

THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF FREUDIAN GUILT IN *OPPENHEIMER* (2023)

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of guilt in Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023) by synthesizing David Bordwell's narratological framework with Sigmund Freud's structural model of psychoanalysis. Rather than offering a clinical diagnosis or analyzing the film as an objective historical biography, this research treats the work as a formal narrative construct where non-linear temporal reordering directly mirrors the protagonist's internal psychic fragmentation and moral decay. Using a qualitative-descriptive methodology, the paper conducts a detailed textual analysis of selected scenes, cinematic devices, and mise-en-scène to examine how the reordering of the *syuzhet* (plot) relative to the chronological *fabula* (story) functions as a cinematic metaphor for the dynamic tension between the Id, Ego, and Superego. The analysis reveals that the film's narrative architecture systematically maps Oppenheimer's psychological deterioration. Specifically, the color-saturated Fission timeline and early impulsive acts foreground the unchecked intellectual drives of the Id. The logistical orchestration of the Manhattan Project and the Trinity Test depict the pragmatic mediation of the Ego, which ultimately weakens under overwhelming historical pressures. Finally, the black-and-white Fusion timeline, non-linear fragmentation, and subjective hallucination sequences embody the punitive, sadistically aggressive nature of the Superego, trapping the protagonist in chronic melancholia and unassimilated remorse. The study concludes that Nolan's non-linear narrative structure is an artistic tool where cinematic form enacts psychoanalytic depth, projecting Oppenheimer's inescapable guilt and the structural collapse of the self.

Keywords: *Oppenheimer*, Narratology, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Syuzhet, Guilt

INTRODUCTION

Freudian guilt manifests cinematically as an inescapable, self-destructive architecture of the human conscience, where the punitive aggression of the Superego relentlessly assaults a weakening Ego. In Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023), this



abstract psychological warfare is translated directly into the coordinates of a complex cinematic plot (*syuzhet*) which consists of all the events that are directly presented to us (Bordwell et al., 2020) Through this structural alignment, the film actively seeks new ways of interpreting the stories and developing a verbal layer of cine-text (Kuryaev & Osmukhina, 2018). The *syuzhet* deliberately rejects a traditional chronological record of historical facts, organizing itself instead around the protagonist's internal moral decay. By fragmentation of time and space, Nolan forces the viewer to experience the narrative not as an objective biography, but as a non-linear, suffocating projection of an unassimilated and fracturing sense of guilt.

Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* is widely recognized for its complex narrative structure, which challenges the audience to reconstruct a puzzle of history and morality. In the field of popular literature, this film is not merely a biography but a narrative labyrinth that mirrors the internal suffering of its creator. Behind the technical achievement of the atomic bomb, the film constructs a chain reaction of guilt that is expressed through its unique storytelling method. Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze how the film's narrative structure represents the psychological conflict between J. Robert Oppenheimer's Id, Ego, and Superego. Specifically, this study aims to reveal how the arrangement of the plot serves as a cinematic metaphor for the protagonist's overwhelming remorse.

This research is based on a synthesis of two frameworks: David Bordwell's Narratology and Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis. Bordwell's concepts of *fabula* (the story) and *syuzhet* (the plot) provide the tools to analyze how the non-linear timeline functions as a literary device. This is combined with Freud's tripartite model from *The Ego and the Id* (1923) to interpret the psychic forces behind the narrative. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative-descriptive method is used to conduct a textual analysis of the film's scenes, dialogues, and structural shifts.

Previous studies, such as the work of Shan (2025), highlight that the disrupted narrative timeline in *Oppenheimer* creates a symbolic expression of tragedy and fatalism (Shan, 2025) Furthermore, literature on intrapsychic guilt suggests that such remorse is often represented through self-critical tendencies in narrative forms. This research fills the gap by specifically linking the formal narrative elements of the film to the punitive mechanisms of the Freudian Superego. It must be noted that, within a Freudian framework, the Id, Ego, and Superego are never independently operative they are always simultaneously active and in dynamic tension with one another. The following analysis does not propose that each scene represents a single psychic structure in isolation; rather, it identifies the dominant psychic mechanism that each narrative moment foregrounds, acknowledging that the other structures remain present as competing forces in the background. Consequently, the discussion will focus on three items: first, the use of the *syuzhet* to represent the Id's intellectual ambition; second, the narrative cross-cutting as a representation of the Ego's struggle; and third, the non-linear fragmentation as a manifestation of the Superego's relentless guilt.

