-existing texts". This unavoidable method of filmmaking is more visible and helps the film to become relatable and comprehensible for the spectators. Hence, films are mostly transformed, reinterpreted, and alluded to previously established ideas and work to criticize and challenge them cynically and freshly.

## **V) The Willing Suspension of Disbelief**

At the end of the eighteenth century, when the western literary world was at the peak of enlightenment, rejecting and criticising the notions of supernatural, aestheticism, and faith; the romantic poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth experimented with new forms of perceiving literature in their co-partnered collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). This revolutionary piece started the Literary Romantic Movement, consisting of everyday affairs, romanticism ideas by Wordsworth and

Coleridge's poems were about gothic, spirits, horror, and supernatural elements. Faced with criticism, Coleridge elaborates on many knots regarding the book in his later written collection of essays, *Biographia Literaria* (1817). He coins the term willing suspension of disbelief, recalling, "... my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Martin). The term describes the obligation that the writer has to create a bond of poetic faith between himself and the reader. Coleridge's term draws a distinction between the physical world and the world inside our minds. He claims that it is the writer's responsibility to create vivid and believable worlds- mental landscapes that exist only in the readers' imaginations. Readers consciously suspend their disbelief in the fictionality and unrealism of the written words, as well as in theatre, cinema, and magic, in order to gain the utmost pleasure from the content.

This wilful suspension of disbelief is a psychological tactic imposed by filmmakers to make audiences believe that what they are watching is a pure form of fiction. However, they become unaware of the reality and pretend the film is real. This is what Jean Baudrillard called "simulation", where people forget (temporarily) reality and observe the imitation as real, which does not have its origin (Baudrillard 4). According to Ed Hooks, stated in the book *Acting for Animators*, "The willing suspension of disbelief means the people in the audience know that what they are seeing on stage or screen is a pretend reality, but they are pretending that they do not know that. They accept the given premises of the story being told in order to empathise with the actors" (Hooks 36). Although most films fail to keep the audience engaged, suspending their disbelief for two to three-hour-long films, those that can do so become masterpieces.

Considering the postmodernist filmmakers' approach to recreating simulacrum, an illusionary reality in the social realism genre, inspired by historical and other textual references to make cinema more approachable and comprehensible to spectators, this dissertation attempts to demonstrate the fictional boundaries which audiences are obliged to maintain. The neorealist social thriller film, *Joker* (2019), has become profound with its viewers, raising the possibility of a cult-like masterpiece. Hence, analysing the film under the light of sociological theories of violence described by Slavoj Žižek and Hirschi, and the postmodernist film theory of simulacrum, the analysis is focused on the audience's influence on acting according to the movie character Arthur Fleck, a pure delinquent. This complete and wilful suspension of disbelief makes the audience indistinguishable from reality and fiction. Therefore, I attempt to analyse how postmodernist filmmakers control moviegoers' minds to an extreme extent and act accordingly through their repeated production of sequels, remakes, and prequels.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

### 4. a. Intertextualized *Joker*

Postmodernist literary products, especially cinema, are believed to have very few authentic creations but mostly amalgamations of intertextual references from predecessors. The character Joker has a long genealogy of his own, but the director Todd Phillips brought many direct and indirect instances, historical references, and similar characteristics of plots from other texts, movies, and series into his 2019 film *Joker*. Some of them are Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1964), Martin Scorsese's films like *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1982), and also the *Batman* comics and series, and movies like 2008's *The Dark Knight* and *Batman: The Killing Joke* (2016).

The first text, a philosophical novella, *Notes from Underground* (1964) by Fyodor Dostoevsky, demonstrates a self-contained consciousness, a masochist and pessimist underground man, a perfect representation of an abject hero, a by-product of an unsteady political system. This nihilist unnamed protagonist of the nineteenth century plays with the readers' minds by directly participating in his personal life, allowing them to picture a certain persona of himself, a blatant quest for identity in a lost city. This unsophisticated man directly breaks the fourth wall, creating discourse with his invisible readers to receive reactions and justifications. Giving an example, in the novella, the underground man says,

"You do not understand even now, gentlemen? No, it seems our development and our consciousness must go further to understand all the intricacies of this pleasure. Did you laugh? Delighted. My jests, gentlemen, are, of course, in bad taste, jerky, involved, and lacking in self-confidence" (Dostoevsky 20).



