

Defense Mechanisms in the Character of Atlas Shepherd in *Atlas* (2024): A Psychoanalytic Study

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ABSTRACT

*The film *Atlas* (2024) presents anxiety about the development of artificial intelligence through the psychological conflict of its main character. This study discusses the issue of trauma and fear of Artificial Intelligence (AI) experienced by *Atlas Shepherd* due to a traumatic experience in the past. The main objective of this study is to identify the types of defense mechanisms used by *Atlas Shepherd* and also explain how these mechanisms help *Atlas* face trauma and fear of AI. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with a psychoanalytic approach based on Anna Freud's theory. Data were obtained from dialogues, scenes, and actions of the main character in the film *Atlas* (2024) that show psychological conflicts and emotional responses. The results show that *Atlas Shepherd* uses four main defense mechanisms: denial, repression, projection, and rationalization. Denial is the most dominant mechanism, followed by other mechanisms, which function as psychological strategies to reduce anxiety and protect oneself from emotional distress. These findings confirm the relevance of psychoanalytic theory in understanding psychological conflicts in contemporary science fiction films.*

Keywords: *defense mechanisms; psychoanalysis; psychological trauma; artificial intelligence; science fiction films*

INTRODUCTION

Film is not only a form of entertainment but also a cultural text that represents human experiences, including psychological conflict and social anxiety. Like literary works, films often depict inner struggles, emotional tension, and traumatic experiences that shape the way characters think and behave. Psychological conflict plays an important role in character development because it reveals how individuals respond to fear, trauma, and emotional pressure, both in fictional narratives and in real life (Milliken Humphrey, 2020)

In recent years, issues of psychological trauma and anxiety have become increasingly relevant alongside rapid technological development, particularly the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI). Although AI is often associated with progress and efficiency, it also gives rise to fear, distrust, and concerns about the loss of human control. These anxieties are frequently reflected in science-fiction films, which often portray technology as something that is both helpful and threatening. Such representations show how technological development can influence human psychology, especially in relation to fear, uncertainty, and trauma.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, psychological conflict arises when unconscious impulses come into conflict with moral awareness and external reality, resulting in anxiety. This anxiety is managed by the ego through unconscious psychological strategies known as ego defense mechanisms. Anna Freud explains that ego defense mechanisms operate unconsciously as a way to protect individuals from excessive emotional pressure (Freud, 1993). Recent theoretical discussions further emphasize that ego defense mechanisms remain relevant in modern psychology, particularly in understanding how individuals respond to trauma and situations filled with uncertainty (Freud, 1938/1993; Tavoloni et al., 2024).

These psychological conditions are clearly depicted in the film *Atlas* (2024). The film focuses on Atlas Shepherd, an intelligence analyst who experiences deep psychological trauma as a result of being betrayed by an AI system named Harlan during her childhood. This traumatic event leads to the death of her mother and leaves lasting emotional wounds that shape Atlas's fear and distrust of artificial intelligence. As an adult, Atlas is forced to confront her unresolved trauma when she is required to work alongside another AI system in a high-risk mission. This situation creates intense inner conflict between her fear of AI and the professional necessity to cooperate with it. Atlas's struggle illustrates how unresolved trauma can unconsciously influence emotions, perceptions, and decision-making.

Previous studies have applied psychoanalytic theory, particularly Anna Freud's concept of ego defense mechanisms, to analyze psychological conflict in films and literary works. However, most existing studies focus on conventional sources of psychological trauma, such as family conflict, interpersonal relationships, moral pressure, or workplace stress. Research that specifically examines ego defense mechanisms in response to trauma caused by technology, particularly artificial intelligence in science-fiction films, remains limited. In fact, the rapid development of modern technology has introduced new forms of anxiety and psychological conflict that differ from traditional human-centered trauma.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to analyze the ego defense mechanisms used by Atlas Shepherd in the film *Atlas* (2024), with particular attention to denial, repression, projection, and rationalization as proposed by Anna Freud. This study seeks to identify the types of ego defense mechanisms displayed by the main character and to explain how these mechanisms function in helping her cope with trauma and fear related to artificial intelligence. By applying classical psychoanalytic theory to a contemporary science-fiction narrative, this research demonstrates that psychoanalysis remains relevant for understanding psychological conflict in the modern era of technological development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anna Freud's Theory of Defense Mechanisms

According to Anna Freud, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological processes employed by the ego to protect individuals from anxiety arising from internal conflict, traumatic experiences, and external pressure (Freud, 1938/1993). These mechanisms operate automatically to reduce emotional tension and maintain psychological stability without eliminating the source of anxiety.

