



Repressive apparatuses and biopolitical logic: A dystopian critique of Stephen King's *the Institute*

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ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 28 August 2025

Revised: 13 February 2026

Accepted: 22 June 2026

Published: 17 August 2026

Keywords

Biopolitics

Dystopian literature

Homo Sacer

RSA

Stephen King.

Stephen King's *The Institute* is a critique of unregulated institutional power and its exploitative tendencies. His work highlights the predicament of telepathic and telekinetic children, illegally captured by a state institution and coerced into achieving strategic objectives. This paper aims to examine King's novel, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Giorgio Agamben. It endeavors to explore the controlling and repressive mechanisms to enhance the understanding of power operating to regulate discipline, life, and death. The study adheres to qualitative research methodology, adopting close reading and textual/thematic analysis in relation to Biopower, Repressive State Apparatus, Homo Sacer, and State of Exception to comprehend the institutional violence exemplified by abduction, isolation, surveillance, and abuse. Findings of the study reveal the execution of institutional power through biopolitical logic, structural production of dehumanization, and normalization of cruelty for the greater good. It also emphasizes the significance of resistance as a counterforce to the aforementioned modalities. It situates *The Institute* within the tradition of dystopic literature for congruence with contemporaneous transnational practices of militarized surveillance, secured detention, and weaponized science. Finally, the novel foregrounds literature's significance in critiquing oppressive mechanisms as well as the implications of dystopian control.

Contribution/Originality: This research diversifies the scope of studies into Stephen King's works, primarily examined for horror elements. It positions King's *The Institute* within dystopian studies grounded in critical perspectives of Foucault, Althusser, and Agamben, demonstrating the novel's potential to integrate with practical contexts highlighting biopolitics and repression.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Institute (2019) is an exceptional work of twenty-first-century dystopian literature as it amalgamates Stephen King's ability for psychological horror with an acute political conscience. The story involves the abduction of telepathic and telekinetic children who are subjected to psychological control and medical experimentation, followed by their extermination. This paper summarizes these elements to highlight how King transforms horror from paranormal themes to institutional power, reflecting his fascination with control, capitalization, and the obliteration of human life.

Stephen King's works are renowned for horrific features, and existing scholarship has predominantly evaluated his writings within the scope of the supernatural dimension. There are only a few studies that situate the novel in the

realm of critical dystopia and political theory. Therefore, the unaddressed area of research pertains to the limited critical attention to *The Institute* (2019) as an ideologically conscious dystopia, characteristically unique to King's prominent literary domain. The gap is therefore bridged by positioning the novel as an allegory of institutional violence and ethical resistance. Foucault's Biopower, Althusser's State Apparatuses, Agamben's Homo Sacer, Bare Life, and State of Exception inform this study to enable understanding of the relationship between state institutions and their oppressed subjects.

Essentially, *The Institute* (2019) provides a fictional context in which brutality becomes almost unnoticed due to bureaucracy and is legitimized within the framework of necessity. The strict surveillance and enforced obedience at the institution, along with the dehumanization of the captor, recapitulate the architecture of total institutions, which operate through total control over bodies and minds. The ethical justification used by the Institute's workers "to sacrifice the few for the benefit of the many" serves as the moral pretext that legitimizes cruelty as pragmatic agency. In this way, the novel enacts a critique of institutional logics that refigure individual suffering as an abstract calculation in the interest of the presumed collective good. This paper therefore foregrounds (*The Institute*, 2019) not merely as a supernatural or paranormal text but as a critical dystopia that interrogates the logic of extreme institutional governance and critiques the moral and ontological reduction of people, especially children, to entities that can be instrumentally discarded.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Contemporary scholarship in literary criticism aggressively emphasizes how surveillance and biopower are concrete mechanisms shaping modern society, transcending simple narrative functions. To illustrate, Connors (2017) explores representations of young adults navigating oppressive gazes and power, revealing aspects of coercion and space for resistance in young adult dystopias. Similarly, Mallan (2017) in "Dystopian Fiction for Young People: Instructive Tales of Resilience" discusses the psychological ruptures of young protagonists as a result of the control imposed by a totalitarian state and their strategies of resilient survival. Rana and Adhikari (2015) investigate *The Hunger Games*, which highlights the agency of young adults contesting the institutional violence masquerading as spectacle and control, especially young people living in regimes that normalize social stratification and promote the empowerment of young adult protagonists. Bhat, Bhat, Trambo, and Antony (2025) examine the ways in which gendered silencing and digital surveillance work together to discipline subjectivities within the genre of dystopia. Building on this trajectory to recent academic scholarship on King, Mercer (2021) discusses *The Institute* (2019) and representations of children who physically and psychologically bear violence and exploitation categorizing King as significantly more fatalistic in his imaginings compared to former generations of dystopian literature, such as Orwell (1949) or Atwood (1985). Anas and Manju (2021) consider themes of childhood, betrayal, and hope in *The Institute*, while drawing attention to the psychological trauma and resilience of children living within an abusive institution. Bohovyk and Bezrukov (2023) analyze how *The Institute* reshapes horror with language, narrative structure, and psychological/emotive means to produce bureaucratic terror, showcasing surveillance, institutional violence, and the normalization of cruelty.

