

## EXPOSING SOCIAL INEQUALITY FROM THE MENTALLY ILL REPRESENTATION IN TODD PHILLIPS' *JOKER*

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### ABSTRACT

Social inequality has continuously become a problem especially towards marginalized group. Such topic is presented in Todd Phillips latest psychological thriller, *Joker* (2019). Whilst other researches focus on the psychological aspect of the film, this study takes on the perspective of the sociological/socio-political aspect in the film which is social inequality. In analyzing the social inequality aspect of the film, this study uses theory of structural discrimination by Link, et al. which theorizes that laws, policies, or other practices. are discriminating a marginalized group. To analyze the film itself, the writers analyzed the mise-en-scène and cinematography aspects of the film. The purpose of this study is to find if government's policies have any involvement of impact to the life of a mentally ill person. Method used for this analysis is qualitative data research. In analyzing the film, it is found that Fleck's life as a mentally ill and poor person is deliberately sabotaged by the discriminative policies and laws applied in Gotham city. In conclusion, this film represents *Joker* as more than just a Batman's main film but rather used as a vehicle to criticize the state of social inequality in the world.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From the early invention of cinema, films are made to entertain and for profits; however, as time goes on, those are not the only purpose of films. In their experimental research study, Igartua and Barrios (2012, pp. 513-541) find that movie has narrative persuasion which is able to sway people's perspective on things. Little by little, directors start making films about topics that are usually taboo or untouched in hopes of changing the society's views on them, such as racism, politics, discrimination, inequality, and moral. Whilst those topics are not be new, in the past those topics were usually addressed in a lighthearted and comedic way in the films as not to offend the viewers. Presently, those topics are delivered to open the minds and eyes of the viewers of said problem and start the discourse of said topic in hopes for finding the solution to the problem.

One of the problems that is commonly tackled in films is social inequality. A survey done by Richard Wike (2013) uncovers that social inequality has been a big problem in nearly every country across the globe. One of the reasons is the increasing gap between the upper class and the



working class. This happens as the result of the lack of good education, public health insurance, and income inequality. In addition, the same survey finds that in 31 of 39 surveyed, most of the population believe that the system heavily favors the wealthy; therefore, it decreases the chance of closing in on the gap. At this alarming rate, social inequality needs to be handled and fixed seriously to avoid increasing the gap even more; however, the elite society thinks this is not a big issue, so there is a rush in solving this problem. With the media being controlled by the wealthy and powerful and the system being made against the working people, it is hard for the matter to be solved. Since fixing the problems lies in the hands of the system and upper-class people, discrimination among themselves start among the working-class people. The discrimination heavily affects marginalized people in working and lower class more than anybody else.

One of the marginalized groups that is affected is people with mental illness or mental disorder. They constantly struggle to fight the stigma and discrimination against them. In addition, they are obligated to find help for their mental illness or disorder which most of the time is not affordable for them. Mckeon (2021) writes that a new organization called Advocates for Community Health (ACH) is urging the Congress in America to invest in community health for a more affordable and accessible health care for people. It is not a new thing to propose, yet, it seems that most countries choose to neglect the need for mental health care, especially in developing countries (Newey and Gulland). Without the professional's help, the patient is unable to control their mental illness, which results in the change of behavior of the patient. In addition, the way the system—both the government and society—discriminates against the poor and mentally-ill person heavily affects the person's way of life. These aspects are represented in the psychological thriller film, *Joker*.

*Joker* (2019) is the most recent live action adaptation of Batman's number one villain's origin, the Joker. The film garners a lot of attention from the public since it is the origin story of Batman's number one villain. It gives a backstory of how Joker comes to be even though the film is vastly different than the comic. Furthermore, the film manages to get nominated in both BAFTA Awards and Academy Awards in several categories with Joaquin Phoenix winning the Best Actor, and Hildur Guðnadóttir winning the Best Music in both awards (IMDB n.d.). The film represents many current problems in the society, such as, morality, social class inequality, systemic discrimination, and mental illness/disorder.

