

Repetition Compulsion in the Character of Sonny Hayes in “F1: The Movie” (2025): A Psychoanalytic Study

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Abstract. This study examines the representation of repetition compulsion in Sonny Hayes, the protagonist of “F1: The Movie” (2025), whose persistent return to dangerous racing despite past trauma exemplifies an unresolved psychological pattern rarely examined in film scholarship. While prior studies have addressed trauma recovery or applied alternative frameworks such as logotherapy to fictional characters, none has combined Freud's repetition compulsion with Todorov's narrative theory to analyze how this specific psychological condition is structurally embedded within a film's plot. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repetition compulsion with Todorov's narrative stages, creating a dual-framework approach to analyze how psychological pathology is structurally encoded in cinema. By mapping four clinical forms of compulsion such as unconscious drive, reenactment, connection to trauma, and attempt at mastery, onto the film's five-stage plot progression, the research demonstrates that character behavior is not merely a plot device but a systematic representation of unresolved psychic wounds. The findings identify four forms of repetition compulsion unconscious drive, reenactment of painful experiences, connection to trauma, and attempt at mastery structurally organized across Todorov's five narrative stages. This study contributes a specific analytical model for tracing psychoanalytic conditions through narrative structure, offering a concrete reference point for future studies examining repetition compulsion in other film characters.

Keywords: *representation; repetition compulsion; narrative aspects; unconscious drive; reenactment of painful experiences*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi dorongan pengulangan pada Sonny Hayes, tokoh utama dalam film “F1: The Movie” (2025), yang terus-menerus kembali ke balapan berbahaya meskipun pernah mengalami trauma di masa lalu; hal ini menggambarkan pola psikologis yang belum terselesaikan dan jarang diteliti dalam kajian film. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah membahas pemulihan trauma atau menerapkan kerangka kerja alternatif seperti logoterapi pada karakter fiksi, belum ada yang menggabungkan dorongan pengulangan Freud dengan teori naratif Todorov untuk menganalisis bagaimana kondisi psikologis spesifik ini tertanam secara struktural dalam alur cerita sebuah film. Penelitian ini mengatasi kesenjangan tersebut dengan menggabungkan teori psikoanalitik Freud tentang dorongan pengulangan dengan tahapan naratif Todorov, sehingga menciptakan pendekatan kerangka ganda untuk menganalisis bagaimana patologi psikologis dikodekan secara struktural dalam sinema. Dengan memetakan empat bentuk klinis kompulsif seperti dorongan tak sadar, reenactment, keterkaitan dengan trauma, dan upaya penguasaan ke dalam perkembangan alur cerita film yang terdiri dari lima tahap, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa perilaku karakter bukan sekadar alat naratif, melainkan representasi sistematis dari luka psikis yang belum terselesaikan. Temuan penelitian mengidentifikasi empat bentuk dorongan tak sadar kompulsif pengulangan yaitu, pengulangan pengalaman menyakitkan, hubungan dengan trauma, dan upaya penguasaan yang secara struktural terorganisir melintasi lima tahap naratif Todorov. Penelitian ini menyumbangkan model analitis spesifik untuk melacak

kondisi psikoanalitik melalui struktur naratif, serta menawarkan titik acuan konkret bagi penelitian-penelitian selanjutnya yang mengkaji kompulsif pengulangan pada karakter film lainnya.

Kata Kunci: *representasi; dorongan untuk mengulangi; aspek naratif; dorongan bawah sadar; pengulangan pengalaman menyakitkan*

INTRODUCTION

Studying trauma and its repetitive manifestation in contemporary popular films is particularly urgent, as such films are widely consumed and capable of shaping public understanding of psychological distress; repetition compulsion itself is recognized as one of the key outcomes of unresolved trauma, as established by research in the field of trauma psychology conducted by van der Kolk (1989) and Ehlers & Clark (2000). Developed by Freud (1961), psychoanalysis presupposes that human behavior emerging out of the unconsciousness of individuals results from memory pressure or trauma experienced in the past. In his book titled "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud (1961) states that individuals who have encountered trauma in their lives continuously relive those experiences both in reality or imagination, a phenomenon he terms "repetition compulsion." The phrase is composed of two parts: "repetition," referring to an act of repeating, and "compulsion," meaning an uncontrolled urge or impulse. In other words, this phrase describes a condition in which individuals, without knowing why, find themselves compelled by their subconscious minds to repeat old, unfinished patterns. According to Freud (1961), people experiencing this feel uncomfortable but continue their behavior because something within them operates beyond the pleasure principle, with such drives being more primitive and fundamental than the pleasure principle itself.

