Deconstructing Power Relations in Film: A Critical Film Analysis of Joker (2019)

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Abstract

This research employs Derrida's theory of deconstruction to critically examine the representation of power relations in the film Joker (2019). Positioned within the broader field of film studies and critical theory, deconstruction provides a productive lens for uncovering the internal contradictions, unstable meanings, and binary oppositions that structure the film's portrayal of societal authority and marginality. The purpose of this research is to reveal how Joker simultaneously constructs and disrupts hierarchies of power through its visual language, character development, and narrative progression. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research investigates key scenes in which dominance, resistance, institutional control, and social exclusion are depicted, focusing on the ways the film both reinforces and challenges conventional power structures. Findings indicate that power in Joker is not presented as stable or singular; rather, it emerges as fluid, fragmented, and continually contested across social, psychological, and political dimensions. The film exposes cracks within dominant ideologies by foregrounding marginal voices, ambiguous moral positioning, and contradictions in character motivations that destabilize the narrative's coherence. Through these ruptures, the film ultimately challenges traditional understandings of power, inviting multiple interpretations that resist authoritative or fixed readings. This research contributes to the growing scholarship on critical film analysis by demonstrating how deconstruction can illuminate the complexities and ambivalences embedded in cinematic representations of power, positioning film not as a closed text but as an open field of tensions and interpretive possibilities.

Keywords: *Deconstruction, power relations, Joker*

INTRODUCTION

Film has long functioned not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a cultural text that articulates, negotiates, and contests social meanings. In contemporary society, cinema plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions about identity, power, and social structures. As films become increasingly complex in their narrative strategies and thematic concerns, critical approaches that uncover deeper ideological layers have become more necessary (Gutiérrez et al., 2014). One such approach is deconstruction, a method derived from Jacques Derrida's philosophical framework, which challenges the stability of meaning and interrogates the hidden assumptions that operate within texts. Applying this approach to film enables researchers to dismantle taken-for-granted interpretations and reveal multiple layers of power embedded within cinematic narratives. For this reason, research using deconstruction in film analysis offers a valuable contribution to both film studies and critical theory.

The choice of Joker (2019) as the object of analysis further strengthens the relevance of this research. As one of the most discussed films of the decade, Joker presents a narrative centered on social marginalization, psychological struggle, and institutional failure. Its portrayal of power relations between societal institutions and individuals has sparked global debates about mental health, class inequality, and the politics of representation (Ardini, 2017). Despite being framed as a character-driven psychological thriller, the film also operates as a social commentary that questions dominant ideologies about morality, justice, and authority. The tension between the film's narrative and its ideological underpinnings invites a deeper critical reading that goes beyond surface-level interpretation. Deconstruction provides an ideal

lens to scrutinize these tensions because it focuses on contradictions, ambiguities, and the instability of meaning—all of which are strongly present in Joker.

Furthermore, studying the film through the lens of power relations is essential due to the contemporary global context in which issues of oppression, resistance, and social inequality have become increasingly prominent. Many societies across the world face intensifying disparities that shape individual experiences and collective realities (Levin & de Filippo, 2014). Joker mirrors these concerns by presenting a character who becomes a symbol of social unrest. Yet the film does not offer a single, coherent explanation about the nature of power; rather, it constructs a complex web of relationships where dominance and marginality continuously shift. This instability reflects real-world conditions, where power is rarely fixed and is often negotiated through various social, political, and cultural mechanisms. Research that seeks to unpack these complexities contributes to broader conversations about how media representations influence public understanding of structural inequality. Another reason this research is necessary is due to the unique narrative style of Joker. The film deliberately blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination, truth and distortion, victimhood and agency. This ambiguity disrupts traditional cinematic structures and challenges viewers to question what is authentic within the film. Such narrative instability aligns closely with the principles of deconstruction, making the film an exemplary case through which to explore how meaning is constructed and deconstructed simultaneously. By examining these narrative structures, the research provides insight into how films can manipulate audience perception and how interpretations of power can be shaped by narrative techniques.