Future Orientation: While these works have approached the themes of surveillance, biopolitics, childhood trauma, and horror aesthetics at the intersections, it is important to situate *The Institute* (2019) in a particular broader dystopian keeling context which points to King's work metaphorically representing contemporary state domination structured around repressive state apparatus and biopolitical rationalities that engender harshness under the guise of security. To consider this gap, this essay takes a transdisciplinary theoretical approach, asserting that the horror in the novel derives from the bureaucratic sanction/normalization of violence as an administrative necessity rather than supernatural aberration.

3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative design relying on close reading and textual/thematic analysis of *The Institute* (2019). It is informed by a combined, interdisciplinary theoretical approach encompassing Biopower, Repressive State Apparatus, Homo Sacer, and State of Exception. It utilizes political theory, cultural studies, and critiques of dystopia. The methodology and theoretical frameworks aid in understanding the political meaning through thematic elements like captivity, surveillance, bureaucratic and institutional rationality, and noncompliance, ultimately framing the analysis and perspectives on governance, intimidation, and curtailment of rights. The paper engages with the text within deliberations on security, surveillance, and institutional violence and explores possibilities for employing fiction as a means of critique on governance while contributing to conversations about power and ethics.

As biopolitical readings are amplifying across heterogeneous literary traditions, this study situates (*The Institute*, 2019) within that panoramic critical discourse. The novel retains dystopian features as the narrative subjects captive children to surveillance, experimentation, and control. It is significant for its unique presentation of a state-like system exerting control and engaging with explicit institutionalized coercion, manipulation, and surveillance, corroborating (Arendt, 1963) “banality of evil,” which elucidates how violence is endorsed in large bureaucracies. In addition, the themes closely align with biopolitics and state-sponsored repression, and therefore, a thematic selection of the critically relevant sections was performed to maintain conceptual rigor without excessive elaboration. Moreover, the single-text focus allows thorough scrutiny and interpretive analysis, synthesizing possibilities for comparative studies within Stephen King’s oeuvre or with other notable dystopian writers, including (Atwood, 1985; Ishiguro, 2005; Orwell, 1949; Tchaikovsky, 2015), or whose works in speculative and science fiction often exhibit biopolitical anxieties (Vint, 2011).

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework of this study centers on three interrelated theoretical paradigms, which cumulatively develop a multi-dimensional lens for analysis.

4.1. Foucault’s Biopower

Foucault (1977) and Foucault (1978) provide paradigms that equip this research with vocabulary to highlight how power and control operate at micro and macro levels. This is evident in the novel, where imprisoned children undergo intensive surveillance. Additionally, punishment for disobedience is enforced through confinement or sedation, often without warning or with minimal indoctrination. These malevolent practices aim to suppress resistance, reflecting Foucault’s theory of the body as a site of training and correction under the influence of power, ultimately leading to internalized control.

Regulatory power, on the other hand, regulates entire populations instead of one individual. *The Institute* (2019) rationalized its operation as a method of regulating a population of children with psychic abilities, whose exploitation is justified through the lens of geopolitical intervention. The idea of biopolitics converts the mass death or permanent incapacitation of these children into a rational administrative means to an end. This echoes Foucault’s argument that modern power is increasingly a matter of managing death and life through statistics and medicalization (Foucault, 1978). In King’s fictional world, to govern in this way is an unquestionable power, which sidesteps the possibility of cruelty by normalizing it in the name of the “greater good.”

4.2. Althusser’s State Apparatus

In his landmark work Althusser (1971) makes a distinction between Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). Institutions like the military, police, and the criminal justice system are examples of RSAs that primarily use coercion, whereas ISAs use ideological persuasion, including education, religion, and culture (Althusser, 2006).

