p-ISSN 2252-7427 e-ISSN 2541-3635
Indonesian EFL Journal
AISEE The Association of Indonesia Scholars of English Education

TRAUMA, DISSOCIATION, AND CINEMATIC AMPLIFICATION IN SPLIT: A HERMAN-INFORMED ANALYSIS OF KEVIN WENDELL CRUMB

Bahar[1*], Dahlia Husain[2], Ana Mariana[3]
[1]*Universitas Fajar, Makassar, Indonesia*
[2,3]*Universitas Muhammadiyah Gorontalo, Gorontalo, Indonesia*

Corresponding author's email: baharsetiawan@unifa.ac.id

APA Citation: Bahar., Husain, D., & Mariana, A. (2026). Trauma, dissociation, and cinematic amplification in Split: A Herman-informed analysis of Kevin Wendell Crumb. *Indonesian EFL Journal, 12*(3), 939-950. https://doi.org/10.25134/ieflj.v12i3.180

Received: 11-01-2026 Accepted: 21-03-2026 Published: 30-09-2026

Abstract: This study examines how psychological trauma and dissociation are represented through Kevin Wendell Crumb in M. Night Shyamalan's Split using Judith Herman's trauma framework. Treating the film as a cultural text rather than a clinical case, it combines theory-driven thematic analysis with semiotic attention to selected scenes, dialogue, performance, and recurring visual cues. The analysis focuses on Herman's clusters of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction and on the film's use of childhood maltreatment as narrative explanation. The findings show that hyperarousal is constructed through vigilance, ritualised control, and aggression; intrusion through cue-triggered and fragmented returns of childhood memory; and constriction through affective narrowing, detachment, and rigid survival roles. Sustained childhood physical abuse is foregrounded as the dominant explanatory past, while other forms of maltreatment receive limited narrative space. The study argues that Split draws on recognisable trauma discourse but intensifies it through thriller-horror conventions, especially by converting defensive responses and dissociation into signs of danger and exceptional power. It therefore proposes a distinction between clinical recognisability and cinematic amplification as a concise framework for analysing trauma representation without treating fictional behaviour as diagnosis.

Keywords: *trauma theory; Judith Herman; dissociation; cinematic representation; childhood abuse; Split*.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological trauma has become an important interdisciplinary concern in literary and film studies because trauma is represented not only as individual suffering but also as a disruption of memory, identity, and narrative continuity. Film is especially productive for this inquiry because performance, editing, framing, sound, and visual repetition can externalise psychological experiences that are difficult to express through dialogue alone. Recent studies of trauma in fiction and cinema therefore examine how symptoms, memory, and dissociation are translated into cultural forms rather than assuming that fictional characters simply reproduce clinical reality (Laine, 2023; Umer and Aziz, 2022; Gortat, 2025).

A persistent problem, however, is the gap between psychological terminology and cinematic representation. Some analyses identify PTSD-like behaviour without clearly defining the theoretical model used, while films may appropriate clinical language for suspense or spectacle. This problem is particularly visible in narratives of dissociation, where fragmented identity can become shorthand for unpredictability or danger. Such portrayals matter because entertainment media contributes to the cultural vocabulary through which audiences encounter trauma and mental illness (Utami,, 2025; Iyer and Neve,, 2021; Ling,, 2025). A rigorous analysis therefore needs to distinguish between clinically recognisable features and the narrative transformations imposed by genre.

Judith Herman's trauma framework offers a useful organising model because it describes three broad clusters: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Hyperarousal concerns persistent alertness and reactivity; intrusion refers to the

involuntary return of traumatic experience; and constriction involves emotional numbing, avoidance, or narrowed engagement with the world (Andrushko and Lanza, 2024). In film analysis, these categories can function as interpretive tools rather than diagnostic labels. They allow researchers to ask how particular actions, memories, and visual cues are organised into patterns of meaning while keeping the distinction between fictional representation and clinical assessment explicit.

Split is a productive case because Kevin Wendell Crumb's multiple identities are structured around threat, control, memory, and survival. The film links this fragmented identity system to childhood abuse, yet it also embeds trauma within the conventions of the psychological thriller and horror film. Existing trauma scholarship has examined fragmented memory and cinematic form (Hou and Jiang, 2024), while studies of dissociation have emphasised the potential for media representation to simplify complex psychological phenomena. What remains insufficiently examined is how Herman-like symptom clusters are distributed across Kevin's identities, how childhood maltreatment is mobilised as narrative causality, and how genre conventions amplify these features into danger and exceptional power.

This study addresses that gap through three questions: (1) how are hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction represented across Kevin's dominant identities; (2) how does the film connect these patterns to childhood maltreatment; and (3) how does thriller-horror form reshape clinically recognisable trauma discourse? The contribution is conceptual as well as interpretive. By distinguishing clinical recognisability from cinematic amplification, the study offers a compact framework for analysing how popular cinema may borrow psychological concepts while reorganising them through characterisation, visual motifs, identity switching, and suspense. The analysis is limited to Split and does not attempt to diagnose the fictional character or generalise about people with trauma-related disorders.