As a result of its popularity, the film has been analyzed through various lenses and perspectives. From artistic perspectives, Jurgens (2020) argues that Joker's epileptic dance is a sign of male hysteria and spectacted illness that represent the anarchy of the body which goes hand-in-hand with the social revolution that he embodies in the film. Furthermore, Keris (2021) claims the sound design of the film enables viewers to enter Arthur's head through constant barrage of ambient noise that represents the decaying city environment and Arthur's transformation from nobody to become the villain and the hero that the city needs.

In his article, Brown (2021) argues that the absence of Batman as the protector of status quo and hegemony in the film shows that the Joker represents the society's refusal towards conformity and desire to change the status quo. Jimenez et.al (2021) on the other hand claims that the Joker film is an effort to bring auteurism towards the superhero genre. It falls within the city-mysteries narrative that combined radical politics with sensational fiction whose purpose is mainly to expose



the vices, crimes, and corruption of the elites. By exploring the ambivalence perspective of the loneliness aspect in the film, Redmond (2021) argues that the loneliness that Arthur's experienced could either represent as pathological loneliness due to Arthur's individuated social circumstances or systemic isolation and loneliness due to the late capitalism that erodes human connection and sympathy towards one another.

From psychological perspectives, Bainbridge (2021) focuses her analysis by using Meltzer's psychoanalytical theory to find that Joker as a film represented the anxiety rooted from social-political dynamic from the toxic elements of the neo liberalism. Fitriani (2019), in her study using Sigmund Freud's psychological theory, finds that Fleck's Id, ego, and superego are affected by his surroundings and up-bringing. In Rahman's (2021) thesis, he analyzes Fleck's personality disorder using Theodore Milton's theory and finds that Fleck suffers from 5 personality disorders which are triggered by psychological factors and environmental factors. Sarasa (2020) uses Freud's theory of psychoanalysis to analyze the indicators of bullying and the impact it has on character building.

From the sociological standpoint, Mathijs (2021) puts emphasize on the media reception of the Joker film. he argues that media panics, muted voices, and anxieties of consumption that the film entails are forms of micropolitical acts which negotiate the political discourse between the viewers and public opinion makers. Baharuddin and Gosan (2021) use Marx theory of class contradiction to explore the aspect of exploitation and discrimination in which they conclude that they are categories of exploitation in Joker which cover three areas namely the Health Sector, the Labor Sector, and the Media News Sector. Meanwhile, a thesis by Amelia (2021) analyzes the class struggle represented in the film using Marxism theory of social class.

From the previous research above, it has been seen that *Joker* has been analyzed through many aspects and perspectives. This study specifically focuses on analyzing social inequality and its implication to Fleck, a poor mentally-ill person; in addition, this analysis is going to analyze the system's—both the government and the society— involvement in shaping the mentally-ill person. By using a different perspective, hopefully this study is able to fill the gap from previous studies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory used in the analysis is social inequality theory. Link, et al. (2014) categorize four types of discrimination born from stigma: Direct Person-to-Person Discrimination, Discrimination that Operates Through the Stigmatized Individual, Interactional Discrimination, and Structural Discrimination. Direct person-to-person discrimination happens when Person A discriminates Person B created on the prejudicial attitude and stereotype of the label applied to Person B (Allport, 1954). Discrimination that operates through the stigmatized individual means that the stigmatized individual is aware of the stereotype that may be stamped to their label; thus, the consequences may subtly manifest in the individual's mind unconsciously (Link, et al., 2014, p. 56). For example, a child of divorce may grow up believing they will be destined to have an unsuccessful marriage. Interactional discrimination is a discrimination that emerges when social interaction between individuals happens (p.57). Lastly, structural discrimination happens “when social policy, laws, or other practices disadvantage stigmatized group cumulatively over time” (p. 58).