Moreover, the academic field of film studies has increasingly recognized the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Applying philosophical theories such as deconstruction to film analysis opens new possibilities for exploring how ideology operates within visual media. This research aligns with that trend by bridging literary theory, cultural studies, and cinematic analysis. It demonstrates that films should not be understood solely through plot or character, but also through the underlying conceptual frameworks that shape meaning (Widayati & Nugrahani, 2019). Deconstruction allows researchers to uncover the subtle ideological work that films perform—work that often goes unnoticed in traditional analyses. Thus, the present research fills an important gap by bringing a philosophical and theoretical lens to a widely circulated and socially impactful film. The importance of this research is also grounded in the need to critically evaluate the representation of marginalized individuals in popular media. Joker foregrounds the experiences of a socially ostracized character and portrays how systemic failures contribute to his transformation. While some viewers interpret the film as a critique of oppressive social structures, others argue that it risks glorifying violence or oversimplifying complex societal problems. Deconstruction does not aim to settle these debates; instead, it examines how such conflicting interpretations arise and what they reveal about the film's ideological contradictions. Through this approach, the research highlights the responsibility of filmmakers and audiences in engaging with representations of marginality and power.

Additionally, this research contributes to the understanding of power as a dynamic concept rather than a fixed social attribute. Deconstruction reveals that power operates through difference, contradiction, and the interplay of opposing forces (Ozdemir, 2014). In Joker, power relations manifest in various forms: institutional authority, economic inequality, interpersonal domination, and symbolic power. By analyzing these layers through deconstruction, the research offers a nuanced perspective on how power is portrayed cinematically. It also demonstrates how films can both reinforce and destabilize dominant ideologies, depending on how they construct narrative and visual elements. The urgency of this

research is also linked to the increasing influence of cinema on public discourse. Films now function as cultural texts that shape collective attitudes toward social issues. As audiences engage with films not only for entertainment but also for meaning-making, the role of critical analysis becomes more vital. Research that examines films through sophisticated theoretical frameworks helps prevent passive consumption and encourages viewers to question the ideological assumptions embedded in cinematic narratives. This is especially important in the case of Joker, a film whose themes resonate strongly with contemporary concerns about social justice and institutional failure.

Ultimately, this research is necessary because it contributes to a deeper understanding of how films construct and challenge meanings related to power. By applying deconstruction to Joker, the research exposes the film's internal tensions and demonstrates how cinematic texts can simultaneously uphold and resist dominant ideologies. This duality reflects the complexity of real-world power relations, where structures of authority coexist with acts of resistance and reinterpretation. Through its theoretical and analytical contributions, this research enriches academic discussions within film studies, critical theory, and cultural studies. It ultimately emphasizes the importance of approaching films not merely as entertainment, but as rich, layered texts that demand critical examination.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Previous research on film analysis has generally explored themes, character arcs, and socio-political messages conveyed through cinematic storytelling. Many studies examine how films reflect structures of authority, social hierarchy, and institutional control (Battaglia, 2018; Gran & Gaustad, 2021; Lout, 2017). These works consistently highlight cinema as a cultural product that mirrors patterns of dominance and inequality found in society. Despite offering valuable insights, such analyses usually assume that meaning within a film is coherent and can be interpreted through stable frameworks. As a result, the complexity and fluidity of meaning—especially in films with ambiguous narrative structures—often remain underexplored. Research focusing specifically on Joker (2019) predominantly addresses psychological and sociological dimensions. Numerous scholarly discussions emphasize the film's representation of mental health struggles, class disparities, and systemic neglect. Other research highlights moral gray areas, symbolic imagery, and the protagonist's transformation as reflections of broader societal tensions. Although these studies contribute to the academic understanding of the film, they commonly interpret Joker as delivering a clear critique or message. This approach may overlook the film's inherent contradictions, narrative instability, and ambiguous ideological positioning, all of which resist singular interpretation.