The Institute is a covert, coercive organization that kidnaps children, imposes confinement, and subjects them to harsh disciplinary measures without legal accountability. It functions almost entirely as an RSA, avoiding ideological engagement in favor of physical control, threats, and punishment, unlike ISAs that gain consent by shaping beliefs. This makes the Institute a clear example of repressive machinery in its purest form, untouched by the ideological softening often used to justify state authority in democracies. Aside from brief rhetorical appeals to “national interest,” ISAs are largely absent, emphasizing the extremity of the Institute’s model.

4.3. Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, *Bare Life*, and the State of Exception

Agamben (1998) offers a crucial conceptual layer. According to Agamben, the “bare life” is a way of living that has been devoid of political and legal legitimacy, making people subject to extermination without the act being considered murder in either the legal or moral sense (Agamben, 1998). This legal vacuum is exactly what the detained children in *The Institute* occupy: they are taken from society without any proper procedure, made imperceptible to the law, and put through deadly experiments.

The institute in the novel functions continually in a state of exception beyond any constraints of legal or constitutional restrictions. It operates outside the moral-ethical domain where sovereign authority administers unhindered. Similar to Foucault, Agamben’s frameworks map the biopolitical management of disposable bodies existing outside legal bounds, where children’s lives are valued solely according to their usefulness to the despotic state.

4.4. Justification for a Combined Framework

Conjointly, theories of Foucault, Althusser, and Agamben ascertain various novel aspects and interpretations of *The Institute* transgressing traditional, unidirectional, and simplistic horror readings of Stephen King. They uncover the underlying political structure of the novel thoroughly and emphasize the conflation of dehumanization and coercive control as core principles of the Institute’s operations. While Foucault’s perspectives aid in the explanation of power dynamics and the state’s exertion of control on its subjects, Althusser articulates an equivalent notion in terms of repression; and Agamben’s theoretical paradigms illustrate the legal, state-sanctioned annulment that permits unchecked violence. In a unified approach, these frameworks contextualize the novel within a more extensive discourse about the existential and moral implications of a totalitarian state’s control over the life and death of its populace and, at the same time, provide nuances to any corresponding real-world counterparts.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

5.1. Repressive State Apparatus

The repressive mechanism and rationalization of violence: The institute, in the Althusserian sense, has become extra-legal, invisible, and inaccessible, displayed by secretive and totalizing power, degree of indoctrination, and coercive means. In the institute, there is an utterly complete absence of scrutiny or inquiry that authorizes repressive practice, unlike state apparatuses in the traditional sense. The lives of abducted children are disembedded from the political framework when they are unlawfully detained, with eroding parental protection and biopolitical domination of their existence. It echoes Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* theory (Agamben, 1998) as the children are situated, unprotected, within a violent atmosphere through abduction, detention, continual surveillance, and structural punishments. The salient example of the institute as a repressive apparatus is the state regulating the movements and routines of the children to create “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977) who are psychologically manipulated, sedated into bodily exploitation, and subjected to corporal punishment.

You need to realize that you are here to serve, Luke. That means you have to grow up fast. It means being realistic. Things will happen to you here. Some of them will not be so nice. You can be a good sport about them and

earn tokens, or you can be a bad sport and get none. Those things will happen either way, so which should you choose? It shouldn't be hard to figure out (The Institute, 2019).

Instead of assigning punishment, this threat indicates a climate of endless fear and unpredictability in which compliance is upheld. It is a disturbing echo of extraordinary rendition. Just as detainees in such instances are involuntarily taken to clandestine, unexplained locations to vanish from any official legal and social record, so too are children rendered invisible to legal and social recognized records. The text reflects the moral void of these practices by reigning a state on the very at-risk victims, children, and expands moral outrage of institutional violence.

More concerning than the violence itself is its rhetoric that makes violence legitimate in the novel. Staff routinely framed their actions in utilitarian language, that they sacrifice the few to save the many, for the sake of safety. This language replaces the cruelty of their violence and produces duty, or what Arendt referred to as the "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963). Workers did not offer themselves as sadistic antagonists but even offered themselves as obedient bureaucrats who could alleviate suffering through policies they thought were necessary to maximize safety. This logic is made explicit by Smith when he endorses the Institute by saying, "Suppose it was only fifty? Or five? Wouldn't it still be worth it?" (The Institute, 2019). Tim's reply, "Sane people don't sacrifice children on the altar of probability. That's not science, it's superstition" (The Institute, 2019), reveals how such mechanical reasoning functions as a mask for cruelty. With this scene in the novel, King dramatizes the ways in which the rationalization of violence is carried out by modern institutions and obscured as bureaucratic responsibility. This circumstance signifies the biopolitical nature of the institutions that treat the death of humans as a simplistic, functional population-regulating apparatus (Foucault, 1978).