Freud's theory of repetition compulsion comprises four interrelated forms: unconscious drives, reenactment of painful experiences, connections to trauma, and attempts at mastery. Unconscious drive refers to latent impulses that compel individuals to unknowingly repeat past trauma; Levine (2021) notes that such reenactments are often irrational and detrimental, surfacing through behavior, relationships, dreams, and lifestyle choices, while Cogan (2010) adds that repressed trauma resurfaces as repetitive patterns despite the distress they cause, marking a key indicator of psychopathology. Reenactment of painful experiences occurs when individuals relive trauma through analogous situations or relationships; Fleisch (2018) explains this as the psyche's attempt to process memories not yet fully integrated, while Picht (2022) frames it as an unconscious bid to regain control over previously uncontrollable events, transcending the pleasure principle. Finally, attempted mastery refers to the unconscious effort to regain psychological control by reliving trauma in modified forms an act that appears intentional but is ultimately driven by the need to resolve unfinished psychic conflict.

Habibah & Prastiwi (2021) found that trauma in *All the Bright Places* can be resolved through writing, communication, relaxation, and social support; however, their focus on recovery overlooks how trauma can instead trap individuals in repetition, which is the focus of the current study. Ruiz (2024) explains that repetition compulsion arises when individuals lose agency and fail to make sense of an event; while relevant to the present framework, the discussion remains conceptual rather than grounded in film analysis. Bitogo (2026) demonstrates how repetition compulsion operates in real-life survivors of recurrent trauma; the present research instead applies the same mechanism to a fictional character, Sonny Hayes. Mukharohmah & Ahmadi (2026) analyze Akaza's trauma through Frankl's logotherapy rather than Freud's repetition compulsion, limiting

its applicability to the present framework. Puspitosari & Setyabudi (2024) examine Estella's personality development rather than repetitive trauma response, leaving repetition compulsion unaddressed. Susiloadi & Renanita (2023) and Lively & Bleile (2020) extend the concept to compulsive buying and musical composition respectively, confirming its broader relevance, yet neither applies it to film or character behavior.

These two frameworks used as an operational basis for analysis. Freud's theory supplies the diagnostic categories used to identify what repetition compulsion looks like in Sonny Hayes's behavior, namely unconscious drive, reenactment of painful experiences, connection to trauma, and attempt at mastery; each of these forms functions as a coding category through which specific scenes, dialogues, and behavioral patterns can be systematically classified. Todorov's five-stage plot structure, by contrast, supplies the structural categories used to determine where and how each identified form is positioned within the film's narrative progression, from the initial equilibrium through disruption, recognition, repair, and toward a new equilibrium. Operationally, the analysis proceeds in two interconnected steps

Despite this body of research, film trauma studies have largely focused on recovery rather than the unresolved cycle of repetition itself; psychoanalytic character studies have favored alternative frameworks over Freud's repetition compulsion; and Todorov's narrative framework has rarely been integrated with psychoanalytic theory. No prior study has combined both frameworks to examine Sonny Hayes in *F1: The Movie* (2025). Accordingly, this research asks: (1) what forms of repetition compulsion are displayed by Sonny Hayes, and (2) how is repetition compulsion represented through the film's narrative aspects. This study aims to identify these forms based on Freud's theory and analyze their representation based on Todorov's narrative theory, contributing to psychoanalytic film studies and future research on other psychological conditions in cinema.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative textual and film analysis approach. Rather than quantifying variables, it interprets meaning through close reading of cinematic texts, attending to the ways narrative structure, character behavior, visual language, and dialogue work together to construct psychological representation on screen.

The primary data source for this study is the feature film *F1: The Movie*, directed by Joseph Kosinski and produced by Apple Original Films and Plan B Entertainment, released in 2025 with a total runtime of approximately 143 minutes. The theatrical release version was used as the sole corpus for analysis. No secondary or adapted versions were consulted. The film constitutes the complete and bounded textual object upon which all analytical claims are grounded.

