

THE DARK SIDE OF DESIRE: A PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS OF TRAUMA IN TALK TO ME (2022)

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ABSTRACT

Trauma is a psychological response rooted in the subconscious and shaped by past experiences, often intensified by social influences. This study explores how Talk to Me (2022) portrays trauma through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the concepts of the Real, desire, and object a. The film presents possession as a metaphor for psychological fragmentation, with the protagonist Mia's unresolved grief leading to obsession, identity collapse, and emotional deterioration. The embalmed hand symbolizes object a, an unattainable object of desire, while Mia's pursuit of connection with her deceased mother triggers a confrontation with the Real, exposing the raw terror of psychic disintegration. Using qualitative methods, this study analyzes the film's narrative and symbolism through observation, film analysis, and supporting academic sources. Findings reveal that Talk to Me reimagines possession as a reenactment of trauma, where each encounter intensifies inner voids. Ultimately, the film suggests that closure from trauma may not emerge through reunion, but through self-sacrifice and painful acceptance.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, Trauma, Desire, Talk to Me (2022)

INTRODUCTION

Horror cinema captivates audiences, especially teenagers and adults, with its intense emotional impact and adrenaline-fueled experiences. Horror is a genre that explores fear, the unknown, and the boundaries of human psychology through suspense, supernatural elements, and moral conflicts. Studying horror helps us understand societal anxieties, cultural taboos, and the ways trauma and emotion are processed through narrative. It often reflects deeper psychological themes, such as repression, desire, and identity, making it rich ground for psychoanalytic and philosophical analysis. Beyond entertainment, horror functions as a mirror revealing what a culture fears, avoids, or refuses to confront directly. Its popularity has led to diverse subgenres, from psychological horror to slasher films, reflecting different audience preferences. For example, horror films like *The Conjuring*, *Insidious*, *Annabelle*, and *Ouija* are still on point with their horror genre, while other horror films like *IT*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Friday the 13th* have already mixed with diverse subgenres like psychological and many slashing scenes. According to the-line-up.com, beyond entertainment, horror films tap into societal anxieties and subconscious fears, making them deeply relatable (Hunter Stangler, 2025). However, according to Medshun.com, while widely celebrated, some viewers avoid horror due to its disturbing themes, excessive gore, or psychological intensity. Studies also

suggest that prolonged exposure to horror imagery may affect mental health, particularly in younger audiences (Alikiotis, 2024).

Studying psychoanalysis requires an understanding of human psychology, especially how the subconscious shapes our behavior by storing experiences that influence our reactions. According to Jacques Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language (Bilik et al., 2021). Psychoanalysis explores the subconscious mind, which may seem abstract but follows a structured pattern. According to the journal with the title "The Projection of Subconscious through Symbolism: An Analysis of Mansfield's 'The Voyage'", psychoanalysis examines subconscious human reactions and the symbols found in what we analyze. It explores human psychological conflicts and examines the underlying causes behind actions that lead to those conflicts (Dananjaya & Veerasingam, 2018). This theory is also to explore an individual's motivation and behavior to gain insight into their mental and emotional states. The research will go deeper into the key concepts of "real," "desire," and "object A" by Jacques Lacan (Johnston, 2013). Those key concepts will unfold the dark desire and trauma that appear in this film. According to Dumas (2014), the theory of psychoanalysis also proves important in research with the object of study in horror cinema. Using psychoanalysis helps film scholars understand the underlying psychological themes and motifs present in horror cinema.

Talk to Me (2022) is a psychological horror film that delves into themes of grief, trauma, and the subconscious mind through its chilling narrative. Directed by Danny and Michael Philippou, the film follows a group of teenagers who experiment with a supernatural ritual, unknowingly exposing themselves to psychological and existential horrors. The movie's exploration of the blurred boundaries between reality and the spirit world aligns with psychoanalytic horror studies, especially in how it reflects repressed emotions and unresolved trauma. Inspired by Lacanian theory, Talk to Me (2022) shows horror as a reflection of the subconscious, where hidden fears surface through unusual imagery and tension. The film's depiction of grief, trauma, desire, and possession aligns with psychoanalysis; it offers insight into how horror reflects subconscious fears.