Anna Freud identifies various types of ego defense mechanisms, including denial, repression, projection, and rationalization. Denial involves rejecting threatening aspects of reality, repression suppresses painful memories into the unconscious, projection redirects internal anxiety toward external objects, and rationalization provides logical justifications for behavior driven by emotional conflict (Freud, 1938/1993; Tavoloni et al., 2024). Although these mechanisms help individuals function under psychological stress, excessive reliance on them may hinder emotional awareness and trauma resolution.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for analyzing psychological conflict in films, especially science-fiction narratives that portray advanced technology as a source of fear and uncertainty. In this study, Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms serves as the main analytical framework for examining how the character Atlas Shepherd copes with trauma and fear related to artificial intelligence in the film *Atlas* (2024).

Several previous studies have applied Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanisms to analyze psychological conflicts in films and literary works. These studies highlight the relevance

of psychoanalytic approaches in understanding how characters respond to anxiety, trauma, and internal conflict. However, each study explores different themes and contexts, which differ from the focus of the present research.

Hamim (2024), in a study entitled "*Amy Loughren's Anxiety in Tobias Lindholm's The Good Nurse*", applied Freud's theory of anxiety together with Anna Freud's defense mechanisms to examine the psychological condition of Amy Loughren in *The Good Nurse* (2022). The findings show that the character experiences reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety, and employs defense mechanisms such as regression, repression, projection, and reaction formation. Although this study confirms the usefulness of Anna Freud's theory in film analysis, it mainly focuses on workplace pressure and criminal investigation, rather than trauma related to technological development or artificial intelligence.

Another relevant study by Marcella and Limanta (2024), entitled "*Ego Defense Mechanisms in Sekala Niskala*", examines how the main character copes with family-related trauma using Anna Freud's defense mechanism theory. The results indicate that repression and denial are used to suppress painful memories and avoid confronting loss. While this study is theoretically relevant, it does not address fear of technology and focuses only on limited types of defense mechanisms, leaving mechanisms such as projection and rationalization unexplored.

Similarly, Daffa (2023), in a study entitled "*Jimmy McGill's Conflicts and Defense Mechanisms in the Television Series Better Call Saul*", analyzes the defense mechanisms used by Jimmy McGill through Anna Freud's psychoanalytic framework. The study finds that denial, regression, and sublimation are employed to manage moral dilemmas and professional stress. Although this research contributes to the understanding of defense mechanisms in narrative media, it does not examine technology-based anxiety or trauma, nor does it discuss projection and rationalization in depth.

Dewi and Bustam (2024), in their study "*The Forms of Denial Used by Jay Gatsby in The Great Gatsby (2013)*", focus specifically on denial as a defense mechanism. The study identifies denial of the past, denial of reality, and denial of identity as strategies used by Jay Gatsby to cope with personal obsession. While this research provides a detailed discussion of denial, it concentrates on a single defense mechanism and addresses personal psychological conflict rather than anxiety related to technological threats.

In addition, Bangi Kaa and Utami (2025), in a study entitled "*Survival Genius: An Analysis of Ego Defense Mechanisms in the Film All Is Lost*", analyze the use of ego defense mechanisms in extreme survival situations. The findings show that suppression and rationalization are used by the main character to maintain emotional control when facing physical danger. Although the study is aligned with ego defense theory, its focus is limited to physical survival rather than deeper psychological trauma. Moreover, defense mechanisms such as repression and projection are not discussed, resulting in a narrower analytical scope.