Surveillance and spatial control: Surveillance is the institute's most insidious weapon. Every movement and utterance is monitored, producing what resembles a panoptic regime (Foucault, 1977; Lyon, 2006). Yet, the effects of this system are not limited to the children: even staff members find their moral bearings eroded. As King notes, the surveillance regime disciplines not only the captives but also those enforcing its rules, normalizing complicity in cruelty. Architecture reinforces this surveillance with locked corridors, one-way mirrors, and spatial compartmentalization that prevents solidarity and ensures isolation. The facility is not only a site of confinement but also a mechanism of subject formation, where surveillance becomes internalized and individuality dissolved. Thus, King shows that the institute's watchfulness does more than monitor bodies; it corrodes ethical subjectivity, exemplifying Foucault's argument that power operates not merely through force but through the constitution of subjectivity (Foucault, 1977). The children are coerced into becoming what the institution requires: bodies stripped of agency and reconfigured as resources for state goals. The institute draws on the connections between disguise, coercion, and bureaucratic rationality in state repression. It is opaque, marked by violent coercion, and uses rhetoric of security, demonstrating the normalization of institutional violence. Surveillance and control of space are ways to compel children to follow social order, along with direct coercion. King criticizes contemporary institutions, revealing how "the greater good" is a means to justify terror, making people disposable, and exposing an ethical surrender to repression.

5.2. Biopolitical Logic

In Stephen King's *The Institute*, the utilization of children's psychic powers as a resource signals the dramatization of biopower. The biopolitical logic organizes psychic potential to serve militarism and the global order, rendering both the body and the population sites of governance. A Foucauldian understanding of biopower illuminates this biopolitical regulation, while Agamben's understanding of bare life reveals the children to be rendered expendable, stripped of legal protections, and complexly denied autonomy. Althusser's framework heralds *The Institute* as a state apparatus where it operates not through ideology but through coercion.

The body as a resource and the population as a target: The institute monopolizes the child's body as a site for experimentation and control; their use of sedation, mandated drug regimens, and physical conditioning is not framed

as medical but rather as disciplinary interventions. Children receive injections that disrupt memory and reduce agency, thus rendering their bodies deliberately malleable. This generates an embodiment that parallels Foucault's concept of dressage; a body is conditioned, corrected, and normalized through routines of intervention repeated frequently and intrusively (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1977). The rationale of discipline means the body is not interpreted as a loss of life but as a resource able to be cashed out. Sedation, in particular, indicates how biopower operates at the micro level. To chemically obliterate disobedience in moments means it was done through an omission of agency, transforming the child into nothing more than a subservient extension of institutional will. Luke notes.

He hated the thought of Maureen snitching but understood her reasons. There were other people here with at least some shreds of decency left, but working in a place like this destroyed your moral compass. They were damned, whether they knew it or not. Maureen might be, too. The only thing that mattered now was whether she really knew a way he might be able to get out of here (The Institute, 2019).

It is a recognition that institutional structures corrupt both the subjects and the agents of control. The systematic regulation of sleep, food, and energy is not incidental; it is a central part of the Institute's attempt to domesticate psychic power. In this way, the children's bodies are governed as if they were machines, where the control begins to collapse the distinction between life and labor.

Although discipline targets individual bodies, regulatory power operates on groups. The Institute shapes psychic children as a population to be monitored, controlled, and intentionally reduced. Children are not acknowledged as individuals; rather, each child's potential contributes to the overall "statistical population" value. This aligns with Foucault (1978)'s observation that modern power regulates life and death at the population level, making individual bodies calculable through data within the governance system. The institutional language employed by the Institute is also part of this logic. As Luke reflects, "this life we think we're living isn't real. It's just a shadow play..." (The Institute, 2019). Here, the experience of captivity is not merely a matter of being reduced to numbers but of feeling one's entire existence drained of authenticity, as if life itself has been hollowed into performance. Their personhood disappears for the sake of management as a population or demography. This is a depersonalization that embodies Agamben's notion of a life without political value, where the child is not a subject of law but a biological resource hidden in the math.