Confronted with ideological confusion and political instability during 1860's Russia, a crucial historical period when the Tsar rule was at the verge of conclusion due to liberating serfdom and also intellectuals' interest in westernization. Class struggle, a troubled economic state, and fallacious narratives are illustrated beautifully by the underground man, on whom Fyodor experimented with multiple literary devices. This character and his writing styles inspired various fields of work: literature, philosophy, film, influencing scholars like Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka, Ralph Ellison, Albert Camus, and expressionist and postmodernist filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Todd Phillips, and Wes Anderson (Wikipedia Contributor).

Next, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and its protagonist, Travis Bickle is unmistakably a mirror image of Arthur Fleck and his surroundings, as portrayed in the 2019 film *Joker*. The movie is set in the post-Vietnam War era and stars Robert De Niro, as Travis Bickle, an honourably discharged U.S. Marine and Vietnam War veteran (*Taxi Driver* 3:40–3:48). He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, which has caused him extreme insomnia and depression. This modern man from the deteriorating city of New York, works as a taxi driver and resents the city and its socio-political system. Although the movie focuses on gender relations and fragile masculinity as well as the rise of child prostitution around Greenwich Village. However, the plot and the protagonist's psychic state manifest as a sufferer of an existential crisis and a notoriously sick man who converts his social and sexual failure into a political crime, attempting to assassinate running president Palantine (1:36:46). As explained before in the book *Violence*, violence does not occur in a delinquent out of the blue, but rather under the strong influence of external oppression and internal rage (Žižek 48). In the case of Travis, he sees a rotten, blemished city, filled with criminals and illegal activities that are carried out openly. Using media propaganda and armed forces, authoritative

people systematically oppressing others and seeing all this alongside his psychological defects, Travis commits unforgivable crimes, shooting two people dead.

Most of society's depiction in the film, the political state, corruption, and, of course, the protagonist's psychological state are intertextualized in the film *Joker* (2019). For instance, buying illegal arms from the black market without any proper qualifications, getting caught by the super shop owner when Travis killed a black robber in defence and a second time in a rage. Moreover, he often imitates assassination in front of the mirror at his house, writes aphorisms in his notebook, and also at the last scene, when he impersonates himself shooting in the head. Most importantly, despite the fact that he has not served any punishment for his heinous crime, he is regarded as a heroic vigilante by the citizens; this concept was directly borrowed by Todd Phillips in his directed 2019 film.

The 1982 film, *The King of Comedy*, is another film by Martin Scorsese, in which many plots, scenes, and stories have been directly and indirectly intertextualized by Todd Phillips. The film is about Rupert Pupkin, an independent reporter and aspiring stand-up comedian who suffers from delusion, hysteria, and obsession with maladaptive daydreaming of meeting celebrities, especially the prominent comedian, Jerry Langford ( *The King of Comedy* 11:05-13:40). His obsession prevents him from thinking rationally and living a sane life, which results in him kidnapping Jerry with the help of another mentally distorted lady, Marsha. The ironic part of this film which is directly collected and recreated by the *Joker*'s director is the final part of the film. In the last scene, Rupert Pupkin forcibly enters the stage as a comedian and tells his life story; ironically, audiences conceive of his speech as comedy. And finally, he declares his bitter façade as a kidnapper, but that is also perceived as a joke by the spectators. He then states, "Tomorrow, you'll know I wasn't kidding and you'll all think I'm crazy. But I figure it this way: it is better to be king for a night than a schmuck for a

lifetime" (1:40:19-1:40:55). Similar to the film, *Taxi Driver*, after serving two years in jail, he becomes an icon for the people. His autobiography is published and a film adaptation of his life memoirs is made (1:42:41- 1:43:56). He takes over his idols' place as the greatest comedian in Hollywood, addressed as 'The legendary, inspirational, the one and only King of Comedy' in the final scene (1:44:12).