Although these previous studies confirm the relevance of psychoanalytic theory in analyzing psychological conflict in films, most of them focus on conventional sources of trauma, such as interpersonal relationships, workplace stress, moral dilemmas, or survival situations. Research that specifically examines ego defense mechanisms as responses to trauma caused by technology, particularly artificial intelligence, remains limited. Moreover, few studies explore psychological conflict within the context of contemporary science-fiction films that portray technology as both a threat and a necessity. Therefore, this study presents novelty by analyzing ego defense mechanisms denial, repression, projection, and rationalization used by the character Atlas Shepherd in the science-fiction film *Atlas* (2024). By focusing on trauma and fear of artificial intelligence as the source of psychological conflict, this research contributes to the existing

literature by expanding the application of psychoanalytic theory to technology-induced trauma in modern cinematic narratives.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a psychoanalytic approach to analyze the psychological conflicts experienced by the main character in the film *Atlas* (2024). A qualitative approach is chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of meanings, psychological processes, and emotional responses as represented through dialogue, actions, and behavior, rather than to quantify data statistically (Sugiyono, 2018).

The psychoanalytic approach serves as the main theoretical framework, particularly Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms. This theory explains how the ego unconsciously protects individuals from anxiety and inner conflict caused by traumatic or threatening experiences. Recent theoretical discussions also emphasize that ego defense mechanisms remain relevant in modern psychological studies, especially in understanding responses to trauma and uncertainty (Freud, 1938/1993; Tavoloni et al., 2024).

The primary data source of this study is the film *Atlas* (2024). The research data consist of dialogues, scenes, actions, and emotional expressions of the character Atlas Shepherd that indicate psychological conflict, trauma, and the use of ego defense mechanisms. Data were collected through observation by repeatedly watching the film to understand the narrative context, storyline, and psychological development of the character. Relevant scenes and dialogues were then identified, recorded, and classified based on the types of ego defense mechanisms, namely denial, repression, projection, and rationalization.

Data analysis was conducted descriptively by identifying scenes that reflect the main character's psychological conflict, categorizing them according to the type of defense mechanism displayed, and interpreting how these mechanisms function in helping the character cope with trauma and fear related to artificial intelligence. This analytical process aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics portrayed in a science-fiction film through the application of psychoanalytic theory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Types of Defense Mechanisms Displayed by Atlas Shepherd

The analysis shows that Atlas Shepherd displays four types of ego defense mechanisms: denial, repression, projection, and rationalization. These mechanisms appear in various situations, particularly when Atlas interacts directly with artificial intelligence or when her past traumatic experiences are triggered. Among the four mechanisms, denial appears most frequently. It is followed by rationalization, repression, and projection. This finding indicates that denial becomes Atlas's primary psychological response when she is confronted with situations related to artificial intelligence.

Manifestation of Defense Mechanisms in Atlas's Behavior

In addition to identifying the types of ego defense mechanisms, the results also show how these mechanisms appear in Atlas's behavior. Denial is evident when Atlas refuses to trust or cooperate with artificial intelligence. Repression appears when Atlas avoids certain conversations or reacts emotionally when her traumatic past is mentioned. Projection is observed when Atlas

blames artificial intelligence and perceives it as a source of danger. Meanwhile, rationalization occurs when Atlas explains her fear and decisions using logical or professional reasoning. These findings indicate that Atlas's ego defense mechanisms do not operate separately, but rather work together as part of her psychological response to anxiety provoking situations.

DISCUSSION

The film *Atlas* (2024) is not only a science-fiction story about advanced technology, but also a film that presents deep psychological conflict through its main character, Atlas Shepherd. Throughout the story, Atlas is shown struggling with fear, trauma, and emotional tension that influence the way she thinks, feels, and makes decisions, especially in her interactions with artificial intelligence. Because of this, the film is relevant to be analyzed using a psychoanalytic approach.

Based on the purpose of this study, which is to examine the ego defense mechanisms displayed by Atlas Shepherd, this discussion section explores the findings presented in the previous section in greater depth. The discussion focuses on how denial, repression, projection, and rationalization appear as Atlas's unconscious responses to trauma and her fear of artificial intelligence. These mechanisms reflect how Atlas attempts to protect herself psychologically when facing situations that trigger anxiety and emotional distress.

