A Reflection of Urban Corruption in Batman movie by Matt Reeves through Social Realism Perspective

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Article Info	Abstract
	This study examines how The Batman (2022) represents urban corruption through a Social Realism perspective. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the research analyzes selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that depict political, institutional, and social corruption within Gotham City. The findings indicate that corruption in the film is portrayed as systemic rather than individual, embedded in political authority, law enforcement, and urban structures. Through realist aesthetics and spatial representation, the film reflects contemporary concerns regarding institutional failure and socio-economic inequality. By applying Raymond Williams' concept of Social Realism, this study demonstrates that a mainstream superhero film can function as a critical reflection of structural corruption in modern urban society. This research contributes to film studies by integrating corruption analysis within a social-realist framework applied to contemporary popular cinema.

1. Introduction

Urban corruption remains one of the most persistent structural problems in modern societies, influencing governance, institutional trust, and social inequality (Bhandari, 2023). Rather than functioning merely as isolated criminal acts, corruption often operates as a systemic mechanism embedded within political and institutional structures. Cinema has long served as a cultural medium capable of exposing such systemic dysfunction, functioning as both representation and critique of social reality (Rajput, 2023).

Within film studies, this representational function is frequently examined through the lens of realism. Social Realism, particularly as articulated by Raymond Williams, emphasizes the depiction of material conditions, institutional power, and lived social experience. Williams argues that cultural texts should reveal structural relationships shaping everyday life rather than focusing solely on individual morality. This perspective aligns with scholarship suggesting that cinematic corruption is not merely thematic but embedded within narrative and aesthetic construction (Beugnet, 2025; Billaudel & Buesa, 2022).

Previous studies have widely examined the role of film as a medium that reflects and critiques corruption, ideology, and social injustice. (Majumder, 2025) explored how the Indian political drama Satyagraha represents anti-corruption movements as a revolutionary struggle, showing that film can serve as a mirror of public dissatisfaction toward corrupt governance. Similarly, (Beugnet, 2025) examined how cinematic techniques embody "productive impurity," suggesting that corruption in film extends beyond narrative content to the very aesthetics and materiality of cinema itself. (Jenkins, 2025) analyzed the intersection between the state and the Hollywood industry, highlighting how film often reveals — and simultaneously participates in — the corruption of institutional power. (Billaudel & Buesa, 2022) provided a comprehensive overview of how directors across cultures use corruption as both a theme and an aesthetic strategy, portraying moral and political decay as central to narrative conflict.

In a similar vein, (Hellmann, 2019) discussed how filmmakers employ visual imagery — such as lighting, urban landscapes, and power symbolism — to make corruption visible and emotionally resonant to audiences. Meanwhile, (Bujgoi, 2025), emphasized that film is a crucial cultural instrument for understanding how societies confront issues such as political manipulation and social inequality.

In addition to these works(Qalbu Zhafirah et al., 2025) studied The Batman using Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Their research focused on ideological dominance and resistance within Gotham's institutions but did not explore how urban corruption itself operates as a structural and spatial phenomenon. While these prior studies provide valuable insight into ideology, representation, and moral conflict, few have specifically examined urban corruption as a cinematic reflection of real-world decay, leaving a conceptual gap that this research intends to fill.

Although (Qalbu Zhafirah et al., 2025)s study provided valuable insight into the ideological dimension of The Batman, it did not fully address the urban corruption that defines Gotham's social reality. The study did not analyze how corruption operates within the spatial and institutional landscape of the city—elements that are crucial for understanding the film's reflection of real-world urban decay. Therefore, there remains a gap in research concerning how The Batman embodies urban corruption as a social reflection, rather than solely as an ideological conflict.

This research introduces a new perspective by analyzing The Batman (2022) through the lens of social realism, focusing on how the film represents urban corruption as a reflection of real-world societal conditions. By applying social realism, this study interprets Gotham City as a cinematic reflection of urban decay, political dysfunction, and institutional collapse. Unlike previous ideological or moral readings, this research highlights the social structures, environments, and power systems that shape corruption within the film's urban setting. Thus, the study's novelty lies in bridging film analysis with the socio-realistic portrayal of corruption as an authentic human and structural experience.

The Batman, directed by Matt Reeves, reimagines Gotham City as a decaying urban space marked by political manipulation, institutional betrayal, and class disparity. Previous studies have examined corruption in cinema as political allegory (Majumder, 2025), aesthetic strategy (Beugnet, 2025), and ideological critique (Zhafirah, 2025). However, limited attention has been given to how urban corruption operates structurally and spatially within a superhero film through a Social Realism framework. And this study addresses that gap.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design focused on interpretative film analysis. Qualitative research enables in-depth exploration of meaning within cultural texts (creswell, 2018). The primary data consisted of The Batman, examined through visual sequences, dialogue, spatial composition, and narrative structure. Secondary data included scholarly works on Social Realism, corruption in cinema, and urban representation.

