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Schizophrenic Insurgency: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Analysis of *Joker* (2019)

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Abstract: The contemporary cityscape, constantly bombarded with electronic media, Big Data, digital screens and surveillance presupposes assemblages of power, hierarchy and enterprising of human resources. The capitalist and networked space manufactures schizophrenics who are labelled as the other, and are excluded from continuing their life in peace. They are caught in the vortex of the illusion of good life and the reality of exploitation. The paper attempts to study the character of Arthur performed by Joaquin Phoenix in *Joker* (2019), directed by Todd Philips. In the unequal capitalist system of Gotham, Arthur exhibits forms of schizophrenia that are apprehended to be signs of resistance to life. Initially he finds contentment in accepting the system but he refuses to conform to it at a juncture. The event, or the juncture is the schizophrenic 'turn' that Arthur adopts after which he refuses to play the victim in the infernal game of capitalism. The habitual chaos in Gotham leaves an impact on the attitude and behaviour of Arthur and others who begin to resist the system. The paper studies the different outlooks and approaches towards schizophrenia by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Fredrich Jameson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Felix Guattari perceive the schizophrenic as the subversive icon of postmodern politics. The paper attempts to read schizophrenia as 'clinical' and 'critical' that observes a negotiation between the subject, the body, the world and the language in films.

Keywords: schizophrenia, capitalism, resistance, postmodern subjectivity, urban alienation, surveillance capitalism

The contemporary world of networked culture has an inherent pull to carry humans to its glossy lifestyle of unlimited information, storage and retrieval irrespective of varied categorisations like age, time, gender and geography. The liberty to access information has opened gates to a democratized environment where with ‘connectivity’ anyone is privileged to access any amount of material online. But the influence of the media and screen culture has synthesised a simulated reality for the people who prefer to consume it without question rather than run behind facts and authentic information. The omnipresence of media screens appear in the form of large and small screens as navigation displays, computer screens, cell phones, TVs, surveillance cameras and other technologies, and these are the markers of everyday media usage (Pisters 2). The contemporary human being is jammed in the vortex of electronic and digital screens, and personal-professional lives. These screens are “always already connected to assemblages of power, capital and transnational movements of people, goods, and information” (2). When one starts to recognize the maddening capitalist-tangle that one has indulged in, one starts to exhibit either forms of submission or forms of resistance. The latter can sometimes manifest in inexplicable forms that can be beyond the existing understanding of human expression and can thus be termed as schizophrenia.

Social theories have tried to encompass the understanding of the history of madness and the social system in which madness is orchestrated and regulated. These approaches run different from the biological and physiological theories that draw madness as purely clinical. Schizophrenia is understood as a chronic mental disorder in the personality of an individual that alters the manner in which the person thinks, acts and responds in personal and individual life. Contrary to the popular belief, schizophrenia is not just a condition where the person seems to exhibit acute or multiple personalities, it involves a condition where in most of the times the individual loses connection to reality. The symptoms may vary from person to person but some of its common characteristics include: withdrawal from social life, difficulty in sleeping, loss of appetite, bursts in temper and trouble in concentrating. This article attempts to connect the contemporary schizophrenic experience as a manifestation of resistance to the networked culture orchestrated by capitalism and also discusses the film, *Joker* (2019) as one that captures this struggle of the central character, Arthur who exhibits forms of schizophrenia as a resistance to the social-political environment that he lives in.

Though postmodern culture has dismantled the constricting binary of the high and low art, it has accelerated connections between the capitalism and mass culture in the picture. American literary critic and Marxist political theorist, Fredric Jameson has questioned the lack of critical and subversive contents of postmodernist art. Postmodernism “replicates... reproduces... reinforces... the logic of consumer capitalism” (Jameson 125). The current of images that go in succession across the retina of an MTV viewer disorients the consumer who becomes a subject in the real world. For Jameson, contemporary capitalism is a reason for the schizophrenic experience. The fragmented experience of the schizophrenic eludes the possibility of critical thinking that existed in modernist traditions. The pressure of consumer capitalism inspires the schizophrenic to assume multiple identities at a moment. According to Johnah Peretti,

late capitalism not only accelerates the flow of capital, but also accelerates the rate at which subjects assume identities. Identity formation is inextricably linked to the urge to consume, and therefore the acceleration of capitalism necessitates an increase in the rate at

which individuals assume and shed identities. The internet is one of many late capitalist phenomena that allow for more flexible, rapid, and profitable mechanisms of identity formation. (Peretti)

