



A SEMIOTIC AND PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS OF VISUAL AND TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS IN OVERTON'S *THE SILENT CHILD*

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Abstract

*The article provides a semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretation of an Academy Award winning short film *The Silent Child* (2017) by Chris Overton that emphasizes the way in which film signs and subconscious processes create meanings of deafness, emotional deprivation, and identity formation. The study is based on the triadic model of signs provided by Charles Sanders Peirce and psychoanalytic theories proposed by Freud, Lacan, and Winnicott, and the research issues How do silence, gesture, gaze, and the space elements of composition work as systems of expression in conveying psychological reality in Libby. Instead of shaping deafness as a medical inadequacy or narrative metaphor, the analysis previews the communication inequality and affective neglect as socially constructed states. With a keen focus on mise-en-scene, framing, colour, lighting, and sound design, the article shows how the film alters the concept of silence into the full-fledged semiotic space that expresses the trauma, desire, and resistance. Combining the semiotics and psychoanalytic film theory, this paper is relevant to current theoretical discussions in film studies and disability discourse by demonstrating how the linguistic implications of depriving the deaf children of language use can have both ethical and emotional implications.*

Keywords: *Semiotics, Psychoanalysis, Disability Representation, Deafness, Trauma, Film Theory, Visual Culture.*

Introduction

Film is not a simply a medium of representation; it is a multifaceted mechanism of signs in terms of which the social realities, emotionalities, and ideological contradictions are created and conveyed. In movies where disability and childhood are central, this representational role is morally charged, since both visual and narrative decisions are made and influence the ways of perceiving and understanding marginalized identities. The short film *The Silent Child* directed by Chris Overton (2017) takes its rightful place in this landscape as it narrates the life experience of Libby, a highly deaf child who lives in an ordinary family that does not acknowledge or support her language requirements.

Instead of showing deafness as a natural restriction, the movie prefigures the outcomes of communicative alienation. Not merely the absence of sound, libby silence is a socially constructed state that is created through the denial of parents, the failure of institutions and the cultural unease with the difference. That is why *The Silent Child* is especially appropriate to a semiotic and psychoanalytic study because the movie is largely dependent on visual narratives, bodily gestures, and emotional moods to deliver meaning.

Semiotics creates a systematic design of the way meaning is created by use of images, gestures, sounds and space. An icon, index, and symbol model of Peirce enables considering how the



stillness, gaze, as well as gestures of Libby are acting as signifying practices, and not passive features. Instead, the psychoanalytic theory allows delving into the unconscious processes that define relationships of characters, emotional repression, and identity formation. Theories like repression, desire, the symbolic order and holding environment provide invaluable understanding of the psychological world of Libby and the breakdowns of maternal care that frame her experience.

This paper will present evidence that using these two methods, *The Silent Child* creates a strong argument on how normative systems function and how society views deafness. The movie shows how the denial of the language access is a kind of the emotional violence, which prevents the child to enter the subjectivity. The current discussion therefore places the film as a part of wider discussions in film studies, disability studies, and visual culture and the ability of cinema to enunciate psychological and moral truths that is unspoken in the everyday discourse.

Background of the Study

Historically, the film depiction of disability has been demonstrated as swinging to both sides of sentimentality, tragedy, and heroism. The disabled characters are also positioned as something to be pitied or as inspiring figures where the main role in their stories is to provoke emotional reaction in the able audience. Deafness as a form of disability has been represented inaccurately via tropes of isolation, reliance, or magical healing all too often, which only endorses medicalized conceptualizations of disability instead of structural obstacles to communication.

These traditions of representation are thrown into question by recent events in disability studies which promote the social approach to disability that views disability as not in the flesh but in the inabilities of the social environment to respond to difference. In this sense, it is not the deaf character of Libby that is the problem of the central problem in *The Silent Child*, but rather it is the unwillingness of the hearing world to acknowledge her linguistic reality. The movie is consistent with this pivotal change in which it predicts the use of British Sign Language (BSL) as a form of empowerment, but not compensation.