Militarization of Child Potential and Normalization of Cruelty: Biopolitical exploitation in the King's novel possesses several grievous facets, among which the militarization of children's telepathic and telekinetic abilities is the foremost. The institute employs their psychic potential as weapons for national geopolitical struggles and wars. This logic is made explicit through the comments of a military officer on the capitalization of this nonhuman energy for strategic enhancement.

We only concentrate on stopping the big ones. The world has survived because we've been able to take these proactive measures. Thousands of children have died in this process, but billions of children have been saved." He turned to Luke and smiled. "Of course, you understood it's a simple enough deduction. I understand you're also quite the math whiz, and I'm sure you see the cost-to-benefit ratio. You may not like it, but you see it" (The Institute, 2019).

This draws a striking parallel to the contemporary state-sponsored exploitation for militarized objectives, be it human potential or science and technology. As Althusser makes a distinction between ideological and repressive state apparatuses, it becomes apparent here that children are not subjected to ideological propaganda to be exploited for military goals but coerced into submission. The militarization of children's potential explains, in social terms, how a repressive institution carries biopolitical logic into the site of security and war by reducing life to its instrumental value in the pursuit of geopolitical advantage.

The Institute's operations are maintained through a discourse of necessity. Employees frame their actions not as sadism but as obligations of security, where suffering is recast as pragmatic duty. In this way, the suffering and death of children become an acceptable burden within a utilitarian calculus. For the children, however, the experience of such systemic cruelty leads to revelations about freedom and captivity. As King writes.

He had done this before, in his grandfather's little aluminum fishing skiff with its putt-putting two-stroke engine, many times, but he had never not even as a four-year-old to whom everything was new and amazing been so overwhelmed by the sight of those momentary grooves. It came to him, with the force of a revelation, that you had to have been imprisoned to fully understand what freedom was (The Institute, 2019).

This recognition highlights the insidious normalization of violence: the deprivation of liberty and the infliction of harm are reinterpreted as ordinary conditions of governance, altering even how freedom itself is understood. These justifications showcase the workings of biopolitical necessity, in which the management of populations is legitimized by the extermination or suffering of individual lives. Because monstrosity is framed as a technical hurdle toward mass suffering, the Institute resembles modern security state logics, which justify surveillance, detention, or torture of some to protect the safety of many. Again, the detrimental actions are not denied; instead, the act of suffering is re-invented as a necessary input toward a modality of security. Arendt (1963) is useful again because the workers at the Institute are not overtly sadistic, but mundanely ordinary people who participate in cruelty by virtue of it being normalized as part of their professional comportment.

5.3. Dehumanization and Ethical Collapse

Stephen King's work condemns state power by showing how institutions reduce subjects to expendable units, normalize complicity, and dissolve moral responsibility. The novel depicts dehumanization not as an exception but as the inevitable product of repressive apparatuses, through identity reduction, statistical abstraction of death, and bureaucratic submission. Drawing on Foucault, Althusser, Agamben, and Arendt, King's narrative reveals how bureaucratic rationality collapses morality and exposes the dangers of blind obedience to authority.

Reduction of identity: The first step of dehumanization at the institute involves transforming children into useful units of power. The child's name and identity are stripped down and replaced with numbers, categories, or functional designations as individuality is erased. As one doctor explains.

It's called BDNF, which stands for brain-derived neurotrophic factor. Kids with high BDNF are targeted, followed, and eventually taken to the Institute. Sometimes they're as old as sixteen, but most are younger. They grab those with very high BDNF scores as soon as possible. We've had kids here as young as eight" (The Institute, 2019).

This administrative policy embodies Foucault's assertion that disciplinary institutions reduce individuals to cases to be observed, recorded, and intervened upon. In this way, identity loses all intrinsic value and becomes merely a point in the institution's biopolitical calculus, acting on productivity by erasing individuality. The removal of individuals also illustrates Agamben's notion of bare life, as children are stripped of political recognition and reduced to biological existence. By replacing names with data points, the Institute forces children to surrender legal and social personhood. This is not just a denial of dignity but a process whereby human beings are abstracted as resources, valued only for their measurable potential. Such depersonalization also critiques broader institutional functions where individuals can become invisible within bureaucratic classification.