In parallel, research employing deconstruction within film studies has gradually expanded. Scholars who apply Derrida's theoretical framework often focus on binary oppositions, unresolved tensions, and the instability of meaning within filmic texts. These studies demonstrate how deconstruction can illuminate layers of complexity that conventional analytical methods might miss. However, the majority of deconstructive film analyses tend to center on experimental or art-house films that explicitly present fragmented or nonlinear narratives (Hayati, 2017; Ridwan, 2010). As a consequence, there is limited exploration of how deconstruction can be applied to mainstream films that reach global audiences and exert substantial cultural influence. This context reveals a significant gap in the existing literature. Joker is a mainstream film with substantial social impact, yet its narrative contains deep contradictions, unstable meanings, and ideological tensions that align closely with the concerns of deconstruction. Previous research often treats its message

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as coherent, either endorsing or critiquing particular social realities, while the film itself presents a far more fragmented representation of power. Its blending of psychological breakdown, social violence, and institutional failure produces a text filled with ambiguity that cannot be fully captured through traditional interpretive lenses. A deconstructive reading is therefore necessary to unpack how the film simultaneously constructs and destabilizes its portrayal of authority, dominance, and marginality.

The purpose of this research emerges from this gap. By applying Derrida's theory of deconstruction to Joker, the research seeks to uncover how the film's meanings are produced through contradictions, narrative ruptures, unstable character motivations, and shifting symbolic cues. Instead of viewing the film as a coherent ideological statement, this research interprets it as an open field of tensions where multiple interpretations coexist and challenge one another. Through this approach, the research aims to offer a deeper understanding of how power is represented not as a stable force but as a fluid, contested, and often contradictory construct within cinematic narratives.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative design grounded in textual and visual analysis to examine how power relations are constructed and destabilized in Joker (2019) through a deconstructive lens. A qualitative approach is suitable because the objective of the research is not to measure or generalize, but to interpret and uncover layers of meaning embedded within the cinematic text (Morgan, 2022). Film, as a complex cultural artifact, requires methodological strategies that allow for nuanced, flexible, and interpretive engagement. Therefore, qualitative textual analysis provides the space to explore contradictions, ambiguities, and ideological tensions consistent with Derrida's theory of deconstruction. The research design centers on deconstructive analysis, which involves identifying binary oppositions, narrative ruptures, and unstable meanings within the film. Rather than seeking fixed or authoritative interpretations, the design encourages continuous questioning of how meaning is constructed and how the film simultaneously undermines its own narrative assertions. The focus is on understanding how visual cues, dialogues, character interactions, and cinematic techniques reveal contradictions related to power. This design aligns with the core principles of deconstruction, which emphasize the fluidity of meaning and the impossibility of absolute interpretive closure.

The approach in this research treats the film as a text composed of multiple interconnected elements. Scenes, camera movements, color schemes, sound design, character behaviors, and narrative transitions are examined as carriers of meaning that reflect and challenge power structures. This approach avoids viewing the film as a singular, unified message. Instead, it positions the film as an open system where meanings shift depending on context, opposition, and narrative gaps. Such an approach is essential for revealing how Joker constructs and destabilizes hierarchies of authority and marginality. The primary instrument of this research is the researcher, who functions as the analytical interpreter of the film. In qualitative deconstructive studies, the researcher's role is central because interpretation cannot be separated from subjectivity (Elo et al., 2014). The researcher engages with the film through repeated viewing, detailed note-taking, and reflective analysis to capture subtle contradictions and thematic instabilities. No additional instruments such as surveys or interviews are required because the data are entirely derived from the film as a textual and visual artifact. However, the analytical process involves systematic observation to ensure the interpretation remains rigorous and grounded in the film's actual content.