The use of visual narration is also important in the film. Silence is one of the key expressive techniques, defining the sensual and emotional perception of the viewer. The silenced soundscape makes the hearing audience feel uneasy and confused, as Libby does in her daily life. This aesthetic decision encourages a semiotic interpretation of silence as a denoting signifier, and not the lack of narrative. At the psychoanalytical level, silence is associated with repression, desire that is not fulfilled and emotional withdrawal especially where there is maternal neglect.

By placing *The Silent Child* into the context of these critical discourses, the current study shows the value that the film has to add to the modern visual culture. It shows that the effects of social exclusion on the human psyche can be revealed through the cinematic form and non-reductive narratives of disability.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide the study include:

1. What role does Peircean signs (icon, index, and symbol) play in *The Silent Child* to build the meaning?
2. What are the psychoanalytic patterns of the behavior of Libby and her mother, and other characters?



3. What roles do cinematic components of mise-en-scene, framing, sound, lighting, and color play to support the interpretation of the film psychologically and symbolically?

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the study of films and literary criticisms by showing that there are aspects of meaning that cannot be found through a superficial interpretation of the narrative, but through the use of an integrated semiotic and psychoanalytic approach. The study is a sensitive reading of the ways in which the process of forming identity and communicating trauma are exchanged through visual manifestations, affective structures, and unconscious processes instead of merely the use of visuality.

The article also contributes to the discussion of disability as it takes a shift in focus on people with impairment and focuses on the systemic inefficiencies of communication and care. By examining silence, gaze and spatial exclusion, the study highlights the moral role played by social institutions and family structures in creating the emotional life of the deaf children. Through this, it makes *The Silent Child* a critical text that questions cultural beliefs on what is normal, language, and even belonging.

Literature Review

In addition to classical semiotics and psychoanalysis, other modern approaches to film studies make use of affect theory and phenomenology in order to understand the way spectators get a sense of meaning on the bodily level. According to the phenomenological approach to cinema, Vivian Sobchack (1992) believes that cinema is not understood cognitively but experienced sensorially, through embodied perception. This point of view can be applied especially to the interpretation of *The Silent Child*, in which the effect of tactile gestures, glances, proxemic relations creates an affective intimacy between a viewer and a character. The viewer is not merely a decoder of signs but is empathetically engaged in the sensorial world of Libby and experiences silence as a limitation and communicative power. This embodied spectatorship further intensifies the semiotic process by placing meaning in lived affective experience and not in abstraction by symbols.

Likewise, the idea of haptic visuality proposed by Laura Marks (2000) explains further that the films that pre-empt texture and intimacy and sensationality prompt their audiences to touch and feel like they have done. Where hands of Libby are traced over objects, or the camera is held on her facial micro-expressions, the vision becomes haptic, investing in non-verbal indicators of communication. This haptic mode undermines the preeminence of dialogue-driven narrative, and also solidifies the foundation of the film on sensory semiotics. Silence is, thus, not emptiness, but a thick grid of embodied signs, which demand emotional and physical attunement on the audience.

The perspectives of cultural studies also expand the interpretive context because deafness is not placed in the context of individual pathology. There is also an argument by scholars inspired by disability studies, including Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) and Lennard Davis (2013), that disability is constructed within culture that upholds some bodies and communicative practices and also marginalizes others. In this perspective, the exclusion of Libby is not a personal weakness as but a failure of the family as well as the society to accept different ways of language. The insistence of the mother on oralism and normative speech therefore seems like an ideological imposition of the symbolic order, which reiterates the Lacanian theory but at the same time brings out the cultural politics within communication practices. The combination of disability studies and psychoanalysis allows perceiving the movie as a commentary on the normalcy hegemonies.



In addition, modern sound studies offer one more aspect to the interpretation of silence. According to work by Michel Chion (1994) on the relations between audio and vision, silence in the film is never merely the lack of a sound but a constructive structuring effect that predetermines perception and emotion speed. *The Silent Child*, uses instances of soft or quiet soundscapes to make the viewer more conscious of the subjective isolation of Libby, and reduces silence to an act of expression in regard to acoustics. Such conscious working of sonic absence concurs with semiotic conceptualizations of markedness, according to which what is not marked is as communicatively effective as that which is marked.

