

Sam's Trauma in Jim Sheridan's film *Brothers* (2009)

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Abstract:

This study examines the representation of psychological trauma in Jim Sheridan's film *Brothers* (2009) through the framework of psychoanalytic theory. Centered on the character of Sam Cahill, a U.S. Marine who returns from Afghanistan exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the film offers a compelling narrative of psychic fragmentation, relational rupture, and the struggle for reintegration. The objective of this paper is to analyze how trauma is constructed and mediated cinematically, and how psychoanalytic concepts illuminate the psychological depth of the characters and their interpersonal dynamics. Methodologically, the study employs a close reading of narrative structure, character development, and visual symbolism, supported by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks (Forsyth, 2024). The analysis reveals that trauma in *Brothers* is not only portrayed through explicit behavioral symptoms, but also embedded in the film's mise-en-scène, temporal disruptions, and relational tensions. The findings suggest that the film functions as a cinematic container for traumatic memory (Bion, 2023), inviting viewers into a shared affective experience that mirrors the disorientation and fragmentation of the traumatized subject (Caruth, 2022). The study concludes that *Brothers* contributes to trauma discourse by dramatizing the psychic cost of war and the fragile process of healing. Its implications extend to film studies, trauma theory, and psychoanalytic criticism, offering a model for interdisciplinary engagement with cinematic texts.

Keywords: Trauma; Psychoanalysis; PTSD; Film Analysis; *Brothers* (2009)

Abstrak:

Studi ini mengkaji representasi trauma psikologis dalam film *Brothers* (2009) karya Jim Sheridan melalui kerangka teori psikoanalisis. Berpusat pada karakter Sam Cahill, seorang Marinir AS yang kembali dari Afghanistan dengan gejala gangguan stres pascatrauma (PTSD), film ini menawarkan narasi yang memikat tentang fragmentasi psikis, keretakan hubungan, dan perjuangan untuk reintegrasi. Tujuan makalah ini adalah untuk menganalisis bagaimana trauma dikonstruksi dan dimediasi secara sinematik, dan bagaimana konsep-konsep psikoanalisis mencerahkan kedalaman psikologis para tokoh dan dinamika interpersonal mereka. Secara metodologis, studi ini menggunakan pembacaan yang cermat terhadap struktur naratif, pengembangan karakter, dan simbolisme visual, yang didukung oleh kerangka psikoanalisis Freudian dan Lacanian. Analisis ini mengungkapkan bahwa trauma dalam *Brothers* tidak hanya digambarkan melalui gejala perilaku yang eksplisit, tetapi juga tertanam dalam mise-en-scène film, gangguan temporal, dan ketegangan hubungan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa film ini berfungsi sebagai wadah sinematik untuk memori traumatis, mengajak penonton ke dalam pengalaman afektif bersama yang mencerminkan disorientasi dan fragmentasi subjek yang trauma. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Brothers* berkontribusi pada wacana trauma dengan mendramatisasi dampak psikis perang dan proses penyembuhan yang rapuh. Implikasinya meluas ke studi film, teori trauma, dan kritik psikoanalitik, menawarkan model untuk

Kata kunci: Trauma; Psikoanalisis, PTSD; Analisis Film; *Brothers* (2009)

INTRODUCTION

The representation of trauma in film is an increasingly relevant topic in interdisciplinary studies, particularly amidst growing awareness of the psychological impact of war, violence, and loss in contemporary life (Kaplan, 2024). The film *Brothers* (2009), which tells the story of a marine returning from war with symptoms of PTSD, offers a complex narrative of emotional wounds, identity disintegration, and relational tensions within a family. Examining trauma in this film is important because it not only represents individual suffering but also demonstrates how trauma spreads affectively into the immediate social environment (Herman, 1993), making it a rich field of reflection for the study of psychology and visual culture.

Several previous studies have addressed trauma in cinema through a psychoanalytic approach, such as the analysis of psychoanalysis in trauma (Eshel, 2016), and general studies of cinematic trauma by (Kaplan, 2024) and (Caruth, 2022). However, studies on *Brothers* remain limited, particularly in terms of in-depth exploration using classical and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to interpret the unconscious dynamics of the film's characters and narrative structure (Lacan, 1966). This gap opens up opportunities to understand how trauma is not only explicitly displayed but also implicitly depicted in visual symbolism, narrative repetition, and the relationships between characters (Mulvey, 1975).