The distinction between representation and diagnosis is especially important in literary and film scholarship. A fictional character is produced through scripting, editing, performance, and genre conventions, whereas clinical assessment depends on longitudinal evidence, context, differential diagnosis, and direct evaluation. Treating these evidentiary conditions as equivalent can overstate what textual analysis can establish. The present study therefore uses psychological concepts as a vocabulary for representational patterning: the question is how the film makes trauma intelligible and dramatic, not whether Kevin meets a clinical threshold. This position also allows the analysis to discuss stigma without reducing the film to a simple test of accuracy.

A second reason for examining Split concerns the relation between character architecture and narrative economy. Kevin's identities are not presented with equal depth or screen time; each is assigned recognisable behavioural, vocal, and moral features that help audiences rapidly distinguish one identity from another. Trauma-related motifs become part of this differentiation. Control, fear, emotional restriction, childhood memory, and bodily threat are distributed across the system in ways that support suspense. Consequently, the film offers an opportunity to study not only what trauma symptoms look like on screen, but how psychological language can become an organising principle of character design and genre storytelling.

Herman's framework remains influential because it describes trauma through recurring patterns of heightened arousal, intrusive re-experiencing, and constriction. Hyperarousal includes irritability, vigilance, exaggerated threat response, and difficulty regulating physiological or emotional activation (Zhu et al., 2022). Intrusion concerns involuntary memories, flashbacks, or other returns of traumatic experience that interrupt present functioning (Bayoumy, 2023; Schafer, 2024). Constriction describes emotional numbing, avoidance, withdrawal, and a narrowing of attention or relationship as defensive responses to overwhelming affect (Parker et al., 2021; Andrushko and Lanza, 2024). In this article, these clusters are used as theory-informed representational categories, not as criteria for clinical diagnosis.

Trauma theory becomes especially useful in film when combined with attention to form. Cinematic texts can render psychological fragmentation through discontinuous editing, confined spaces, repeated objects, changes in performance, and disrupted chronology. Such devices do not simply illustrate an already stable psychological state; they shape how viewers interpret memory, threat, and identity (Garibotto, 2022; Carmagnani, 2022). The analytical task is therefore double: to identify recognisable trauma patterns and to examine how visual and narrative

techniques intensify, simplify, or redirect them for genre purposes.

Childhood maltreatment is relevant because Split repeatedly positions Kevin's early experiences as the origin story of later fragmentation. Research commonly distinguishes physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, while also stressing that multiple forms of adversity often co-occur and have cumulative effects (Nagar and Nakash, 2024; Verbist et al., 2021; Weleff and Potter, 2023). This complexity provides an important critical benchmark. A film may foreground one form of abuse for narrative economy, but that choice should not be mistaken for an empirical claim that a single event produces a particular disorder. The distinction between narrative causality and clinical causation is therefore central to the present reading.

Within Herman's framework, the three clusters are analytically related rather than isolated categories. Persistent arousal can make reminders more disruptive, intrusive recollection can intensify avoidance, and constriction can reduce the relational resources through which traumatic experience might otherwise be integrated. Literary and cinematic representation often separates these tendencies for clarity, attaching particular behaviours or images to particular characters. That separation is useful for analysis, but it can also create an impression that trauma consists of discrete visible signs rather than a fluctuating and context-dependent process. Reading the clusters together therefore helps prevent the analysis from becoming a checklist of symptoms.

Dissociation adds another level of complexity because it concerns disruptions in the integration of memory, identity, perception, or experience rather than simply one of Herman's three clusters. In trauma-related research, dissociation is frequently discussed as a response to overwhelming experience and can coexist with PTSD-related symptoms (Kratzer et al., 2021; Starkov et al., 2024). In Split, however, dissociation is also a formal device: changes of voice, posture, costume, gaze, and editing make internal division visible to the audience. The film thus converts an abstract problem of psychological integration into an immediately readable performance system. This formal visibility is central to the later distinction between recognisability and amplification.

The cultural dimension of trauma representation is equally significant. Film does not circulate clinical concepts in a neutral form; it embeds them in genres with established expectations about danger, revelation, suspense, and resolution. Horror and thriller conventions reward visual intensity and rapid legibility, which can encourage the condensation of complex psychological states into striking signs. Trauma theory therefore needs to be paired with film analysis so that the presence of familiar psychological vocabulary is not mistaken for transparent realism. The present study uses this combined perspective to ask how meaning is produced at the intersection of symptom discourse, character performance, and cinematic form.

METHOD

The study uses a theory-driven qualitative film-analysis design. Split is treated as a narrative and audiovisual text, and the units of analysis are selected scenes, dialogue, performances, settings, recurring objects, and moments of identity disruption involving Kevin Wendell Crumb and his dominant identities. Selection is purposive: material is included when it contributes evidence to Herman's categories or to the film's construction of childhood maltreatment. A qualitative descriptive orientation is appropriate because the purpose is to explain patterns of representation and meaning rather than make statistical or diagnostic claims (Hanifah et al., 2024; Tangkilisan et al., 2024).