Existing scholarship on the theoretical frameworks employed in this study falls into three thematic clusters. The first concerns the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to film and literary characters. Aritonang et al. (2022) establish that the theory of psychoanalysis is able to reveal the unconscious impulses that affect human behavior, demonstrating through *The Chronicles of Narnia* how the contradiction between the id, ego and superego is externalized through specific character behaviors. Complementing this, Ramadhan (2026) argue that characters are not just elements of a story, but representations of the psychological condition of humans, showing further that in moments of trauma, the superego is present in the form of guilt and moral pressure while a weakened ego surrenders mediation, allowing impulses and conscience to clash without control.

The second cluster addresses guilt, melancholia, and denial as psychoanalytic phenomena in personal and literary narrative. Rayyan, (2025), in their analysis of Jennette McCurdy's memoir, demonstrate that guilt and denial constitute some of the most profound notions in psychology when examined in personal narrative, and that guilt is often driven by a subject's conflicted relationship with authority figures a dynamic directly transferable to the Oppenheimer-Truman and Oppenheimer-state relationships in the film under study.

The third cluster addresses narrative structure. Riyanto, (2025) establishes that the syuzhet can be productively identified and analyzed as an independent formal device, and that narrative structure plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of any text that must convey meaning within constrained conditions. Shan, (2025) further confirms that the disrupted narrative timeline in *Oppenheimer* specifically functions as a symbolic expression of tragedy and fatalism.

While these studies individually address either psychoanalytic character dynamics or narrative structure, none has systematically connected the formal manipulation of the syuzhet to the psychic mechanisms of the Id, Ego, and Superego as a unified argument. This study fills that gap by treating the film's narrative architecture not merely as a stylistic feature but as the structural representation of Oppenheimer's psychological disintegration.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Before analyzing the individual scenes, it is essential to establish the film's fabula the chronological, causally-ordered story of J. Robert Oppenheimer's life as the viewer mentally reconstructs it in order to appreciate the full force of Nolan's syuzhet. The fabula of *Oppenheimer* follows a linear biographical arc: from Oppenheimer's volatile student years in Cambridge and his encounter with quantum physics in Europe, through his recruitment to lead the Manhattan Project, the successful Trinity Test in 1945, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and finally his public humiliation during the 1954 security hearings. This is the raw material of the story a sequence of causes and effects arranged in natural time. However, Nolan's syuzhet aggressively reorders, compresses,

and fragments this fabula. The film does not open with Cambridge; it opens with atomic particle visions that belong to no single moment in time, images that exist purely inside Oppenheimer's psyche. By beginning in subjective psychological space rather than objective biographical chronology, the syuzhet immediately signals that the film's governing logic is not historical but psychoanalytic. The disruption of the fabula is therefore not a stylistic flourish it is the primary argument. Each rearrangement of chronological time in the syuzhet corresponds to a displacement of rational order by psychic pressure, and it is through this displacement that the film maps the progressive conquest of the Ego by the Id and, ultimately, the Superego.