For Jameson, the postmodern experience and culture simulates a schizoid experience in multiple ways. The schizoid fails to procure a fully developed system of language due to which the society finds it difficult to communicate with him. Jameson draws inspiration from Jacques Lacan and defines schizophrenia as, “the failure of the infant to accede fully into the realm of speech and language” (Jameson 118). Jameson further writes that “schizophrenic experience is an experience of the isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the “I” and the “me” over time” (119). The schizophrenic lacks a personal identity and finds it difficult to differentiate between the real and illusionary world, and also experiences time in a discontinuous style.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari apprehend the relationship between capitalism and schizophrenia differently. Even though they admit the correspondence between the latter two, they approach it with the lens of poststructuralism and strongly oppose the Freudian and Lacanian treatment of schizophrenia. According to Deleuze and Guattari, Freud could not accept the schizophrenic because the experiences of the schizophrenic oppose the psychoanalytical system developed by Freud. Since the schizophrenic does not possess a developed ego the schizophrenic is “somewhere else, beyond or behind or below” in the Oedipal triad (Deleuze and Guattari 23). In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983), the Deleuze and Guattari explain schizoanalysis as a new approach to materialist psychiatry. This approach was first put forward by Wilhelm Reich who claimed that psychic repression depends on social repression, i.e. aggressive social behaviour is a result of the suppression of desires like sexual drives.

Schizoanalysis tries to dispose of the authoritarian psycho-political structure to a society where desires are not repressed or neglected. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis fail to critique the full scope of social and historical factors that make way for people to become schizophrenics. They condemn Freud for his dislike of schizophrenics and treatment towards them which were more or less as animals (23). They deliberate that revolutionary psychology such as schizoanalysis must critique the psychopolitical structures of control. The psychiatric clinic which is usually perceived as a system that renders a cure only constructs the illness. This is also substantiated by the studies made by Michel Foucault in his studies on madness. For Deleuze and Guattari (1983) desire is linked to production. When the dynamics of desire do not stifle, people tend to create new ideas, form new associations and progress in creative fields. The schizophrenic embraces production but there is no attainable summit. It is a process where the person is given the freedom to create. The schizophrenic being will be able to manifest a multitude of broken experiences of reality during a psychotic episode. But the goal of being will be to locate where the disruptions actually occur, and this will help to develop a new kind of subjectivity.

Joker (2019) is an American psychological film directed by Todd Philip who also co-authored the screenplay with Scott Silver. Joaquin Phoenix plays the central character of Arthur Fleck, an aspiring stand-up comedian living in the city of Gotham with his mother, Penny. From the beginning of

the film Arthur demonstrates visible forms of psychological trouble for which he is under professional-medical treatment provided by social services. He suffers from a condition that makes him laugh loudly at inappropriate times. He is on seven different medications and his life sunken in poverty only makes things worse for him. In his journal, his medical help finds the words, “I just hope that my death makes more cents than my life” (Philips 00:06:19).

The city of Gotham is portrayed as one that is developed but also as one that is buried in unemployment and crime. The first scene shows Arthur painting his face as part of his costume of a clown. The news on television displayed in the background announces that it was the eighteenth-day of the garbage strike with ten thousand tons of garbage piling up daily. This scene sets the tone of the first-half of the film as it reflects the attitude of the authorities towards the well-being of people. Arthur’s innocence exhibits a world that was gradually becoming extinct, especially in Gotham. People had resorted to new ways of entertainment as a result of which the demand for clowns had almost ceased. Arthur is fired from his job after a gun falls from his pocket while performing as a clown at a children’s hospital. The gun was given to him by his colleague for Arthur’s protection who later denies its ownership once Arthur is fired. On his way back home in his costume, Arthur confronts three men who worked at Wayne Enterprises who attempt to torture him, and in defence Arthur kills them with his gun. Later, city-wide protests begin against the rich, donning masks of a clown, sparking a comment from the billionaire and mayoral candidate, Thomas Wayne. He offensively calls the rebels as clowns who were envious of successful people.

Arthur experiences the ‘schizophrenic turn’ for the first time in his life when he finds acceptance and visibility when protesters in the streets were fighting against inequality in an identity that he introduced. Until then he led a miserable existence with poverty and not being able to accept his mental illness. His mother always wanted to see him happy no matter how terrible their life conditions were. In one of his delusionary episodes he imagines himself on one of his favourite talk shows where the anchor, Murray, invites Arthur to the stage where the latter says he takes good care of his mother and she loves him very much: “She always tells me to smile and put on a happy face. She says I was here to spread joy and laughter”. To which Murray answers, “That was great Arthur. Thank you. I mean, I loved hearing what you had to say. It made my day. You see all this, the lights, the show, the audience, all that stuff? I’d give it all up in a heartbeat to have a kid like you” (Philips 00:13:50 – 00:15:04).