The prequel *Joker* is about the metamorphosis of Arthur Fleck, turning into a vicious and dangerous nihilist criminal, who is portrayed by Heath Ledger in the 2008's sequel film, *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan. *The Dark Knight* is one of the best-sequelized movies of all time in the history of cinema whose majority credit goes to Heath's commendable acting and portraying pure devilish persona in a fictional character. In the movie, the Joker plays a role that does not fit into a binary definition of hero or villain. He depicts a heinous evil that is morally just in the context of the radical, anti-capitalist viewpoint. Although his actions are not ethically justifiable, his reasons for doing such acts to lure humanity within citizens and authoritative people in a corrupted city are applaudable by few critics as stated in an article by The New York Times (Manohla). In the film, the Joker does not confront or establish any grand narratives but rather rejects any notion of living or abstract meaning of 'happiness' (*The Dark Knight* 1:27:12- 1:29:35). Therefore, this character mesmerised so many of its spectators that the star actor, Heath Ledger, was awarded the Academy, the Golden Globe, and eight more of the most notable prizes in the film industry (Wikipedia Contributors).

#### **4. b. Disclosing the Enigmatic Knots**

Now comes the question: why is this similar character depicted numerous times over the decades in all sorts of literary and visual media? How this character is still yearned for

and on a quest to unveil its mystery by the spectators? To answer that, the "Joker" is an enigmatic character who does not fit into the box of conventional humane comprehensive ability. As discussed before, transmedia (intertextualized products) provides insights into the enigmatic knots that were left behind by their predecessors (Jenkins). These knots, for example, the ambiguity of the underground man and his perception of modernist society, psychologically distorted Travis Bickle and Rupert Pupkins' obsessive fantasies of achieving what they lack as a quest for identity, left traumas in the readers' and spectators' minds for decades. Most importantly, in 2008's film *The Dark Knight*, Heath Ledger's characterization of the Joker traumatised moviegoers to that point when the news of violence was reported, killing 12 people and wounding over 58 in a shooting incident at the movie premiere in Aurora, Colorado (Margolin and Katersky). This sense of afterwardsness, which is believed by the scholar Paul to be the "sole purpose of the spectators to look for more, as the trauma is left unresolved" regarding certain characters who leave behind complex identities that are indescribable to them (Sutton 143).

#### 4. b. i. The Other Side of the Coin

Via Arthur Fleck, the filmmaker Todd Phillips tried to provide some of the answers to this confusion regarding the aforementioned characters. For decades, the fictional character "Joker" has been illustrated and portrayed by many comic writers, series, and movies, which includes Cesar Romero in 1966's *Batman* series, Jack Nicholson in 1989's *Batman*, Heath Ledger in 2008, and finally Jared Leto in 2016's *Suicide Squads*. Every time, the Joker is presented in an extremely degenerated and villainous way, but captured from the perspective of the other side, the morally "good" one. In 2008's film, the Joker left his ambiguous origin, providing three different backgrounds for his baseless and irrational acts, without giving much of any reason for his intentions (*The Dark Knight* 58:40). Because the movie is filmed

from the perspective of Batman, Bruce Wayne, Inspector James Gordon, and Harvey Dent, the city councillor, all are people of power. They rule Gotham City. They are in charge of all the mayhem and chaos. Due to the corrupt officials and mob bosses, the city stays in a state of deterioration for the majority of the people, similarly shown in the film, *Joker*. The Joker from *The Dark Knight* comes forward when the binary opposites of good and evil in society are in a battle to win in the war of humanity. He brings a different kind of crime—irrational, altruistic, and unconventional—that breaks down the city just with one of his actions. He depicts a very cunning and trickster persona who thinks a few steps ahead of the hero of the film, which is unorthodox for any film critic and audience.

#### 4. b. ii. Depiction of the Real

The ambiguity left the spectators stunned and that is why 2019's prequel film *Joker* arrived to unfold some of the knots left by *The Dark Knight's* Joker. *Joker* is a movie of the psychological neorealism genre, which illustrates 1981's Gotham, a rotten city, struggling with financial and social instability (Phillips and Silver 1). Political oppression has been consuming the people of the lower classes, who live in a garbage-like environment where leaders never dare to look at. This is the other side of the coin from *The Dark Knight's* portrayal. *Joker's* cinematographer Lawrence Sher and Edwin Rivera, the supervisor of Visual Effects, shared their visions in exhibiting life-like visuals in the movie, where they exaggerated the societal picture of 1980's New York City using modern technology to create this simulacrum for the audience to believe its authenticity on an online interview (YouTube 6:44-7:25). If we look at 1980's New York City, the allegories in *Joker* do not capture the reality, but rather depicts a pessimistic view of that society for the audience to empathise with the protagonist, Arthur Fleck.