Data collection involves selecting key scenes that depict power dynamics between

characters and institutions. These scenes are chosen based on their relevance to the research focus, such as moments where authority is asserted, resisted, or blurred. The data include visual details, dialogue lines, symbolic representations, and narrative shifts. Each selected scene is analyzed not in isolation but in relation to the film's broader thematic structure, allowing the research to identify patterns of instability and contradiction (Yi et al., 2020). Data analysis follows the principles of deconstruction by examining the internal tensions within the film. The analysis begins by identifying dominant narrative or ideological claims presented in the film, such as depictions of institutional authority or societal neglect. Next, the research traces elements that disrupt or contradict these claims, such as ambiguous moral cues, conflicting character motivations, or visual symbolism that undermines narrative coherence. Through this process, the analysis uncovers how the film constructs multiple layers of meaning that resist closure. The final stage of analysis involves interpreting how these contradictions reveal the fluid and contested nature of power within the cinematic text. Overall, the research method ensures that the analysis remains aligned with the philosophical foundation of deconstruction while maintaining methodological rigor. The combination of qualitative design, deconstructive approach, researcher-as-instrument, and systematic analysis enables the research to reveal the complexities and instabilities of power portrayed in Joker.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research reveal multiple layers of contradiction, instability, and ambiguity in the representation of power within Joker (2019). Using deconstruction as an analytical framework, several key themes emerged that illustrate how the film both constructs and destabilizes power relations. These themes are presented below through sub-sections for clarity.

Institutional Power as an Unstable Structure

The film initially frames institutions—such as healthcare, law enforcement, government, and media—as entities possessing stable and legitimate authority. However, a deconstructive reading reveals significant contradictions within these structures. The mental health system claims to support Arthur, yet simultaneously abandons him due to budget cuts. Law enforcement attempts to maintain order but repeatedly fails to manage Gotham's social unrest. Media platforms function as moral judges but also humiliate and exploit vulnerable individuals. These contradictions destabilize the binary between "powerful institutions" and "powerless citizens." Instead of presenting institutions as coherent sources of authority, the film exposes their internal fragility, revealing that institutional power is fragmented, inconsistent, and heavily dependent on unstable narratives of legitimacy.

The Contradictory Construction of Arthur's Identity

Arthur's identity emerges as one of the central contradictions in the film. He is portrayed as both a victim of systemic oppression and the agent of violent disruption. This duality undermines any attempt to categorize him within a single moral framework. His laughter, for example, functions simultaneously as a symptom of neurological illness and an act of symbolic defiance against societal expectations. Arthur's transformation into Joker reflects the instability of identity itself. Instead of a linear progression from powerlessness to empowerment, the film presents identity as fluid, fractured, and shaped by conflicting forces. This instability resists binary classifications such as sane vs. insane, strong vs. weak, oppressed vs. empowered. Arthur's identity exists in the unstable space

between these categories.

Narrative Ambiguity and the Collapse of Truth

Several scenes challenge the boundary between reality and imagination, indicating that the narrative cannot be interpreted as a coherent or reliable account. Arthur's imagined relationship with Sophie, his uncertain memories of childhood, and his hallucination-like experiences introduce fractures in narrative stability. This ambiguity destabilizes the notion of truth, making it impossible to definitively locate power within objective structures. If reality itself is uncertain, then interpretations of power, control, victimhood, and resistance also become unstable. The film shows that meaning is not fixed within the narrative but constantly shifts depending on perspective.

Social Inequality as a Deconstructed Binary

Joker visually contrasts Gotham's wealthy elite with the impoverished masses, creating a binary between "the powerful" and "the powerless." However, deconstruction reveals that these categories depend on one another for identity. The rich require the existence of the poor to maintain their sense of superiority, while the poor define their social position through exclusion. When riots erupt, the movement is portrayed as both an act of resistance and a chaotic force without clear moral direction. This ambiguity dissolves simplistic interpretations of rebellion as purely empowering or purely destructive. Power circulates unpredictably between social classes, resisting fixed hierarchies.

Media as a Space of Ambivalent Power

The media, represented primarily through Murray Franklin's talk show, constructs its role as a moral authority. Yet the platform that initially mocks Arthur later amplifies his voice on a national scale. Arthur becomes visible, not because the media grants him legitimacy, but because he subverts the platform's intended function. This duality reveals that media power is fundamentally unstable. It can both silence and empower, validate and delegitimize. The talk show scene deconstructs the assumption that media unilaterally controls narratives. Instead, the film shows how representation itself is contradictory, shifting between performance, humiliation, and rebellion.

