

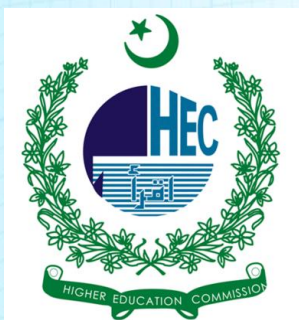
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**EXPLORING TRAUMA IN THE FILM LOVING VINCENT (2017): A
MULTIMODAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS**



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Abstract

The current paper investigates how trauma is presented in the movie *Loving Vincent* (2017) on a **multimodal level of semiotic**. It was the first animation movie in the world itself to be painted entirely in oil paints and it was made by over a hundred artists who made more than 65,000 hand-painted frames. This study explores how the inner world and traumatic experiences of Van Gogh can be achieved in both the visual and emotional form of cinema art. Relying on *Semiology by Saussure*, *Triadic Semiotics by Peirce*, *Multimodal Grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen*, and the *Trauma Theory of Freud, Caruth*, the paper explores the role of visual representations, narrative and symbolism in meaning-making. The analysis of filmic codes, color binaries, brushstroke movement, and the interaction between characters is done using a qualitative semiotic and multimodal approach. The conclusions made by the findings indicate that *Loving Vincent* brings back the painful life of Van Gogh by rendering his trauma into aesthetic expression so as to make viewers experience his pain as emotional resonance.

Keywords: trauma, multimodality, semiotics, signifier, signified, icons, indexes, symbols, filmic codes, visual grammar, *Loving Vincent*.

Introduction

Like in language, images represent meaning in the form of structured arrangements, but images have an affective weight as well. The understanding of these arrangements is facilitated by semiotic systems which include the study of how signs-visual, auditory or linguistic-form the meaning in culture (Bowcher, 2007). As an example, in a movie, each color, gesture, and camera angle can be added to the overall discourse and creates the layers of interpretation to the audience.

The concept of semiotics introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce offers an approach to the study of these complex systems. The idea of the signifier and the signified was first presented by Saussure (1916/1974) the signifier (form) and the signified (concept) and signs were classified into categories of icons, indexes, and symbols by Peirce (1931-1958). Such frameworks are particularly effective in the analysis of the films such as *Loving Vincent* when the meaning develops not only through the dialogue or the story itself, but through a complex interconnection of the painted pictures and movements and sounds.

The film *Loving Vincent* is a call to the viewers to look more closely into the life of Van Gogh; using an unusual medium an animated oil painting. Every frame is a moving painting that is a combination of a biographical narration and aesthetic experience. The movie places the suffering of Van Gogh not merely in the history but in the empirical, perceivable reality, which provides a clue to the trauma as it is revealed in the form of art. Developing the concept of Semiotic Theory and visual grammar, this paper locates *Loving Vincent* in the multimodal context based on the meaning-making framework of Saussure and Peirce, Kress and van Leeuwen approaches to visual design, and Freud and Caruth idea of Trauma Theory explained in 1920 and 1996 respectively. The combination of these approaches will allow taking a closer look into the way the film turns the personal suffering into the aesthetic expression, approaching art, psychology and the film discourse.

2. Vincent van Gogh: A Reviewed Biography.

The life of Vincent van Gogh was full of artistic genius and great misery. Van Gogh was born in 1853 in Groot-Zundert, Netherlands, to a minister father and an artistically minded mother and this gave him an early liking to nature and color. He was a poor and mentally ill artist despite his prolific artistic work of more than 2,000 artworks. His letters to brother Theo show that he was a highly thoughtful individual who was suffering due to loneliness and an interest in the idea of pursuing beauty.

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The self-harm of Van Gogh, such as the notorious cutting of his ear, and his subsequent suicide, which happened in 1890, amplifies how intense the inner struggle was. However, according to Hyams (2003), the letters and paintings by Van Gogh provide an incredibly bright picture of the trauma, and hence help the audience and researchers to comprehend his mental existence.

Some of his masterpieces such as the *Starry Night* (1889) and *Irises* (1889) are some examples where he managed to use emotion into color and shape. A swirling night sky and a brilliant crescent moon are used in the painting, *Starry Night*, to transmit a combination of hope, despair and transcendence, painted during that period when Van Gogh was at the asylum of Saint-Remy. Painted in the asylum garden, *Irises* suggests careful attention to detail and emotional appeal, both of which are shaped by Japanese woodblock prints. These paintings, which were subsequently animated in *Loving Vincent*, serve as the basis of the semiotics of the film, and can show that even art can be a representation of the experience of the soul.