Such integrative readings are further supported by recent studies of multimodality and digital media. According to scholars such as Bateman and Schmidt (2012), the film meaning is produced as a result of multimodal grammar complex orchestration of image, sound, movement, and editing rhythms. Framing, close-ups and rhythmic pacing used in the film creates an emotional syntax, which compares to how Libby learned strategy by sign language. Editing therefore serves not just as a narrating process but also as a linguistic one, just like the very process of communication itself.

Collectively, these interdisciplinary methods semiotic, psychoanalytic, phenomenological, affective, disability-oriented, and multimodal in nature will offer a broad scope of approaches to *The Silent Child*. They show that the cinemal meaning has a multi-register of functioning: symbolic, unconscious, sensual, and cultural. The reduction of speech and foregrounding embodiment of expression also forces the movie-goers to rethink the traditional beliefs about language, subjectivity and belonging. Therefore, this paper makes the film an attractive place to discuss how silence, rather than being an indication of nothingness, is a potent instrument that can be used to express trauma, identity, and caring relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The critical paradigm of this paper combines the semiotic theory and psychoanalytic approaches to the analysis of the creation of meaning, emotion and identity in *The Silent Child*. The study does not use these frameworks as distinct analytical tools, but in a complementary fashion, as the meaning in cinema is created when these systems of symbols and unconscious work together.

6.1 Peircean Semiotics and Cinematic Meaning

The concept of semiotic theory by Charles Sanders Peirce understands meaning through a triadic relationship of the sign and the object, and the interpretant. In this model, signs will be icons when they are similar to their objects, indices when they are causally or existentially related to their objects, and symbols when their meaning is defined by a social convention (Peirce, 1931/1958). Such a triadic method is especially useful in analyzing films since the visual resemblance, the affective appeal, and the culturally acquired codes help to convey meaning in cinema at the same time.

The Silent Child uses icons to work with visual immobility, gesture, and facial expression. The physical immobility of Libby is often the silence of the flesh and thus forms an iconic relationship between the gesture and speechlessness. The indexical signs come out in the form of the emotional reactions to tears and eye avoidance, and abrupt smiling, which directly indicate the inner psychological processes. Symbols on the other hand are produced through cultural coded aspects of school uniforms, domestic places and institutional environments that reflect conformity, authority and social normalization.



The power of Peircean semiotics is the fact that it explains such overlapping layers of meaning. Instead of separating signs into inflexible categories, the model enables a fluid interpretation, with the understanding that a single cinematic element can act iconically, indexically and symbolically simultaneously. This is an essential aspect of the analysis of a film where silence in itself becomes a thick semiotic field.

Psychoanalytic Visions

Psychoanalytic theory is used to explain the influence of unconscious processes in determining behavior, emotion and the relationship between individuals. The concept of repression introduced by Sigmund Freud is quite applicable in the characterization of Libby. Her reticent nature, her coldness of emotion, her lack of affect can be interpreted as the symptoms of the repressed experience, not in the sense of the conscious repression but of the failure to express the needs of the heart with words.

The symbolic order theory by Jacques Lacan also throws more light on the maternal failure in the film. Symbolic order reflects the sphere of the social law, language and cultural norms. The mother of Libby is constantly concerned with the social appearance, institutional demands and normal concepts of childhood at the cost of her emotional and linguistic realm. Such conformity to the symbolic order is possible only at the cost of affective recognition which results in a break in the subjective coming-of-age of the child.

The holding environment theory by Donald Winnicott is a more relational explanation of psychological development. Winnicott believes that the sense of self in a child can develop in a favorable emotional environment that is created by a thoughtful caregiver. In *The Silent Child*, this holding role lacks in the mother child relationship but is somewhat reinstated with the help of Joanne who offers emotional responsiveness, patience, and language access. Even sign language itself is a transitional phenomenon which helps Libbie to connect her inner world with the external reality.