Analysis proceeded in three linked stages. First, scene-level description recorded observable evidence such as gesture, tone, dialogue, spatial arrangement, and narrative context. Second, theory-informed thematic coding grouped recurring evidence under hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction and compared how these patterns were distributed across identities. Third, semiotic interpretation examined recurring spaces and objects - particularly the bathroom, the belt, naming cues, and identity-switching sequences - as signs that connect threat, memory, control, and dissociation (Prawirodigdo, 2025; Sihombing, 2024). This sequence keeps descriptive evidence distinct from theoretical interpretation while allowing both to inform the final argument.

Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation across dialogue, performance, narrative context, and visual cues; peer debriefing; and an audit trail recording coding and interpretive decisions. Where applicable, selected scenes were independently reviewed by an additional coder and disagreements were resolved through discussion (Ayub, 2023; Llausas, Santos,

and Citero, 2025). These procedures strengthen consistency but do not transform the study into a clinical assessment. The analysis remains an interpretation of cinematic representation.

Coding was iterative rather than purely mechanical. A scene initially identified as evidence of hyperarousal, for example, was reconsidered in relation to surrounding dialogue, the identity in control, and its function in the sequence. This prevented a single gesture from being treated as sufficient evidence for an interpretive category. Where a scene supported more than one category, the analysis prioritised the pattern most central to its narrative function while noting overlap in the analytical memos. Such iterative comparison is important in a film where behavioural features recur across identities but acquire different meanings according to context.

The semiotic stage also focused on recurrence rather than isolated symbolism. The bathroom, belt, full-name cue, the concept of 'the light', and enclosed spaces were considered meaningful because they return across the narrative and connect present behaviour with memory, authority, or threat. Their interpretation therefore depends on patterned use within the film rather than on an assumption that any single object has a fixed universal meaning. This approach keeps the analysis grounded in the filmic text and supports a more transparent link between evidence and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Herman-informed trauma patterns across identities

Hyperarousal

Hyperarousal is distributed across Kevin's dominant identities through three recurring modes: ritualised control, vigilant monitoring, and aggressive mobilisation. Dennis most consistently embodies control-oriented hyperarousal. His tense posture, abrupt tonal shifts, rigid rules, compulsive cleaning, and aggressive body language repeatedly appear when routines are disrupted. Within the film's logic, order becomes a strategy for managing perceived threat. Patricia presents a more restrained form: measured speech and controlled movement coexist with rapid escalation when obedience is challenged. The Beast intensifies the cluster into continuous environmental scanning and violent aggression. The progression from Dennis to Patricia to The Beast therefore converts heightened alertness from defensive regulation into a spectacle of danger. This broadly resembles descriptions of heightened arousal as irritability and threat sensitivity (Invernizzi et al., 2023), but the film amplifies aggression because it is narratively legible within the thriller-horror genre.

Kevin himself provides an important baseline against which these identities are differentiated. When he briefly regains control, the film shows visible tension, disorientation, and exhaustion rather than the ritualised certainty of Dennis or the ideological confidence of The Beast. This contrast matters because hyperarousal is not uniformly coded as aggression. In Kevin, it appears as vulnerability and loss of control; in Dennis, as compulsive regulation; in Patricia, as restrained vigilance; and in The Beast, as spectacular mobilisation. The same broad trauma category is therefore redistributed into distinct character functions, allowing the film to preserve a common psychological logic while making each identity narratively legible.

Hedwig further complicates the pattern. His fidgeting, fluctuating energy, dependency, and fear of stronger authority figures do not carry the same threat value as Dennis or The Beast, yet they contribute to a system organised around anticipation of danger. Read within the film rather than clinically, Hedwig embodies a child-like mode of hyperarousal in which fear and excitement remain close to the surface. The contrast demonstrates that the film uses age-coded performance as well as aggression to visualise arousal. It also reinforces the idea that trauma representation in Split operates through a distributed identity architecture rather than through one stable behavioural profile.

Intrusion

Intrusion appears primarily as cue-triggered disruption of the narrative present. The clearest cue is Kevin's full name: when it is used, facial expression, voice, and posture shift abruptly, and the film briefly returns to childhood spaces or disciplinary memories. The cue collapses temporal distance between past and present and destabilises the identity currently controlling 'the light'. Fragmentary internal references to 'what happened', being 'broken', or having 'suffered' create a second form of intrusion. These statements are incomplete and resist chronological reconstruction, representing traumatic memory as partial knowledge circulating within the identity system. This mechanism is recognisable in research describing intrusive memories as involuntary and reminder-linked (Iyadurai et al.,

2023; Kanstrup et al., 2021), yet Split externalises the disturbance by making it a trigger for identity switching and plot acceleration.