Across the five studies, a recurring theme emerges: horror cinema serves as a powerful mirror for the unconscious, revealing deep psychological wounds, repressed desires, and unresolved traumas. Whether through the fragmented psyche of Jessie in 'Night, Mother', the haunted longing of Intan Paramaditha's narrator in *Gentayangan*, or the emotional vulnerability of Dodo in *Miracle in Cell No. 7*, each character embodies the Lacanian subject—trapped between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. These narratives show how trauma, whether rooted in personal loss, societal alienation, or familial abandonment, manifests in symbolic acts like suicide, storytelling, or rebellion. The characters' struggles with identity, desire, and the gaze of the Other reflect a deeper search for meaning and autonomy in a world that often denies both. These studies reveal that horror and psychological drama are not just genres of fear or spectacle, but spaces where the psyche confronts its most intimate terrors—and sometimes, begins to heal. This study was conducted to explore more deeply the topic of trauma in the main characters raised in the film *Talk To Me* (2022) using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis with the key concepts of The Real, Desire, and Object A. The objectives of this study are to analyze the trauma reflected in the main character and to explore how the main character deals with the trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychoanalysis Theory by Jacques Lacan

This research will use the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan's theory. Psychoanalysis has a relation to psychology; the historical connection between the two is often disguised in psychology textbooks, and psychoanalysis has become attractive among some critical psychologists because it offers quite different understandings of subjectivity (Parker, 2001). The psychoanalysis theory focuses on character analysis using the real approach, desire approach, and object A approach (Fink, 2025). The real approach is to explore how the character faces reality that is not fully symbolized, like death, loss, and trauma. The desire approach is to explore the desires that underlie the characters' actions and choices and how these desires are hindered by symbols and social structures. The object A is to identify the object that becomes central to the character's desires and fantasies and how this object functions as an incomplete substitute.

Trauma

Trauma is a feeling where someone feels a sense of fear about certain things within themselves. Based on the research, trauma can also arise as a result of grief over the loss of someone important in one's life (Mikles, 2024). A trauma can exist because humans cannot cope and adapt to their past. For Jacques Lacan, trauma is not merely the result of a catastrophic event, but a rupture in the symbolic order that exposes the subject to the Real—an overwhelming force that resists meaning, destabilizing the psyche and echoing through unconscious desire (Wright, 2020). The process of healing from trauma is complex and unique to each individual. It requires time, patience, and professional support. Healing from trauma often involves confronting painful memories and emotions head-on. It also involves building a support system of friends, family, and professionals who can help guide the individual through the healing process. It's important for those experiencing trauma to prioritize self-care and practice self-compassion as they navigate their journey towards healing. By working through their trauma in a safe and supportive environment, individuals can gradually learn to release the hold it has over their lives and find a sense of peace and closure. Healing from trauma is a courageous and transformative journey that requires strength and perseverance, but it is possible with the right tools and support in place. With time and dedication, individuals can begin to rebuild their lives and create a brighter future for themselves.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the psychological horror film *Talk to Me* (2022) through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the concepts of the Real, desire, and objet petit a. Qualitative research emphasizes interpretation and understanding, involving diverse forms of data collection and the use of verified materials and approaches (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The primary data consist of the film itself, its narrative structure, dialogues, and picture. Data were collected through close viewing and observation of

the film, a literature review of Lacanian theory, and analysis of supporting scholarly work to provide context and theoretical grounding.

To enhance data validity and reliability, source triangulation techniques were applied. This included (1) cross-verifying interpretations of narrative elements with multiple academic texts on Lacanian psychoanalysis, (2) comparing symbolic imagery and motifs with recurring patterns identified in similar genre films analyzed through psychoanalytic theory, and (3) consulting critical reviews and audience receptions to enrich contextual understanding. These triangulated sources helped mitigate bias and offered a more nuanced and grounded interpretation of the film.

