

Research Article

Ego Defense Mechanisms in Dominic Toretto's Character: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of The Fate of The Furious

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Abstract: This study explores the ego defense mechanisms in Dominic Toretto's character in The Fate of The Furious (2017), aiming to bridge the gap in understanding how psychological depth can operate within the narrative constraints of action cinema. Using Freudian psychoanalytic theory as the analytical framework, the research applies qualitative content analysis through a context-oriented approach. It examines how psychological responses unfold within the film's narrative structure, genre conventions, and cultural values. The analysis focuses on selected scenes, character dialogue, and cinematic techniques to identify expressions of Toretto's personality structure—Id, Ego, and Superego—and five key defense mechanisms: rationalization, suppression, displacement, isolation of affect, and sublimation. Findings show that Toretto's psychological structure reflects a dynamic interplay between primal instincts (Id), rational mediation (Ego), and internalized morality (Superego). This interplay creates intense psychological tension, requiring a set of ego defenses to manage internal conflict. Each mechanism serves a distinct adaptive function, translating emotional distress into calculated action. For instance, rationalization justifies morally ambiguous decisions, while sublimation channels emotional turmoil into mission success. These mechanisms allow Toretto to navigate high-stakes situations, balance conflicting loyalties, and maintain both operational and emotional stability. The study concludes that action films can successfully integrate psychological complexity without diminishing entertainment value. Defense mechanisms serve not only as coping strategies but also as narrative tools that highlight emotional resilience and moral ambiguity. By applying a systematic psychoanalytic framework to an action hero, this research offers a new methodological model for character analysis in genre cinema. Moreover, it shows how psychological elements reflect contemporary cultural ideals, particularly concerning family loyalty, sacrifice, and emotional endurance in modern society.

Keywords: Action Cinema; Character Psychology; Ego Defense Mechanisms; Freudian Theory; Psychoanalytic Film Analysis

1. Introduction

Films have become powerful tools for exploring human psychology, especially in how characters deal with internal conflicts and emotional pressures. The relationship between film and psychology has grown stronger over time, with filmmakers now including more psychological depth in their stories, allowing researchers to study these films using psychoanalytic theories. This trend is particularly noticeable in action cinema, where characters often face both physical dangers and emotional struggles, requiring sophisticated psychological responses that mirror real-life coping strategies.

Modern action heroes are no longer just tough fighters who overcome obstacles through physical strength alone. Contemporary action films have evolved beyond simple entertainment to include deeper psychological elements, making them valuable subjects for psychological analysis. The Fast & Furious franchise exemplifies this evolution, transforming from street racing films to global action blockbusters that emphasize family, loyalty, and moral

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complexity. This transformation reflects broader cultural trends toward greater psychological awareness and interest in complex character development in popular entertainment.

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Sigmund Freud's concept of ego defense mechanisms, provides useful tools for understanding how characters cope with psychological pressure. According to Barry, defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies people use to protect themselves from anxiety and emotional distress. These mechanisms often manifest through character behavior, dialogue, and interactions with others when characters face severe conflicts, requiring various psychological strategies to maintain their emotional balance. Previous research has examined defense mechanisms in various film genres, including comedy, drama, and literature, but few studies have focused specifically on how these psychological processes operate within action cinema's unique constraints.

"The Fate of The Furious" (2017) offers an excellent case study for examining ego defense mechanisms in action cinema. In this eighth installment of the Fast & Furious franchise, Dominic Toretto faces an unprecedented situation that forces him to betray his team while secretly protecting his son, creating intense psychological pressure that triggers various defense mechanisms throughout the film [12]. What makes Toretto's character particularly interesting is how he maintains his core identity while appearing to violate his most fundamental values, balancing competing loyalties between his established team family versus his biological family.

The significance of studying defense mechanisms in Toretto's character lies in understanding how psychological complexity enhances action cinema. Rather than presenting a simple hero narrative, the film demonstrates how psychological resilience and strategic thinking work together, reflecting contemporary audiences' desire for more sophisticated character development even within action-driven narratives. Action films must maintain fast-paced narratives while developing complex characters, creating specific challenges for portraying psychological depth that this study addresses.

