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# *Interpreting Cinematic Elements: Psychological Explanations*

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*Question: Which psychological theories best explain how audiences interpret characters and musical elements in film?*

## **Introduction**

As the study of psychology has become more popular, it has been utilized as a lens for research in multiple fields of interest. Likewise, visual media studies appear to be more prevalent due to the advances in technology in recent years. With the growth of these two fields, it has become increasingly evident that there is link between psychology and visual media, and more specifically, psychology and cinema. Research indicates that the manner in which individuals interpret film can be explained through psychological principles. Furthermore, those conducting such research have indicated a necessity for further investigations into the relationship between psychology and cinema. Dan Nadaner, in articulating the usefulness of visual arts in education in his article "Film and Cognition: A Critical Review of Current Theory," claims that the type of study between "film and cognition has been hampered by the absence of dialogue between psychological researchers, film critics, and phenomenologists," which calls for more research in this field (122).

Two cinematic elements in particular that researchers study with conclusive results are both the behaviors and personalities of characters, as well as musical elements. By analyzing these components of film using several psychological theories, these studies have yielded proof that there are complex yet conclusive explanations as to why an audience favors certain characters or feels certain emotions while watching film. For instance, Richard Keen, Monica McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell ask questions about why an evil character is appealing to audiences in their article "Rooting for the Bad Guy: Psychological Perspectives." They pose questions such as, "How do we understand the proliferation in popular culture of the beloved villain?" and "Why do so many seemingly normal . . . people root for the bad guy?" to articulate why and how audiences appear to favor the archetypical villain in films (129). Inquiries such as the aforementioned call for further investigation. Moreover, in the article "Viewer's Interpretations of Film Characters' Emotions: Effects of Presenting Film Music Before or After a Character is Shown," Siu-Lan Tan, Matthew Spackman, and Matthew Bezdek study how music can affect schemas or prime an audience, two important psychological methods that allow audiences to understand film. The authors state, "Many interesting questions remain. Future studies may go beyond examining the effects of music on interpretations" and the emotions film music can evoke in audiences (148). Many studies delve into the combined fields of psychology and film, which gives reason to believe that research on this topic will be beneficial to numerous groups.

Multiple studies have gone so far as to conclude that film music can affect how an audience comprehends or interprets characters, which adds a complicated connection between two distinct film elements. Marilyn G. Boltz concludes that film music is the auditory medium that has an effect on how audiences process information, such as character emotions or thoughts (428). Similarly, Jessica Green stated, “one of music’s advantages. . . is that it has the power of suggestion concerning what a character may be thinking about.” She adds to that statement and says that music offers “subliminal messages” to an audience, which allows them to feel the same emotions through the various moods or tones music can project (83). Investigations by both researchers prove that audiences use music as a tool to interpret characters in film.

The psychological theories researched and applied throughout this study were the schema, identification, and the fundamental attribution error theories. Jean Piaget, a well-known cognitive psychologist, developed the idea of schemas: the most basic building block of knowledge that develops through experiences and associations. Interactions through experiences force one to build associations through “a dynamic balance of assimilation and accommodation,” with which one makes representations and generalizations about the world that continuously evolve with more experiences and knowledge (Nadanner 123). Identification, as defined by Jonathan Cohen, is “a process that culminates in a cognitive and emotional state in which the audience member. . . imagines being one of the characters” (252). When one develops emotional connections with characters, he or she has a psychological identification with that character, which helps in understanding or interpreting the character’s role in the film. Lastly, the fundamental attribution error is a theory that explains how one would not consider motivations or situational variables when interpreting a character’s actions (Keen, McCoy, and Powell 130). Through my analysis of these theories, I found that identification and the fundamental attribution error are connected. By using a compilation of scholarly sources, as well as films that will supply material for a textual analysis, I will be able to explore the connection between these psychological theories and the construction of audience representation of cinematic elements.

## Methodology

To begin the research process, I utilized the JSTOR database and collected various scholarly articles about cinematic elements, audience representation, and psychological perspectives and theories. In reading the articles, I found an abundance of information about schemas, identification, and the fundamental attribution error, which are three psychological theories I have based my research on. For my textual analysis, I chose both character development and musical elements as the cinematic features I would analyze. To select which movies to use, I accessed the American Film Institute website to search for the most popular characters and best movie scores. The films selected were *Star Wars*, *Schindler’s List*, and *Thor*.