Timeline Fission & Fusion

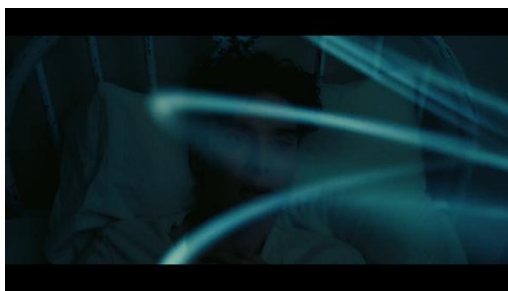


Figure 1: Oppenheimer Hallucinating



Figure 2: Lewis Strauss in Court

As shown in Figure 1, the Fission timeline in *Oppenheimer* (2023) is presented through an intense color spectrum, which narratologically functions as an embodiment of David Bordwell's concept of mental subjectivity. (Bordwell et al., 2020) In constructing the plot (syuzhet), Nolan does not merely present a chronological sequence but curates all the events that are directly presented to us to forcibly place the audience within the protagonist's internal coordinates (Bordwell et al., 2020). The use of sharp colors, explosive particle visuals, and auditory distortions creates a cinematic space where objective reality fades, replaced by the deeply personal inner perceptions of Oppenheimer. This proves that the film has become a cine-text capable of performing a translation of one text into the coordinates of the other, transforming historical narrative into a subjective psychological narrative, this colour contrast align with Mise-en-scene consists of all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed: settings, props, lighting, costumes, makeup, and figure behavior (Sikov, 2010).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the use of color in this timeline symbolizes the dominance of the Id, which is the center of human instinctual energy. Freud explained that the Id is the primitive part of the psyche that contains the passions. (Freud, 1923) The visions of atoms and fire that constantly appear on the screen are not merely scientific abstractions, but visual representations of the Id's drives, which know no moral boundaries in pursuit of pure intellectual satisfaction. In this phase, the desire to master the secrets of nature becomes the narrative's primary driving force, where the intensity of color reflects the strength of the libidinal and destructive energy stemming from the Id

a point previously emphasized in research stating that the theory of psychoanalysis is able to reveal the unconscious impulses that affect human behavior (Aritonang et al., 2022).

Amid the overwhelming pressure of the id, the ego emerges as a mediator striving to balance those ambitions with external reality through the construction of Los Alamos. Freud stated that The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions (Freud, 1923). In this colored timeline, the reserachers' see Oppenheimer's Ego actively at work through the process of mediation organizing scientists, managing military logistics, and building a city in the middle of the desert. These efforts are a manifestation of the Ego's struggle to translate the Id's impulses into concrete forms in the real world. However, as noted in related studies, when the ego, which should have been the mediator, weakened, (Freud, 1923) emotional impulses and moral pressures would clash, ultimately triggering the psychological fragmentation that Nolan depicts through a non-linear plot structure.

The Fusion in the film *Oppenheimer* (2023) is presented through a black-and-white aesthetic that, narratologically, marks a shift from mental subjectivity toward external objectivity. Nolan utilizes this visual choice to construct the plot (syuzhet), which encompasses all the events that are directly presented to us, in order to offer a different perspective on the same events. Through this manipulation of temporal order, the film creates a cold and confrontational emotional distance, reflecting the legal and political realities that lie beyond the protagonist's inner control. This technique is a concrete manifestation of the translation of one text into the coordinates of the other (Kuryaev & Osmukhina, 2018) in which factual historical data is translated into cinematic coordinates that are visually and narratively judgmental.

This black-and-white timeline serves as a personification of the punitive superego. In the cramped security hearing room, Oppenheimer no longer functions as an active subject but becomes an object interrogated by state authorities. Freud explains that the superego retains the character of the father (Freud, 1923), which in this context is represented by the legal system and institutions of power demanding absolute moral accountability. This dynamic illustrates how the superego is present in the form of guilt and moral pressure (Ramadhan, 2026). The courtroom is not merely a physical setting, but an architectural representation of the Superego's internal aggression against Oppenheimer's ego, where every piece of evidence presented becomes an instrument to impose guilt.

The contrast between the colored and black-and-white timelines depicts total psychological fragmentation, in which objective reality (Fusion) becomes a tool for deconstructing the protagonist's sense of self. As noted in previous research, the theory of psychoanalysis is able to reveal the unconscious impulses that affect human behavior. As the dominance of external laws and norms intensifies, Oppenheimer's ego experiences helplessness due to being constantly drawn into a state where the stricter the domination of the superego over the ego will be later on in the form of conscience or perhaps an

unconscious sense of guilt (Freud, 1923). This black-and-white plot structure systematically locks the protagonist in a permanent prison of perception, proving that moral guilt does not merely occur within the mind, but is concretely manifested in the unforgiving order of social reality.

Poisoned Apple as the Id



Figure 3: Oppenheimer Injecting Potassium Cyanide

As shown in Figure 3, the opening scene in which Oppenheimer injects potassium cyanide into his apple is a fundamental element in the formation of the plot (*syuzhet*) constructed by Christopher Nolan. Placing this scene at the beginning of the narrative serves to establish the audience's understanding of the character's impulsiveness. Even at the basic level of a single shot, *mise-en-scene* yields meaning. The first shot of an important character is itself important in this regard (Sikov, 2010).