The form of these recollections is as important as their content. Rather than presenting an extended, coherent flashback that explains Kevin's history once and for all, the film releases fragments at moments of pressure. The viewer therefore encounters the past through interruptions, partial images, and short verbal references, mirroring the narrative problem of incomplete access to Kevin's autobiographical history. This strategy creates suspense because information about the past is withheld, but it also gives intrusion a formal analogue: the past arrives in pieces that interrupt the present. The technique is consistent with trauma-oriented film analysis that treats fragmentation and discontinuity as meaningful features of representation (Hou and Jiang, 2024; Gortat, 2025).

Constriction

Constriction is represented as a narrowing of affect, relationship, and moral response. Dennis reduces interpersonal interaction to order and function; Patricia suppresses overt emotion and frames coercive action as protection; The Beast represents the most extreme form through fixed affect, apparent indifference to pain, and a worldview organised around survival. The important cinematic transformation is that emotional narrowing becomes not merely a defensive response but a sign of invulnerability and superiority. Trauma scholarship associates emotional numbing and withdrawal with loss, isolation, and reduced flexibility (Sawalha et al., 2022; Womersley et al., 2023). Split retains the idea of defensive narrowing but inverts its value, converting psychological restriction into power and threat. The result is clinically recognisable at the level of motif but cinematically amplified at the level of meaning.

Constriction also structures relationships within the internal system. The identities are defined by restricted roles - protector, controller, child, moral authority, survivor - that reduce behavioural flexibility and make interaction increasingly rule-bound. This narrowing is represented not only in facial affect but in the limited range of relational possibilities available to the characters. Trust is scarce, intimacy is displaced by surveillance, and protection becomes coercive. The film thus extends emotional constriction into social and moral constriction. This broader pattern helps explain why the character system can appear both organised and unstable: rigid roles provide temporary order, yet the very rigidity of those roles intensifies conflict when circumstances exceed their narrow functions.

Taken together, the three clusters form a patterned system rather than three independent lists of behaviour. Hyperarousal establishes a world organised around threat; intrusion repeatedly reopens the relation between present identities and childhood memory; constriction limits the emotional and relational responses available to the system. Their interaction produces the film's distinctive rhythm of control, disruption, and defensive closure. This pattern also explains why identity switching carries such narrative force. A switch is rarely presented as neutral change; it reorganises the balance among vigilance, memory, affect, and authority. Herman's categories are therefore most useful here when read relationally, as a structure through which the film distributes psychological functions across characters.

This relational reading also reveals a difference between visibility and significance. The Beast is visually dominant because violence and bodily transformation are spectacular, but less dramatic identities contribute essential parts of the trauma narrative. Kevin's exhaustion establishes vulnerability, Hedwig preserves child-like fear and memory, Dennis embodies compulsive control, and Patricia gives protection a moral vocabulary. The film's meaning depends on these quieter functions even when promotional and climactic attention centres on The Beast. Recognising this distribution prevents the analysis from allowing the most sensational scenes to define the entire representation of trauma.

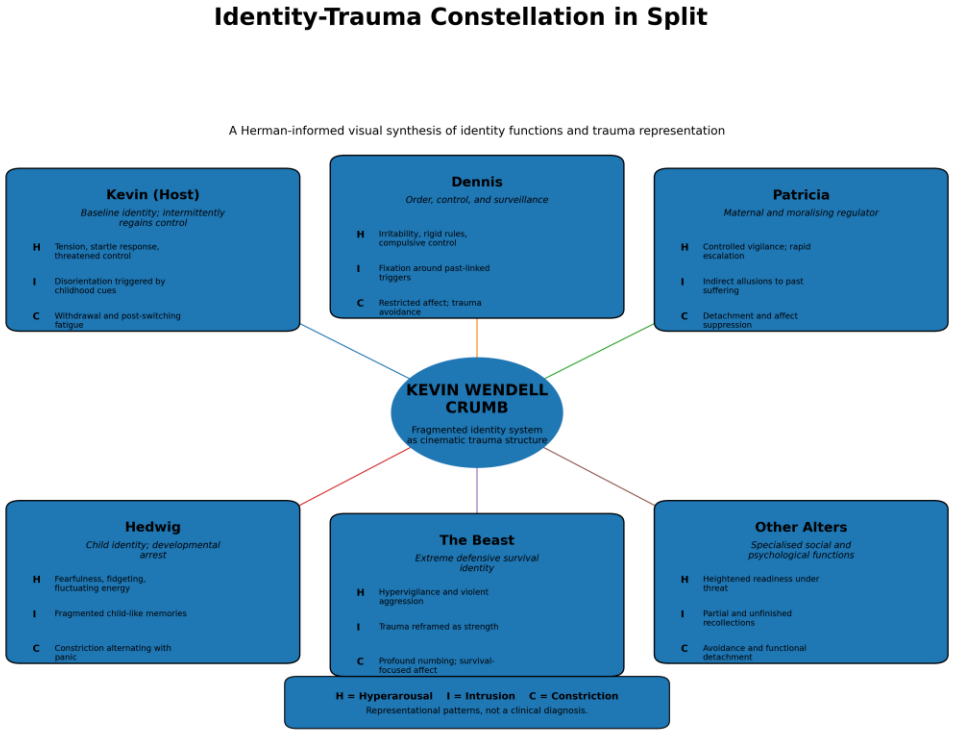

Figure 1. Identity-trauma constellation in split: A Herman-informed visual synthesis of identity functions and trauma representation.