3. The Film *Loving Vincent* (2017)

3.1 Synopsis

The film, *Loving Vincent*, narrates the story of an artist, Armand Roulin, a son of a postman, whose mission is to deliver one of the last letters of Van Gogh to his brother Theo. To know that Theo is dead, Armand explores the final days of Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise, France. The story is presented in the form of interviews, flashbacks and animated illustrations of paintings created by Van Gogh, which give several implications regarding the death of the painter. Such layered storytelling brings about the unclear and inconsistent versions of the life of Van Gogh and challenges the audience to think about the essence of truth, memory, and trauma (Riganas, 2017).

3.2 Making of the Film

The process of the movie production is remarkable: more than 100 painters produced more than 65,000 frames with oil paint, and it was possible to see the style of Van Gogh on the screen. Actors were shot on green screens and the frames were painted frame by frame in an attempt to recreate the brushstrokes and color palette of Van Gogh. Such an excruciating procedure transforms the whole movie into a semiotic experiment, a combination of classic painting and the film narration.

However, her interest in the last days of Van Gogh inspired Kobiala to view the film as a detective narrative depicted by painted landscapes and she managed to capture the historical and emotional truths. The combination of painted images and the investigation of the narrative enables viewers to feel that the trauma of Van Gogh is simultaneously personal and collective, which is mediated by art.

4. Semiotics and Multimodal Analysis

The semiotic theory allows analyzing *Loving Vincent* in a way that is not limited to a narrative approach. The model of signifier and signified that Saussure introduced together with the icon, index, and symbol proposed by Peirce is the means of interpreting the multimodal aspects of the movie. An example is that the swirling sky of *Starry Night* is an icon, similar to the original painting, the jagged crows are the indices of death and otherness, and the recurring yellow motifs are the symbols of hope, which are momentary. The semiotics of multimodality as described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) goes further to explore the interplay of visual, auditory and linguistic signs. In *Loving Vincent*, the semiotic ensemble of color, gesture, music, and dialogue is employed in order to express both emotion and story. The movie is a good example of how the multimodal analysis can reveal the means of the trauma representation with the help of complex sign system interconnecting aesthetics with psychology and culture.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

The analysis in this paper follows a multimodal semiotic approach which is qualitative in nature. Instead of quantifying the variables, it looks at how the visual, auditory, and narrative modes are applied to convey the psychological state of Van Gogh in the movie, *Loving Vincent*. The framework is built on the Saussurean semiology, Peircean triadic semiotics and visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, which enables the subtle interpretation of meaning through multiple channels of semiotics.

5.2 Data Selection

The analysis is devoted to the important sequences, such as:

- *Starry Night* animated scenes.
- *Wheatfield with Crows*
- Portraits of Dr. Gachet and Madame Roulin.

The reason why each of the sequences is selected is that it is an example of a multimodal interaction: color, motion, and sound intertwine to bring across the inner experience of Van Gogh. The sequences were watched several times and brushstroke, gesture, music, and framing were observed.

5.3 Analytical Procedure

The procedure was iterative:

1. **Semiotics resources identification:** colors, textures, gestures, musical patterns, dialogue.
2. **Sign classification:** icons, indexes, symbols.
3. **Interpretation:** investigating their affective and narrative meaning of these signs.
4. **Contextualization:** placing findings in the context of the life and letters of Van Gogh as well as historical context.

This approach recognizes the fact that meaning is negotiated by the audience. The semiotics of the film presented in the film is not only what is contained in the film but how the viewers interpret it, based on their cultural capital and their emotions.

5.4 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The interdisciplinary model, which is used in this study, is a combination of Semiotics, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, and Trauma Theory. The discussion is based on the linguistic model of the signifier and signified by **Saussure** (1916/1974) and the triad model (icon, index, and symbol) by **Peirce** (1931-1958), which are used to explain the use of visual forms to transmit meaning in the film *Loving Vincent* (2017).

In generalising the study of semiotics beyond linguistics, this study will use the approach of Social semiotics introduced by **Halliday** (1978) and explicated by Kress and **van Leeuwen** (2006) and their concept of visual grammar, which describes the organisation of meaning in multimodal texts in representational, interactive and compositional levels. This framework enables the researcher to research on the convergence of visual, linguistic and auditory modes in conveying the emotional and psychological richness behind the film. It is also based on the study about the application of the Trauma Theory, specifically the concept of the repetition compounding offered by **Freud** (1920) and the concept of the unclaimed experience offered by **Caruth** (1996) to comprehend the representation of the film fragmented temporality and kinetic visual motion as a symbol of psychological disturbance, distortion of memory, and emotional discontinuity.