#### **4. c. Gotham, a Dysfunctional and Rotten City, an Allegorical New York.**

The movie shows the society and political turmoil of Gotham where leaders use the media to spread propaganda about peace and tax-free cities over the radio, television, road announcements, and posters (*Joker* 22:32). But in reality, all these are just façades to hide the politicians' incapability to maintain the sanity, stability, and security of the citizens. They blame the "super rats" that are devouring the city and spreading diseases (12:45-13:03). Hiding behind the label of "Super Rats" and blaming the lower class people for this cause is absolutely insane, which is highly relatable in today's America. During Trump's Republican Party presidency, officials blamed Mexicans immigrants for the rise in crimes, so they announced to build a wall in South America reported in BBC News (Rodgers and Bailey). The rise in homicides and robberies is blamed on black Americans, infecting Republican right wings with a discriminatory attitude and influence them to blindly follow their leaders' arrogance. When the Novel Corona attack occurred in 2020, President Trump publicly make slurs it as "Chinese Virus" reports by The Washington Post. And the whole nation of conservatives and blind followers of Trump started to threaten and destroy East Asian people's property (Moynihan and Porumbescu). The same picture is illustrated in the film, where the incapability of the leaders and political authorities is demonstrated by the failure to prevent crimes and diseases. They scapegoat the underprivileged and weak, minor and helpless people of our society.

Critics demonstrate that these super rats are a metaphor for the criminal activities, escalation of corruption, and systematic violence in Gotham City. Michael says in his review,

"As the city deteriorates, with social care being cut as the rich grow richer, the rats represent what happens to things when they go unloved. Rats, on their own, don't pose much of a threat. When they're left – along with the garbage that's been abandoned on the streets – they evolve into mutant rats. It's a metaphor for the issues with the mentally ill. Gotham City is ignoring its most vulnerable people – and it will cause a problem for the city" (Moore).

Aforementioned, in 1981, when Ronald Reagan took power to rule the country, he stopped the public health services, which left mentally ill and physically sick people in the street (Green 8:07- 8:24). These people, who are unable to work for themselves, are left behind in the hope of a better country with less financial struggle, which was Regan's plan. This injustice is depicted beautifully by Todd in his film. Where do unprivileged people in need turn when they can't earn a dime or receive any government assistance, other than criminal activities?

The exploitative upper hierarchy, the authoritative people, are ignorant and ambiguous about the sufferings of the masses in Gotham City; two sides of the coin. The powerful people's version is portrayed in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*, and the other, the sufferers' side, is shown in 2019's film, *Joker*. The dysfunctional system creates social instability that leads to the birth of criminals. As suggested by Slavoj in his book *Violence*, no crime is liberated from zero influence. There must be some sort of "invisible background force, the mastermind and notorious 'dark matter' of crimes" labelled as systematic violence, behind every visible destructive crime (Žižek). This violence is inherent in the political, economic, and social systems that control the entire lives of citizens. If Arthur was given proper treatment when he was locked up in the Arkham Asylum, if he was given prescribed and accurate treatment funded by the Ministry of Health, if him, being a socially

disadvantaged person were given the opportunity to work and live in a respectful environment, all the mayhem created in the later parts of the film would not have been created.

#### **4. d. A Sadist Protagonist**

The movie starts with Arthur Fleck's image in the mirror of his dressing table in his workplace. He impersonates a certain happy character that everyone expects of him. Then, in a later scene, we see him seeing a social worker who works under the Ministry of Health and is affiliated with Arkham Mental Asylum asked to prescribe him stronger doses of medicine to become more "sane" and "not feel bad anymore" (*Joker* 7:00-7:43). Like Travis Bickle, Arthur also keeps a journal of jokes that he finds funny. For example, "I just hope my death makes more sense cents than my life" (6:25-6:30). His lifelong neurological disease, Pseudobulbar affect, an uncontrollable laugh that eventually turns into physical pain, caused him to be discriminated against, feared, and not given enough opportunities to succeed in life in Gotham, an allegory of America. The illusion of the American Dream of success has been proven absolutely wrong by the movie director. Because this dream is not for everyone, especially not the disadvantaged people of our society. His relationship with his mother causes him to imagine his neighbour as his lover, a Freudian complexity. From the later parts of the movie, we get to know that his mother was a psychologically challenged woman who had brutally beaten her adoptive son, Arthur Fleck, in his childhood. This prevented him from growing mentally and intellectually as a sane and ordinary being. People are frightened and disgusted by him, and tend to avoid him. They blatantly bully and insult him, for example, when Murray Franklin verbally bullies him in front of the whole nation in a comedy show (59:15-1:01:00).