Childhood trauma and narrative causality

The film foregrounds sustained childhood physical abuse as the most explicit traumatic history associated with Kevin's later fragmentation. Flashback-like sequences depict young Kevin as threatened or punished by his mother, while the family bathroom becomes the most concentrated site of traumatic memory. The mother's commands, Kevin's fearful compliance, the belt, and the enclosed space form a repeated visual constellation of coercion and bodily vulnerability. When these elements reappear later as triggers or fragments of recall, the bathroom functions as more than setting: it becomes a semiotic container linking childhood punishment to adult identity disruption.

This causal structure is selective. Physical violence is directly shown and repeatedly referenced, while emotional abuse is suggested through humiliation, threat, and unpredictable anger. Sexual abuse is not directly represented in the analysed material, and neglect is not developed as a distinct theme. The film therefore creates a clear hierarchy of maltreatment: physical abuse is foregrounded, emotional abuse is partially implied, and other forms remain outside the explanatory frame. Such narrative economy differs from research emphasising the cumulative and intersecting nature of childhood adversity (Harb et al., 2025; Verbist et al., 2021). The point is not that the film's history is impossible, but that it compresses developmental complexity into a singularly legible origin story.

The identities then transform victimisation into differentiated survival functions. Dennis responds through order and surveillance; Patricia through moral authority and protection; and The Beast through a doctrine that treats suffering as proof of strength. This progression is central to the film's meaning because trauma is not presented only as vulnerability. It becomes the narrative rationale for domination. The movement from injury to survival ideology therefore links the results on childhood abuse with the film's larger transformation of trauma into threat.

The bathroom scenes are especially important because they connect physical space with authority and memory. The enclosure of the room limits escape, while commands concerning cleanliness give punishment a ritualised quality. Later returns to this space do not need lengthy exposition because the setting itself has acquired narrative meaning. In semiotic terms, the bathroom condenses bodily control, shame, maternal authority, contamination, and fear into one recurring location. Its repetition allows the film to communicate traumatic history economically while also creating a visual trigger that audiences can recognise across time.

The film's treatment of suffering also creates a moral hierarchy. The Beast repeatedly frames pain as evidence of purity or superiority,

suggesting that those who have suffered are stronger than those who have not. This logic is not a neutral consequence of trauma theory; it is a narrative ideology generated by the film. By converting victimisation into entitlement to judge, punish, or dominate others, Split moves beyond representing trauma symptoms and constructs an ethical worldview around suffering. That move is central to cinematic amplification because it transforms personal history into a justification for present violence.

Table 1. *Compact evidence matrix of childhood trauma representation in Split*

Code	Representative cue	Narrative function	Maltreatment
S1-S2	Belt, bathroom, harsh maternal commands, fearful compliance	Establishes repeated punishment and coercive bodily control as Kevin's dominant traumatic past	Physical; implied emotional
S3	Full-name cue followed by abrupt affective shift and childhood visual fragments	Links present identity disruption to involuntary return of traumatic memory	Physical abuse recalled
S4-S5	References to being hurt, broken, or strengthened by suffering	Reframes victimisation as collective identity and survival logic	Generalised maltreatment
S6	The Beast links suffering with purity, strength, and present aggression	Turns traumatic history into ideological justification for domination	Long-term narrative effect

Clinical recognisability and cinematic amplification

The central interpretive finding is that Split occupies an unstable space between clinical recognisability and cinematic amplification. Clinical recognisability refers to the use of features that resemble established trauma discourse: heightened threat sensitivity, triggered recollection, emotional narrowing, dissociation, and the long-term significance of childhood abuse. Cinematic amplification refers to the intensification, redistribution, and moral reframing of those features to produce suspense and character contrast. The distinction is useful because a film can appear psychologically informed without providing a clinically balanced account.

Hyperarousal demonstrates this process clearly. Dennis and Patricia retain recognisable features of vigilance and reactivity, yet the film gradually magnifies these features until The Beast turns heightened arousal into violent exceptionalism. Intrusion undergoes a parallel shift: triggered recollection is recognisable, but its principal narrative consequence is not sustained internal distress; it is identity destabilisation and acceleration of threat. Constriction is transformed most radically, because emotional numbing becomes associated with purity, strength, and invulnerability rather than primarily with interpersonal loss. Across all three clusters, cinematic amplification selects the most dramatic expression and makes it visually central.