The units of analysis in this study comprise the discrete and identifiable elements of the film through which meaning is produced and interpreted. Specifically, the analysis attends to: (1) scenes, understood as bounded segments of continuous action unified by time, space, or narrative function; (2) dialogue, which encompasses spoken exchanges and monologues that externalize character psychology; (3) visual motifs, referring to recurring images, symbols, or cinematographic patterns that carry thematic significance; (4) character actions, defined as deliberate behavioral choices made by Sonny Hayes that reflect or enact his psychological condition; and (5) narrative sequences, which are chains of causally or thematically connected scenes that constitute identifiable stages in the film's plot progression. The thirteen representative scenes were selected based on

'psychological density,' defined as sequences where character behavior deviates from standard competitive racing logic (e.g., irrational aggression) or where cinematic markers (e.g., non-linear editing, flashbacks) explicitly signal an intrusion of the protagonist's past into the narrative present.

Data were collected through a multi-stage process of systematic film observation. The researcher engaged in repeated viewings of the film to enable familiarity, pattern recognition, and the detection of subtle recurring elements that may not be apparent upon a single viewing. During each viewing session, detailed note-taking was conducted to record initial observations regarding character behavior, emotional tone, and narrative development. Relevant dialogues were transcribed verbatim to ensure analytical accuracy and to preserve the exact linguistic register employed by the characters. The film was further subjected to scene segmentation, whereby it was divided into discrete, analyzable units aligned with the five narrative stages proposed by Todorov. This segmentation allowed for a structured mapping of where and how repetition compulsion manifests across the film's narrative arc.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, this study employs multiple validation strategies. Peer debriefing was conducted through consultations with colleagues familiar with psychoanalytic theory and film studies, allowing the researcher to test interpretive claims and identify potential blind spots. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting each analytical decision, coding choice, and interpretive revision, thereby enabling external reviewers to trace the logic of the analysis. Theoretical consistency was upheld by ensuring that all interpretations remained anchored in the specific conceptual frameworks of Freud's repetition compulsion and Todorov's narrative theory, with no analytical claims extending beyond what those frameworks can legitimately support. Denzin (1978), theoretical triangulation was employed by cross-referencing insights derived from the psychoanalytic lens with those derived from the narratological lens, allowing the two frameworks to mutually validate and enrich each other's interpretive conclusions.

This study is subject to an important epistemological limitation. The analysis operates strictly within the domain of narrative representation and does not constitute a clinical assessment of any individual. The character of Sonny Hayes is a fictional construct, and the identification of repetition compulsion in his behavior reflects an interpretive reading of cinematic narrative rather than a diagnostic judgment. Accordingly, this research does not clinically diagnose Sonny Hayes or attribute any psychological disorder to him in a medical or therapeutic sense. The aim is to examine how the film constructs and communicates the phenomenology of repetition compulsion as a narrative and psychological phenomenon, and to contribute to the scholarly understanding of how contemporary cinema engages with psychoanalytic concepts in its storytelling.

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the forms of repetition compulsion in the character of Sonny Hayes in *F1: The Movie* (2025), analyzed through Sigmund Freud's theory of repetition compulsion as articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and organized according to Tzvetan Todorov's five-stage narrative structure. The results are presented in four subsections: an overview of selected data, an analysis of the forms of repetition compulsion, an examination of how these forms are organized within the film's narrative aspects, and a summary of findings.

Overview of Selected Data

Through repeated and systematic viewings of *F1: The Movie* (2025), the researcher identified and catalogued scenes, dialogues, and behavioral patterns pertaining to repetition compulsion in the character of Sonny Hayes. From the full corpus of observed data, the most representative instances were selected for in-depth analysis. These instances were classified according to Freud's four forms of repetition compulsion unconscious drive, reenactment of painful experiences, connection to trauma, and attempt at mastery and subsequently mapped onto Todorov's five narrative stages.

Table 1 below presents the selected data, organized by form of repetition compulsion. Each entry includes the relevant scene timestamp, transcribed dialogue (where applicable), and a brief description of the data's significance.