This analysis is going to primarily use structural discrimination as the core theory. Structural discrimination does not need direct involvement of specific parties; be it a residue of past practice or policy that discriminates against a certain group. For instance, even though it has been proven through scientific and social studies that having disability is not a proof of weakness, discrimination towards mentally disabled people still exist to this day. Knowing that stigma is fully dependent on power (Link and Phelan, 2001), it is impossible to believe that changes for the better inclusive policy or practice will happen. If a group does not have enough power, their opinions and actions have no effect on the outcome whatever it be. It means the more powerful group always drives the society and dictates how they should act towards the group with less-to-no power. As Scheff (1996) theorized, the society and the deviant's actions are driven by the traditional stereotype of insanity. When the society reacts according to that traditional stereotype; overtime, the deviant is going to act according to the expectation even though they are not in the first place.

To analyze the social inequality aspect of the film, theories of film studies are going to be used. The film studies theories used in this analysis are the dialogues, cinematography and mise-en-scène as those are seen as the representation of the social inequality and Fleck's state of mind. Understanding the aspects of film is important as it helps the audience to appreciate the film with a more critical eye (Sutandio, 2020, p. 197). Mise-en-scène refers to how the director uses the space in an individual shot to create a dramatic or emotional effect, or a symbolic meaning in the film. In other words, it refers to how objects, characters, and properties are placed in a frame shot to create meaning for the audience (p. 160). Aspects of mise-en-scène that are going to be analyzed are costume, make-up, facial expression, body language, property, color, lighting, and sound. According to Oxford Dictionary, cinematography means "the art of making motion pictures" ("Cinematography"). In general, cinematography analyzes the camera placement and how it is moved. Thus, the conclusion will be drawn after the data are collected and analyzed.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The method of research used in the analysis was qualitative data research. In analyzing the film, the writers also used the social inequalities theory from Link, et al. (2014), Link and Phelan (2001), and Scheff (1996) as well as film studies theories. First, the writers watched the film multiple times in order to identify and collect accurate data that are related to the restriction. Second, the writers collected the data from the film such as: shots and dialogue that showed the inequality occurring in the film, how the characters dress, act, and react. In addition, the writers searched and took some online articles and journals to support the analysis. Next, the writers determined which issue of the film to be analyzed. The writers paid attention to the characters' action, setting, dialogue, and other details in the film. The writers looked for important details and information that could help in reaching the purpose of this article and wrote them down. Most of the data in this analysis was taken from the scenes in the film and later connected to the theories. Other data was taken from the article, journal, and online media. Finally, the writers determined shots and dialogue that were correlated with the theory of social inequality.



#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Joker* gains a lot of attention because it is an origin story of Batman's archnemesis; however, the story is not only about Joker's origin. The film exposes how there is a discrimination happening in Gotham City, specifically structural discrimination. Upon further watching, it can be seen how the system favors the rich and wealthy people while the group with less power are stuck in poverty. This is portrayed through the mise-en-scène and cinematography from several scenes in the film in which I am going to analyze.

The first scene that I am going to discuss occurs early in the film when Fleck is called to his boss' office. He is asked about his disappearance during his job. Hoyt Vaughn, his boss, is not happy with him since this is not the first time Fleck disappears during the job; in addition, this time, Fleck does not return the property of the store he is advertising. Fleck tries to explain his situation to Hoyt, but he is ignored. Hoyt refuses to believe Fleck and keeps berating him for being irresponsible. In the end, Fleck is forced to stay silent and smile as his boss talks over him. Even though Fleck and Hoyt belong to the same class, a lower-class, it is evident that there is a power imbalance between the two. As a boss, Hoyt has the power to do and say whatever they want with little to no consequence; meanwhile, Fleck, an employee, cannot do or say much against his boss without getting repercussions. The general practice in a workplace often demands full submission to the people in the position higher than them. This puts the people on the bottom chain of command in disadvantage as they are often blamed for something they are innocent of but incapable of rebutting. In this scene, Hoyt blames the whole incident on Fleck even though Fleck is the victim of the incident; however, Fleck cannot argue with his boss because he is on the bottom of the chain.