This study aims to analyze the representation of trauma in *Brothers* using a psychoanalytic approach to uncover the psychological mechanisms at work behind the narrative and visualization of trauma, as well as their implications for understanding cinema as an affective and therapeutic medium (Christian Metz, 2021).

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, few studies have examined *Brothers* (2009) through a psychoanalytic lens that synthesizes Freudian and Lacanian frameworks with formal film analysis (Kaplan, 2024). Moreover, the relational dimension of trauma—how one character's psychic rupture destabilizes familial affective structures—remains underexplored (Albert & Bowlby, 1982). This study addresses these gaps by integrating psychoanalytic theory with close readings of cinematic form, offering a comprehensive model for understanding trauma as both a psychological and aesthetic phenomenon.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of trauma in cinema occupies a critical intersection between psychoanalytic theory, narrative trauma studies, and formal film analysis. Foundational literature in this field spans theoretical explorations of trauma and narrative, psychoanalytic approaches to film, and case studies of war and psychological films. This review critically engages with prior research, highlighting convergences, divergences, and limitations, while positioning the current study as a response to existing gaps.

Trauma, Narrative, and the Limits of Articulation

Scholars such as Cathy (Caruth, 2022) argue that trauma resists full articulation, emerging instead through indirect narrative forms. Film, as a temporal and visual medium, is uniquely suited to represent this disjunction—often through non-linear structures, visual repetition, and diegetic gaps (Roger Luckhurst, 2021). While these studies illuminate the representational strategies of trauma, they tend to focus on narrative form without fully accounting for the psychodynamic mechanisms underlying character behavior and relational tension (Freud, 2024).

Psychoanalytic Approaches to Film: Freudian and Lacanian Perspectives

Psychoanalytic film theory, as developed by (Ivandić, 2002), (Collins et al., 2021), and others, explores concepts such as repression, repetition compulsion, disavowal, and the gaze. Freudian readings often emphasize familial dynamics and object relations (Freud, 2024), while Lacanian approaches foreground language, mirror structures, and the symbolic order (Lacan, 1966). Despite their depth, many of these studies lack integration with formal cinematic techniques—such as *mise-en-scène*, editing, and sound design—leaving the connection between psychic processes and film form underexplored (Christian Metz, 2021).

Case Studies on War Films and PTSD Representation

Analyses of war films like *The Hurt Locker* (Denny, 2011) and psychological thrillers (Muhlisin & Widhi, 2025) reveal recurring patterns in the depiction of PTSD: nightmares, flashbacks, hyperarousal, and dissociation (Mihalik-Wenger et al., 2024). However, these studies often rely on surface-level symptom identification, without delving into unconscious guilt, ego-splitting, or the relational transmission of trauma—elements crucial to a psychoanalytic reading (Bowman et al., 1928; Herman, 1993).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative design with a psychoanalytic film-text approach.

Data

- Primary data: the feature film *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009).
- Units of analysis: 20 purposively selected scenes that foreground Sam Cahill's trauma and family interactions.
- Selection criteria: scenes that contain flashbacks, nightmares, intense conflicts, visual or thematic repetition, or clear psychological turning points (Caruth, 2022; Lacan, 1966).

Instruments

- Audiovisual corpus: a viewable copy of the film and a full dialogue transcript with timecodes.
- Coding rubric: a simple sheet mapping psychoanalytic indicators (repetition compulsion, repression, disavowal, guilt, splitting) and film-form categories (mise-en-scène, framing, editing, sound, close-ups) (Freud, 2024; Lacan, 1966).
- Observation sheet: structured form for scene description, key dialogue quotes, timecode, and provisional interpretations.

Data Collection Procedure

1. Watch the film in full to understand the overall narrative.
2. Create a full transcript and add timecodes.
3. Select 20 scenes purposively using the selection criteria and assign scene codes (A01–A20).
4. Rewatch each selected scene multiple times and complete the observation sheet for each scene.
5. Note specific visual and sound details and record short textual descriptions of important frames.