Despite the growing interest in psychological complexity in action films, there remains a gap in understanding how ego defense mechanisms specifically manifest in action cinema protagonists who must balance intense physical action with complex psychological conflicts. Current literature lacks comprehensive analysis of how these mechanisms operate within the unique constraints of action genre storytelling. This study employs a context-oriented psychoanalytic approach to analyze Dominic Toretto's character, examining how his ego defense mechanisms function within three important contexts: the film's narrative structure, the action genre's conventions, and contemporary cultural values. The analysis focuses on identifying specific defense mechanisms (rationalization, suppression, displacement, isolation of affect, and sublimation) through detailed scene analysis and character interaction examination.

This research offers several significant contributions to both film studies and psychological research. It provides a systematic framework for applying psychoanalytic theory to action film character analysis while demonstrating how ego defense mechanisms can be effectively portrayed in fast-paced action narratives without compromising entertainment value. The study bridges the gap between theoretical psychological concepts and their practical application in contemporary popular cinema, establishing a methodological approach for future studies exploring psychological elements in action films. Furthermore, it contributes to understanding how defense mechanisms reflect broader cultural attitudes toward family, loyalty, and moral conflict in modern society.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework of psychoanalytic theory and reviews related literature on defense mechanisms in film analysis; Section 3 describes the proposed analytical methodology and context-oriented approach; Section 4 presents the results and discussion of Toretto's personality structure and defense mechanisms; Section 5 provides comparative analysis with existing studies; and Section 6 concludes with implications and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Psychoanalytic Theory and Defense Mechanisms

Psychoanalysis, established by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, fundamentally changed how we understand human psychology and behavior. Originally developed as a therapy method for treating psychological disorders, psychoanalysis evolved into a comprehensive theory about human consciousness and behavior that emphasizes how unconscious mental processes shape our actions and emotions. The core principle of psychoanalytic theory

suggests that unconscious forces primarily drive human behavior, including repressed desires, fears, and memories that influence conscious decisions and actions.

Freud's personality structure theory presents a fundamental framework through three distinct components: the id, ego, and superego. In "The Ego and the Id", these three elements work in constant interaction to shape human behavior and psychological responses. The id represents the most primitive component operating on the "pleasure principle," containing all inherited mental material and basic drives that demand immediate gratification. The ego functions as the mediator between the id's demands and external reality, operating on the "reality principle" and serving as the organized part of the psyche that includes defensive, perceptual, and executive functions. The superego represents the moral component incorporating societal values and ideals, acting as the moral conscience that strives for perfection rather than pleasure or reality.

Defense mechanisms represent unconscious psychological strategies that the ego uses to protect itself from anxiety, conflict, and distress. As conceptualized by Freud and further developed by Anna Freud in "The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense" (2018), these mechanisms serve as essential tools for maintaining psychological equilibrium when individuals face situations that threaten their emotional stability. Bailey and Pico explain that defense mechanisms operate automatically and unconsciously, helping individuals manage uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, or situations that might otherwise overwhelm them. Richardson et al. note that these mechanisms can be observed in character behavior through specific patterns of response to psychological stress, making them particularly valuable for film character analysis.

Defense Mechanisms in Film Studies

The application of psychoanalytic theory in film analysis has gained significant attention in contemporary media studies. When applied to cinema, psychoanalysis opens new ways of understanding character motivation and story structure, as films provide visual representations of internal psychological states that might otherwise remain abstract. The visual nature of film makes it particularly effective in communicating complex psychological ideas to diverse audiences while reflecting current social concerns. McGowan argues that films externalize psychological processes, including defense mechanisms and internal conflicts, through character development, visual symbolism, and narrative structure. Prabowo emphasizes the importance of cinematic signs and symbols in conveying temporal and psychological states, demonstrating how visual elements in film serve as carriers of deeper meaning that can be systematically analyzed to understand character psychology and narrative complexity.