Six scenes were selected based on explicit representation of corruption, visual depiction of urban inequality, and narrative relevance to systemic failure. Thematic categorization followed patterns identified in prior film studies research (Dianiya, 2020). Social Realism was operationalized using three analytical indicators derived from Williams' framework: representation of material conditions, exposure of institutional power structures, and depiction of lived social consequences.

3. Result

Now in This section presents selected scenes from The Batman (2022) that visually and narratively represent the theme of urban corruption. Each scene demonstrates how social realism operates within the film—revealing the connection between cinematic imagery and real-world structures of power and moral decay.

Figure 1. Mayor Mitchell's death scene symbolizing the exposure of political corruption and the moral collapse of Gotham's leadership (The Batman, 2022).

The opening sequence reveals Mayor Don Mitchell Jr.'s involvement in financial misconduct connected to the Renewal Project. Official documents and investigative revelations indicate that public funds intended for urban development were misappropriated and redirected through corrupt networks. The visual framing—dim interiors, obstructed camera angles, and surveillance-like shots—emphasizes secrecy and concealment.

Analytical Summary:

This scene establishes corruption as embedded within executive authority, positioning governance itself as compromised.

Figure 2. The Iceberg Lounge as a representation of the intersection between political power, law enforcement, and organized crime (The Batman, 2022).

The Iceberg Lounge functions as a shared space where politicians, law enforcement officers, and criminal figures interact openly. The mise-en-scène juxtaposes luxury with shadow, visually suggesting moral ambiguity. Police officers are shown tolerating or participating in illicit exchanges.

Analytical Summary:

The collapse of boundaries between legal authority and organized crime indicates institutional normalization of corruption.

Figure 3. the orphanage flashback (The Batman, 2022).

The film contrasts elite high-rise environments with neglected districts and abandoned infrastructure. The orphanage flashback reveals deteriorated facilities despite allocated public funding. Visual desaturation and unstable camera movement intensify the depiction of neglect.

Analytical Summary:

Urban space is presented as material evidence of corruption's unequal distribution of resources.

Figure 4. Riddler's livestream confession (The Batman, 2022).

The Riddler's backstory reveals prolonged institutional neglect during childhood. His livestream confession frames his violence as exposure of elite hypocrisy. Documentary-style broadcast visuals and digital overlays simulate realism.

Analytical Summary:

Corruption is depicted not only structurally but psychologically, shaping individual consciousness and moral extremism.
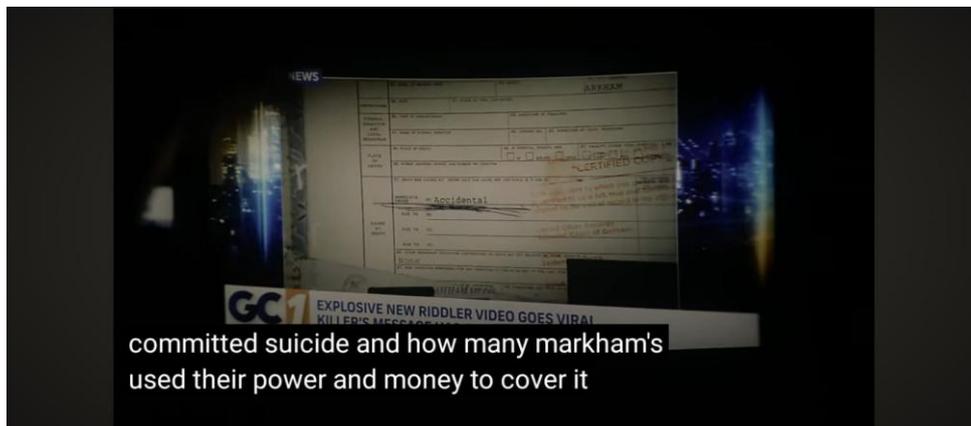

Figure 5. Broadcasted news (The Batman, 2022).

From a social realism perspective, this scene exposes how power structures operate through bureaucratic institutions. The death certificate functions as a symbol of institutional erasure, showing how corruption is not only enacted through violence or bribery but also through paperwork, classification, and administrative manipulation. The visual emphasis on the altered document aligns with Williams' (1977) view that realism foregrounds the material conditions

through which social forces exert control. The dark color palette and dim lighting further reinforce the clandestine nature of the cover-up, visually situating the scene within Gotham's broader atmosphere of decay and mistrust.