I used the articles written by Keen, McCoy, and Powell and Tan, Spackman, and Bezdek as lenses for the film analysis. The Keen, McCoy, and Powell article focuses on how an audience would interpret characters by outlining several theories and explanations regarding characterizations and qualities audiences tend to favor when watching films. The article by Tan, Spackman, and Bezdek uses charts and matrices to relate emotions and film music, in addition to going in depth about how music can trigger emotions from an audience that helps when interpreting plots and characters. By using these studies as lenses, I was able to model the character analyses and evaluate the effectiveness of music in film. While watching the films, I also took notes of my reactions during specific scenes in the movies that related to music that evoked emotion or showed development in character plots.

## Contribution

### Schemas and Characters

A specific schema regarding characters in film includes the stereotypical behaviors of labeled characters, such as a protagonist striving to do good, or the antagonist trying to overcome other characters. Richard Keen, Monica McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell confirmed this idea when they gathered information about how schemas influence why audiences favor a villain in films and how schemas affect how audiences interpret characters in films (136). Dan Nadaner claims that the theory of gestalt is a complementary explanation for how an audience makes meaning out of information. Similar to schemas, the theory of gestalt suggests that audiences seek a deeper meaning in a text, make associations based on experiences, and then organize the information (Nadaner 123). For this study, I applied the schema theory as opposed to the gestalt theory because as a whole, schemas provide a better explanation for how audiences construct a general meaning from text, whereas the gestalt requires an audience to thoroughly analyze the information and form more complex connections to personal experiences. In my textual analysis, the characters of the films *Thor*, *Star Wars*, and *Schindler's List* fit certain stereotypes of distinct categories, including the villains and protagonists. While interpretation of characters does not require exposure to preexisting schemas that define typical character relations, many analyses on how audiences interpret the role of a character clearly indicate that individuals use schemas to better understand characters by associating them with archetypal personalities and behaviors.

#### *The Villain*

When thinking about a villain, one has a schema of an evil character with a wicked personality, and who follows a formulaic pattern in which his or her malevolent actions serve particularly egotistical or heinous purposes, ultimately resulting in a certain degree of chaos. For example, a typical villain would create obstacles for other characters, possibly inflict physical or emotional harm, and threaten the safety of innocent citizens. Moreover, a villain would do all of these things for the purpose of self-preservation, personal gain, or to ensure that the opponent does not obtain what he or she is seeking.

In *Thor*, Loki is the main antagonist who meets all of these criteria. In addition to his actions, Loki's personality is one that strives for self-gain without considering how the collateral damage of his upward progression would affect others. However, he is not a typical villain. Throughout the movie, audiences become aware that he was adopted from an enemy planet, all to forge a peaceful alliance between two warring kingdoms. This adds a layer of complexity to the villain schema because although he has a unique past, he still acts in the evil manner that any other villain would. Audiences consequently feel sympathy for the villain, which makes Loki the character audiences hate to love.

One of the most notorious villains in cinema is Darth Vader from the *Star Wars* films. In the first movie, it was apparent that Darth Vader was the villainous character. As the ruling force in the entire empire, he called for destruction for all of those who opposed him, fulfilling the villain's requirement of causing physical or emotional harm to others. Since he was the leader of the group that opposed the protagonists, it was inevitable that there would be a final battle of some sort where either evil or good would overcome the obstacles the other created. Throughout the *Star Wars* films, Darth Vader's actions and mentality reveal his characteristics, which allow an audience to understand that he is a villain by using the general formula of a villain schema.

In *Schindler's List*, a movie set in the era of the Holocaust, a villain is obviously manifested within Amon Goeth, a second lieutenant in the Nazi regime. An audience would use preexisting knowledge about the Holocaust and Nazi Germany to understand that a great majority of those associated with the Nazis are interpreted as villains. His cruel actions, including public humiliation

and executions, coupled with his lack of remorse complement the audience's preexisting schema as a heinous individual whose mentality matches that of an inhumane, debauched character.

### *The Hero*

On the other hand, the protagonist in a movie takes the opposite role in film. The hero schema provides a generalization of protagonists by allowing the audience to interpret the character's role or purpose in the film by grouping the characteristics of an archetypical "good guy." A schema for the protagonist, or the hero, includes a character that overcomes internal or external conflicts that are out of his or her control, ensures the safety and welfare of others, possibly forms a romantic relationship with another character, engages in some sort of battle with the villain, and ultimately, prevails over the villain.

Thor, in the same way as Loki, fulfills these requirements about what makes a hero a hero. He finds himself struggling with the decision to do what is best for him versus what is best for others, and in making that decision, Thor finds himself in a position where he has to consider the lives of people around him. Furthermore, a romance inevitably evolves between Thor and Jane, which is yet another characteristic from the hero schema. By having a preexisting schema of the behaviors and personalities that classifies one as the "good" character, audiences can associate Thor's actions with those of a typical hero, solidifying his role in the story as the hero trying to save his kingdom.