Table 1. Form of Repetition Compulsion displayed by Sonny Hayes

No	Form of Repetition Compulsion	Data	Dialogue	Description
1.	Unconscious Drive	 Scene: 0:00:49	(no dialogue)	Sonny dreams of his past accident, establishing his identity as a driver haunted by a painful event. The dream functions as the first visible manifestation of an unconscious impulse pulling him back toward the source of his trauma.
		 Scene: 0:11:02	Ruben: "I'm offering you an open seat in Formula 1. The only place you could say, that one day if you win, you are the absolute best in the world" Sonny: "Hey Ruben! ever see a miracle?" Ruben: "Not yet"	Sonny's acceptance of the F1 seat reveals a drive that exceeds rational career calculation. His deflection through humor masks the compulsive nature of his return.
2.	Reenactment of Painful Experience	 Scene: 0:24:50	Ruben: "Are you okay?" Sonny: "Im good"	Sonny's aggressive driving during practice results in a crash that mirrors his original accident. His

dismissal of concern indicates a lack of conscious awareness of the repetitive pattern.

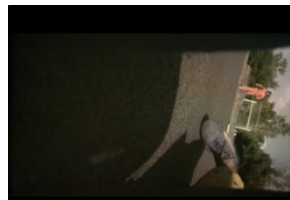


Scene: 1:45:11

Joshua: "Hey what's wrong with Sonny? What's he's doing?"
Ruben: "He's driving angry, it's not good"

Sonny's self-described motive of "revenge" reveals a compulsive need to reenact confrontation, while Ruben's alarm highlights the destructive and repetitive nature of the behavior.

3. Connection to Trauma



Scene: 1:36:39

(no dialogue)

Sonny explicitly connects his present behavior to the original traumatic accident. The nightmare preceding this confession demonstrates that trauma continues to intrude involuntarily upon his consciousness.



Scene: 1:37:42

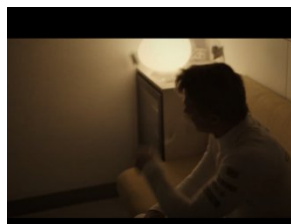
Sonny: "I was gonna be the best, I'm quick, fearless and I was next. And then, it was all taken away"
McKenna: "That crash huh?"
Sonny: "So I lost my seat, my money, my sanity, myself. Turning me into angry, shameful shthead not someone that I'm proud of"

Each time Sonny enters a car, visual flashbacks of the accident recur, demonstrating that the racing environment functions as a persistent traumatic trigger linking past and present.

4. Attempt at Mastery

(no dialogue)

Sonny uses a card-shuffling ritual to calm himself before racing, representing



Scene: 1:42:42

a conscious effort to resist the subconscious impulses that drive his compulsive behavior.



Scene: 2:18:19

Hugh: "What's happening?"
Mckenna: "He's Flying"

Despite visible signs of trauma resurfacing, Sonny maintains composure and control, signaling a shift from unconscious repetition toward deliberate mastery over his psychological state.

The analysis identified four forms of repetition compulsion exhibited by Sonny Hayes, each corresponding to a category within Freud (1961) theoretical framework. The following subsections present each form with reference to the most representative data.

Unconscious Drive

The unconscious drive constitutes the foundational mechanism of Sonny's repetition compulsion. In the film's opening sequence (0:00:49), Sonny is depicted dreaming of his catastrophic 1993 accident an event that ended his original F1 career. The dream is not presented as a voluntary act of remembering; rather, it erupts unbidden during sleep, indicating that the traumatic memory operates autonomously beneath conscious awareness. This is consistent with Freud (1961) assertion that traumatic experiences stored in the unconscious exert pressure on the individual, compelling actions whose motivations remain opaque to the subject.

The unconscious nature of this drive is further confirmed in the recruitment scene (0:11:02), where Ruben offers Sonny a return to Formula 1. Sonny's response "Ever see a miracle?" deflects the gravity of the decision through humor, suggesting that his acceptance is not the product of deliberate calculation but of an impulse he cannot fully articulate. As Levine (2021) observes, such reenactments are often irrational and detrimental, surfacing through behavior and lifestyle choices that the individual does not consciously recognize as repetitive. Sonny does not return to F1 because it is advantageous; he returns because something within him demands it.

Reenactment of Painful Experiences

The reenactment of painful experiences manifests most clearly in Sonny's aggressive driving behavior, which consistently reproduces the conditions of his original trauma. During an F1 practice session (0:24:50), Sonny's aggressive overtaking results in a crash. When Ruben asks if he is okay, Sonny's terse reply "I'm good" signals a denial that prevents him from recognizing the pattern he is perpetuating. This resonates with

Fleisch's (2018) explanation that reenactment represents the psyche's attempt to process memories not yet fully integrated into conscious understanding.