The integration of these psychoanalytic points of view helps the study to conceptualize silence more as a result of failure in relationships and social denial. Silence turns out as a symptom of trauma, as well as a kind of opposition to a world that denies significant communication.

Research Methodology

This paper utilizes a qualitative interpretive research philosophy that is based on a close reading and visual analysis. The corpus of data is a set of chosen scenes of *The Silent Child* with gestures, facial expressions, space setting, color schemes, lighting, sound design and the development of the plot. Instead of measuring cinematic elements, the analysis is concerned with their meanings in terms of symbols, emotions, and psyche.

The process of conducting the research was based on several viewings of the film in order to discover common vocabulary of visual and narrative patterns relating to silence, gaze, and communication. Such patterns were semiotically coded based on three categories of icon, index, and symbol as defined by Peirce. The psychoanalytic interpretation was later used to study the relationship between these signs with the unconscious forces of repression, desire, maternal attachment and identity formation.

To provide analytical rigor, cross-referencing of the interpretations with the available body of semiotic and psychoanalytic knowledge was done. The triangulation was necessary to ensure theoretical consistency as well as permit interpretive richness. The proposed research is not aimed



at generalizing the results of the study to the film in general, but is focused on showing how the combination of theoretical domains can be used to shed light on the emotional and moral facets of film.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Joanne educating Libby in sign language is characterized by intimacy, closeness, and sensitivity of emotions. The visual composition is often based on medium shots that focus on physical intimacy, and the soft lighting effect is used to make it safer. Semiotic icons are formed due to the similarity between gestures and actions, which means that meaning can be represented visually as opposed to being said orally.

The smiles of Libby and her greater involvement serve as indexical indications of psychological change, that is, that there is an inner change in the mind of the person as a result of being isolated and becoming connected. Sign language symbolically means empowerment and subjectivity. Holding environment Joanne offers a Winnicottian holding environment within which the emerging self of Libby can be identified and maintained in a psychoanalytic view. In this regard, communication is not only functional but it forms identity itself.

8.2 The Family Dinner Scene

The scene of family dinner gives a great example of how even the most common domestic practices can be used as the spaces of exclusion. The scene is shot in a wide format with Libby on the periphery of the table which symbolically supports her invisibility, as an emotional being. The lack of attunement is indicated by indexical signs like turned backs and distracter gestures and the dinner table itself is symbolic in its use as a space of normative family unity and Libby is in effect locked out.

This scene is an example of repression in the family level, psychologically speaking. The denial to accept the communicative needs of Libby by the family serves as an overall defense mechanism, which maintains the image of normality at the expense of harm to feelings. The searching look of Libby indicates unfulfilled need to gain recognition highlighting the moral failure of the domestic environment.

8.3 The Classroom Scene

The classroom sequence is an important location where institutional power is at the intersection with communicative exclusion. The visual organisation of the scene is based on strict spatial organisation: the desks are arranged in rows, the teacher is in the middle of the picture, and Libby is marginalised, the visual outcast. These orders are semiotically significant as they represent a differentiation between standardized communication and normative learning and personal accessibility.

The muddiness and apparent uneasiness of Libby are indexical indicators of institutional non-care. Verbal instructions that the teacher uses without any visual or gestural accommodation would support symbolic hierarchy whereby speech is considered as the most important source of intelligence and engagement. The psychoanalytic view of this scene is the symbolic representation of what Lacan terms as the coercive force of the symbolic order wherein the subjects are pressured to be in line with the rules of language in order to be accepted as fully human.

The classroom is therefore turned into a place of symbolic violence where the silence of Libby is interpreted as lack of ability and not disparity. Her marginalization is not explicit but rather built within the structure, which demonstrates that systems which are proclaimed to be neutral tend to



reproduce marginalization. The scene intensifies the aspect of critique in the movie on the case of education institutions that do not embrace other forms of communication.