Several researchers have examined psychological defense mechanisms in various film genres, providing important methodological foundations for this study. Siregar et al. studied anxiety and defense mechanisms in the comedy film "Happy Gilmore," finding that the main character used displacement, rationalization, and regression to cope with psychological pressure. Their study demonstrated how Freudian psychoanalysis can reveal character psychology in comedy contexts, though it did not address the unique psychological pressures present in action cinema where characters face both physical and psychological threats simultaneously.

Tarigan et al. analyzed self-defense mechanisms in "The Blind Side," examining how characters use psychological strategies when facing moral conflicts and emotional trauma. Their research established useful methods for analyzing defense mechanisms in dramatic narratives, providing frameworks for examining psychological responses to family-related conflicts. However, their focus remained on dramatic character development rather than the fast-paced action scenarios typical of the genre under investigation.

Setyo and Nugroho conducted a psychoanalytic analysis of defense mechanisms in "No Longer Human," demonstrating how these mechanisms appear through character behavior, dialogue, and narrative structure. Although their study provided valuable insights into psychological analysis in film, it primarily focused on dramatic character development and introspective narratives rather than action-oriented psychological complexity.

Sari et al. conducted a comprehensive analysis of defense mechanisms in "Dune," examining how Paul Atreides employs various psychological strategies while navigating political intrigue and personal trauma. Through careful scene analysis, they identified multiple defense mechanisms including repression, rationalization, and sublimation in response to overwhelming psychological pressures. While their study provided valuable insights into psychological analysis in epic narratives, it focused primarily on coming-of-age themes rather than family-oriented conflicts in contemporary action films.

Action Cinema and Psychological Complexity

Action films occupy a distinctive position within popular culture, often serving as vehicles for exploring societal values through heightened dramatic scenarios. Barker and Jane argue that the action genre frequently addresses deeper themes related to morality, justice, and personal identity, presenting conflicts that resonate with audience experiences. Contemporary action cinema increasingly incorporates psychological complexity into mainstream entertainment, with modern action films moving beyond simple hero narratives to explore how characters navigate moral dilemmas and emotional conflicts.

The Fast & Furious franchise demonstrates how action films can evolve to reflect changing social values. Jenkins observes that the franchise's transformation from street racing films to global action blockbusters mirrors broader changes in popular culture, with the series' emphasis on family, loyalty, and moral complexity contributing to its cultural significance and global appeal. This evolution reflects broader cultural trends toward greater psychological awareness and interest in complex character development in popular entertainment.

Kurniawan analyzed masculinity in "John Wick: Chapter 2," exploring how psychological stress and trauma influence the protagonist's behavior. His research showed how the character's responses to violence and loss reflect various psychological defense mechanisms, particularly in scenes involving moral choices and personal vendettas. However, his study primarily focused on individual masculine identity and revenge narratives rather than complex family dynamics that characterize the Fast & Furious franchise.

Walsh explored the psychological evolution of male heroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, focusing on how characters navigate emotional vulnerability within their heroic journeys. Her study revealed how modern superhero narratives incorporate complex psychological elements, particularly in how male characters balance traditional heroic expectations with emotional growth. However, her research concentrated on superhero narratives rather than more grounded action films dealing with family dynamics and moral conflicts.

Research Gaps and Study Positioning

The literature review reveals several important gaps that this study addresses. First, while existing research has examined defense mechanisms in various film genres, none specifically focus on how these mechanisms operate within action-driven narratives that must balance psychological complexity with genre expectations for fast-paced entertainment. Second, previous studies have primarily analyzed individual psychological responses rather than examining how defense mechanisms function within complex family loyalty conflicts that characterize contemporary action cinema.

Third, existing research lacks comprehensive analysis of how ego defense mechanisms manifest in characters who must simultaneously manage intense physical action and complex psychological conflicts. The unique constraints of action cinema—maintaining narrative momentum while developing psychological depth—create specific challenges for portraying defense mechanisms that require systematic investigation. Fourth, there remains limited understanding of how these psychological elements reflect broader cultural attitudes toward family, loyalty, and moral conflict in modern society.