Data Analysis

- Perform close reading of each scene to identify narrative patterns and character dynamics.
- Apply the coding rubric to label psychoanalytic indicators and formal-film features for each scene.
- Use multimodal analysis to link dialogue, visual composition, and sound to the identified psychoanalytic themes (Christian Metz, 2021).

- Compare scene-based interpretations with existing psychoanalytic and trauma literature for theoretical triangulation (Eshel, 2016; Kaplan, 2024).
- If possible, have one additional coder independently code 20% of scenes and resolve differences by discussion to increase interpretive reliability.

Reproducibility and Ethics

- All materials are publicly available film sources; no human subjects are involved.
- Provide the transcript, selection criteria, coding rubric, and blank observation sheet in an appendix so other researchers can replicate the procedure.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in line with the study objectives: (1) how trauma appears in the film, (2) psychoanalytic mechanisms evident in characters, (3) cinematic techniques that signal trauma, and (4) relational effects on family dynamics. The section lists objective observations without extended interpretation.

Captions for tables and figures should be numbered (e.g., “Table 1” or “Figure 2”), please note that the word for Table and Figure are spelled out. Figure’s captions should be centered beneath the image or picture and Table captions should be centered above the table body.

Key Empirical Excerpts (selected, transcribed):

- “I was there... I came back” — uttered with long pause and cut to static (Scene A03, timecode 00:12:45).
- Sudden alarm sound over domestic argument, followed by Sam’s freeze (Scene A11, timecode 01:02:20).
- Repeated close-up on Sam’s hands tightening on a rifle across three scenes (A02, A07, A15).

Additional Objective Counts

- Total scenes coded: 20.
- Scenes showing explicit PTSD symptoms: 14/20.
- Scenes employing non-linear memory devices: 6/20.
- Scenes highlighting relational spillover (family impact): 12/20.

Sam exhibits clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as seen in fragmented speech and sudden bodily reactions. For instance, his line “I was there... I came back” (Scene A03, 00:12:45) is delivered with a long pause and followed by a cut to static, while in another scene he freezes in response to a sudden alarm during a family argument (Scene A11, 01:02:20). These moments reflect disrupted memory integration and hyperarousal, aligning with clinical descriptions of PTSD. Psychoanalytically, such interruptions in speech and behavior can be read as manifestations of repetition compulsion and the failure of “working-through” trauma (Bowman et al., 1928).

Repetitive visual motifs—such as close-ups of Sam’s hands tightening around a rifle (Scenes A02, A07, A15)—function as cinematic reenactments that link battlefield trauma to domestic space. These recurring gestures embody Freud’s notion of repetition compulsion, wherein the psyche unconsciously replays unassimilated experiences in search of symbolic resolution. From a Lacanian perspective, these repetitions signal a failure of signification, with gestures becoming empty signifiers that underscore the subject’s fractured symbolic order (Lacan, 1966).

Long pauses, euphemisms, and interrupted dialogue during family conversations about the war (notably in Scenes A05, A08, A13) suggest mechanisms of repression and disavowal. These verbal ellipses reflect the family’s collective avoidance of traumatic content, consistent with (Herman, 1993) observation that trauma is often met with silence or denial in interpersonal contexts. Psychoanalytically, these gaps in speech mark the limits of symbolic articulation, where the “real” of trauma resists integration into language (Caruth, 2022).

Silent, emotionally charged scenes—such as Sam’s tearful breakdown without verbal expression during the film’s climax (Scenes A15–A17)—indicate unconscious guilt and self-blame. Freudian theory posits that such guilt can drive destructive repetition and internalized aggression (Freud, 2024). (Bion, 2023) concept of the container-contained relationship further suggests that the film itself functions as a cinematic container, holding and projecting unprocessed affect for both characters and viewers.

The contrast between Sam’s rigid military posture and his withdrawn domestic demeanor, along with the use of mirrors and reflective surfaces (Scenes A04, A12), illustrates identity fragmentation or splitting. This duality reflects a post-traumatic



rupture in ego continuity. Lacan's mirror stage theory helps explain how these visual cues signal a breakdown in the subject's symbolic self-image, revealing a fractured and unstable identity (Lacan, 1966).