Statistical Sacrifice and Bureaucratic Complicity: Closely tied to identity reduction is the Institute's framing of death as a necessary statistic. The deaths of children are not seen as tragedies but as minor losses in calculations of safety. A staff member's assertion to sacrifice the few so the many can live (The Institute, 2019) exemplifies the utilitarian logic of biopower, where death is no longer the fate of individuals but a mechanism of population management. Within Foucault's terms, suffering is justified by the supposed well-being of others. King dramatizes this collapse by showing how repairs done to children are treated not as care for persons, but as tinkering with discarded parts in a demographic strategy. Staff spoke of losses in the aggregate, reducing human lives to offsets in an equation. This statistical sacrifice reveals the ethical erasure of individual claims upon society. In a parallel sense, Agamben's notion of sovereign power applies, as the Institute legitimizes death administratively and circumvents juridical protections, disguising systematic cruelty as necessity.

One of the more problematic factors in *The Institute* is the known complicity of its workers; they function emotionally removed, assigning their recognition of violence as rational bureaucratic opacity. Following Arendt (1963)'s banality of evil, the workers may not be sadistic monsters, but their intervention with the children enables them to render cruelty as normalized pro forma obligation. This bureaucratic distance also represents Althusser's Repressive State Apparatus. The institute does not rely on ideological persuasion; rather, compliance is maintained through hierarchical authority and bureaucratic necessities. The workers compartmentalize their role in the process and perceive they are doing their job, and in effect, are removed from the violence they present. King illustrates how institutional spaces possess principles that diffuse operational responsibility, continuing to institutionalize structural violence while people remain innocent participants. Bureaucratic complicity renders the moral dilemma procedural: violence is carried out simply as part of workplace management, for instance, blending responsibilities of job responsibilities and residual moral injuries. King points out the blending of responsibility to illustrate how the bureaucratic is encroaching on the individual through the apparatus of control.

Critique of Institutional Morality: *The Institute* (2019) at its essence critiques the nature of institutional morality and the corrosive effects of unquestioning allegiance to authority. The staff's acceptance of the institution's logic shows how people are made to prioritize bureaucratic imperatives ahead of their ethics. King warns about how individuals surrender moral judgment to the dictates of institutions, allowing violence to arise because people stop questioning what they are told to do. Luke's rejection of this logic provides the narrative foil. Confronting Smith, he declares, "Sane people don't sacrifice children on the altar of probability. That's not science, it's superstition" (*The Institute*, 2019). This refusal exposes the moral void of the Institute's utilitarian reasoning and insists on the value of every human life. These oppositional perspectives foreground King's caution about cruelty when institutions appropriate moral reasoning, since morality tied to institutional logic allows cruelty to appear justified. The critique extends beyond the fictional Institute, resonating with present-day practices of detention, surveillance, and the militarization of science in the name of necessity. By showing how systemic violence is rationalized as ordinary practice, King warns against the logic that normalizes cruelty as virtue under the cover of authority.

5.4. Resistance

Whereas *The Institute* (2019) exposes the structural and biopolitical dynamics of repression, it also articulates resistance as an ethical position counter to institutional cruelty. King describes resistance as not the result of divine epiphany but as the capacity to maintain moral reasoning, solidarity, and conscience. The characters' refusal to accept the legitimacy of institutional violence are acts that reclaim their human dignity from bureaucratic reduction. Representing ethical protagonists, nuanced cracks in the institution, acts of reclaimed agency, and a narrative arc from fatalism to critique, King represents resistance as a crucial or vital response to the denigration or dehumanization of life.

Ethical protagonists: Luke Ellis and Kalisha Benson are the ethical center of the novel. They refuse to accept the logic of sacrificing the few for the many, positioning themselves as agents of conscience within a system designed to eliminate moral considerations. Luke directly challenges the institution's calculus of expendability with his "every life counts" remark. His resistance does not arise from physical strength but from moral clarity, making it feel like an ethical duty. Kalisha is equally crucial: together, they embody solidarity. Her resistance stems not from a desire for conflict but from her ability to sustain collective morale among the children, refusing to let institutional language sever the bonds of care. In Foucault's account, both characters resist discipline because they refuse to internalize its logic. Their ethical stance interrupts the production of docile bodies, insisting on the irreplaceable value of individual life. The protagonists' resistance foregrounds ethical agency even within total institutions. This moral awakening is captured in the children's realization:

Both, Avery said. He was smiling, too. Because now we're doing it for ourselves.

Yes, Kalisha thought. Because they were doing it for themselves. They didn't have to be a bunch of dazed dummies sitting on the ventriloquist's knee. It was so simple, but it was a revelation: what you did for yourself was what gave you the power (The Institute, 2019).