In *Star Wars*, a group of characters fit in the schema for heroes instead of a single character. Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Han Solo, and Princess Leia are the main protagonists. Luke was brought into the fold when he revealed a secret message, which initiated the search for Obi-Wan in order to help Princess Leia. Obi-Wan was one of the original Jedi knights, a group that stands for using powers for good instead of evil, making him one of the "good guys." Luke and Obi-Wan sought help from Han Solo, a smuggler who had a fast spaceship, pulling him into the band of heroes as well. As the leader of the rebels, Princess Leia was not under Darth Vader's control, making her a hero because she opposed the villain. These characters fit the hero schema because they had a strong opposition to Darth Vader, strove to restore the empire to a peaceful state, and had a goal to save innocent lives threatened by Darth Vader. A romantic relationship also developed between Han Solo and Princess Leia.

The audience finds yet another hero in Oskar Schindler in the film *Schindler's List*. Even though he is part of the Nazi party, he has a secret agenda that results in him saving innocent Jews from being sent to concentration camps. The general hero schema that any audience would have includes acts of selflessness and sacrifice, which is apparent through Schindler's actions since he risked his life to secretly help the Jews and spare their lives. By overcoming the struggle between choosing what is best for his survival versus what is morally correct, Schindler's role is interpreted as the hero based on the good deeds and sacrifices he has to make for others.

## **Schemas and Music**

Similar to how schemas serve as tools to help interpret a character's role in film, schemas can also be used to make sense of the music in film. According to Marilyn Boltz, the main purpose for schemas is to provide an "interpretive framework" for an audience to use, and film music serves as a schema in many ways (430). Film scores can highlight emotions of the characters or those of the audience, have a priming or foreshadowing effect, transport the audience to a specific setting, or help the audience comprehend the story's plot (Boltz 430).

### *Mood Congruent Music*

One of the most effective uses of music is to enhance or evoke emotion in an audience. When an audience associates a style of music with their emotions, a schema is developed. Audiences then take the auditory stimuli and relate it to the visual representation of emotions

expressed by the characters in a film, creating a more advanced schema between emotion and music. Siu-Lan Tan, Matthew Spackman, and Matthew Bezdek state that “film music may invoke schema that lead to interpretation of visual content in ways that are consistent with the music” (136). The consistency between the visual content of a scene and the tone and tempo of music is labeled as mood congruence. For example, during a somber scene where actors show grief or sadness, mood congruent music will be of slow tempo and minor tones. One has to use experiences and make associations to understand that while somber music is playing, the scene is likely to reflect that with similar emotions, which fits into a schema of determining the style of music that is appropriate for a scene.

While analyzing *Schindler's List*, it was apparent that the music selected for particular scenes was meticulously chosen to reflect the mood of the scene. As previously stated, *Schindler's List* is a movie set during the era of the Holocaust, and tells the true story of Oskar Schindler, a Nazi and German businessman that provides armaments for the war. Schindler, following the advice of his Jewish accountant Itzhak Stern, hires Jewish workers because they are less expensive to employ. By the end of the movie, it is told that Schindler helped save approximately 1,200 Jews from concentration camps and, ultimately, murder. As a German Nazi, Schindler had the privilege of attending parties with extravagant food, live singers and entertainment, and dancing. Music, as suggested by Green, provides an effective way to transport an audience to a place or time that is relevant to the storyline (85). It is important that the music reflect the time period and the party-like situations so that the audience can connect with the characters and the emotions during the scene. Mood congruent music for scenes such as these serves to transport the audience to that era with upbeat and energizing music. The music during the scene allows the audience to use a music schema because the music highlights the joy of the characters and urges the audience to feel the same joy and excitement. On the other hand, when scenes involved concentration camps or raids on a community, mood congruent music was upbeat, but chaotic or suspenseful to reflect or enhance the negative emotions and actions in the scene. As Nazi soldiers were hastily running around Jewish ghettos, the fast paced music reflected the actions of the soldiers. However, because the scene was leading to the execution of the majority of a town, the music for this scene was more dynamic and reflected not only the actions of the soldiers, but the emotions of the Jews fleeing for their lives. In essence, due to the different moods conveyed during the scenes discussed, the music during the display of the Nazi raid could not share the same jubilant and exciting tones as the dancing scenes in the film.

### *Leitmotif*

Green writes, “A concept derived from Wagner’s use of themes in opera, the leitmotif could be defined as ‘a theme in a film [that] becomes associated with a character, a place, a situation, or an emotion’” (86). As a certain theme occurs during similar situations, one forms a schema associating a situation with the particular tune that is played either prior to the scene or simultaneously. The leitmotif becomes engrained in an audience’s mind, and due to its repetitive nature, the audience links an emotion or a character with the theme.