Thus, this discussion highlights the development of Atlas's psychological conflict throughout the film, particularly the shift from rejection to gradual acceptance of artificial intelligence. By applying Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms, this section explains how Atlas's defensive responses change over time and how these changes contribute to her emotional development when dealing with technology-related trauma.

Psychological Meaning of the Defense Mechanisms

The defense mechanisms shown by Atlas Shepherd suggest that her psychological struggle is complex and strongly influenced by unresolved trauma. Instead of depending on only one way to cope, Atlas uses several defense mechanisms at the same time to deal with fear, anxiety, and emotional pressure. These mechanisms work unconsciously, allowing her to keep going and function in difficult situations while avoiding direct confrontation with painful experiences related to artificial intelligence.

Denial as the Dominant Defense Mechanism

Denial emerges as the most dominant defense mechanism used by Atlas Shepherd throughout the film. This dominance reflects Atlas's strong tendency to reject realities that are closely connected to her past trauma involving artificial intelligence. By refusing to trust AI systems, Atlas creates emotional distance from experiences that trigger fear, loss, and vulnerability. From a psychological perspective, the dominance of denial suggests that Atlas is not yet ready to fully confront her trauma. Denial allows her to function and maintain control in stressful situations, even though the emotional conflict remains unresolved. This finding supports Anna Freud's view that denial plays a crucial role in protecting the ego from overwhelming anxiety, particularly when traumatic experiences are too painful to face directly.

Functions of Defense Mechanisms in Managing Trauma and Fear of Artificial Intelligence

In terms of their functions, each ego defense mechanism plays a specific role in helping Atlas manage her trauma and fear of artificial intelligence. Denial helps Atlas maintain emotional distance from AI, allowing her to avoid confronting painful traumatic memories. Repression

enables Atlas to continue functioning in high-pressure situations by pushing these memories out of conscious awareness, even though they may resurface when triggered.

Projection works by shifting Atlas's internal fear and anxiety onto artificial intelligence, causing technology to be perceived as an external threat. Rationalization helps Atlas maintain a sense of control and a rational self-image by justifying her actions with logical explanations. Overall, these defense mechanisms help Atlas cope psychologically, although they do not completely resolve her trauma.

Psychological Shift from Rejection to Acceptance of Artificial Intelligence

Toward the end of the film, Atlas Shepherd shows a gradual change in her attitude toward artificial intelligence. In extreme situations that require cooperation with AI, the effectiveness of denial and projection begins to decrease. Atlas slowly becomes more open to reality and responds to situations in a more adaptive way.

This shift demonstrates that ego defense mechanisms are dynamic and can change over time. When individuals begin to face reality more directly, previously dominant defense mechanisms may weaken. The movement from rejection to acceptance reflects Atlas's psychological development in dealing with her trauma and fear of artificial intelligence

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the ego defense mechanisms used by Atlas Shepherd in the science-fiction film *Atlas* (2024) to cope with psychological trauma and fear of artificial intelligence. The findings show that Atlas unconsciously employs several defense mechanisms, namely denial, repression, projection, and rationalization, as responses to unresolved childhood trauma caused by the betrayal of an AI system. These mechanisms influence the way she perceives artificial intelligence, manages her emotions, and makes decisions throughout the film, particularly in high-risk and emotionally demanding situations. The analysis indicates that denial allows Atlas to distance herself emotionally from artificial intelligence, while repression suppresses painful memories so that she can continue functioning in high-pressure situations. Projection redirects her internal fear toward AI as an external threat, and rationalization helps her maintain a sense of control by justifying her emotional responses through logical explanations. Together, these defense mechanisms function as unconscious coping strategies that protect Atlas from overwhelming anxiety, even though they also prevent her from fully resolving her trauma and emotional vulnerability. Overall, this study demonstrates that ego defense mechanisms play a significant role in shaping psychological conflict in science-fiction films that explore the relationship between humans and advanced technology. By applying Anna Freud's psychoanalytic theory to a contemporary science-fiction narrative, this research confirms that classical psychoanalytic concepts remain relevant for understanding modern psychological issues, particularly trauma and anxiety related to technological development. Future research may further explore similar psychological conflicts in other science-fiction films or use different theoretical approaches to gain a broader and more interdisciplinary understanding of human responses to artificial intelligence.

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