If he were to argue with Hoyt, Fleck would have been out of job. The hypothetical situation will evoke another flaw in the system. As a poor person, Fleck does not have a great education, so any job he lands on will not pay him much. As a mentally ill person, Fleck does not have many choices in regards of job. The stigma that mentally ill person is uncontrollable and useless will prevent many employers from employing him. Therefore, as a poor and mentally ill person, Fleck has to avoid getting fired if he manages to get a job. In preventing the hypothetical situation, Fleck has to accept all of his boss tirades and jabbers. The society has been made to believe stigmas about mentally illness people which drives them to treat mentally ill people like lesser beings. As Scheff (1996) theorize, because the society treats them as less than people, those mentally ill people, in time, believe that they are lesser beings. This is portrayed with Fleck accepting the tirade from his boss even though he is undeserving. In their survey, Kaye, et al. (2011) find that most companies refuse to hire people with mental disability due to the misconception surrounding the mentally ill and the lack of awareness on how to accommodate and deal with a mentally ill person. If Fleck were to act out, he would have a tough time finding a company which would hire him despite his mental illness. Fleck realizes the city is structurally discriminative towards people like him, disabling him to do anything against it. There is nothing he could do other than surviving as best as he can with anything the world offers him. Though it is short, the scene shows the power imbalance between two lower-class people and the way that the system is structured to discriminate and disadvantage people with less power.





Figure 1. Fleck kicks the dumpster with vigor (Phillips, 2019, 00:18:52).



Figure 2. Fleck sits down and looks up to the sky after kicking the dumpster with vigor (00:19:07).

After the scene in the office, the shot cuts to Fleck kicking the garbage bins on an alley. He kicks at the garbage bins until he loses his breath and flops to the ground. In figure 2, there are several things from the cinematography and mise-en-scène aspects that can be analyzed. In the shot, the sky is bright, and Fleck is looking at it. The bright sky can be interpreted as hope or prosperity—a brighter and better future. With Fleck looking up at it, it can be interpreted as Fleck looking at hope, wishing for that better future to come to him. Other than that, the scene can be interpreted in another way. The bright sky can be interpreted as the representation for the upper-class people who live above them all and stay untouchable. On the other hand, the darkness that engulfed Fleck, a poor and mentally ill person, represents poverty while the dumpsters that are towering over him represent his marginalized position in the society and system that traps and restrains him from getting out of poverty. This shows how the system is made to favor one side heavily. Whilst the upper-class people live peacefully, the lower-class people have to struggle their way out of poverty.

The problem in this situation lies on, as represented by the dominating size of the dumpster, the unfair and rotten system which will not allow them to succeed. The discriminative system will always trap them and keep them on the bottom of society. In figure 1, Fleck kicks the dumpster as hard as he can several times; however, he soon loses his power before flopping to the ground in defeat. The action shows that Fleck tries to fight the system and moves it even for a little, but it does not budge even slightly. There is no point for Fleck to fight the system because it has been



designed as such to be unmovable and unshakeable by anything except those with power. In structural discrimination, the policies and laws simply have to exist at some point and just wait until the society adapt to it. While it is not clear whether the discriminative laws and policy toward people with mental illness still abide, it is clear that the society still embrace and exercise such practice. Link and Phelan (2001) believe that stigma is fully dependent on power; as long as the society still embrace the stigma and discriminative policies against mentally disabled people, Fleck and his peers will not be able to fight against it no matter how hard they tried. Unless the people with high social standing initiate the change, the system will be as it is; the people always will terrorize people in the bottom of the hierarchy—which is Fleck and other mentally ill people. He may try his best, but the government’s discriminative system does not allow him to get out of poverty.