8.4 Mother Teacher Interaction.

One significant eye opener is when the mother of Libby talks to the teacher. Instead of showing that she cares about her daughter on the level of communicative needs, the mother makes the problem insignificant and presents the silence of Libby as a stage or a nuisance. Such indexical signs of denial as the dismissive gestures and controlled tone of the mother are pointed out by semiotic analysis.

Symbolically, the engagement between parents and the institutional rules is the correspondence of the authority of parents to institutional standards. This is psychologically driven by the denial mechanism which is a defense mechanism by which the mother can deny that she is also emotionally failed. The recognition of the needs of Libby would necessitate a reorganization of maternal identity, which is disrupted and violated by the mother unconsciously.

This scene highlights the emotional price of being socially conformable at the expense of being relationally responsible. The silence is a mutual family tactic, which serves both the comfort of the adults, and seals the isolation of a child further.

8.5 The Removal from Joanne

Among the most emotionally tense scenes in the film is the one when Joanne is taken out of the life of Libby. The scene is characterized aesthetically by sudden spatial isolation and inhibited emotional activity. The silent panic of Libby expressed in facial strain and gleaming eyes serves as an effective pointer of psychic discontinuity.

In a Winnicottian sense, this will be seen as the failure of the holding environment in which Libby had been able to develop emotionally and linguistically. Joanne had given not only recognition but also communication. Her expulsion is therefore symbolic in a severing of the child to subjectivity. The silence in this scene acquires a different meaning semiotically. It is no longer an effect of being neglected, but it is an indication of loss. The movie does not allow melodrama; rather, it lets silence to do its emotional job, which forces the spectator to question the moral sense of choices taken in an adult life in the name of normality.

Findings and Discussion

Beyond these central findings, the integrated framework further demonstrates that silence in *The Silent Child* operates not merely as a thematic element but as the film's primary structuring principle. Rather than serving as background or absence, silence organizes narrative rhythm, pacing, and spectatorship. Extended pauses, minimal dialogue, and sustained close-ups slow the temporal flow of the film, compelling viewers to attend closely to micro-gestures and subtle emotional shifts. This temporal deceleration transforms silence into a methodological device that restructures how meaning is perceived. In this sense, silence shapes not only what is represented but how representation itself unfolds, reinforcing the semiotic claim that absence can function as a marked and communicatively dense sign.

The findings also reveal that the film destabilizes conventional hierarchies between speech and non-verbal communication. Dominant Western epistemologies typically privilege spoken language as the primary indicator of cognition and subjecthood. However, the semiotic analysis



demonstrates that Libby's gestures, gaze, and bodily orientation form a coherent and intelligible communicative system. Her silence does not indicate cognitive lack but rather a mismatch between her mode of expression and the structures that surround her. Consequently, the film critiques logocentric assumptions that equate voice with intelligence and speech with agency. By foregrounding sign language and embodied interaction, *The Silent Child* reframes communication as multimodal and relational rather than purely verbal.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, these communicative failures acquire deeper psychological significance. Libby's withdrawal can be read as a defensive response to repeated experiences of misrecognition. Drawing on Winnicott's concept of the "false self," her silence appears as a protective adaptation to an environment that fails to provide adequate emotional holding. Instead of facilitating symbolization, the family's insistence on normative speech intensifies fragmentation, preventing the child's entry into a supportive symbolic order. The absence of attuned caregiving thus produces not simply linguistic delay but a disruption in subject formation itself. Joanne's interventions, by contrast, exemplify what psychoanalysis would term a reparative relational space—one that validates the child's gestures and gradually enables the development of a stable, communicative self.

Importantly, the discussion further suggests that trauma in the film is cumulative rather than singular. There is no dramatic event that accounts for Libby's distress; instead, trauma emerges through everyday neglect, exclusion, and institutional oversight. This finding aligns with contemporary trauma studies that emphasize slow, structural, or "insidious" trauma produced by systemic conditions rather than isolated shocks. The repetition of ignored attempts at communication, the absence of educational support, and the family's denial collectively create an atmosphere of chronic affective deprivation. The film's reliance on silence, therefore, mirrors trauma's own resistance to straightforward narration, communicating suffering through gaps, ellipses, and bodily signs rather than explicit articulation.