The pattern escalates during the Vegas Grand Prix (1:45:11–1:47:14), where Sonny drives with conspicuous anger. Ruben identifies the behavior as dangerous "He's driving angry, it's not good" while Sonny frames his actions as "revenge for Monaco." This exchange is analytically significant: Sonny's language of revenge reveals that his present behavior is oriented not toward the current race but toward an unresolved past event. The reenactment is not merely behavioral similarity; it is psychologically tethered to a prior wound. As Picht (2022) argues, such reenactment constitutes an unconscious bid to regain control over previously uncontrollable events, operating beyond the pleasure principle.

Connection to Trauma

The connection to trauma becomes explicit at the film's midpoint, when Sonny experiences a nightmare of his 1993 crash (1:36:39) and subsequently confesses to McKenna the psychological devastation it caused: "I lost my seat, my money, my sanity, myself. Turning me into angry, shameful shithead not someone that I'm proud of" (1:37:42). This scene is the only moment in the film where Sonny verbally articulates the link between his past trauma and his present identity, confirming that his behavioral patterns are not coincidental but causally rooted in an unresolved psychic wound.

The recurring flashbacks that intrude upon Sonny each time he enters a racing car (0:02:40) further substantiate this connection. These flashbacks are involuntary and environmental: the act of sitting in a cockpit reactivates the sensory and emotional conditions of the original accident. This is consistent with van der Kolk (1989) finding that traumatized individuals are compelled to repeat trauma partly because specific environmental cues trigger the reactivation of traumatic memory, binding the individual to a cycle of repetition.

Attempt at Mastery

The attempt at mastery represents a qualitative shift in Sonny's relationship with his repetition compulsion. Prior to the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix (1:42:42), Sonny is depicted engaging in a card-shuffling ritual a self-soothing behavior that functions as a conscious effort to regulate the anxiety triggered by his traumatic associations with racing. Unlike the earlier scenes, where Sonny's actions are driven by unconscious impulse, this scene shows him actively resisting the pull of compulsion. The ritual does not eliminate the trauma; rather, it represents an attempt to create a buffer between the traumatic stimulus and the behavioral response.

The culmination of this trajectory occurs during the final lap of the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix (2:18:19), when McKenna observes, "He's flying." This phrase, previously associated with Sonny's reckless abandon, is recontextualized: Sonny is no longer "flying" as a dissociative escape from trauma but as an expression of controlled mastery. The film visually presents signs of trauma resurfacing tight close-ups, brief flashes of the original crash yet Sonny maintains composure. This moment corresponds to Freud (1961) conception of mastery as the unconscious effort to resolve unfinished psychic conflict by reliving trauma in modified form, though here the modification is significant enough to suggest a partial breaking of the compulsive cycle.

Narrative Organization of Sonny Hayes's Repetition Compulsion

To analyze how repetition compulsion is represented within the film's narrative structure, the researcher applied Todorov & Weinstein (1969) five-stage model. The analysis demonstrates that each narrative stage corresponds to a distinct phase of Sonny's psychological trajectory, with specific forms of repetition compulsion structurally embedded at each stage.

Table 2. Repetition Compulsion across Todorov's Narrative Stages

No	Narrative Stages	Data	Repetition Compulsion	Description
1.	Equilibrium	 Scene 0:06:24  Scene: 0:11:02	Unconscious Drive	Establishes a surface calm that conceals unresolved trauma; Sonny's repetitive racing patterns are present but not yet recognized as compulsive.
2.	Disruption	 Scene: 0:24:50  Scene 0:37:30	Reenactment of Painful Experiences, Connection to Trauma	Sonny's return to F1 reactivates the traumatic field; aggressive behavior breaks the apparent equilibrium and reveals the compulsive pattern.
3.	Recognition	 Scene 1:47:12	Connection to Trauma	Sonny begins to acknowledge that his behavior follows a recurring pattern linked to unresolved trauma. Ruben's warning "No one drives forever, Sonny" forces internal awareness.

4. Attempt to Repair	 Scene 1:57:45	Connection to Trauma, Attempt at Mastery	Sonny actively works to reorganize his response to compulsive impulses, developing coping strategies and confronting his trauma verbally.
5. New Equilibrium	 Scene 2:18:19	Attempt at Mastery	Sonny achieves controlled performance despite trauma resurfacing; repetition no longer fully dictates his actions, indicating a new psychological balance.