The second scene that I am going to discuss is during Fleck’s visits to his social worker. From the scene, it can be seen how the government does not really care about the well-being of mentally ill people. As someone who is poor, Fleck does not have enough money to pay for a psychiatrist or therapist; therefore, he relies on the counseling that are provided by the government. Even though the facility is provided by the government, it does not seem the social services are taken care of quite well.



Figure 3. Fleck’s meeting with his social worker. (Phillips, 2019, 00:05:44)

As seen from figure 3, the room is in a state of disarray. There are a lot of files that are stored in the bookcase, and boxes of them piled together. The lighting is quite dim despite there being two lamps in the room. It seems the government does not care about the social services they are providing for the people with financial hardship. The abundance of files implies the amount of people that are referred to one social worker. It means the government does not employ enough social workers which forces the social workers to overwork themselves with the number of patients they have to deal with.

Not only through the messy room, the ignorance of the government about social services also can be seen through Fleck and his social worker’s conversation. During his second visit to his social worker, Fleck starts to open up to the social worker by telling her what he realizes about the world he lives in. Fleck is telling her about his realization when she cuts him off to inform him that the social services will stop.

FLECK : ...until a little while ago, it was like nobody ever saw me. Even I didn’t know if I really existed.



- SOCIAL WORKER** : Arthur, I have some bad news for you.  
**FLECK** : You don't listen, do you? I don't think you ever really hear me. You just ask me the same question every week. "How's your job? Are you having any negative thoughts?" All I have are negative thoughts, but you don't listen anyway. I said, for my whole life, I didn't know if I even really existed. But I do. And people are starting to notice.
- SOCIAL WORKER** : They've cut our funding. We're closing down our offices next week. The city has cut funding across the board. Social Service is part of that. This is the last time we'll be meeting.
- FLECK** : Okay...how am I supposed to get my medications now? (Phillips, 2019, 00:40:38-00:42:02)

With the funding being cut, it means people like Fleck, who is poor and struggling with mental health, can no longer have free mental health services. Fleck--and those like him--does not have the luxury of money to achieve and get whatever he wants; therefore, he has to rely on social services including counseling. It seems the government stops caring about people like Fleck altogether; they cut the funding for services to help those in need of such services. In the same scene, Fleck points out how the social workers that are employed by the government do not really listen to him or his needs either. It means though the government is at fault here, the social workers that are employed by the government also take part in discriminating against people like Fleck. If the social worker assigned to Fleck has not truly listened to him, it implies that the decisions made by the social worker for Fleck rarely fit his actual needs or concerns.

The flaws in the social services further prove that the discrimination towards mentally ill people is orchestrated by the government's discriminative policies. In their article, Altiraifi and Rapfogel (2020) write how mental health care is unaffordable and inaccessible even for people with insurance coverage; therefore, people with low-income will have hard times fulfilling their medical needs without emptying their pockets. Whilst the government has regulated insurers to provide mental health coverage, the policy does not enquire the insurers to be transparent and accountable. Rowan, et al. (2013) find that people with mental illness are less likely to get an insurance from the government. Their low-income and disability hinder them from being legible from getting the insurance coverage. If mentally ill people with low-income fail to get an insurance from government, they would not be able to pay for the mental health care that has already been unaffordable and inaccessible with or without the insurance coverage. It means they are fully dependent on social services given by the government; yet, the federal government in charge of it has been neglecting to fund the social services, especially mental health service (Raphaelson, 2018). The same situation is shown through the scene. Fleck, a poor and mentally ill person, does not have enough money to pay for proper mental health care, so he depends on the social service. However, as it can be seen from the scene, the social services provided by the government is lacking fund and ended up being closed permanently as the result of the insufficient funds. From the scene, it is revealed that the implementation of the social services is a mere façade and not an honest act for the betterment of the mentally ill people. It can be proven from how under-funded the social service is: the building looks grim and small, also the social worker is overworked from



having to take too many cases. This scene proves theory of structural discrimination by Link, et al. (2014): the social policy implemented in Gotham city is disadvantaging the mentally ill people cumulative over time. The government under-funds the social services cause the social workers to have a hard time getting the proper medication and help for mentally-ill people. Later on, the government fully cuts the fund which implies that social services are not the priority even though most poor and mentally ill people in Gotham depend on it. The act of cutting the fund gives another proof of structural discrimination happening in Gotham city. The whole situation with social service makes it seemed as if the services are designed as formality, but when too much money is spent on the lower-class people, they cut it. It implies that the government will not let the lower-class people get better mentally and financially as to maintain the existing hierarchy.