The audience of the film understands that Arthur finds acceptance and solace in society only in his delusionary moments. In reality he is an invisible man ineffectually striving to find happiness and take care of his ailing mother. At a certain point when he intercepts one of the letters that Penny had written to her old master, Thomas Wayne, for whom she had served thirty years, Arthur loses the last grip of hope. From the letter he finds that he was the son of Thomas Wayne. But when he goes to meet Wayne at his residence, his butler, Alfred denies the information saying that Penny was delusional. At another instance Wayne also informs Arthur that Penny had adopted him while she worked for them. He also tells him that Penny was arrested and admitted to Arkham State Hospital while Arthur was a boy (Philips, 2019). When Arthur somehow seizes the old files of Penny at the Hospital, he is distraught at the reports according to which Penny had allowed her boyfriend to physically abuse herself, and little Arthur. When the police had found them, little Arthur was malnourished with

multiple bruises across his body, and had endured severe trauma to his head and was tied to a radiator. But according to Penny, it was Wayne's influence that fabricated the story.

After understanding that Penny was not his real mother, his attitude towards her changes. Unable to decide which version of the story to believe he resolves to question Penny. At the hospital where Penny was admitted due to a stroke, he finally confesses to her that he had never felt happiness even for a minute in his life. He tells her that he no longer believes that his laughter was a condition and that something was wrong with him. He admits that he used to believe that his life was a tragedy, but then he understood that his life was comedy. Later he murders her. Here Arthur begins to embrace the limits that the society had conditioned him with. Arthur then appears at the show "Live with Murray Franklin" to which he was invited after receiving negative popularity when one of the clips from Arthur's stand-up comedy performances was aired previously on the show. Arthur gives a green dye to his hair and adorns the full costume of joker for the first time; bright red suit, green shirt and ochre waistcoat. On his way he dances rhythmically to the song, "Rock and Roll" on the stairways in the suburbs.

At the backstage Arthur tells Murray that he would like to be introduced as the Joker since that is what Murray first described him on the show. In the greenroom mirror Arthur had ironically written, 'put on a happy face' with lipstick. On this show, Arthur reveals that it was he who would have killed the three Wall street men. When Murray questions why Arthur was laughing, he says "I got nothing to lose. Nothing can hurt me anymore. My life is nothing but a comedy... And I'm tired of pretending it's not" (01:41:57-01:42:20). Arthur then criticises the system, and sometimes talk directly into the camera,

you decide what's right or wrong. The same way that you decide what's funny or not!... I killed those guys because they were awful. Everybody is awful these days. It's enough to make anyone crazy...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? (Philips 1:42:28 - 01:43:28)

He then questions Murray whether he had ever left the studio to experience the outside world that was filled with chaos and incivility. He tells Murray that nobody ever thinks from the side of the other. "You think men like Thomas Wayne ever think what it's like to be someone like me? To be somebody but themselves? 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!" (01:43:50-01:44:04). Arthur then calls Murray as awful for putting his video and inviting him to the show just because he could make fun of Arthur. The tension in the scene accelerates with the fuming Arthur questioning and commenting, "what do you get when you cross a mentally-ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? ... You get what you f***ing deserve" (01:44:57-01:45:09). Arthur then shoots Murray on his head, laughs and enjoys the cries of panic from the people around him and leaves the studio.

The repercussions of a stringent capitalist society are depicted with the representations of the rich and the poor in the film. Arthur's gloomy apartment contrasts the fortunate castle in which Wayne lives. The song, "Rock and Roll" appropriately reflects the psyche of Arthur who had already begun to

accept his personality and was slowly resorting to giving expression to it. The controversial song was written in 1972 by the infamous Gary Glitter who was sentenced to 16 years in jail for child-sexual offences in 2015. The rhythm of the song is significant as Arthur dances ardently as a non-professional attempting to give a vent to his emotions. Arthur's facial expressions during the scenes mirror the troubled psychological stature of a schizophrenic that wrestles with an unfair society, and also a world of fantasy and reality.

In a similar study Patricia Pisters analyses the character of Arthur Edens in the *Michael Clayton* (2007) directed by Tony Gilroy in the book *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (2012). She refers to Eden's symptoms of schizophrenia as a "sign of time" (Pisters 4). According to Pisters, the authors and artists are like doctors who are 'symptomatologists' or 'physicians of culture' who would reflect the state of affairs in the society. Eden's opening monologue in the film is a strong narrative of him becoming the other. In the process he resists, refuses and revolts against institutionalised power structures. He sees the "madness" of his contemporary capitalist culture and refuses to adhere to it (5). Edens recognises his place in the maddening system and decides to confront it. Similarly when Arthur confronts his schizophrenia he begins to resist the vicious madness of the system.