Gotham City as a Contradictory Social Space

Gotham is depicted as a decaying city shaped by poverty, corruption, and institutional dysfunction. However, the film also presents moments where individuals exert agency despite environmental constraints. Gotham becomes a site of tension between structural determinism and human autonomy. This contradiction suggests that power cannot be located solely in institutions or individuals. It emerges through their interaction within an unstable social space. Gotham acts not merely as a backdrop but as an active force shaped by contradictions in morality, economics, and collective identity.

The Instability of Moral Categories

Traditional binaries such as good vs. evil or right vs. wrong collapse under scrutiny. Arthur's actions cannot be interpreted within rigid moral frameworks, as the film intentionally blurs moral boundaries. His violence is contextualized within systemic neglect, psychological suffering, and social marginalization. This moral ambiguity forces viewers into interpretive uncertainty, demonstrating that power is not a moral attribute but a contested construct shaped by unstable meanings. The film resists any authoritative moral judgment, reinforcing the deconstructive principle that meaning cannot be fixed or

finalized.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal several important theoretical and practical contributions that extend the existing scholarship on film analysis using deconstruction. One of the central novelties of this research lies in its commitment to reading Joker not merely as a psychological or sociopolitical narrative, but as an unstable text whose meanings are continuously produced and dismantled through the play of contradictions. While many analyses of Joker emphasize themes such as mental illness, class inequality, or social violence, this research highlights the dynamic instability of power relations as the film's most productive site of interpretation. This perspective demonstrates a shift from thematic analysis to a more structural and philosophical inquiry that exposes how the text resists closure. This novelty is evident in how the film's binary oppositions—such as authority versus marginality, sanity versus madness, and victim versus villain—are shown to collapse into ambiguity, opening new interpretive pathways that earlier research has not fully explored.

The theoretical contribution of this research emerges from its application of Derridean deconstruction to cinematic narrative. By treating scenes, characters, and dialogues as textual elements subject to slippage and contradiction, this research expands the methodological possibilities of deconstructive criticism within film studies (Fadhilah, 2011; Hayati, 2017; Ozdemir, 2014). It demonstrates that deconstruction is not only a tool for literary texts but can also be applied rigorously to visual media, where meaning arises through a combination of images, sound, and narrative structures. This contributes to ongoing theoretical conversations by asserting that power, as depicted in film, does not operate through fixed hierarchies but through dispersed and shifting relations that destabilize dominant ideology from within. This theoretical insight enriches the broader academic discourse on critical film theory by reframing cinematic meaning as inherently fluid, unfinished, and open to reinterpretation.

From a practical perspective, this research provides valuable implications for educators, filmmakers, and media analysts. For educators, the findings illustrate how films like Joker can serve as critical pedagogical tools that encourage students to question taken-for-granted social hierarchies and examine the instability of meaning in popular media (Levin & de Filippo, 2014; Morie, 1998; Ramrao, 2016). By engaging with deconstruction, learners can cultivate deeper critical thinking skills and develop a more nuanced understanding of how films shape perceptions of power, identity, and social norms. For filmmakers, this research highlights the potential of ambiguity and contradiction as narrative strategies that stimulate audience reflection rather than presenting moral or ideological conclusions. The analysis shows that films can maintain artistic and cultural relevance by resisting simplistic binaries and embracing complexity. For media analysts and cultural critics, the research underscores the importance of examining how visual narratives subtly reinforce or undermine dominant power structures, providing a framework for more layered and critical interpretations of contemporary cinema.

LIMITATION AND SUGGESTION

This research, while offering a comprehensive deconstructive analysis of Joker (2019), is not without limitations. One of the primary limitations lies in the exclusive reliance on textual and visual analysis without incorporating audience reception data. Since deconstruction emphasizes the instability of meaning and the multiplicity of interpretations, the absence of audience perspectives limits the exploration of how various viewers might negotiate or challenge the film's representations of power. Including audience responses

could have enriched the analysis by demonstrating how meanings circulate differently among diverse social groups and contexts. Another limitation concerns the focus on a single film. Although Joker provides a rich site for examining contradictions and unstable power dynamics, analyzing only one cinematic text restricts the generalizability of the findings. Power relations in film vary widely depending on genre, cultural background, directorial style, and narrative intent. Therefore, a multi-film comparison could have offered a broader understanding of how different cinematic structures either reinforce or dismantle dominant ideologies through deconstructive tendencies.