The fourth scene that I am going to discuss is the protest in front of Wayne Hall. There is a benefit being held in Wayne Hall. In front of the building, the people are rallying against Thomas Wayne's run for mayor. The rally is caused by Thomas Wayne's statement regarding the clown-masked killer: "... Someone who is envious of those more fortunate than themselves, yet they're too scared to show their own face. And until [less fortunate] kinds of people change for the better, those of us who have made something of our lives will always look at those who haven't as nothing but clowns" (00:39:21-00:39:40). The statement angers the lower-class people since it degrades them as nothing but a joke. From the statement alone, it is clear that Thomas Wayne, as the representative of upper-class and mayor candidate, looks down on the lower-class people. He, and the rest of the upper-class people, believes that the lower-class people stay poor because they are less fortunate. It implies that success comes from fortune and luck, not hard work. He says that the lower-class people are jealous because they are less fortunate; that's why a clown-masked person kills the more fortunate men on the train. The upper-class people look down on lower-class people because they believe lower-class people are full of cowards. As the statement angers the public, the lower-class people arrange a rally in front of the Wayne Hall the next day. In a news coverage, the reporter asks a man the reason they are rallying. The man answers, "[bleep] the rich. [bleep] Thomas Wayne. That's what the whole [bleep] thing is about. [bleep] the system" (01:01:39-01:01:46).



Figure 4. The rally in front of Wayne Hall (Phillips, 2019, 01:02:26)

The people rallying realize that Thomas Wayne will not have the lower-class people's best interest at heart. They are protesting against his run as the city's mayor. They realize that the system will always protect the rich but not the poor and mentally disabled. They know that if



Thomas Wayne were to be elected, any changes in the policy would have only benefitted the rich and not the rest of the civilians.

In a New York Times article, Giridharadas (2018) writes that any changes a rich person make will always be a “fake change”. The change will help the poor and saves lives, but the main focus of the change is maintaining the system which benefits them. They will be seen and praised for their decision, but the change will cover the more problematic, but invisible, harm. Hearing Wayne’s attitude towards lower-class people, the change he implements will be causing the lower-class people to stay repressed and poor. As the stigma is fully dependent power (Link and Phelan, 2001), if Wayne wins the run, the stigma towards lower-class people will be worsen; furthermore, it will be even worse for lower-class people will mental illness. Wayne will be able to change the policy to be even more discriminative towards the lower-class and the mentally ill people.

Moving on with the scene, Fleck sneaks into the building seeing the guards are busy with the rally protestors. He disguises himself by wearing a staff uniform for the theatre hall. He goes inside and sees the film the rich people are watching.



Figure 5. Fleck inside the theater with the rich people laughing at screen (Phillips, 2019, 01:03:37)

There are contrasting elements from the two figures above. In figure 4, it shows that the demonstrators are lower-class people which can be seen from the bleak and dirty clothing signifying their social status as a part of the lower-class people. The lighting in the They are collectively protesting against the rich people and the system that is heavily favoring the rich and powerful people. Them being outside shows how they have to fight in the open world without safety net. There are chaos and disorder from the rally as they are fighting for a better life and society: equality. On the contrast, the rich people in the theatre room are enjoying themselves watching a Charlie Chaplin film. The building they are in can be interpreted as them being in the haven of the system. It implies that they are protected from the disturbance from lower-class people. They are laughing and smiling as if there is nothing happens in front of the building. They feel at ease and comfortable because they know the social policy will not change just because some of the non-influential people are protesting against them. They know as a part of the society, they are on the top of the hierarchy; so, they are saved and protected by the system of Gotham City.