While all three psychic structures operate simultaneously throughout this scene, the poisoned apple sequence foregrounds the dominance of the Id with unusual clarity, making it the most productive site for examining the unchecked nature of Oppenheimer's primal impulse., at the very beginning, all the libido is accumulated in the Id (Freud, 1923). The aggressive impulse that arose from Oppenheimer's sense of humiliation at the hands of Professor Blackett indicates that the libidinal energy within him had not yet been managed rationally. The act of poisoning the apple is a pure manifestation of the Id's demand for immediate gratification of its resentment, disregarding any form of safety logic or potential legal consequences.

In this scene, the failure of mental mediation is clearly evident, as self-control is overpowered by dark instinctual impulses. The domination of the id affects behavior, which in this case transforms academic frustration into an attempted murder. This inability to restrain oneself indicates that at this stage, The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id (Freud, 1923), yet Oppenheimer's ego is still too weak to fulfill that role.

Nolan translates biographical facts into a visual text that depicts profound psychological fragility. This depiction is crucial to the overall narrative because it demonstrates that the characters in the film are representations of the psychological condition of humans (Ramadhan, 2026). By presenting the Id as the primary driving force

at the beginning of the film, the audience is given the key to understanding why Oppenheimer would later be capable of creating weapons of mass destruction a result of the Id's impulses that transcend the boundaries of traditional morality.

Trinity Test as the Ego

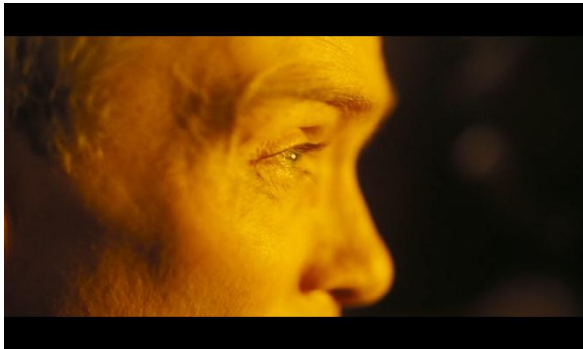


Figure 4: Oppenheimer Lost in Thought as The Bomb Exploded



Figure 5: Trinity Scientist and the bomb test in Los Alamos

As shown in Figure 4, Robert J. Oppenheimer watches the Trinity Test explosion in the Manhattan Project through a close-up shot that focuses on his face, particularly his eyes. As Sikov (2010) explains, the closer the camera is to the subject, the greater the emotional weight the subject gains.

As shown in Figure 5, the Trinity scientists prepare the bomb test in Los Alamos, emphasizing Oppenheimer's role in organizing scientific knowledge and military resources during the Manhattan Project. The construction of Los Alamos and the logistical orchestration of the Manhattan Project represent the peak of the protagonist's Ego functioning as a pragmatic mediator. According to Freud, the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world (Freud, 1923). In this phase of the narrative, Oppenheimer's ego effectively translates the raw, chaotic energy of the Id the passions for theoretical discovery into a structured, physical reality. This process aligns with the claim that the ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions (Freud, 1923). By managing thousands of people and vast resources, Oppenheimer's ego performs its economic task of harmonizing the internal drive for scientific achievement with the harsh demands of a world at war.

From a narratological perspective, Christopher Nolan utilizes the plot (syuzhet) to emphasize this mediation through a rigorous chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space (Bordwell et al., 2020). The screenshots showing the physical assembly of the laboratory and the bomb highlight how the syuzhet focuses on the technical and logistical reality of the project. This cinematic focus reinforces the idea that characters are not just elements of a story, but representations of the psychological condition of humans (Ramadhan, 2026). The deliberate pacing of the Manhattan Project

sequence illustrates the Ego's attempt to exert control over the physical environment, transforming abstract physics into a concrete, world-altering weapon.

The Trinity Test serves as the ultimate moment of reality-testing for the Ego. As the bomb is hoisted into position (seen in the second screenshot), the narrative tension mirrors the Ego's struggle to maintain stability. Freud notes from the other point of view, however, the researchers' see this same ego as a poor creature owing service to three masters (Freud, 1923). The success of the test is the Ego's triumph in proving its theories against the external world, yet it also marks the moment where the Ego begins to lose its grip. As previous studies suggest, the ego, which should have been the mediator, weakened, causing emotional impulses and moral pressures to clash without stable control (Ramadhan, 2026). This Conflict of Reality signifies the point where the Ego's scientific mastery inadvertently awakens the punitive power of the Superego, which will later dominate the narrative through an overwhelming sense of guilt.