Arthur Fleck, a mentally unstable man, failed to live up to the expectations of his own and others. He was deceived and oppressed by his mother as well as the political system, which led him to act in rage; creating chaos in the society he lived in. The protagonist portrays a multidimensional character, each part of a different phenomenon. However, his biological defaults prevent him from achieving his goals of becoming a successful comedian and "being seen by everyone" in a rational and conventional way (*Joker* 41:11-42:23). He cannot be considered as an abject hero like Fyodor's underground man because he is not self-aware and conscious of his surroundings. He laughs at his own pace without understanding the circumstances. His jokes are irrational and cruel to the point of disgust, almost like Rupert from *The King of Comedy*. He is socially detached, as, according to Travis explains in the text, *Causes of Delinquency*, Arthur is completely unbounded from society. He does not confront the attachments, commitments, involvement, and beliefs that defy all the Theories of Delinquencies (Hirschi 17). Hence, as per the theory, we can agree that he is utterly liberated from social ethics and conventions, leading him to act immorally and delinquently. We can never rationalise him or his actions according to the grand narratives and societal laws. He commits delinquent acts like killing three men and a colleague in defence as well as in rage, or causing a revolution while going on broadcast and assassinating a television icon, Murray, to exhibit his resentment (*Joker* 1:45:10). These can never be comprehended as the acts of a fool or villain. He is an undoubtedly sick man, a nihilist being who left the world in angst, infuriated by the vicious cycle of chaos.

#### 4. d. i. Creation of a Criminal

The film *Joker* shows the metamorphosis of a timid and shielded Arthur Fleck into a persona consisting of unadulterated, nihilist, unapologetic, and destructive characteristics, which are shown in the *Batman* sequel, *The Dark Knight* (2008). In the 2019 movie, Arthur

gradually loses his attachment with society and his surroundings, his commitment towards his mother. Finally, his beliefs break down when he is ultimately aware of his origin as an adopted and tortured baby, which results him of being a mentally sick person due to the head injuries and traumas he received from his loving mother. He resurrects. He unveils his covers, detaching from all the narratives by killing the last bond, his mother. He confronts his anagnorisis. He reaches his epiphany, standing in a public restroom, dancing and relishing his freedom, fully identifying himself as “The Joker” (*Joker* 1:21:00-1:29:50). He no longer has to deal with his pseudobulbar effect weakness or his fear of socializing with people after this point. He exacts heinous retaliation against his colleague Randall with scissors as written in the film script (Phillips and Silver 92). At that point, he was a different man. The inception of Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker. In the interview with Murray Franklin, Arthur says,

"Have you seen what it's like out there, Murray? Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody's civil anymore. Nobody thinks what it's like to be the other guy" (118).

His justification for killing the three Wall Street men is nothing but baseless, as he says, "I killed those guys because they were awful" (111). His sense of subjectivity and consciousness in his comedic world is beyond irrational and anything but imitable. He let his super-ego to lead his way, controlled by his sickly drive.

#### **4. e. Is *Joker* Influential Enough to its Spectators in Committing Crime?**

Critics of the film, *Joker*, are very concerned about the influence that this film has had on its viewers and how much a spectator should be inspired by it. The social realism genre has always been consumed broadly by moviegoers due to the realistic simulacrum created by

filmmakers. The film *Joker* has also depicted a near-real-life 1980s America, as an allegory of New York City. After the shooting incident in 2008 at the movie premiere of *The Dark Knight*, armed forces and legal authorities have been cautious of any violent threat that might arise during the post-premiere of *Joker* in 2019. Although the FBI has announced that they have received tips of threatening posts on social media regarding this psycho-thriller film, however, no news of violence was heard afterwards. Some critics, like Sohrab, rooted for the "incels" community, justifying them being inspired by the film and spreading rumours of committing violent acts in his blog "*Joker* and Our Crisis of Solidarity" (Ahmari). Nevertheless, most of them completely reject this proposition.