Figure 6. Blindfolded Charlie Chaplin skating to the edge of the floor (01:03:57)

The film they are watching is one of Charlie Chaplin's pantomime film. When Fleck enters the theater room, the audience is laughing over Chaplin's act. Chaplin is skating around the stage blindfolded. At one point, Chaplin is skirting over the edge of the platform but managing to stay away from falling off of it. The theatre full of upper-class people finds the act funny and laughs out loud over it. The short clip shown during the film can be a metaphor for the lives of poor civilians in the eyes of upper-class people. As seen in figure 8, Charlie Chaplin is blindfolded during the whole act, and one side of the platform's railing is on the side of the room, unattached. The scene can be interpreted as a metaphor for lower-class people who are trying to survive day by day in Gotham. They may skirt around the edges too often or even fall down sometimes because their platform does not have the railing on to keep them safe. Whilst the lower-class people are struggling to survive, the upper-class people are going to watch them from a far as if they live in a different world. The riches do not care for their existence; they will laugh because the lower-class' survival is nothing more than an entertainment for them.

The scene above showcases what Link, et al. (2014), state about how policy and practice must exist for the structural discrimination to work. As the current policy and practice are favoring the rich and powerful people, they do not have to worry about their social status or well-being during the protest. The stark contrasts in the scene prove how discriminative the system is towards lower-class people. The lower-class people are fighting for the better life; yet, the upper-class people are laughing and living in peace as if there is no disturbance outside the building.

The fifth scene that I am going to discuss is the final conversation between Fleck and Murray. Before Fleck's entrance to the show, Murray, along with the audience, are mocking Fleck's stand-up routine. Murray humiliates Fleck in front of the public just because he is not funny in his eyes. During the interview, Fleck confesses he kills the men in the train station. After saying so, he is booed by the crowd, even Murray and other guests look at him in disgust. Here is the dialogue of Fleck and Murray about the incident:

FLECK : Oh, why is everybody so upset about these guys? If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me! I pass you every day, and you don't notice me. But these guys, what, because Thomas Wayne went and cried about them on TV?

MURRAY : You have a problem with Thomas Wayne, too?



FLECK : Yes, I do. Have you seen what it's like out there, Murray? Do you ever actually leave the studio? Everybody just yells and screams at each other. Nobody's civil anymore. Nobody think what it's like to be the other guy. You think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? No, they don't. They think that we'll just sit there and take it, like good little boys! That we won't werewolf and go wild! (Phillips, 2019, 00:40:38-00:44:20).

From the conversation above, Fleck exposes how discriminative the system is towards mentally ill people like him. He states that "if it was me dying on the sidewalk, you'd walk right over me!" The sentence shows how the society pretends that mentally ill people does not exist. It implies the old practice of pretending that mental illness does not truly exist still done in the society. This is aligned with Fleck's statement previously in the meeting with his social worker. He admits that he feels like nobody every sees him to the point he does not even know if he truly exists. Link, et al.'s (2014) theory about structural discrimination can be seen in this situation. The practice is old and outdated, yet the society is still exercising it because the stigma has been embedded to the mind of society. The opposite of Scheff's (1996) theory of insanity can be applied in this situation. As the society pretends the non-existence of mental illness and expecting the mentally ill people to act and be normal, with time, the mentally ill people will act as normal as they could in social situation. Nevertheless, the expectation will crumble as their mental illness is neglected and not taken care properly.