This moment exemplifies Foucault's notion of reclaiming agency against institutional control: the children's awareness that their power comes from acting for themselves interrupts the Institute's attempt to produce passive, docile bodies. By asserting autonomy and collective solidarity, Luke and Kalisha transform moral clarity into practical resistance, demonstrating how ethical action can persist even under pervasive systems of domination.

Fractures from Within: Resistance can also arise through internal dissension within the institution. Maureen, a staff member who, despite her initial complicity, chooses to collaborate with the children against the Institute, demonstrates that obedience is not guaranteed. Her alignment with the children exposes cracks in institutional control and shows that even insiders can undermine oppressive systems. The novel dramatizes institutional pressure on individuals.

The doors banged open at the far end of the hall. Luke was suddenly sure he was going to see a couple of caretakers, a couple of the mean ones, Tony and Zeke, maybe coming for him. They'd take him somewhere and question him about what he and Maureen had been talking about, and if he didn't tell right away, they'd use 'enhanced interrogation techniques' until he spilled everything. He'd be in trouble, but Maureen's trouble might be even worse (The Institute, 2019).

This quote shows Maureen actively supporting the children, creating a space where resistance can occur within the institution. Her actions highlight the fragility of institutional control, showing that repression depends on the acquiescence of actors. Maureen embodies how ordinary people can be complicit through mundane compliance, validating Arendt's theory, yet also demonstrates that conscience can disrupt habituated obedience. Her moral resistance asserts responsibility within bureaucratic rationalization, proving that complicity is a choice rather than a given. By siding with the children, she introduces fractures in the bureaucracy, generating uncertainty within the institution and exposing its reliance on the transience of human participation rather than inherent strength.

Reclaiming agency: The children's acts of defiance are indeed reclaiming agency (those acts of defiance are a kind of anticipation, to place one's own agency in motion to counter an ongoing systematic (and increasingly degrading) diminishment of one's subjectivity and dignity). While the institute tries to erase individual subjectivity, defiance asserts and recuperates it. Even the simplest motions, such as defying an order, quietly hatching a plan, or keeping a friendship, offer an act of dignity in the face of the bureaucratic logic and power of dehumanization. Luke's eventual (and predominant) escape dramatizes this sense of global recovery of agency, shifting his subjectivity from the passive object of discipline to the active agent of a human moral critique. Reclaiming agency will fit within Agamben's insistence that even "bare life" can recover itself to "political life" through a form of resistance, even when talking about a space of exception. By refusing to be made voiceless, the children are undermining the very logic that renders them useless and disposable. Their resistance demonstrates how subjectivity, once denied, can be reclaimed in solidarity and action. Importantly, their acts of resistance are not purely individual but collective, confirming that resistance emerges from belonging to humanity rather than isolated heroism.

From Fatalistic to Critical Dystopia: The Institute (2019) major contribution is its shift from narrative fatalism to critical dystopia. At the beginning, it seems as if the children of the Institute will be doomed to extermination. The latent institutional power seems exorbitant, and familiar structures suggest inevitability to the children. Of course, acts of resistance recast the narrative and shift the register of the novel away from fatalism and despair, towards a political critique. Repression is no longer narrated as if it's absolute. King acknowledges human repression's reliance on the paranoid silence of its subjects and the compliance of the agent(s) who can oppress. This transformation positions the novel in the continuum of critical dystopia, which gives hope where annihilation is implied. Critical dystopia critiques some aspect of reality while not merely depicting destruction, but signaling some alternative. The novel provides successful resistance, thus becoming a political guide. It both warns about the perils of obedience to

institutions and declares there is potential for conscience and solidarity to dismantle institutional powers. The narrative is not nihilistic in the sense that it could be pedagogical, by encouraging readers to be ethically vigilant.

6. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The Institute (2019) connects us to the surreptitious or concealed realities of surveillance, detention, and the securitization of lives characterized as at risk. The morally compromised, or disassociated, demeanor of abducted and organized children, treated as so many unnamed, faceless things left irretrievably dead, signifies precisely the illogic of post-9/11 security regimes, from black sites to extraordinary rendition to indefinite detention (Hajjar, 2011), which allows for a suspension of legality under the guise of necessity (Agamben, 1998). King's fictional institute occupies, and sheds light on, contemporary global conversations on expendability no more apparent than a commitment to the state of exception within everything from counter-terrorism, border governance, and the inhumane treatment of marginalized individuals (Mbembe, 2003).

