

The Representamen of Psychological Awareness in The Main Character of The Film “A Man Called Otto”

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Abstract

Film is a powerful form of mass communication that conveys not only entertainment but also deep psychological and social messages. This study explores the representamen of psychological awareness in the main character, Otto, from the film “A Man Called Otto,” using Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic theory. The research applies a qualitative descriptive method by analyzing scenes and visual symbols that reflect Otto’s emotional journey from grief and isolation to social reconnection and healing. Otto’s character transformation is examined through Peirce’s triadic model: sign, object, and interpretant. The findings reveal that Otto’s psychological struggle—stemming from the trauma of losing his wife—manifests through defensive behavior, emotional detachment, and resistance to social bonds. However, through continuous interaction with neighbors and the support of his new social environment, Otto gradually regains emotional openness and self-awareness. The film employs visual metaphors, symbolic cues, and narrative structure to portray the healing process, emphasizing the role of social support and human connection in overcoming emotional pain. This study contributes to the intersection of film studies and communication psychology by showcasing how cinematic storytelling can represent and shape psychological experiences in a relatable and impactful way.

Keywords

Psychology, Main Character, Symbols, Film, Semiotics, Otto

Introduction

The advancement of mass communication technology has significantly influenced how individuals perceive, process, and interact with media messages. Among various forms of mass media, such as television, newspapers, radio, and digital platforms, film stands out as a powerful tool for delivering messages that combine both artistic and communicative value. As a visual and auditory medium, film possesses a unique capacity to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually. It not only serves as a source of entertainment but also functions as a medium for education, ideological reinforcement, and psychological reflection (Huda et al., 2023). The ability of film to depict complex emotions, inner conflicts, and character development makes it an ideal object of study, especially when exploring human psychology through symbolic representation.

One such film that encapsulates emotional depth and psychological transformation is *A Man Called Otto*, directed by Marc Forster. This film tells the story of Otto Anderson, a widower who becomes consumed by grief, isolation, and despair after the death of his beloved wife. His struggle with emotional emptiness leads him to consider ending his life. However, through unexpected social encounters and the persistent kindness of his new neighbors, particularly Marisol and her family, Otto gradually reengages with the world around him. The narrative progression illustrates not only a personal transformation but also a broader commentary on the importance of human connection and psychological healing. This kind of character evolution provides rich material for examining how emotional states are encoded and communicated through cinematic techniques.

In this study, the concept of *representamen* becomes a central analytical lens. This term is borrowed from the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's semiotic model emphasizes a triadic relationship between the sign or representamen, the object it refers to, and the interpretant, or the meaning generated by that sign in the mind of the observer (Peirce, 1931–1958). This framework allows for a systematic analysis of the symbolic and visual signs used in the film to convey the protagonist's inner psychological states. By applying this model, it becomes possible to identify how visual elements, gestures, and dialogue operate as signs that reflect Otto's evolving psychological awareness.

Psychological awareness, in this context, refers to an individual's capacity to recognize and understand their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. William James (1890) described consciousness as a "stream of thought," emphasizing its fluid and ever-changing nature. Koch (2021) further argued that consciousness emerges from the integration of various brain regions that work in coordination to produce a cohesive sense of awareness. These theoretical perspectives highlight the complexity of internal experience and validate the use of film as a medium through which such experiences can be represented and interpreted.

Otto's character arc in the film represents a transition from emotional numbness and social withdrawal to a state of increased self-awareness and engagement with others. Initially, Otto exhibits behaviors indicative of emotional suppression and social aversion. He lives in a rigid routine, avoids meaningful contact with others, and expresses hostility toward change. These traits reflect a psychological defense mechanism against the trauma of losing his spouse (Hartoyo & Wulandari, 2023). As the film progresses, however, Otto is gradually drawn into the lives of others. Marisol, in particular, disrupts his isolation through genuine care and persistence. This shift is not only visible in his actions but also symbolized through specific scenes, such as when Otto openly expresses his grief or begins to assist his neighbors.

In examining these changes, it is crucial to recognize the film's reliance on both verbal and non-verbal communication. According to Samovar and Porter (as cited in Mulyana, 2022), non-verbal communication includes all expressive behaviors, such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, which often convey emotional content more powerfully than words. The film

effectively utilizes these elements to illustrate Otto's shifting mental state. His stiff posture and silence in early scenes contrast with a more relaxed and expressive demeanor later in the story. These physical and emotional cues are interpreted by viewers and function as interpretants in Peirce's semiotic model.

This research also draws upon interdependence theory, proposed by Kelley and Thibaut (1959), which emphasizes the mutual influence of individuals in social relationships. Otto's transformation is not an isolated internal event. It is catalyzed by the support and presence of others. His journey from isolation to connection underscores the role of external social forces in fostering internal change. The actions of those around him, such as offering help, showing empathy, and maintaining patience, serve as signs that disrupt Otto's emotional detachment and invite new interpretations of his experiences. The interplay between external signs and internal meaning-making is a core concern of this research.