Analytical Summary:

Corruption extends beyond physical violence into institutional paperwork and legal manipulation.
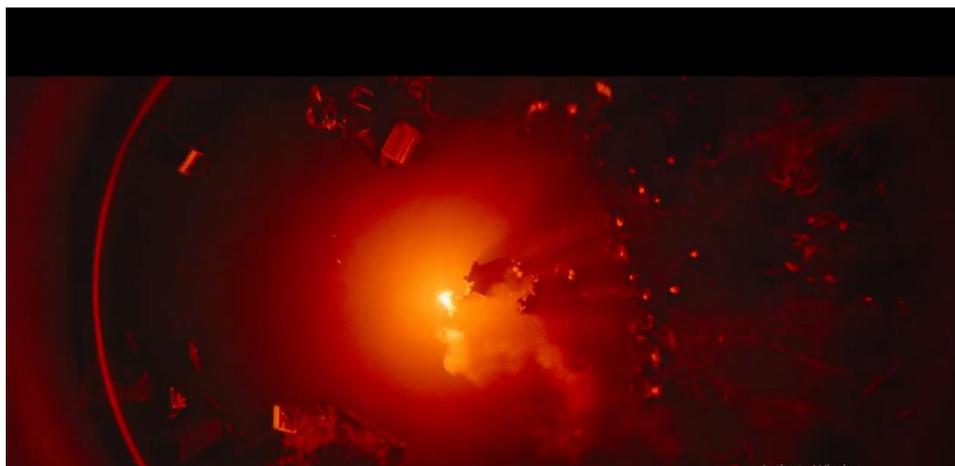

Figure 6. The flooding of Gotham representing the physical and moral collapse of a city consumed by corruption (The Batman, 2022).

The climactic flooding symbolizes structural breakdown. Citizens, officials, and criminals occupy the same submerged space, eliminating hierarchical separation.

Analytical Summary:

The physical destruction of the city functions as a metaphor for systemic institutional collapse.

Through these scenes, The Batman (2022) functions as a mirror of urban corruption and social failure. The film's dark visual palette, decaying cityscapes, and morally conflicted characters exemplify the principles of social realism, where cinematic imagery exposes the underlying power structures and ethical dilemmas of real society. Each frame reflects the complexity of corruption—not as isolated criminality, but as a systemic and cultural condition that shapes the moral landscape of urban civilization. The table below summarizes the types of corruption.

Corruption Type	Scene Evidence	Structural Level
Political corruption	Mayor Mitchell, Renewal Fund	Executive governance
Institutional corruption	Iceberg Lounge	Law enforcement
Spatial corruption	Orphanage, urban decay	Socio-economic distribution
Psychological corruption	Riddler's radicalization	Individual consequence
Bureaucratic corruption	Forged documents	Administrative systems
Systemic collapse	Flooding of Gotham	Urban structure

4. Discussion

The findings confirm that The Batman aligns closely with the principles of Social Realism. By foregrounding institutional power and material conditions, the film reveals corruption as structurally embedded within urban systems. This supports Williams' argument that realism must expose the social relations shaping lived experience.

Unlike conventional superhero narratives centered on individual antagonists, this film displaces moral focus from singular villains to systemic dysfunction. This extends previous scholarship which frames corruption in cinema as aesthetic impurity (Beugnet, 2025) or thematic device (Billaudel & Buesa, 2022). Here, corruption becomes institutionalized rather than personalized.

The depiction of police complicity reflects broader discussions of institutional collapse in political cinema (Majumder, 2025). Similarly, the spatial contrast between elite skyscrapers and neglected orphanages resonates with (Rajput, 2023) argument that films mirror socio-political inequalities embedded in urban life.

Furthermore, the Riddler's psychological radicalization aligns with research on corruption narratives as reflections of social marginalization (Maheswara, 2024). Rather than presenting violence as innate pathology, the film situates extremism within structural abandonment, reinforcing Social Realism's emphasis on material causality.

In relation to prior research on The Batman (Zhafirah, 2025), this study extends ideological analysis by integrating spatial and institutional dimensions of corruption. The contribution lies in demonstrating that a mainstream superhero film can operate as structural socio-political critique rather than purely ideological allegory.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that The Batman (2022) offers a powerful social realist representation of urban corruption by portraying political institutions, law enforcement, and elite authorities as interconnected systems of power. Through narrative and cinematic techniques, the film reflects the structural nature of corruption and the social inequalities that sustain it. Gotham City becomes a symbolic mirror of contemporary urban societies, where institutional failure, class dominance, and moral conflict create conditions of persistent social instability.

By applying Raymond Williams' Social Realism, the study reveals that the film's depiction of corruption is grounded in material realities rather than heroic or individualistic narratives. The film emphasizes the systemic roots of corruption and demonstrates how these structures shape the lived experiences, moral decisions, and psychological responses of its characters. The inclusion of themes such as political complicity, police misconduct, elite exploitation, and social trauma underscore the film's broader critique of modern governance.

The findings contribute to the scholarly discussion on film and corruption by showing how The Batman—despite being a mainstream superhero film—uses realist aesthetics and ideological critique to address pressing socio-political issues. The study also highlights the relevance of social realism in contemporary cinema, demonstrating how visual and narrative strategies can expose institutional dysfunctions and challenge dominant ideological narratives.

Future research may build on this study by examining comparative representations of corruption in other neo-noir or superhero films, exploring audience reception, or analyzing how cinematic portrayals of institutional failure influence public perceptions of real-world corruption. Ultimately, this research affirms that cinema remains a significant medium for reflecting social realities and questioning the moral foundations of modern urban life.

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