Hallucination as the Super-ego and Guilt



Figure 6: Oppenheimer Hallucinating Stepping in the Corpse



Figure 7: Oppenheimer Expressing His Feelings

As shown in Figure 6, the Gymnasium Hallucination sequence, in which Oppenheimer hallucinates himself stepping on the corpses of the atomic bombing victims, represents the peak of mental subjectivity within the film's plot (syuzhet). The close-up shot emphasizes his emotional burden and psychological fragmentation. As Sikov (2010) explains, a close-up isolates an object in the image, making it appear relatively large. This cinematography aligns with Sikov's (2010) explanation that a close-up isolates an object in the image, making it appear relatively large. Oppenheimer says *Mr. President, I feel bloods in my hands* we can see the shoot is close up which is this shoot align with Ed Sikov statement in his works titled *Film Studies* (2010) A close-up is a shot that isolates an object in the image, making it appear relatively large. As David Bordwell explains, the filmmaker may choose to go even deeper, into the character's mind to show inner images, such as memories, fantasies, dreams, or hallucinations (Bordwell et al., 2020). In this scene, the overexposed lighting and the visceral imagery of skin peeling are not objective reality, but the translation of abstract moral decay into a haunting visual cine-text. The cheering crowd is transformed by Oppenheimer's psyche into the

screaming victims of Hiroshima, proving that the syuzhet is no longer tracking history, but is tracking the protagonist's descent into psychological fragmentation.



Figure 8: Oppenheimer Hallucinating

As shown in Figure 8, Oppenheimer's hallucination represents the cinematic manifestation of what Freud identifies as the punitive nature of the Superego. From a cinematographic perspective, the close-up shot allows the audience to perceive the character's emotional suffering more intensely, supporting Sikov's (2010) argument that closer shots create greater emotional impact. According to Freud (1923), it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices. In this context, the abandoned object is the humanity sacrificed for the bomb. As the Superego asserts its dominance, it manifests as conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt (Freud, 1923) that the Ego can no longer mediate. The violent intrusion of these hallucinations suggests that the Superego has become sadistically aggressive toward the Ego, punishing it for the Id's destructive passions during the Manhattan Project. This mirrors the psychological finding that the grieving process is not always easy, as Freud (1917) in (Ramadhan, 2026) notes in *Mourning and Melancholia*. Anger, denial, or even excessive guilt may result from an individual's inability to deal with their feelings of loss, a state visually captured in the screenshot of Oppenheimer's distraught and hollowed expression.

The moral crisis culminates in the meeting with President Truman, where Oppenheimer's verbal confession *I feel I have blood on my hands* (See figure 7) serves as an externalization of this internal judgment. Freud posits that the super-ego retains the character of the father (Freud, 1923), and in this scene, the President functions as a literal and symbolic authority figure (the Father of the State) to whom the Ego attempts to confess. However, because the Superego is internal and absolute, Truman's dismissal of Oppenheimer's guilt only intensifies the protagonist's isolation. As noted in contemporary psychoanalytic studies, the superego is present in the form of guilt and moral pressure, and for Oppenheimer, this pressure becomes a permanent fixture of his identity, transforming his life into a state of chronic melancholia and mourning.

These scenes demonstrate how Nolan uses the temporal order and perceptual subjectivity of the film to illustrate a psyche that has been completely conquered by the

Superego. The contradiction between the id, ego and superego is no longer a hidden conflict; it has become the very fabric of the film's reality. By the end of this crisis, the Ego is so weakened that it can no longer distinguish between the physical ripples in a pond and the metaphorical ripples of a world-ending chain reaction, signifying a total collapse of the self under the weight of historical and moral responsibility.