The theme of *Schindler's List* is played eight times throughout the movie, each time during a heart-wrenching and dramatic scene. Fitting the extremely evocative nature of the film, the musical theme is complementary to the emotional content. Because it is played numerous times and is coupled with similar emotions every time, the theme becomes a leitmotif, therefore establishing a schema that is unique to the film. After being exposed to the music through the movie, hearing the theme without visual content generates the same sorrowful emotions because it is engrained in one’s mind to associate the sound with the emotion.

Similarly, Darth Vader from the *Star Wars* films has his own theme song. By being exposed to the character and the leitmotif simultaneously, the audience forms a strong association between the song and the character (Green 87). In this case, the leitmotif can also provide a foreshadowing

effect for an audience. With the well-known ominous tune, an audience is aware that Darth Vader is coming into the scene. This type of association allows the audience to interpret not only the music and its effectiveness, but it also helps the audience construct a meaning about the character. Different themes of various styles can lead the audience to come to a conclusion about the role of a character, such as Darth Vader's imperial march, suggesting an almost authoritative and menacing role.

### Identifying with Characters

After researching identification, it was obvious that the psychological process could have various degrees in which the audience connects with a character. An audience's identification for a character begins to develop when an event in the film triggers an emotion from the audience, such

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as empathy. According to Jonathan Cohen, as this emotional attachment occurs, one begins to have an affinity for or imagine a relationship with the character (247). With a growing affinity for a character, audiences perceive themselves as the character, and then audiences can use their perceptions and emotions to help interpret characters' actions and personalities in films.

#### *Fundamental Attribution Error and Identification*

Identification from the development of emotions towards a character can evolve, and as a result, one understands situational variables that reveal motivations for a character's actions. The fundamental attribution error is a theory that explains how one would pass judgments about a character without taking into consideration the situation, but basing judgments solely on perceived intrinsic characteristics (Keen, McCoy, and Powell 131).

In regards to the film *Thor*, there are plot lines that reveal secrets about Loki's past, as previously discussed, which give the audience a reason to have sympathy for the character. After repeated exposure, audiences want to see him succeed, despite the fact that he is the villain. Since the audience identifies with Loki by feeling sympathy for him, the sudden realization of his past serves as a justification for his actions and his desire to assume the throne. The audience excuses his evil persona, but still understands and is aware of his role as the villain in the film. Instead of concluding that he is intrinsically evil, the audience is given information that excuses the cruel actions. While Loki still plays the role of the villain, the audience identifies with him and understands the situation and his actions.

Similarly, throughout the *Star Wars* films, audiences are given hints that there is an underlying relationship between Darth Vader, Luke, and Leia, but until the relationship is known, the audience is left to assume that Darth Vader is evil for the sake of being evil and to have power over the empire. Once it is revealed that Darth Vader is Luke and Leia's father, the audience understands why there was such a conflict between the characters. In addition to the revelation, audiences who watch the prequel trilogy of the original *Star Wars* films are exposed to Anakin Skywalker, the intrinsically good character that becomes Darth Vader. If an audience combines the fact that Darth Vader was once a hero, but succumbed to the temptation of evil, and the fact that there is a familial connection between the characters, then the audience will eventually identify with Darth Vader. Darth Vader has overcome internal and external conflicts that cause a devastating change in his life. With this identification, the false attribution error theory is also applicable because the audience originally interpreted Darth Vader as the villain because he was striving for destruction and power. However, after the situations are revealed, the audience can justify his actions and his motivations because they feel sympathy for what Darth Vader has gone

through. The false attribution error is a tool audiences can use to interpret the actions of a character, which subsequently leads to the audience identifying with that character.

## Conclusion

After my research through scholarly articles and analysis of films, it is clear that the schema theory, the identification theory, and by association, the fundamental attribution error theory have a strong influence on how audiences interpret characters' roles and musical elements in film. Schemas about characters provide a mental framework that allows an audience to categorize characters by their actions, personalities, and motivations. By doing so, the audience can understand and interpret the role each character plays in the film. Audiences use musical schemas and cognitive tools, such as mood congruence and leitmotifs, to make sense of how the music in film relates to characters and emotions, and to clarify and compliment the desired interpretation filmmakers intend for the cinematic production as a whole. The cognitive and emotional connection between an audience and a character leads to identification. This type of relationship has several degrees, including an affinity for a character, an attraction to a character, an imaginative role exchange where the audience imagines themselves as the character, and a change in behaviors or attitudes to model those of the character one identifies with. Identification also relates to the fundamental attribution error since the situational variables that are exposed can evoke emotions that initiate the process of identifying with a character.

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