#### 4. e. i. Fictional Boundaries

However, most of the critics and scholars speak against imitating violence like Arthur, a fictional creation, but to search for the reasons why all the oppressive injustices have been going on. The film provides a lot of inspiration for movie-lovers because this character is one of the most enigmatic and fascinating of all time. Therefore, the author, like Slavoj Žižek in his film review article "More on *Joker*: From Apolitical Nihilism to a New Left", says, it would be nothing but "an act of stupidity" to imitate Jokers' actions in real life. I have already mentioned, Arthur is not a sane and rational being. His understanding and vision of life are completely unreasonable and a nuisance. This recontextualized America and the corruption and social instability may correspond, but preserving the fictional boundaries is a responsibility of the spectators. The simulacrum is a postmillennial concern. Illustration in the realism genre has become so close to reality that it is difficult to distinguish between the real and the distorted representation noted by Slavoj. Justifying the irrationality of imitating the Joker's act in real life, even if we live in similar social chaos, he calls for zero political subjectivity in the Joker's action, with no political program, but some explosion of negativity (Žižek). Sympathizing with a fool, relishing his resurrection as a herald of destruction, and

acting accordingly are both different things. Even a morally disturbed being would not choose that path of destructiveness due to the socio-political bindings. A radical nihilist can never reach the position of authority. Unless the leader believes in conventional or non-conventional narratives, he should never be followed. Joker, who agrees not to have any affiliation with any political or economic movement, thus, is unwarranted of being followed. Even if for a moment we consider him standing in the position of a new authoritarian ruler, in the last scene, the whole nation, army, and police, go against him. This is an utter hopeless and fictional approach because as Slavoj mentions in his critics, "No authoritarian society can be made so powerless. No, we don't identify with the joker, we see his total deadlock" (Žižek).

Like systematic violence as described before, the film camouflages the political, economic, and ideological oppression perpetrated by the society of Gotham City. The movie shows oppression but also ways to prevent it, but certain right-wing radicals still consider the film's self-destructive scenes to be violent enough to cause social crimes against the convention. Hence, movie reviewers urge people to avoid looking at the surface level of the film, where the resurrection of the protagonist and his violent acts torment his surroundings, but rather quest for an in-depth explanation of the ideological and political conformity which are oppressive enough to create such destruction. Slavoj Žižek, being a communist, left-wing scholar, suggests a hypothetical counter resolution to overcome the oppressive rule of law for social beings. He suggests to start from ground zero if one has to break an existing system, but not like what the Joker did. He says in the article 'System Deadlock' that, "Joker's stance is radical nihilism, a blind alley, a total deadlock, superfluous and non-productive" (Žižek). He resents the depiction of the violence portrayed in the film *Joker* as it leads nowhere near a foundation but rather to a dead alley.

Therefore, we see that a film is always intertextualized for the people's need to understand the mysteries left behind by their predecessors. This traumatic mystery creates the afterwardsness to quest for more of the film sequels to unfold. Moreover, moviegoers tend to rely more on the social realism genre that represents the simulated real-life to be more relatable and comprehensible. Hence, by creating simulacra and establishing simulations using visual media, filmmakers capture the close-mirror image of the reality but distort the authenticity of the position. Hence, psychological movies like *Joker* (2019) have been wholeheartedly accepted and scrutinised by worldwide spectators. Illustrating the enigmatic character, the "Joker", who has always been in the interest of the movie and DC comic lovers, the filmmaker tries to portray the origin of this character, creating a simulacrum of the 1980's society in New York City. Hence, spectators became more enthusiastic and influenced by the film and the stories that came with it, and the question of being unable to distinguish between reality and fictional boundaries came into concern for the filmmakers and critics. However, if fiction creates threats by imitating them, it should always stay within the realm of the imagination. As a result, no matter how far the film *Joker* pushes the boundaries of fiction and pleases its audience by displaying as much reality as possible through a simulacrum, the film fails to reconcile with reality and provides any pragmatic resolution.