The relevance of this study lies in its potential to bridge communication theory, semiotics, and psychology within the context of film analysis. As Bazin (2021) notes, cinema holds a unique power to represent reality in ways that are both aesthetically compelling and psychologically revealing. By examining the representamen of psychological awareness, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how film narratives can depict emotional transformation. It also sheds light on how audiences decode and relate to these transformations using cultural and psychological frameworks. Additionally, this study emphasizes the educational and therapeutic potential of film, particularly in raising awareness about mental health issues.

With the growing prevalence of psychological distress and social isolation in contemporary society, understanding how films represent and communicate mental health themes is more important than ever. Films like *A Man Called Otto* offer more than just storytelling; they provide emotional insight, foster empathy, and encourage reflection. Through an analysis of visual and symbolic elements, this study seeks to highlight how cinematic techniques make emotional narratives believable and impactful. It is hoped that this research will contribute not only to academic literature but also to public conversations about emotional well-being and the value of social support.

In conclusion, this research aims to explore how the film *A Man Called Otto* represents the main character's psychological awareness through signs, symbols, and narrative structure. By applying Peirce's semiotic theory, the study will identify and interpret the visual and verbal signs that convey Otto's emotional transformation. The findings are expected to contribute to the fields of communication studies, film semiotics, and psychology, offering a comprehensive view of how internal human experiences are represented externally in cinematic texts.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method aimed at understanding how signs and symbols represent the psychological awareness of the main character in the film *A Man Called Otto*. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this type of research because it allows the researcher to interpret meaning, analyze symbols, and uncover the emotional depth within visual and narrative content. As Creswell (2021) explains, qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. In this context, the film is treated as a cultural and symbolic text that reflects the internal psychological processes of the character Otto.

The primary data source is the film *A Man Called Otto*, directed by Marc Forster. The object of analysis is the main character, Otto Anderson, with a focus on his transformation throughout

the narrative. The researcher examined selected scenes that are rich in symbolic elements and emotionally significant in portraying Otto's psychological development. These include scenes depicting his daily routines, interactions with neighbors, flashbacks to moments with his late wife, and his evolving behavior over time.

Data collection was conducted through scene-by-scene analysis, in which the researcher closely watched and annotated the visual elements, dialogues, character expressions, background settings, and symbolic objects used in the film. These elements were then interpreted using Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, which consists of the sign (representamen), object, and interpretant (Peirce, 1931–1958). This model helps explain how each sign used in the film relates to Otto's internal psychological condition and how it is likely to be interpreted by the audience.

The analysis focused on identifying patterns of signs that reflect Otto's emotional evolution, including his initial emotional isolation and subsequent openness to social relationships. The scenes were selected based on their relevance to the character's psychological progression and their symbolic richness. Supporting theoretical frameworks such as interdependence theory by Kelley and Thibaut (1959) and cognitive psychology theories on trauma and emotional awareness were also used to interpret the significance of social interaction in shaping Otto's consciousness.

Through this method, the research aims to uncover how film can serve as a medium for expressing complex psychological states and how semiotic analysis can reveal deeper meanings embedded within visual storytelling.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the psychological awareness of the main character, Otto Anderson, in the film *A Man Called Otto*, is represented through a series of visual and symbolic elements that align with Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. According to Peirce, meaning is constructed through a triadic relationship involving the sign or representamen, the object, and the interpretant. This framework allows for a structured analysis of how Otto's inner emotional journey is portrayed through cinematic signs.

At the beginning of the film, Otto is introduced as a rigid, withdrawn man who clings to routines and expresses frustration with others. These characteristics serve as signs of his internal turmoil following the death of his wife. For example, one scene shows Otto measuring the alignment of garbage bins outside his home. This act, although mundane, functions as a representamen that reflects his need for control in a life that feels emotionally unstable. The object behind this behavior is the unresolved trauma he carries, and the interpretant constructed by the audience is an understanding of his psychological pain and the emotional disconnection that results from grief.

As the story unfolds, Otto begins to interact with his new neighbors, particularly Marisol, whose kindness challenges his emotional isolation. A notable scene involves Marisol offering food to Otto. Though he initially resists, he eventually accepts and shares a meal with her family. The act of sharing food becomes a powerful symbol of human connection. In this context, the food represents warmth and care, and the audience interprets it as a breakthrough in Otto's willingness to reconnect with others.

The film continues to use signs that evolve alongside Otto's transformation. His relationship with his deceased wife is illustrated through objects such as her books, framed photographs, and an empty chair at the dining table. These items act as indexical signs, pointing directly to his loss

and his enduring attachment to the past. As Otto becomes more emotionally open, his interaction with these objects changes. He no longer avoids them but instead begins to organize and preserve them with affection. This shift signals that he is slowly accepting his grief and allowing space for new relationships in his life.