Interrogation Scene As Psychological Fragmentation



Figure 9: Oppenheimer Interrogated by Roger Robb

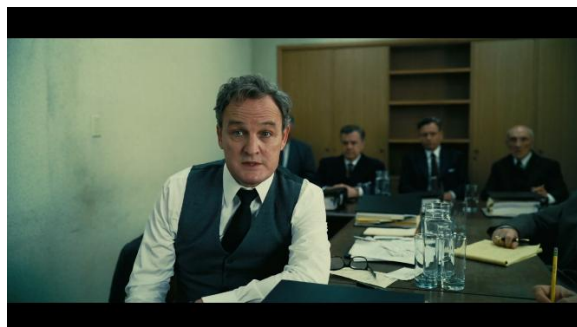


Figure 10: Roger Robb interrogating Oppenheimer

As shown in Figure 9, the security hearing sequence in *Oppenheimer* serves as a profound exploration of mental subjectivity by transforming a historical interrogation into a traumatic return of the past. Christopher Nolan's manipulation of the plot, defined as all the events that are directly presented to us, functions as a cinematic representation of transforming a historical interrogation into a traumatic return of the repressed. The syuzhet's non-linear movement between past and present mirrors what Freud identifies as the compulsion to repeat the psyche's inability to release a traumatic event, condemned instead to re-experience it in displaced form (Freud, 1923). posits that trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on. By oscillating between the vibrant past and the claustrophobic hearing, the film suggests that the protagonist is not simply remembering history, but is caught in a delayed appearance of a truth that he could not fully grasp at the moment of the bomb's creation.

This structural fragmentation reflects the Superego's total annexation of the Ego within an externalized space of judgment. As Freud explains, the Superego retains the character of the father (Freud, 1923), and the interrogation room operates precisely as this paternal authority cold, procedural, and absolute. The relentless cross-examination does not seek truth; it enacts punishment. The syuzhet's oscillation between the colored past and the claustrophobic hearing room creates what Bordwell identifies as a radical manipulation of temporal order (Bordwell et al., 2020), in which the audience is denied the comfort of a stable present. Every cut back to the vivid, colored timeline only deepens the cruelty of the return to the grey hearing the Ego briefly remembers what it once was

before being dragged back under the Superego's control. Oppenheimer's passive acceptance of the prosecution's attacks is not weakness of character but the cinematic manifestation of what Freud describes as the Superego's capacity to become sadistically aggressive toward the Ego (Freud, 1923), punishing it perpetually for impulses that originated in the Id, illustrating that his greatest creation has become the instrument of his own psychological destruction.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) is most productively understood not as a biographical film that happens to have a non-linear structure, but as a psychoanalytic argument made through that structure. By reading the film's *syuzhet* against the *fabula* it fragments, and by mapping those fragments onto Freud's tripartite model of the psyche, this research has shown that the film's narrative architecture is inseparable from its psychological content. The disruption of chronological order is not a stylistic preference; it is the formal equivalent of a mind that has lost the capacity to process experience in rational sequence.

The three dominant psychic movements identified in the analysis illuminate a coherent arc of psychological deterioration. The Id's unbounded energy, visible in the early scenes of Cambridge and the poisoned apple, establishes the primal force that drives the narrative forward. The Ego's brief triumph during the Manhattan Project its ability to translate destructive impulse into controlled, structured reality represents the film's only moment of psychological stability, and its fragility is established precisely because Nolan's *syuzhet* surrounds this triumph on both sides with images of its collapse. The Superego's dominance, crystallized in the security hearing and the hallucination sequences, is rendered not as an external event but as a perceptual condition: the black-and-white aesthetic is not merely a visual style but a psychic prison, a world from which subjective warmth has been permanently evacuated.

What the combination of Bordwell and Freud uniquely reveals is that the meaning of this film cannot be recovered from either framework alone. A purely narratological reading would identify the temporal disruption as a formal device without accounting for what that disruption represents emotionally; a purely psychoanalytic reading would identify the guilt without explaining why it feels so architecturally embedded in the viewing experience. Together, the two frameworks show that Nolan has built a film in which form enacts psychology where the experience of watching the *syuzhet* unfold reproduces, for the audience, the same inability to escape the past that the protagonist cannot escape within the story.

Future research may extend this framework to other Nolan films *Memento*, *Inception*, or *Dunkirk* where non-linear structure similarly appears to carry psychoanalytic weight. Additionally, the relationship between Bordwell's concept of style and the Freudian Superego's visual grammar in the black-and-white sequences deserves

a more extended treatment than this study has been able to provide, and would constitute a productive direction for subsequent work.

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