Beyond plot structure, the film deploys several narrative aspects to reinforce and communicate Sonny's repetition compulsion:

Character dynamics. Sonny Hayes functions as the individual embodiment of repetition compulsion, while the surrounding characters serve structurally distinct roles. Joshua Pearce acts as a competitive antagonist whose presence on the grid recreates the conditions of interpersonal pressure associated with Sonny's original trauma. Kate McKenna and Ruben Cervantes operate as psychological counterbalances McKenna elicits Sonny's verbal articulation of trauma (enabling the connection to trauma to become conscious), while Ruben's confrontations ("It's not a joke!") force Sonny to recognize the destructive consequences of his reenactments.

Setting as traumatic trigger. The racetrack, pit box, and cockpit function not merely as physical locations but as psychological spaces that reactivate traumatic memory. Each time Sonny enters the cockpit, the film presents visual flashbacks of his 1993 crash, establishing a spatial logic of repetition: the environment itself compels return to trauma. By contrast, the hotel room where Sonny's confession to McKenna occurs serves as a liminal space between the public arena of reenactment and private confrontation with the traumatic source, enabling the shift from connection to trauma toward attempt at mastery.

Point of view. The film alternates between third-person perspective and subjective first-person shots. Third-person framing is used during race sequences to depict Sonny's behavioral patterns as externally observable phenomena, allowing the viewer to identify reenactment and aggression as compulsive. First-person perspective particularly during flashback sequences and the Abu Dhabi finale immerses the viewer in Sonny's subjective experience, making the intrusive, involuntary nature of traumatic memory viscerally felt. This dual perspective mirrors the psychoanalytic distinction between the observable symptom (behavior) and the subjective experience (internal compulsion).

Theme. The film's thematic core redemption and resilience provides the interpretive frame within which repetition compulsion operates. Repetition compulsion is not

presented as mere pathology but as a psychologically coherent response to unresolved trauma, and Sonny's arc from unconscious repetition to attempted mastery enacts the thematic movement from entrapment to qualified agency.

Summary of Findings

The analysis yields two principal findings corresponding to the study's research questions:

First, Sonny Hayes exhibits all four forms of repetition compulsion as defined by Freud (1961) framework: (1) unconscious drive, manifested through involuntary dreams and an inarticulate compulsion to return to racing; (2) reenactment of painful experiences, expressed through aggressive driving that reproduces the conditions of his original crash; (3) connection to trauma, evidenced by recurring flashbacks, nightmares, and Sonny's explicit verbal acknowledgment that his behavior is rooted in his 1993 accident; and (4) attempt at mastery, demonstrated through conscious self-regulation rituals and the controlled performance achieved in the film's climax. These four forms are not isolated but interrelated: the unconscious drive initiates the cycle, reenactment and connection to trauma sustain it, and the attempt at mastery represents the beginning of its potential resolution.

Second, repetition compulsion is structurally embedded across Todorov's five narrative stages. The equilibrium conceals compulsion beneath apparent normalcy; the disruption reactivates trauma through environmental return; recognition marks the transition from unconscious repetition to conscious awareness; repair involves active efforts to reorganize the compulsive pattern; and the new equilibrium represents a modified relationship with trauma in which repetition no longer entirely governs behavior. The film's narrative aspects character dynamics, setting, point of view, and theme each function as distinct vehicles through which repetition compulsion is communicated, reinforcing the psychoanalytic content through structural and cinematic means.

DISCUSSION

Racetrack as Traumatic Space

The racetrack in *F1: The Movie* functions as more than a competitive arena; it operates as a psychologically charged environment that reactivates Sonny Hayes's unresolved trauma each time he enters it. This is most clearly evidenced by the recurring flashback sequences that erupt whenever Sonny sits in the cockpit (0:02:40, 1:36:39), images that the film codes as involuntary rather than reflective. The intrusive, unbidden quality of these visual memories aligns with what van der Kolk (1989) identifies as the mechanism by which specific environmental cues compel the reactivation of traumatic memory, binding the individual to a repetitive cycle. The track does not merely remind Sonny of the past; it physiologically reinstates it.