Altogether, such a combination of the semiotic, multimodal and trauma-based approaches allows a subtle understanding of the text of *Loving Vincent* as this aesthetic and psychological writing, that turns suffering inside into visual beats and expressive movement hence making trauma a work of art.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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6.1 Semiotics and Meaning-Making

Semiotics is a prism with the help of which we can comprehend how the inner world of Van Gogh is conveyed in *The Loving Vincent*. A sign, Saussure (1916/1974) maintained, consists of a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept), meaning is not inherent but in a relation. Practically this implies that the swirling blue skies or the bright yellows in the movie are not merely visual effusions—they are semiotic capital, which is emotive and symbolic.

The triadic model of Peirce (1931-1958): model-icon, index, and symbol—further sheds even more light on meaning-making of the film. The reproduced paintings are icons, aesthetically similar to the original picture by Van Gogh; the disorderly brushwork can be an index, indicative of mental illness; and recurrent symbolism, like crosses or crows, can be a symbol, meaning sacrifice or doom. It appears just to be right to note that the strength of the film lies in this stratified signification: each frame speaks in various layers at the same time.

6.2 Multimodal Semiotics

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) offered the notion of multimodality, stating that the meaning in the present-day text is created by the combination of various semiotic modes. Film is a multimodal medium in its nature: it combines images, sound, plot and acting. This merging is exceptionally vivid in *Loving Vincent* since every frame of the movie is a painted canvas. The color scheme, the work of lines, the movement, and the music are also united to deliver the psychological terrain of Van Gogh.

To illustrate, the representational metafunction—the description of characters, scenes, and things—conveys the story of the life of Van Gogh. The interactive metafunction makes the viewer involved directly and he/she can empathize with the characters and reflect upon the suffering Van Gogh had. The compositional metafunction, in its turn, arranges them into a concise unit, which makes it possible to have a cinematic rhythm resembling emotional swell and fall. Looking at this, it is impossible not to think that the film itself turns into a kind of a semiotic system, a language of emotions expressed in paint.

6.3 Trauma and Aesthetic Representation

According to trauma studies, the life of Van Gogh represents the so-called unclaimed experience, the events that are too intense to be understood immediately and that come back through the depiction in the future. This theory is made real in *Loving Vincent*. The disjointed narrative, perspective, and brushstrokes used in the film suggest the feeling of memory and trauma, in which the present reality and the memory come together. Looking at the sky moving in the sky of the picture, or seeing the shaking forms in the close-up, the audience takes part in the beat of the agony of Van Gogh. As an audience, one cannot stay on the outside since trauma is not presented but experienced.

7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Color as Emotional Semiotics

The semiotically expressive medium the most immediate and expressive in the film is color. Blues and greens prevail in the isolating and depressing scenes, whereas yellows are interlaced to brighten the moments of hope and transcendence. Specifically, the first sequence, a spiral blue night sky is both awe-inspiring and uncomfortable, which reflects the ambivalent attitude of Van Gogh to the world. There is no randomness in these color selections but they are well-planned to portray a sense of psychological intensity.

The contrast of dark and light colors reflects the swings between the extremes of appearance in trauma. Looking at the fields of wheat dipped in gold the spectators are suddenly surrounded by the warmth, but then they see crows flying in the same area—a visual sign of decay and menacing. This play of oscillation reveals the rhythm of internal world of Van Gogh as the traumas are tangible in form of the color and composition.

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7.2 Animated Paintings as Signs

More than 120 original works of Van Gogh are animated in the film, and turn lifeless objects into moving symbols. *Starry Night* is kinetic and swirling and alive; not only is it a depiction of a landscape, it is an expression of emotional turmoil. In the same manner, *Wheatfield with Crows* is both icon (a reference to the original picture) and index (a premonition of death).

Portraits in certain sequences can be viewed as symbolic reference points. Dr. The melancholic gaze of Gachet executed within muted interiors conveys sympathy and the mutual regrets. The reserved pose of Marguerite Gachet and silent movements imply the presence of the memory and loss. These semiotic signs cooperate and form a pile of meaning, which is aesthetic, narrative and emotional at the same time.

7.3 Motion, Framing, and Temporality

Motion is a key semiotic resource of the film. Every stroke of the brush is shot frame by frame, producing the slightest tremors that represent the instability of the mind. The dynamic nature of painted animation reflects the way trauma is persistent: the memory never remains in one place. The use of close-ups of people faces and wide shots of landscapes contribute to intimacy and emotional appeal and isolation and vulnerability, respectively.

Flashbacks of temporal fragmentation/interwoven with current investigation-is the experience of being traumatized, in which the past and the present overlap. The pace of walking, the alternation of slow contemplative episodes and active, disorderly cycles, is a reflection of the unpredictable course of emotional intensity and immerses the viewer in the semiotic reality of the psyche of Van Gogh.