The analysis followed three stages: (1) film analysis to examine character behavior and plot development, (2) thematic outlining to identify recurring motifs of trauma and desire, and (3) psychoanalytic interpretation to explore how Lacanian concepts are embedded within the film's narrative elements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study reveal how trauma is reflected in Mia, the main character of *Talk to Me* (2022), and how she attempts to cope with it. Through close analysis of narrative scenes, dialogue, and symbolism, three key Lacan psychoanalytic concepts of the Real, desire, and object a, frame Mia's experience of trauma. There are 2 research objectives which consist of the trauma reflected in Mia's character and how Mia deal with the trauma. The trauma reflected in Mia's character can be seen by how Mia still in her grief after her mother, Rhea's death. Mia tries to find a way to communicate with her late mother. Mia's refusal to accept her mother's suicide reflects Lacan's concept of the Real, the unbearable truth that cannot be symbolized. Mia's trauma originates from the loss of her mother, creating a profound lack that fuels her unconscious desire. The embalmed hand symbolized the concept of object A, which become a desire that unattainable and it also leads Mia into her own destruction. Mia copes with her trauma through denial, emotional projection, and self-sacrifice. Unable to accept the reality of her mother's suicide, she holds onto the comforting belief that her mother's spirit remains kind and present, even when signs suggest otherwise. This unresolved grief causes her to become emotionally distant from her father and seek comfort in the embalmed hand—a symbolic and ritualistic escape from facing reality.

The Real as Ontological Horror: Possession and Identity Collapse

Table 1. Dialogue & Narration in *Talk to Me*

Dialogue

Hayley: "Alright, somebody time it. As soon as she lets it in, it cannot go for more than 90 seconds. Am I clear?"

Mia: "What happens after 90 seconds?" **Hayley:** "They'll want to

stay.” Joss: “And if you die while they’re in you... they’ll have you forever.”

Narration

“Riley becomes possessed by a spirit masquerading as Rhea. Eager to talk to her mother, Mia stops the others from blowing out the candle, despite clear warnings of the approaching 90-second mark. Riley pays immediate, horrific consequences.”

The trauma and fear in this movie is when the evil spirits begin to possess Mia body. Mia face a deep trauma and fear. That moments are manifestations of “The Real” that threaten her identity and existence. It is can be seen from the movie dialogue above. This exchange sets the stakes that possession isn’t just a thrill, it’s a confrontation with something uncontainable. The spirits don’t just visit; they invade, and if boundaries collapse, the subject risks annihilation. That’s the Real, not symbolic fear, but the raw, unmediated terror of losing one’s self. Another moment that captures this rupture is Riley’s possession scene. From the narration above, Riley’s body becomes a battleground, his identity fragmented, his autonomy erased. The trauma here isn’t just physical; it’s ontological. Mia’s desire to reconnect with her mother opens a portal to the Real, and Riley becomes collateral damage.

Uncontrolled Desire as the Catalyst for Trauma

Table 2. Dialogue in *Talk To Me*

Dialogue

Mia: “I don’t want to let her go. I need to see her again.”

There is a consequence of the uncontrollable desire that lead to the trauma. Everytime they use the embalmed hands, Mia recall collective or individual trauma. The horror narratives she create become a way for her to confront the fears and overcome the trauma. From the dialogue above, the exchange shows how Mia and her friends treat possession like a thrill, but the desire to prolong it, especially Mia, has leads to irreversible consequences. The spirits don’t just visit; they embed themselves, dragging personal trauma to the surface. Mia’s desire to reconnect with her mother overrides caution, and Riley’s trauma becomes a collective burden. The horror they unleash isn’t random, it’s tied to their emotional wounds. Each possession

becomes a reenactment of unresolved grief, guilt, or fear. The dialogue above is a proof that Mia have a desire to meet her mother and cannot let go of her mother.

The Embalmed Hand as Object A: Desire, Fantasy, and the Impossible Return



Picture 1. The symbol of Object A in Talk To Me

Object A acts as a desired but unpossessed object. The embalmed hand in the film "Talk to Me" symbolizes desire, lack, elusiveness, and addiction. The embalmed hand, as an object, holds the promise of connecting with the absent, for Mia. For Mia, it becomes a surrogate for her lost mother, a way to reclaim what was taken from her. This aligns with Object A as the elusive thing that promises to fill the void but never truly does. The embalmed hand is also an addictive object, compelling Mia to play the game, but the more she tries to pursue what she desires, the more chaos ensues. Mia's trauma itself stems from her mother's suicide, which she refuses to accept. The hand allows her to "see" her mother again, but this vision is manipulated by spirits. Her desire to believe in the illusion leads her to harm others and herself. Lacan's notion of the death drive is evident in Mia's descent. Her repeated use of the hand, despite knowing the risks, reflects a compulsion toward self-destruction—a way to resolve her trauma by surrendering to it.