As a prospective piece of dystopian literature itself, *The Institute* takes up familiar tropes to be sure, while simultaneously repositioning them as well. The surveillance focus evokes Orwell (1949) while the biopolitical control in terms of bodies is similar to Atwood (1985). The comparison with Ishiguro (2005) is especially apt, as developing children lose their individual identity, being treated instead as mere functions of contested utility (Ishiguro, 2005). Dick (1956) anticipates King's focus on psychic capability being weaponized for state use in protecting security, and recently popularized dystopian young adult fiction such as *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins, highlights the same tendency of exploiting children to uphold a systemic false idol (Collins, 2008). Similarly, Lu (2011) foregrounds the manipulation and instrumentalization of youth within a militarized state, reflecting comparable tensions between individuality and systemic control (Lu, 2011). Comparable biopolitical dynamics are also dramatized in Neal Shusterman's *Unwind*, where youth are reduced to expendable resources (Gumilang & Retnaningdyah, 2022). More broadly, dystopian literature continues to function as a cultural discourse negotiating governance, control, and resistance (Robina & Keerthana, 2025). Nevertheless, King's text makes clear that his focus is distinguished by its immediacy; it offers no allegorical distractor and maps the structure of dystopia directly into recognizable aspects of the modern security state. Through the lens of comparison, *The Institute* (2019) can simultaneously act as a continuation of the dystopian genre and an urgent cultural critique of present conditions. With the concerns of usurpation/reclamation of biopolitical violence on children heightening the ethical stakes to warn against a society that legitimizes cruelty through normalizing it bureaucratically, King's novel illustrates that dystopia is still a useful feature in exploring the political and moral cost of governing today.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study, while offering a focused and theoretically robust reading of *The Institute* (2019) is subject to several limitations that define the scope and applicability of its findings.

7.1. Textual Scope

This paper focuses primarily on a single text, *The Institute* (2019) as the central object of analysis. While comparisons are drawn with other dystopian works, these serve to contextualize and highlight specific themes rather than constitute a comprehensive comparative study of dystopian literature. Consequently, the findings remain primarily applicable to King's text and limit the broader generalizations across the genre.

7.2. Theoretical Concentration

The study is guided by a triangulation of theorists such as Foucault, Althusser, and Agamben, and engagement with Arendt, but this excludes approaches like feminist theory, postcolonial reading practices, or trauma studies, which might offer different interpretations.

7.3. Cultural and Contextual Specificity

The study draws on Western political and philosophical approaches to understand governance, repression, and resistance, which limits the cross-cultural applicability of the findings.

7.4. Interpretive Nature

Qualitative literary studies like this work produce interpretive rather than empirical findings. While focusing on The Institute (2019) some themes relate to real-world contexts such as post-9/11 security and unethical confinement, highlighting broader relevance without claiming universal applicability.

8. CONCLUSION

The Institute (2019) exemplifies how contemporary institutions bring together repressive and biopolitical power that turn life into a site of consumption and exploitation, especially in the case of life being ultimately fungible. Through the ideas of Foucault, Althusser, Agamben, and Arendt, the representation of secrecy, surveillance, and bureaucratic rationalization illustrates how cruelty is legitimate and normal, turning lives and, especially, children into statistical instances of expendability. The novel illuminates the abandonment of identity, rationalization of death, and the complicity of bureaucratic agents of violence, as King critiques the ethical breakdown that happens when authority overtakes conscience. Similarly, the novel resists a fatalistic and dystopian reading, instead foregrounding the possibility of moral reasoning and solidarity. The ethical resolve of Luke, Kalisha, and Maureen's development as moral individuals shows that even total institutions can face destabilization through acts that represent a personal conscience. Thus, the work represents dystopia more as a critical possibility than a determining fate, showing readers that authoritarian power has fragility, and ethical resistance will always have significance. King locates the real danger not in the supernatural but rather in the normalization of institutional violence with the intent of affirming literature's power, which spotlights the political and moral consequences of the values of contemporary governing. In doing so, this essay contributes to the field of dystopian literary studies and King studies by re-reading The Institute (2019) as a critical dystopia that combines horror and political critique. It demonstrates how fiction by King not only captures but also contests contemporary political logics of governance and ultimately shows how it continues to be important to study literature as a space for political and ethical critique.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure of AI Use: Artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT by OpenAI) was used solely for language refinement and reference formatting. The intellectual content, analysis, interpretation, and final arguments of the manuscript are entirely the authors' own. All outputs generated by AI were critically reviewed, edited, and approved by the authors prior to submission.

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