Other than exposing the discriminative system, Fleck also points out how the upper-class people will not understand the life of lower-class people, with or without mental illness. He exclaims his hatred for Thomas Wayne—and his peers—is because they have been living in their own special bubbles. They do not understand the tough life of a working-class like Fleck because they are protected by their wealth and the system that favors their kind so much. He points out that there are people fighting out there for a better life; yet, the upper-class people are remained clueless because they are secured in the safety of the system. The exposure clearly indicates that the system is discriminative towards one group. This is the proof of the structural discrimination Link, et al. (2014) are saying. The people in Gotham city are living in the same city, under the same policies, yet one is living way better off than the others, not knowing how harsh it is for people like Fleck who are poor and mentally ill.

Early in the film, Fleck admires Murray so much and sees him as a father figure for Fleck. Little by little, Fleck loses his admiration for Murray. It starts with Murray mocking his stand-up routine on national television. When Fleck is invited to the show, same clip is shown which Murray proceed with jokes to mock Fleck, humiliating Fleck before his entrance to the show. Still, Fleck puts on a smile and tries to be civilized during the interview. At last, Fleck finally snaps when the discourse about the death of the Wall Street men comes up. During the conversation, Fleck realizes Murray does not understand the reality of the world out there for people like Fleck. Murray sympathizes with the men Fleck kills, telling him that the men are not awful even though he does not know that those same men are harassing a woman on the train before beating up Fleck. Realizing Murray is just the same as other upper-class people, Fleck gives Murray what he deserves and shoots him on the head.





Figure 7. Fleck shoots Murray on the head and smiles (Phillips, 2019, 01:45:11-01:45:28).

Afterwards, Fleck is just sitting there, smiling, looking proud at what he has done and laughing. From the top shot of figure 7, it can be seen that the studio is well lit, but in the bottom shot, the lighting is directed only to Fleck, making Fleck stand out against the black background. The black background can be interpreted as the city's broken system whilst the light shining on Fleck can be interpreted as Fleck winning against the system because he manages to expose the system that has failed to serve its people. The lighting on Fleck can also be interpreted as the people finally see Fleck and not put him on the side or keep pretending that he and people like him do not exist—as he becomes the main focus on the live TV show.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This analysis focuses on analyzing the happenstance of social inequality in the film *Joker* (2019). Theory of structural discrimination by Link, et al. (2014) is used as the main theory, along with Link and Phelan's (2001) theory of power imbalance and Scheff (1996) theory of insanity as the supporting theories. By using those theories, it can be revealed that the social inequality occurs in *Joker* is the result of systemic discrimination. The policies and laws implemented by the government are proven to discriminate the mentally ill, especially if they are of low-class people. The people in power to change such practice and policy do not seem to care about the injustice of the situation because they are not impacted negatively by the system. The situations put the



mentally ill people like Fleck suffering because of the systemic discrimination caused by unequal and unjust system.

Throughout the film several instances of the social inequality caused by the systemic discrimination especially for people with mental illness like Arthur Fleck are shown in the film. From the beginning to the end of the film, it is shown though the society has come so far, the life of a mentally ill person is far from decent. In terms of employment, there are not many companies willing to hire mentally ill people because of the stigma surrounding them which renders many mentally ill people jobless and poor. Furthermore, the film also manages to expose the government's failure in terms of providing a decent health care for the mentally ill like Fleck. In the film it shows the lack of funds and sufficient help make it harder for the social services to provide a decent help for their patients; as the result, people with mental illness who are dependent on them are unable to get better. Moreover, in terms of social gap, the film give emphasize on the stark contrast between the have and the have-not. It is shown when the group of people protesting for a better welfare policy, those in the position of power simply refuse to acknowledge the existence of the protestors. They are ignoring the existence of the inequality and power imbalance in the society. Such display of social gap which caused by the unfair state policies shows how the government took an active part in ensuring that the system itself keep the elites in the position of power while keeping the rest of the people to be powerless and suffer in perpetual poverty. Criticism against the system is explained explicitly that as long as the policies are not affected the riches in the negative way, they will not acknowledge the glaring problem of social inequality in the society. In this film, Joker is represented as more than just a Batman's main villain but rather used as a vehicle to criticize the state of social inequality in the world.

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