7.4 Gestures and Dialogue

The semiotic texture is also enhanced by the movements of characters and their conversations. The indecisive speech of Armand Roulin and his lowered head point to the indecisiveness of his morals and slow realization. Dr. The hands shaking on Gachet are a symbol of guilt of the survivor and the quiet moments of Marguerite Gachet are an indication of containment by looking back. These details provide an extra layer of meaning on top of the visual or narrative information, and it is a demonstration of how multimodal semiotics works.

7.5 Sound and Silence

Sound is equally critical. The musical score by Clint Mansell recreates the mood of the film in sound: sad strings reflect the bluish moments of the movie, and the piano themes are heard as the product of the golden light. Silence and especially reflective scenes increase the intensity of emotions, and viewers can feel the burden of suffering Van Gogh is going through. These contrasts of sound and silence, motion and stillness, make the experience of the semiotic space engaging, where trauma is experienced and not seen.

8. Findings

8.1 Visual Findings: Color, Texture, and Spatial Composition

In the analysis, it is shown that the movie depicts the trauma mainly via the dynamics of visuals in *Loving Vincent*. The juxtaposition of melancholic blues and bright yellow semiotically captures the swings of hopelessness and brief hope in the life of Van Gogh. Fat, textural brush strokes act as pointers to mental mayhem; every animated line turns out to be an actual object of feeling. Characters are commonly placed alone in vast sceneries, which focus on the nature of alienation. It can be said that this space framing is a reflection of the psychological isolation that Van Gogh experienced-his inner world taken to canvas.

8.2 Narrative and Temporal Findings

Another way of expression of trauma is presented in nonlinear temporality. There is a fusion of memory,

reflection and the current events and a fragmented story comes out which reflects the interior experience of Van Gogh. The investigative work of Armand Roulin reflects likewise the experience of the audience, reconstructing the last days of Van Gogh with the help of scattered semiotic traces. Interestingly, this method stimulates the viewers to be active in the meaning-making process and rebuild the life of the painter, similar to how one does to traumatic memory.

8.3 Auditory and Affective Findings

Sound as one of the semiotics plays an essential role in the movie. The musical score by Mansell gives color a sound, where the melancholic scenes are accompanied by a low sounding of the strings and the moments of beauty and transcendence are taken out with higher notes. The silence is used to highlight emotional moments and it provides a reflective moment to the viewer. Sound and silence together enhance empathy where people have a chance to follow the emotional world of Van Gogh.

8.4 Semiotic and Cultural Findings.

The movie becomes a polyphonic text, which combines painted images, dialogues, letters, and soundtracks. The interactions between each mode give rise to multilayered sense and justify the claim on multimodal texts, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) made, which states that multimodal texts need to be coordinated among various resources. The film is also a cultural rehumanization of Van Gogh, as it no longer relies on the stereotype of the mad genius, but uses a more detailed portrayal of creativity and vulnerability. It is possible to reflect that in such a way, the process of making a movie about trauma turned into a communal aesthetic experience in the movie, *Loving Vincent*.

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 Synthesis of Insights

With the help of the semiotics of multimodality, then every frame of the film becomes a sign, and the inner world of Van Gogh is deciphered through visual and auditory means. The movie works at symbolic, indexical and iconic levels at the same time. There is a convergence of color, motion, texture and sound, in which the trauma can be felt and becomes a collective aesthetic experience.

9.2 Implications for Semiotic and Cinematic Studies

The paper identifies how multimodal semiotics could be used to study modern film. When the painting and animated storytelling are joined in one whole, as is the case with *Loving Vincent*, they show that both visual and auditory mediums can be as informative as words. In case of trauma research, the film is an excellent illustration of the ability of aesthetic form to capture psychological condition which demonstrates how materiality of art-brushstroke, color, sound-can can be very strongly emotional.

9.3 Future Research recommendations.

Further research may contrast the film, *Loving Vincent*, with other biographical cinema artworks like *Frida* (2002) or *At Eternity's Gate* (2018) to see how these moviemakers can turn the mental condition of artists into semiotics on the screen. Empirical research of the audience may explore the way in which painted animation is emotionally and cognitively received by the audience. The connections between color, motion, and the emotional appeal could also be quantified with the help of computational semiotic tools to add qualitative analysis with some quantitative data.

9.4 Final Reflection

In the end, the film *Loving Vincent* is beyond the biography and the filmmaking to turn into the reflection on human resilience. The film makes Van Gogh's works to have a life, as it brings suffering to life and provides

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viewers with the experience of trauma both aesthetically and emotionally. According to Barthes (1977), it is the grain of the image that presents a form of sensuous materiality that cannot be contained. The endurance and transformation of human experience is enjoyed by the audience through this grain trauma is articulated, beauty is created, and the audience is a part of the process.

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