This spatial logic of repetition is reinforced through the film's cinematographic choices. Close-ups of the steering wheel, the narrow cockpit frame, and the approach of the starting grid are shot in a manner that mirrors the perspective of the 1993 crash footage, collapsing the temporal distance between past and present. The pit box similarly functions as a liminal threshold: the moment Sonny crosses from the garage into the pit lane, the narrative consistently escalates his psychological tension. Setting, in this film, is not neutral background but an active force that reproduces the conditions of the original wound.

Aggressive Driving as Reenactment

Sonny's aggressive driving style constitutes the most behaviorally visible form of reenactment in the film. Across multiple race sequences, his conduct exceeds what competitive strategy can explain: unnecessary late braking, deliberate contact with other cars, and an escalating recklessness that endangers both himself and others. The practice crash (0:24:50) in which Sonny dismisses Ruben's concern with a terse "I'm good" is particularly telling, because the denial prevents him from recognizing that he has just reproduced, in miniature, the accident that ended his original career. Fleisch (2018) account of reenactment as the psyche's attempt to process memories not yet integrated into conscious understanding is precisely applicable here: Sonny repeats the crash not because he intends to, but because his body acts out what his mind cannot yet articulate.

The Vegas Grand Prix sequence (1:45:11–1:47:14) makes this reenactment explicit. Ruben's alarm "He's driving angry, it's not good" names the affect that is driving the behavior, while Sonny's own declaration of "revenge for Monaco" reveals that his present action is oriented not toward the current race but toward a prior grievance. The displacement of motive from the present to the past is structurally identical to what Picht (2022) describes as an unconscious bid to regain control over a previously uncontrollable event. Sonny is not racing against Joshua Pearce; he is racing against his past.

Flashback and the Failure of Symbolization

The recurring flashbacks in *F1: The Movie* are not simply a cinematic device for exposition; they function as evidence of what psychoanalytic theory identifies as the failure of symbolization the inability of the psyche to convert raw traumatic experience into narratable memory. A successfully processed traumatic event can be remembered, placed in the past, and assigned meaning. Sonny's flashbacks operate differently: they are sensory, fragmented, and temporally disorienting, erupting into the present rather than being recalled from it. This distinction is central to understanding why Sonny's behavior remains compulsive rather than reflective.

The confession scene (1:36:39–1:37:42) represents the film's most significant attempt at symbolization. When Sonny tells McKenna "I lost my seat, my money, my sanity, myself," he is, for the first time, converting fragmented trauma into coherent verbal narrative. This act of naming is analytically important: it marks the beginning of the shift from reenactment toward recognition. However, the film is careful not to present this verbalization as resolution. The flashbacks continue after the confession, and Sonny's driving behavior in subsequent races does not immediately stabilize. Symbolization, the film implies, is a threshold rather than a cure a necessary precondition for mastery, but not mastery itself.

From Acting Out to Attempted Mastery

The transition from recklessness to precision in the Abu Dhabi finale signifies a critical shift from 'acting out' to 'mastery.' While Sonny's earlier aggressive driving was a symptomatic discharge of trauma, specifically an uncontrolled repetition of the 1993 crash, his final performance is characterized by an imposition of ego-control over the id-driven compulsion. Precision racing requires the subject to be fully present in the 'now,' whereas compulsion traps the subject in the 'then.' Thus, Sonny's 'flying' represents the sublimation of his traumatic energy into a disciplined professional craft, where the racetrack is transformed from a site of victimization into a site of agency.

The arc from acting out to attempted mastery constitutes the film's central psychological movement, and it unfolds gradually rather than through a single decisive transformation. In the film's early and middle stages, Sonny's behavior is predominantly governed by acting out: he responds to traumatic stimuli with immediate, unmediated behavioral discharge, whether through aggressive driving, dismissive denial, or compulsive risk-taking. These responses are not chosen; they are triggered. The interval between stimulus and response is so compressed that there is no space for reflection.

The card-shuffling ritual introduced at 1:42:42 marks the first visible insertion of a buffer between impulse and action. The ritual is quiet and private, which is cinematographically significant: it occurs offscreen from the racing world, in a moment of solitude before Sonny commits to the track. Its function is precisely to create a pause, to interrupt the automaticity of compulsive response. Freud (1961) account of mastery as the unconscious effort to regain psychological control by reliving trauma in modified form is enacted here not through dramatic confrontation but through the small, repeated act of imposing order on something moveable and controllable. By the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix (2:18:19), this internal work becomes externally legible: Sonny races with precision rather than aggression, and McKenna's "He's flying" is recontextualized from recklessness into purposeful command.

