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Joker and the Cult of Alienation:

A Marxist Critique of Estranged Labor at the Box Office

In the movie *Joker*, a glum, socially isolated Arthur Fleck lives in poverty with his disabled and unstable mother. He works various alienating gig jobs, from a sign twirler to a hospital clown, and aspires to become a successful stand-up comedian, with dreams of getting on *The Murray Franklin Show*. Arthur's first killings are acts of self-defense, but he soon embarks on a killing spree, eventually adopting the persona of the Joker. This transition can be viewed as not only psychological—the product of disassociation and delusion—but also social and political. Karl Marx's critique of estranged labor and theory of alienation help explain the material conditions driving Arthur toward violence: his labor under capitalism separates him from his species-being and strips him of his essence.