One of the most significant turning points occurs when Otto rescues a man who has fallen onto train tracks. This location holds deep emotional weight, as it is the same place where Otto once attempted to take his own life. By choosing to save another person in that very space, Otto reclaims agency and expresses renewed purpose. The act of saving someone becomes a complex sign within Peirce's model. It represents his psychological rebirth, and the audience interprets it as a sign of his regained humanity and empathy.

In addition to the semiotic analysis, this study applies interdependence theory to understand the social dimension of Otto's psychological development. Interdependence theory, proposed by Kelley and Thibaut, emphasizes the influence of social interactions on personal outcomes. Otto's transformation is not isolated but occurs through his engagement with others, especially Marisol and her family. Their persistence and emotional availability gradually disrupt Otto's emotional barriers. This highlights that psychological healing often emerges through meaningful interpersonal relationships.

The film also uses cinematic techniques to reinforce Otto's psychological states. In the early part of the film, the *mise-en-scène* features cold lighting, tight framing, and sparse color. These visual choices reflect Otto's emotional numbness. As he begins to open up, the lighting becomes warmer, the spaces more expansive, and the camera angles more dynamic. These changes in aesthetic elements signal a parallel shift in Otto's emotional world and are interpreted by the viewer as indicators of personal growth.

Flashbacks are used strategically to provide context for Otto's trauma. These sequences function as iconic signs because they closely resemble Otto's actual past experiences. They depict his life with his wife, including moments of joy and sorrow, which deepen the viewer's understanding of his emotional complexity. The audience interprets these scenes as reminders of the love that once sustained him and the emptiness that followed its loss. These memories play an important role in shaping Otto's path toward acceptance and recovery.

Sound and silence also function as significant expressive tools. In the early scenes, Otto's speech is limited, his tone is harsh, and pauses dominate his interactions. These vocal patterns reflect his emotional detachment. Over time, his tone softens, his words become more thoughtful, and he begins to initiate conversations. These shifts in verbal communication signal increased self-awareness and a readiness to re-engage with the world. The use of music, particularly during moments of emotional revelation, reinforces these developments without relying on dialogue alone.

By the final act of the film, Otto is no longer the same man. He participates in his community, forms meaningful relationships, and becomes a protector to the people around him. His home, once portrayed as a cold and silent space, becomes a place of warmth and shared memories. These changes are not only narrative conclusions but also semiotic affirmations of the character's growth. The visual and narrative signs converge to construct a coherent representation of psychological healing.

In summary, the film *A Man Called Otto* offers a compelling portrayal of psychological awareness through carefully constructed signs. These include gestures, objects, facial expressions,

spatial arrangements, and narrative structures. Through the lens of Peirce's semiotic theory, the audience is invited to interpret Otto's journey not as a linear recovery, but as a layered, symbolic process in which each sign contributes to a deeper emotional and psychological meaning.

This research confirms that film can serve as an effective medium for expressing inner psychological states. It also demonstrates the relevance of combining semiotics with psychological theory to analyze character development. Otto's transformation is not simply told through dialogue or exposition but is communicated through a constellation of signs that require active interpretation by the viewer. In doing so, the film becomes a site of emotional engagement, inviting audiences to reflect on grief, connection, and the slow, fragile process of healing.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the film *A Man Called Otto* successfully represents the psychological awareness of its main character through a sophisticated interplay of visual, narrative, and symbolic signs. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, the study has identified and analyzed how signs function as representamen that reflect the inner emotional state of Otto Anderson. Each symbolic act, object, and gesture serves as a vehicle through which the audience can interpret Otto's psychological journey, particularly his transition from grief and isolation to acceptance and social reconnection.

The film communicates Otto's psychological awareness not only through dialogue but also through non-verbal elements such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound. At the beginning of the film, Otto's behaviors and interactions with his environment reflect unresolved trauma and emotional detachment. As the story progresses, these signs gradually evolve to reveal a growing openness, empathy, and engagement with others. The turning point in his transformation—marked by his decision to save another person at the same location where he once attempted suicide—functions as a powerful sign of redemption and rebirth.

This research also highlights the crucial role of interpersonal relationships in shaping psychological awareness. The presence of supportive characters, particularly Marisol and her family, becomes essential in disrupting Otto's psychological defenses and encouraging his emotional development. Through the lens of interdependence theory, the study confirms that healing and self-awareness are deeply influenced by human connection.

Furthermore, the application of Peirce's triadic model has proven effective in uncovering the layered meanings embedded in the film's visual and narrative elements. Signs in the film operate not in isolation but in dynamic relationships that require the viewer to construct meaning actively. This reinforces the idea that cinema is not only a medium of entertainment but also a form of symbolic communication capable of conveying deep psychological truths.

In conclusion, *A Man Called Otto* stands as a compelling example of how film can represent complex emotional and psychological processes. Through its rich use of semiotic elements and its humanistic storytelling, the film invites reflection on loss, healing, and the transformative power of empathy. This study contributes to the academic discourse on semiotics and film psychology by demonstrating how meaning is constructed through signs and interpreted through the viewer's emotional and cognitive engagement.

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