Narrative Closure and the Ambiguity of Healing

The film's closing sequence offers narrative resolution without psychological finality, and this distinction is analytically significant. Sonny completes the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix without capitulating to his compulsive patterns, and the visual rhetoric of the finale-controlled speed, sustained focus, the crowd's affirmation codes this as a form of triumph. Yet the film does not propose that Sonny's repetition compulsion has been dissolved. The flashbacks return briefly during the final lap; the trauma does not disappear but is navigated rather than vanquished. This is consistent with a psychoanalytically realistic understanding of recovery: the compulsion does not end, but the individual's relationship to it is transformed.

This ambiguity is precisely what elevates the film above conventional sports-redemption narratives. Where the genre typically moves toward a clean catharsis the protagonist overcomes his past and wins F1: The Movie frames Sonny's achievement as partial and provisional. The new equilibrium he reaches at the film's close is not freedom from trauma but a restructured coexistence with it. This is congruent with Todorov & Weinstein (1969) conception of new equilibrium as a state that differs qualitatively from the original equilibrium, and with Freud (1961) recognition that the work of mastery is ongoing rather than conclusive. The film's refusal of full closure is not a narrative weakness but a psychological honesty that renders its representation of repetition compulsion both credible and instructive.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the representation of repetition compulsion in the character of Sonny Hayes in F1: The Movie (2025) by applying Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Todorov's narrative framework. The findings show that Sonny exhibits four interrelated forms of repetition compulsion: unconscious drive, manifested through involuntary dreams and an inarticulate compulsion to return to racing; reenactment of painful experiences, expressed through aggressive driving that reproduces his original crash; connection to trauma, evidenced by recurring flashbacks and his explicit verbal

acknowledgment of the 1993 accident; and attempt at mastery, demonstrated through conscious self-regulation and controlled performance in the film's climax. These forms are further shown to be structurally embedded across Todorov's five narrative stages, moving from a fragile equilibrium through disruption, recognition, and repair, toward a new equilibrium in which repetition no longer entirely governs Sonny's behavior.

These findings directly answer the two research questions guiding this study. In response to the first question, regarding what forms of repetition compulsion are displayed by Sonny Hayes, the analysis confirms that all four forms identified in Freud's framework are present and interrelated, with the unconscious drive initiating the cycle and the attempt at mastery marking the beginning of its partial resolution. In response to the second question, concerning how repetition compulsion is represented through the film's narrative aspects, the analysis demonstrates that Todorov's five-stage plot structure, together with character dynamics, setting, point of view, and theme, functions as the structural and cinematic means through which this psychological condition is communicated to the audience.

Theoretically, these findings offer modest support for the applicability of Freud's repetition compulsion beyond clinical contexts into the analysis of fictional cinematic characters, and they suggest that Todorov's narrative structure can be productively paired with psychoanalytic theory to examine how a psychological condition is embedded within plot progression. However, these implications remain limited to the single case examined here and should not be read as evidence of a generalizable model for representing trauma in film.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis is confined to a single film and a single character, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other cinematic representations of trauma. Second, as a qualitative interpretive study, the analysis inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity in the identification and classification of scenes, despite the validation strategies employed to mitigate this concern. Third, the study examines the film purely as a textual and narrative object; it does not incorporate audience reception or director intent, both of which could offer complementary perspectives on how repetition compulsion is constructed and understood. Finally, this research does not constitute a clinical assessment, and its psychoanalytic reading of Sonny Hayes should be understood strictly as an interpretive analysis of narrative representation rather than a diagnostic claim.

Future research could extend this study in several directions. Comparative analyses involving multiple films or characters would help determine whether the forms of repetition compulsion identified here recur across other cinematic representations of trauma or are specific to this film. Future studies might also incorporate audience response data to examine how viewers perceive and interpret repetition compulsion on screen, or apply alternative psychoanalytic and narrative frameworks to assess the robustness of the present findings. Finally, given that this research focused on a male protagonist within a sports narrative, further inquiry into how repetition compulsion is represented across different genres, gender positions, and cultural contexts would help clarify the broader applicability of these findings to contemporary cinema.

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