The same process shapes the film's representation of dissociation. Trauma research recognises dissociation as a possible protective response to overwhelming stress, especially in relation to severe childhood adversity (Kratzer et al., 2021; Starkov et al., 2024). Split, however, partitions trauma-related traits across identities and then differentiates those identities through escalating levels of control and aggression. Critics have noted that linking Dissociative Identity Disorder with menace can reinforce public stereotypes (Iyer and Neve, 2021; Ling, 2025). The present analysis clarifies the representational mechanism behind that concern: the most spectacular identity is also made the centre of danger, so protective fragmentation is narratively re-coded as threat.

Film form reinforces this recoding. Confined spaces, abrupt shifts in performance, repeated visual triggers, and suspense-oriented pacing turn internal conflict into observable danger. Such choices support the argument that cinema does not merely transmit psychological concepts; it mediates them through aesthetic and genre conventions (Garibotto, 2022; Carmagnani, 2022). The bathroom, the belt, the use of Kevin's full name, and the repeated struggle over 'the light' operate as compact signs through which memory, control, and identity are made visible. Semiotic analysis is therefore necessary alongside trauma theory because it shows how the meaning of a symptom-like pattern is produced by the film's formal organisation.

The broader implication concerns cultural understanding of mental illness. Mainstream media can shape fear, stigma, or empathy depending on whether psychological disturbance

is presented primarily as danger or contextualised as suffering (Mittmann, Schrank, and Steiner-Hofbauer, 2024; Romer, 2022). Split does acknowledge Kevin's victimisation, but it repeatedly converts that suffering into unpredictability, bodily transformation, and violence. This tension makes the film analytically valuable: it demonstrates how trauma discourse can be simultaneously recognisable and reductive. Critical media literacy is therefore important when audiences encounter clinical vocabulary through entertainment rather than through clinical or educational contexts (Petrash and Petrash, 2024).

Methodologically, the analysis also demonstrates the value of combining a psychological framework with close attention to cinematic form. Herman's categories provide a disciplined vocabulary for identifying recurring representational patterns, while semiotic and film analysis prevents those categories from being treated as transparent diagnoses. The resulting approach remains interpretive and text-specific, but it offers a transferable model for examining other films in which psychological concepts are reorganised through genre.

The distinction between recognisability and amplification also helps avoid a false choice between declaring a film psychologically accurate or inaccurate. Representation can contain elements that resonate with trauma research while still rearranging them for narrative effect. In Split, triggered memory, hypervigilance, emotional withdrawal, and childhood adversity provide recognisable points of contact with trauma discourse. Yet these features are selectively combined with extraordinary bodily power, predatory violence, and sharply differentiated identities. Evaluating both levels at once produces a more precise account than either celebrating the film as realistic or dismissing it as entirely fictional.

This perspective further clarifies the role of genre. Thriller and horror films depend on uncertainty, escalating threat, and moments of revelation. Split uses dissociation to satisfy these demands by making identity itself unpredictable: the question of who occupies 'the light' becomes a suspense mechanism. Trauma is therefore woven into the film's temporal structure. Memories interrupt the present, protective identities compete for control, and the revelation of past abuse retroactively explains current behaviour. The film's psychological vocabulary is consequently inseparable from its narrative architecture.

At the same time, the film offers moments that complicate a purely stigmatising reading. Kevin's victimisation is not concealed, and several identities are presented as attempts to protect a vulnerable self rather than as arbitrary embodiments of evil. These moments can invite sympathy and recognition of suffering. The problem is that the narrative repeatedly subordinates this complexity to the spectacle of The Beast. The result is ambivalent: vulnerability and protection remain visible, but the most memorable cinematic image of dissociation is still organised around exceptional danger. This ambivalence is precisely why the film requires a layered rather than binary evaluation.

A further implication concerns the difference between narrative sympathy and representational consequence. A film may invite viewers to sympathise with a traumatised character while simultaneously relying on conventions that associate mental disturbance with danger. Split performs both moves. It provides a history of abuse that can generate compassion, but it also structures suspense around the possibility that a different identity will emerge and become violent. These two effects are not mutually exclusive. Their coexistence helps explain why the film can be emotionally engaging while still participating in cultural patterns that link dissociation with unpredictability. A nuanced critique should therefore examine both the humane and the stigmatising dimensions of the representation rather than assuming that one cancels the other.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Split distributes Herman-informed trauma patterns across Kevin Wendell Crumb's dominant identities rather than representing trauma as a single unified state. Hyperarousal appears through vigilance, ritualised control, and aggression; intrusion through cue-triggered and fragmented returns of childhood memory; and constriction through emotional narrowing, withdrawal, and rigid survival roles. Sustained childhood physical abuse is positioned as the principal explanatory past, with the bathroom, the belt, maternal commands, and Kevin's full name functioning as recurring signs that connect memory to present identity disruption.