The picture above symbolized the object a in the movie, a desirable object that cannot be owned by Mia. This embalmed hand was a mysterious artifact that allows anyone who grips it to communicate with spirits for ninety seconds. For Mia, the hand symbolizes her desperate longing to reconnect with her deceased mother, blurring the line between comfort and obsession. Although it promises clarity and contact, the hand ultimately unleashes chaos, possession, and psychological torment. Its sinister power grows with repeated use, reflecting how desire can spiral out of control when tethered to grief and unresolved trauma.

Discussion

Mia's Trauma as Psychological Fragmentation: A Lacanian Perspective

In *Talk to Me*, trauma manifests not merely as emotional distress but as a rupture of identity, a confrontation with Lacan's concept of "The Real." When evil spirits possess Mia, her body becomes a site of ontological terror, where boundaries between self and other collapse. This is not symbolic fear but raw, unmediated horror: the Real intrudes, threatening annihilation. Riley's possession scene intensifies this rupture, as his body is overtaken, his autonomy erased, and his identity fragmented. Mia's desire to reconnect with her deceased mother opens a portal to this realm, and Riley becomes collateral damage, his trauma absorbed into a collective psychic wound. The film then reframes possession not as spectacle, but as a violent encounter with what cannot be symbolized or contained.

This descent is driven by desire, specifically, the pursuit of Lacan's object *a*. The embalmed hand operates as this elusive object, promising connection, closure, and transcendence, yet delivering chaos and fragmentation. For Mia, the hand becomes a surrogate for her mother, a way to reclaim what was lost. But the more she reaches for it, the more she spirals into addiction and destruction. Each possession scene reenacts unresolved grief and guilt, dragging submerged traumas to the surface. Mia's refusal to accept her mother's death fuels her compulsion, aligning with Lacan's death drive: a repetition that seeks resolution through self-destruction. In this way, *Talk to Me* uses horror to dramatize the psychic cost of desire, how the pursuit of the unattainable can fracture identity and unleash the Real.

Coping Through Illusion: Mia's Ritualized Escape from Grief

Mia's way of dealing with trauma in *Talk to Me* is marked by denial, projection, and self-sacrifice. Unable to accept her mother's suicide, Mia clings to the illusion that her mother's spirit is still present and benevolent, even when the evidence suggests manipulation. Her grief isolates her from her father and drives her to seek solace in the embalmed hand, which becomes a ritualized escape from reality. As her hallucinations intensify and the spirits exploit her vulnerability, Mia lashes out, stabbing her father and nearly killing Riley under the belief that she's saving him. In the end, Mia's final act, throwing herself into traffic instead of Riley, signals a tragic moment of clarity. She chooses to absorb the consequences of her desire and trauma, sacrificing herself to sever the link between Riley and the spirits. This act, while devastating, reflects a shift from denial to acceptance, suggesting that Mia's confrontation with the Real leads not to healing, but to a haunting form of closure: becoming part of the very limbo she tried to escape.

CONCLUSION

Talk to Me offers a haunting psychoanalytic exploration of trauma, desire, and identity dissolution. Through the symbolic function of the embalmed hand as object *a*, the film illustrates how the pursuit of emotional closure can spiral into self-annihilation when mediated by uncontainable forces. Mia's descent reveals that trauma is not simply remembered but it is relived, embodied, and weaponized through desire. Possession becomes a metaphor for the collapse of psychic boundaries, where the Real erupts and destabilizes the subject. In

confronting the dead, Mia and her peers do not find healing; they uncover the terrifying truth that some voids cannot be filled, only repeated.

This study has demonstrated how *Talk to Me* (2022) serves as a compelling site for psychoanalytic exploration, revealing how trauma and unresolved desire manifest through supernatural horror. By applying Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Real, desire, and object a, the film is shown to use possession not merely as a genre device but as a symbolic representation of psychic collapse. The embalmed hand emerges as a stand-in for unattainable emotional closure, driving the protagonist into a cycle of obsession, grief, and ultimately, self-destruction. Mia's final act reflects a tragic acceptance of her trauma, suggesting that closure may require sacrifice rather than resolution. This analysis highlights the power of Lacanian theory to uncover how horror films engage with the unconscious and dramatize inner psychological ruptures. *Talk to Me* exemplifies how contemporary horror can reflect the emotional complexities of grief and the unrelenting pull of desire, offering not catharsis, but confrontation with the Real.

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