Relational transmission of trauma is evident in the emotional strain experienced by Sam's wife Grace and brother Tommy. Two-shot compositions and spatial staging emphasize emotional distance and misattunement, particularly in scenes of awkward family dinners and escalating tension (Scenes A08, A13). These dynamics support the view that trauma is not confined to the individual but reverberates through attachment systems, destabilizing familial roles and emotional bonds (Albert & Bowlby, 1982; Herman, 1993).

Cinematic techniques such as jump cuts, sound bridges, close-ups, and recurring motifs (e.g., static noise, military paraphernalia) serve not only aesthetic purposes but also function as formal mechanisms for representing psychic disturbance. These devices externalize internal processes like repression, repetition, and fragmentation. As (Christian Metz, 2021; Kaplan, 2024) argue, film form can operate as a symbolic language, and in *Brothers*, it becomes a medium for staging the unspeakable dimensions of trauma.

Quantitatively, 14 out of 20 coded scenes depict explicit PTSD symptoms; 6 scenes employ non-linear memory devices; and 12 scenes highlight relational spillover effects. Key empirical excerpts include "I was there... I came back" (A03, 00:12:45), the alarm-triggered freeze (A11, 01:02:20), and repeated close-ups of Sam's hands on a rifle (A02, A07, A15).

In sum, *Brothers* portrays trauma as both an intrapsychic rupture and a relational disturbance, materialized through bodily symptoms, fragmented language, and formal cinematic strategies. These findings support existing trauma scholarship on narrative disruption (Caruth, 2022; Roger Luckhurst, 2021) and extend psychoanalytic film theory by mapping Freudian and Lacanian concepts onto specific audiovisual techniques. The study bridges the gap between symptom-based readings of PTSD and formalist approaches to film analysis.

Limitations include the focus on a single film and a purposive sample of 20 scenes, which restricts generalizability. Interpretive coding, while guided by a rubric, remains partially subjective. Future research should apply this framework to a broader corpus of

trauma films, incorporate audience reception studies, and explore cross-cultural variations in cinematic trauma representation.

Table 1. Structured Summary Research Finding

Theme	Evidence (Representative scenes)	Cinematic markers	Frequency/Prominence
Behavioral and symptomatic signs of PTSD	Sam’s nightmares, startle reactions, and violent outburst in domestic scenes	Sudden cuts; close-ups on face; diegetic loud noises	High; appears across opening, midpoint, climax
Repetition and reenactment patterns	Recurrent military gestures and repeated domestic conflicts	Repeated motifs (radio/static, rifle imagery); parallel scene structures	High; repeated across 8–10 coded scenes
Repression and disavowal (verbal avoidance)	Euphemistic or evasive dialogue about battlefield events	Long pauses; ellipses in dialogue transcript; interrupted lines	Moderate; present in key family conversations
Unconscious guilt and self-blame indicators	Moments where Sam fixates on imagined failures (silences, tears)	Close-up lingering; low-key lighting; slowed pacing	Moderate; concentrated in climactic confrontations
Splitting / identity fragmentation	Alternating confident soldier posture vs. withdrawn domestic posture	Shot-reverse-shot contrast; mirror/reflective surfaces	Moderate; visible in scenes showing Sam alone vs. with family
Use of non-linear temporal devices (memory/flashback)	Flashback inserts during sleep and high-stress moments	Jump cuts; sound bridges; altered color grading	Moderate; used to indicate intrusive memory

CONCLUSION(S)

This study set out to analyze how trauma is represented in Jim Sheridan’s *Brothers* (2009) using a psychoanalytic framework. The analysis shows that the film stages trauma both as intrapsychic disruption—manifested in nightmares, repetition, repression, and guilt (Freud, 2024)—and as a relational phenomenon that reshapes family affect (Herman, 1993), with these psychic processes consistently signaled by concrete cinematic techniques such as close-ups, repeated visual motifs, sound bridges, and mirror imagery.

The findings confirm and extend existing trauma and psychoanalytic film literature by linking Freudian and Lacanian concepts to identifiable formal (Ivandić, 2002; Lacan, 1966), offering a reproducible rubric for future analyses. Implications include a stronger

basis for interdisciplinary dialogue between film studies and trauma theory and a practical tool for reading cinematic enactments of psychic wounding. Future research should apply the rubric to a larger corpus, incorporate audience reception data, and explore sociocultural variations in cinematic representations of trauma (Caruth, 2022; Roger Luckhurst, 2021).

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