The study's main contribution is the distinction between clinical recognisability and cinematic amplification. Split borrows features that resemble trauma discourse but intensifies them through thriller-horror conventions, converting

defensive responses into danger, emotional narrowing into exceptional power, and complex childhood adversity into a largely linear origin story. This framework supports a more cautious reading of popular cinema: psychological concepts can provide narrative credibility while still being transformed by genre. Because the study analyses a single film, it does not establish diagnosis, causal claims about trauma survivors, or actual audience effects. Comparative film studies and audience-reception research could further test how genre and cultural context shape the public meaning of trauma and dissociation.

The findings also suggest a practical implication for trauma-oriented film criticism. Analysts should identify the psychological concept being invoked, examine the specific filmic evidence through which it is represented, and then ask what genre does to that concept. This sequence reduces the risk of diagnosing fictional characters while keeping the cultural consequences of representation visible. Because the study analyses a single film, it does not establish diagnosis, causal claims about trauma survivors, or actual audience effects. Comparative film studies and audience-reception research could further test how genre and cultural context shape the public meaning of trauma and dissociation.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

In developing this work, the authors utilized ChatGPT to support information retrieval, along with DeepL (V.24.4.3) to enhance linguistic accuracy and readability. The authors have carefully reviewed, revised, and refined the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

REFERENCES

Andrushko, Y., & Lanza, S. T. (2024). Exploring resilience and its determinants in the forced migration of Ukrainian citizens: A psychological perspective. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,*, *21*(11), Article 1409. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21111409

Ayub, A. M. (2023). Representation signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in Smile Film by Parker Finn. *Lakon Jurnal Kajian Sastra Dan Budaya*, *12*(2), 112–128. https://doi.org/10.20473/lakon.v12i2.48549

Bayoumy, H. M. (2023). Trapped in the past: Trauma in the sins of the mother and outside time. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *10*(1), Article 53. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01573-6

Carmagnani, P. (2022). Trauma, multimodal mental imagery and intermediality in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. *Il Tolomeo, (1)*, Article 11. https://doi.org/10.30687/tol/2499-5975/2022/01/011

Garibotto, V. (2022). Pitfalls of trauma: Revisiting postdictatorship cinema from a semiotic standpoint. *Latin American Research Review*, *52*(4), 654–667. https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.56

Gortat, J. (2025). Feeling trauma: A proposal for a new approach to the study of post-traumatic cinema. *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, *(129)*, 195–216. https://doi.org/10.36744/kf.4002

Hanifah, A., Awaludin, L., & Assiddiqi, H. (2024). Ms. Marvel: Marvel's new model of Islam's representation in popular culture. *Jelita*, *5*(1), 180–194. https://doi.org/10.56185/jelita.v5i1.544

Harb, F., Wart, A. G., Brzezinski, J., deRoon-Cassini, T. A., & Larson, C. L. (2025). Subtypes of childhood maltreatment and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in an adult trauma sample: The mechanistic role of sleep. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *17*(2), 353–362. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001716

Hou, L., & Jiang, T. (2024). A study on Celie's trauma in the color purple. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, *7*(1), Article 070105. https://doi.org/10.23977/langl.2024.070105

Invernizzi, A., Rechtman, E., Curtin, P., Papazaharias, D. M., Jalees, M., Pellecchia, A., Santiago-Michels, S., Bromet, E. J., Lucchini, R. G., Luft, B. J., Clouston, S., Tang, C. Y., & Horton, M. K. (2023). Functional changes in neural mechanisms underlying post-traumatic stress disorder in World Trade Center responders. *Translational Psychiatry*, *13*(1), Article, 248. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-023-02526-y

Iyadurai, L., Highfield, J., Kanstrup, M., Markham, A., Ramineni, V., Guo, B., Jaki, T., Kingslake, J., Goodwin, G. M., Summers, C., Bonsall, M. B., & Holmes, E. A. (2023). Reducing intrusive memories after trauma via an imagery-competing task intervention in COVID-19 intensive care staff: A randomised controlled trial. *Translational Psychiatry*, *13*(1), Article, 291. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-023-02578-0

Iyer, M., & Neve, J. (2021). Split sciences: The legal accountability of patients with dissociative identity disorder. *Journal of Student Research*, *10*(4). https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i4.2208

Kanstrup, M., Rudman, A., Göransson, K. E., Andersson, E., Lauri, K. O., Rapoport, E., Sunnergård, L., Bragesjö, M., Andersson, E., Iyadurai, L., & Holmes, E. A. (2021). Reaching

people soon after a traumatic event: An exploratory observational feasibility study of recruitment in the emergency department to deliver a brief behavioral intervention via smartphone to prevent intrusive memories of trauma. *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, *7*(1), Article 196. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40814-021-00916-x

Kratzer, L., Knefel, M., Haselgruber, A., Heinz, P., Schennach, R., & Karatzias, T. (2021). Co-occurrence of severe PTSD, somatic symptoms and dissociation in a large sample of childhood trauma inpatients: A network analysis. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*,, *272*(5), 897–908. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00406-021-01342-z

