Gotham's Mirror: Althusserian Reflections on Todd Phillips' *Joker* and Contemporary America

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Hollywood cinematic adaptations of comic books and superhero narratives have ensnared a substantial audience, not merely due to the popularity of their characters, but also owing to their intricate and multi-layered plots. In contrast to other superhero narratives, Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019) portrays a somber depiction of America, as reflected in the microcosm of Gotham City. Through defamiliarization, the film's narrative orbits around the supervillain, Joker, whose proclivity for violence and psychological complexities has sparked contentious debate among scholars and critics since its debut.

Aim

This article endeavors to unveil the mechanisms of numerous state apparatuses (RSA and ISA) that underpin the survival of the governing system and the perpetuation of dominant discourse and class. Despite widespread civil rights movements, turmoil, and challenges confronted by the state, the fictitious Gotham City remains governed by its oppressive police force, unscrupulous government, and the persuasive influence of radio and television.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Louis Pierre Althusser (1918-1990), the French Marxist philosopher, revolutionized Marxist theories, presenting a methodical comprehension of the intricate and multifaceted nature of domination and control within society. Althusser's delineation of Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) offers a detailed analysis of power manipulation and sustenance within and by the state. These two apparatuses serve as instruments for the ruling class to perpetuate their authority in capitalist societies: the former operates through physical force and coercion, while the latter functions through internalization and normalization of ideologies. Although they operate distinctively, RSA and ISA interlace to serve a singular purpose: governance of the dominant class. The convolutions and tenacity of

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dominant ideologies in a society can only be comprehended through an examination of the interplay between RSA and ISA forces.

Despite criticisms of Althusser's philosophy, numerous researchers have expanded upon his concepts concerning the mechanisms of power and control within the ruling system. An understanding of Althusser's theories will amplify our comprehension of social power and illuminate societal transformations and governing strategies.

After providing a research background, this article briefly delves into the backstory of the Joker as a character. Leveraging Althusser's perspective, this paper scrutinizes the significance of ideology and governance policies in Gotham City; by decoding the ideologies, it unveils the rationale and methodologies underpinning the events depicted in *Joker*.

Discussion

Upon surveying the adaptations of popular comic books into Hollywood superhero films and the genesis of Joker as a character, *Joker* is scrutinized through an Althusserian lens. It elucidates how the ruling system of crime-ridden Gotham City, a metaphor for contemporary political systems, sought to maintain its dominion over the populace by resorting to RSA and ISA. From the opening credits, one may observe the iron fist of RSA and the validation of coercive force employed by the ruling system. The working class is depicted as either psychotics like Arthur and his mother Penny, or as criminals, ruffians, and rioters, even when engaged in civil rights protests like the waste collectors. Both blue-collar and white-collar workers are consigned to prison or mental asylums should they aspire to challenge the status quo. Alongside RSA, ISA manifests in diverse forms, from serious news broadcasts on radio and television to the ostensibly innocuous and recreational *Murray Franklin*'s television show.

On one hand, RSA traditionally intertwines with violence and is materialized in institutions such as the Gotham police, national guard, prison, and asylum. On the other, ISA comprises establishments that primarily operate through the appeal to ideology, such as radio, television news, and *Murray Franklin*'s show. Penny, a silenced victim of the system who bore Wayne's illegitimate son, internalized the ideology of the ruling class to the extent that she deemed her abuser, Thomas Wayne, the most suitable candidate for governing Gotham City. In contrast to Penny, Arthur, after killing three Wall Street traders, realizes that his existence is acknowledged by the system solely when he confronts RSA. Upon discovering the manipulative nature of ISA, Arthur murders his mother and shoots Murray Franklin to dismantle the ideological idols in his life. Thus, the psychotic, reticent, and apprehensive Arthur metamorphoses into Joker, a supervillain who retaliates against RSA and ISA with coercion and ferocity.

Ultimately, the cosmos of *Joker* is juxtaposed with the America of the 1980s and 2010s during Reagan and Trum era, respectively. The film draws a poignant analogy between the fictional Thomas Wayne and the veritable Ronald Reagan and Donald

Trump, particularly in relation to their political campaigns, media portrayals, and crusade-like slogans: Reagan's "Let's Make America Great Again" and Trump's "Make America Great Again." Thus, alongside uncovering *Joker*'s censures of capitalist systems, the article also addresses the potential role of the film in Democrat-Republican conflicts in America.

Findings and Conclusion

In addition to its propagandist undertones critiquing Republican policies, particularly those of Presidential Candidate Donald Trump a year prior to his election (2020), attention must be paid to the film's depiction of violence and its tragic denouement. The widespread upheavals and the murder of Wall Street traders, Penny, Murray Franklin, Thomas Wayne, and his spouse function as an earnest admonition transcending the confines of Gotham City. By portraying unbridled violence, the film serves as a cautionary tale, warning that if the custodians of capitalist systems persist in disregarding the living conditions of the underprivileged and steadfastly adhere to their governance strategies utilizing RSA and ISA, dire consequences will befall the ruling class, who predominantly command the lion's share of state wealth.

Keywords: Hollywood Cinema, Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), Social Class, Philips' *Joker* (2019)

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