In the Introduction to Gilles Deleuze's *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993), Daniel Smith explains that schizoanalysis relates to the critical and the clinical – "through the destruction of the world (singularities and events), the dissolution of the subject (affects and percepts), the disintegration of the body (intensities and becomings), the "minoritization" of politics (speech acts and fabulation), and the stuttering of language (syntax and style)" (Pisters 4). Once Arthur starts to confront his crisis of existence, he resorts to violence and decides to punish all those whom he thought was responsible for his destruction. As his character develops he understands that his laughter is a part of himself and not an ailment as his mother had repeatedly told him. When he finds that his delusions and schizophrenic episodes were all a part of his individuality, he finds peace in accepting the multiplicities within him.

Deleuze and Guattari reject Jameson's idea that the existence of the schizophrenic being contributes to the sustenance of capitalism. They view the schizophrenic as capitalism's "exterminating angel" (Peretti). The schizo is a revolutionary, nomadic being that resists all forms of oppression. Mark Seem comments in the Introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, "on all levels, of anti-oedipal forces—the schizzes-flows—forces that escape coding, scramble the codes, and flee in all directions: orphans (no daddy-mommy-me), atheists (no beliefs), and nomads (no habits, no territories)" (Deleuze and Guattari xxi). Deleuze and Guattari view the schizo as part of the subversive postmodern politics that has the potential to destroy capitalism. For them, "schizophrenia is the exterior limit of capitalism itself or the conclusion of its deepest tendency, but that capitalism only functions on condition that it inhibit this tendency, or that it push back or displace this limit... Hence schizophrenia is not the identity of capitalism, but on the contrary its difference, its divergence, and its death" (246). Arthur's schizophrenic side clubbed with his identity of the Joker can be perceived as a potential force that unsettles the working of capitalism in Gotham.

The concept of performance in postmodernism describes traditional practices in arts to everyday behaviour and large scale political demonstrations. The notion of comedy itself had been problematized by the postmodernists envisioning theatre and performance arts like stand-up comedy as

a diverse enterprise. According to Philip Auslander, the definition of comedy requires “stable referents, norms against which behaviours may be deemed humorous” (107). He adds that in the absence of such references it becomes challenging to define the medium. Arthur’s stand-up performance is incoherent and made up of fragments to the extent that his audience find it uncomfortable to catch the element of comedy in it. Here Arthur’s performance can be considered as a surfacing of his political side on his failed intentions to find happiness amongst his fragmented existence in terms of his schizophrenic side and also his poverty stricken life conditions. His troubled words and actions reflect and constitute his identity which he exhibits on stage with the conviction that his audience would find it entertaining. The scene can also be regarded as one where Arthur aims for recognition and visibility.

Arthur crumbled in his pursuit of happiness and to create a happy world around him. His slanted smile is a result of his impoverished life and mental dispositions. His character of that of a joker represents the invisible and forgotten lives that are pushed to the fringes of the society. The audience understands that nobody including Arthur’s mother believed in his aptitudes. His confidence to sustain a career in comedy was stifled even by his mother who told him that he was not funny enough to become a comedian. He was conditioned with insecurities that when he acquired a chance to perform on stage, he failed to organize it well. He also handled betrayal at different occasions and the strongest was from Penny who he thought was his real mother.

Arthur’s schizophrenia can be understood as a result of his isolated socio-political experience in a capitalist society that did not deem his visibility. He can be perceived as the child of capitalism but also the reason for its destruction. He initiates a mad revolution against the agents of suppression which is later taken up by a crowd that opposes the shady functioning system of Gotham. The traumatic brain injury coupled with unfair life conditions triggered to create a unique character in Arthur. This made it difficult for people to understand him because of which he did not have friends. Though initially he had received help from the social services of Gotham for his illness, the aid had ceased when it was announced that the funds were cut due to an unexplained crisis. Arthur’s condition can then be understood as a product of his conditioning from his family and society. His mother, Penny had instilled in him the tension to hold a smile even in difficult times and this prohibited him from expressing what he truly underwent. His hysterical laughter at inappropriate times can be perceived as a resistance against this obligation. Arthur’s transformation is symbolic of a schizophrenic recognising his conditions, the reasons behind them, and also pledging to revolt against them. When he begins to accept them, he finds negotiation with his body and language.

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