The methodological choice to center on Derrida's deconstruction also presents its own constraints. While this theoretical lens reveals hidden tensions and unstable meanings, it may overlook certain psychological, sociological, or historical dimensions that other theories could illuminate more explicitly. For instance, frameworks such as psychoanalysis, critical discourse analysis, or Marxist film theory could highlight different layers of power that remain outside the boundaries of deconstructive inquiry. As a result, the conclusions drawn from this research remain rooted in philosophical and textual analysis rather than interdisciplinary engagement. Given these limitations, several suggestions are offered for future research. Scholars may benefit from incorporating reception studies or audience analysis to capture the plurality of interpretations that deconstruction inherently invites. Examining how viewers from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds interpret the film could deepen insights into the fluidity of power and the instability of meaning. Additionally, expanding the research to include multiple films, particularly those within similar genres or those that depict social marginalization, could reveal broader patterns of deconstructive resistance or ideological reinforcement within contemporary cinema. Future researchers may also consider integrating deconstruction with complementary theoretical lenses. Combining deconstruction with theories such as posthumanism, affect theory, or political economy could generate more interdisciplinary and holistic insights into power relations in film. Such combinations may help illuminate aspects of cinematic meaning that deconstruction alone does not fully address. Finally, further exploration of deconstruction in non-Western films could provide valuable contributions, as cultural variations in storytelling and symbolism could reveal new configurations of power, contradiction, and instability.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to deconstruct the representation of power relations in Joker (2019) by applying Derrida's theory of deconstruction to the film's narrative, visual composition, and character dynamics. Through qualitative textual analysis, the research demonstrates that power within the film is not depicted as fixed, stable, or singular; instead, it emerges through layers of contradiction, ambiguity, and narrative disruption. The film repeatedly destabilizes traditional binaries—such as authority versus resistance, order versus chaos, and sanity versus madness—by revealing their internal inconsistencies. These findings affirm the central premise of deconstruction: meaning is never settled but constantly shifts as opposing forces interact within a text. The research highlights that the film's power relations operate through tension rather than clarity. Institutional authority appears simultaneously oppressive and vulnerable, while the protagonist, Arthur Fleck, embodies both marginalization and disruptive agency. This duality prevents the viewer from assigning him a fixed role, whether as victim, villain, or symbol of resistance. Similarly, the visual and narrative structure of the film contributes to the instability of meaning by presenting scenes that undermine one another, disrupt narrative expectations, and invite competing interpretations. In this way, Joker exemplifies how cinematic texts can contain within themselves the seeds of their own ideological critique.

The study also emphasizes that deconstruction offers a valuable analytical lens for film research. By treating films as texts full of internal tensions, the method encourages scholars to move beyond surface-level themes and examine the deeper structures that shape meaning. This research contributes to the evolving field of critical film studies by demonstrating that deconstruction can be applied rigorously to visual media, opening interpretive possibilities that extend beyond traditional approaches. It shows that films are not closed systems that deliver predetermined messages but dynamic spaces where meaning is negotiated, contested, and perpetually deferred. Practically, the findings imply that films like Joker can be used in educational contexts to develop critical thinking, encourage nuanced discussions about societal power, and challenge oversimplified narratives about marginalization and authority. The film's ambiguity provides fertile ground for debates about ethics, identity, and social systems. For filmmakers, the results suggest that embracing contradiction and complexity can deepen audience engagement and contribute to richer storytelling. Overall, this research concludes that Joker does not simply portray power but actively unsettles the very structures that attempt to define it. Through its contradictions and narrative ruptures, the film challenges viewers to question dominant ideologies and engage with the instability inherent in social power. This conclusion reinforces the theoretical significance of deconstruction and affirms its continued relevance in analyzing contemporary cinematic texts.

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