Laine, T. (2023). *Reframing trauma in contemporary fiction film*. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781978720879

Ling, D. C. (2025). Examining the relationship between dissociative identity disorder and adverse childhood experiences. *Summer, 2025*, *(13)*, Article 139035. https://doi.org/10.70121/001c.139035

Llausas, R. V., Santos, C. A. d., & Citero, S. Q. (2025). As consequências do abuso sexual infantojuvenil e o transtorno de estresse pós-traumático: Um estudo a partir do filme e do livro *Afetos Secretos*. *Rcmos - Revista Científica Multidisciplinar O Saber*, *1*(2), Article 1416. https://doi.org/10.51473/rcmos.v1i2.2025.1416

Mittmann, G., Schrank, B., & Steiner-Hofbauer, V. (2024). A scoping review about the portrayal of depression and anxiety in mainstream and social media. *International Journal of Psychology*, *59*(6), 1075–1083. https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.13232

Nagar, M., & Nakash, O. (2024). Can I leave the past behind? Associations between childhood abuse and adult psychopathology. *Healthcare*, *12*(3), Article 412. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12030412

Parker, M., Hergenrather, K. C., Smelser, Q. K., & Kelly, C. T. (2021). Exploring child-centered play therapy and trauma: A systematic review of literature. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, *30*(1),, 2–13. https://doi.org/10.1037/pla0000136

Petrash, N. D., & Petrash, E. V. (2024). Socio-philosophical aspects of the hidden influence of film communications on human consciousness. *Obshchestvo Filosofiya Istoriya Kul'tura*, *(5)*. https://doi.org/10.24158/fik.2024.5.13

Prawirodigdo, B. H. (2025). Representasi oksidentalisme dalam film Gintama (2017). *Tuturan Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi Sosial Dan Humaniora*, *3*(2), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.47861/tuturan.v3i2.1428

Romer, D. (2022). Seasonal suicide trends in adolescents in the US: Did they explain the apparent effect of the Netflix show 13 Reasons Why? *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, *53*(2),, 207–218. https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12934

Sawalha, J., Yousefnezhad, M., Shah, Z., Brown, M., Greenshaw, A. J., & Greiner, R. (2022). Detecting presence of PTSD using sentiment analysis from text data. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *12*, Article 811392. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.811392

Schafer, E. S. (2024). Trauma in schools: A review of the impact of childhood trauma and assessment of a potential intervention. *OBM Integrative and Complementary Medicine*, *9*(2), Article 030. https://doi.org/10.21926/obm.icm.2402030

Sihombing, O. P. (2024). Reprenstasi ketakutan meninggalkan kebudayan Batak dalam film *Ngeri-Ngeri Sedap*. *Saber*,, 2(3),, 288–303. https://doi.org/10.59841/saber.v2i3.1485

Starkov, D., Ghiluk, O., Oliinyk, V., & Protsenko, B. (2024). Dissociation, splitting and compartmentalization in trauma-related disorders. *Technologies of Intellect Development*, *8*(2), Article 8. https://doi.org/10.31108/3.2024.8.2.8

Tangkilisan, S., Husain, D., Mariana, A., Otoluwa, M. H., & Rosida, A. (2024). Edward Prendick's harrowing journey on Doctor Moreau's island: A tale of trauma in H.G. Wells' novel. *Journal of English Language Teaching Linguistics and Literature Studies*, *4*(1), Article 51. https://doi.org/10.30984/jeltis.v4i1.3095

Umer, H., & Aziz, S. (2022). Trauma in the movie Ordinary People (1980): An investigation of psychological trauma and recovery from a traumatic experience. *International Journal of Linguistics and Culture*, *3*(2), 151–163. https://doi.org/10.52700/ijlc.v3i2.118

Utami, N. A. (2025). Investigating Eva's trauma in Ramsay's We Need to Talk About Kevin through psychoanalysis. *Lensa Kajian Kebahasaan Kesusastraan Dan Budaya*, *15*(2), 391–416. https://doi.org/10.26714/lensa.15.2.2025.391-416

Verbist, I., Allsopp, K., Huey, D., & Varese, F. (2021). Frequency and impact of childhood sexual and physical abuse on people using IAPT services. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *60*(4), 504–512. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12310

Weleff, J., & Potter, D. (2023). Key updates to understanding roles of childhood trauma in overall health. *The AMA Journal of Ethics*,, *25*(2), E116–E122. https://doi.org/10.1001/amajethics.2023.116

Womersley, J. S., Plessis, M. d., Greene, M. C., van den Heuwel, L. L., Kinyanda, E., & Seedat, S. (2023). Advances in the molecular neurobiology of posttraumatic stress disorder from global contexts: A systematic review of

longitudinal studies. *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*, *10*, Article e53. https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2023.53

Zhu, L., Li, L., Li, X., & Wang, L. (2022). Mind–body exercises for PTSD symptoms, depression, and anxiety in patients with PTSD: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, Article 738211. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.738211