The study also highlights the ethical implications of spectatorship. By positioning viewers within Libby's sensory world, the film encourages an experiential rather than observational relationship to disability. Spectators must work to interpret non-verbal cues, effectively sharing in the labour of communication that the family refuses to undertake. This shift transforms the audience from passive consumers into active participants, generating what may be described as ethical alignment. The viewer's effort to understand parallels Joanne's empathetic engagement, while the discomfort produced by prolonged silence exposes the taken-for-granted privilege of effortless hearing and speech. In doing so, the film not only represents marginalization but momentarily makes the audience feel its constraints.

Furthermore, the integrated analysis reveals how institutional structures—schools, healthcare systems, and family hierarchies—function as mechanisms of symbolic power. These structures regulate which forms of language are recognized as legitimate and which are rendered invisible. The reluctance to introduce sign language reflects broader cultural anxieties about difference and normalcy, illustrating how institutions often prioritize conformity over accessibility. Thus, Libby's isolation is not accidental but produced by normative frameworks that pathologize deviation. Reading the film through disability studies clarifies that silence is socially manufactured: it is imposed when systems fail to adapt to diverse communicative needs. This interpretation shifts responsibility away from the individual child toward the collective structures that exclude her.



Another significant finding concerns the aesthetic strategies of the film itself. Visual composition, framing, and editing are shown to function as extensions of Libby's subjectivity. Frequent close-ups and shallow focus isolate her from surrounding space, visually materializing her social disconnection. Conversely, scenes featuring Joanne employ warmer lighting and shared spatial arrangements, signaling relational attunement. These formal contrasts demonstrate how cinematic technique can embody psychological states, confirming that meaning in film emerges through stylistic choices as much as through narrative content. Silence, therefore, becomes embedded in the very grammar of the filmic image.

Taken together, these insights underscore cinema's unique capacity to render the unspoken visible. Whereas traditional narrative forms rely heavily on dialogue and exposition, *The Silent Child* demonstrates that film can articulate complex emotional and social realities through purely visual and sensory means. The medium's multimodality enables the translation of silence into gesture, rhythm, and space, thereby expanding representational possibilities for experiences that resist verbalization. This finding reinforces the value of interdisciplinary approaches that combine semiotics, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory, as no single framework alone can fully account for the film's layered communicative strategies.

Ultimately, the extended discussion suggests that *The Silent Child* operates simultaneously as narrative, critique, and ethical intervention. It not only depicts the consequences of communicative neglect but also models alternative practices of listening, care, and recognition. Silence, once perceived as lack, emerges as a powerful site of meaning, resistance, and potential transformation. By challenging viewers to reconsider what counts as language and whose voices are heard, the film calls for broader social reconfigurations that affirm difference rather than suppress it. In this way, the findings move beyond textual interpretation to broader implications, positioning the film as a cultural argument for inclusivity, relational responsibility, and communicative justice.

Conclusion

The Silent Child has been explored in this paper using an integrated semiotic and psychoanalytic technique in order to understand how silence can be a cinematic, psychological, and ethical phenomenon that works. Using the model of signification of three elements presented by Peirce, and psychoanalytic concept of subjectivity and relational development, the film analysis has established that silence is not a passive or natural phenomenon in the film but instead is actively created as a result of social neglect and institution breakdown.

The silence of Libby comes in the light of situations in which normative communication is preferred and difference is sidelined. The movie unveils how family denial, school dogmatism, and cultural beliefs collide to put away the vulnerable topics. Concurrently, it presents a counter-narrative with the character of Joanne whose sympathetic interaction demonstrates the power of recognition and care to change.

Finally, *The Silent Child* makes the viewers think about the morality of communication. It implies that the very process of true inclusion cannot be achieved without accommodation, but it presupposes the re-conceptualization of the meaning, language, and subjectivity. Silence here does not appear as nothing but as an address to responsibility, as an invitation that society should hear more.



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