## Conclusion

As illustrated in this study, the postmodernist cinematic movement stepped into the realm of unexpected advancement in depicting reality in visual media. The reason is to extent the limit of fiction where it has become nearly impossible for spectators to distinguish between the fictional boundaries and reality. This scepticism raises doubts about whether a fictional product of mass media is influential enough to promote non-conventional and unethical activities like delinquencies, portrayed by the enigmatic protagonist the Joker into spectators' minds to commit accordingly. Therefore, in this paper, I have come to the conclusion that it is possible for audiences to become infatuated by some iconic characters displayed in films. Nevertheless, this infatuation should always remain behind the boundary of fictional procrastination. *Joker* (2019), a magnificent postmodernist film, depicts the origin and process of resurrection of an enigmatic character of all time, the Joker, by emphasising the dystopian society and political turmoil of 1980s America. The film, which depicts reality in the psychological realism genre, creates a sensation among its viewers by answering questions left unanswered by its predecessors. *Joker* is an utterly fictional product, which amalgamates historical and social references to evoke the willingness to suspend audiences' disbelief. Therefore, it does not provide any sort of conclusive, especially pragmatic resolution throughout the film.

Like I have already elaborated, remaking, sequelizing, and extending by reiterating successful stories and movies have always been in the interest of filmmakers, particularly in the postmodern era of the cinematic movement. This is because the spectators' need to fulfil the afterwardsness, the unresolved knots left behind by mysterious predecessors. Hence, the film, *Joker* is undoubtedly received with great interest by both moviegoers and critics. The social realism genre of films is always absorbed as it portrays the near-real society that we live in. The struggles and challenges of survival in this world of capitalist oppression have

been wonderfully illustrated in the film, *Joker*. Scholars agree that delinquents are the direct results of their social environment as well as the distorted mentalities. Therefore, criminals like Arthur Fleck are not very mythical because they are not supervillains. He does not consist of the untouchable superpower of destruction, but rather, he is a mere sufferer of a dysfunctional society and political oppression. That is why, audiences differentiated this film from the superhero genre as being more convincing.

The demonstrated violence committed by the protagonist exhibits the egalitarian instincts, a barbaric social system. The path he takes leads to absolute deadlock and the end of civilization. His interpretation of freedom and happiness comes from an ill and rotten psyche that has been squeezed by the deteriorated system. This mentally sick person metamorphoses into a vicious criminal, a remorseless serial murderer. As reported by critics, he does not have any motives or beliefs to reach the position of authority that is given to him in the film. Even if we perceive the film's narratives from the perspective of authoritarianism, he alone can never establish the society that he wants. Some radical oppressed folks are undeniably unable to create a utopia, breaking the dysfunctional capitalist system.

Therefore, I have deduced with this proposition that, there is no reason for the audience to follow and act accordingly even if society turns into the portrayed social illusion in the film. The irrational approach to breaking a social system taken by Arthur Fleck will never be applicable in reality. Although some left-wing communist film critics advocate starting from zero-level if the social system is oppressive enough to exist in. However, this communist approach also has to be followed by the support of the masses and especially the armed forces, as has happened before in the history of the political system, such as in the 1917's Russian Revolution and the 1953' Cuban Revolution. A terrorist act by an individual can never break down a system. Moreover, behind all the violence and destruction portrayed in the film, spectators should investigate the systematic violence committed by media

propaganda, the availability of illegal firearms, and the authority's ignorance towards the unprivileged people. If these major yet hidden issues are resolved, such social and political deterioration can be prevented from occurring.

*Joker* is one of the best productions in the postmodernist film media, experimenting with the psychological influences of the great arch-enemy of Batman. This film has been encountering criticism since it was première. However, to expand the discourse on the postmodernist characteristics embedded in the film in a broader scope, I would like to present a feasible argument regarding the existence of the film's protagonist. In the very last scene, we see Arthur being interviewed as an inmate in Arkham State Hospital, which raises the uncertainty of whether he has been in the hospital all along. When he says at the start that he was better off locked up in the asylum, it makes me wonder, if he has been locked up ever since and all the incidents are his imagination. As Murray Franklin suggests, releasing super cats, deciphering the breakdown of corruption in the deteriorated society of Gotham City, to defeat the metaphorical super rats as in the dysfunctions; maybe Arthur Fleck will resurrect as the super cat, the Joker we see in the film *The Dark Knight* (2008).



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