This study positions itself to fill these research gaps by providing the first comprehensive psychoanalytic analysis of ego defense mechanisms in a major action film protagonist. By focusing on Dominic Toretto's character in "The Fate of The Furious," this research demonstrates how sophisticated psychological complexity can be effectively integrated into action-oriented narratives while maintaining entertainment value and cultural relevance. The analysis contributes to both film studies and psychological research by establishing methodological frameworks for future investigations of psychological elements in popular action cinema.

3. Method

This research employs a qualitative content analysis approach using psychoanalytic theory as the analytical framework to examine ego defense mechanisms in Dominic Toretto's character in "The Fate of The Furious" (2017). The study adopts a context-oriented methodology that analyzes psychological responses within three interconnected contexts: the film's narrative structure, the action genre's conventions, and contemporary cultural values. Data collection involves systematic analysis of specific scenes, character dialogue, interactions, and visual elements that demonstrate psychological responses, with particular focus on moments where Toretto faces psychological conflicts and employs defense mechanisms. The analytical process follows Freud's personality structure theory (Id, Ego,

Superego) and Anna Freud's classification of defense mechanisms, specifically examining five primary mechanisms: rationalization, suppression, displacement, isolation of affect, and sublimation. Each identified defense mechanism is analyzed through a cause-effect structure, examining the psychological pressure (cause), behavioral manifestation in the film (evidence), and psychological function (effect) within the character's adaptation strategy. Visual documentation and textual analysis of dialogue support the identification and interpretation of defense mechanisms, while cinematographic techniques such as close-ups, camera angles, and editing patterns provide additional evidence for psychological responses. The methodology ensures systematic examination of how defense mechanisms operate within action cinema's unique constraints of maintaining fast-paced narratives while portraying psychological complexity, contributing to understanding how sophisticated psychological elements can be effectively integrated into popular entertainment without compromising genre expectations.

4. Results and Discussion

Personality Structure Analysis: Id, Ego, and Superego Manifestations

The psychoanalytic analysis of Dominic Toretto's character reveals a complex interplay between the three components of Freudian personality structure that creates the psychological foundation necessitating various defense mechanisms throughout "The Fate of The Furious." Toretto's Id manifests most prominently through his primal protective instincts and immediate emotional responses, particularly evident when he first discovers his son on Cipher's plane (00:48:52). The cinematographic capture of his unguarded reaction—widening eyes, parted lips, and visible emotional overwhelm—represents pure Id functioning driven by the fundamental biological imperative to protect offspring. This raw response demonstrates complete abandonment of his typically controlled demeanor, revealing the primitive emotional core beneath his strategic exterior. Another significant Id expression occurs during his immediate reaction to Elena's execution (01:23:06), where momentary raw grief and rage—captured through clenched fists, rapid breathing, and uncontrolled anger—represent the Id's pure emotional response operating without consideration for strategic implications.

Toretto's Ego functions as the sophisticated mediating force between Id drives and external reality, operating through strategic thinking and problem-solving abilities under extreme pressure. The clearest manifestation appears in his strategic revelation to Cipher: "You lost the minute you interrupted my honeymoon" (01:56:55), demonstrating sophisticated Ego functioning through long-term strategic thinking while managing immediate pressures. His calm delivery and controlled expression during this revelation illustrate the Ego's capacity to integrate complex realities into coherent action plans. The Ego also operates through reality testing abilities, particularly evident when assessing threat scenarios with calculated timing and measured movements, demonstrating the Ego's function of mediating between internal drives and external constraints while maintaining operational effectiveness.

The Superego represents Toretto's internalized moral code, operating through ethical principles about family loyalty, protection of innocents, and personal responsibility. This component creates internal tension when external circumstances force actions contradicting deeply held values, most evident in his visible moral struggle when forced to betray his team in Berlin (00:23:10). Cinematographic techniques capture subtle indicators of internal ethical conflict—momentary hesitation, brief glances toward teammates, and tension around his eyes—representing the Superego's resistance to actions violating his established moral framework. The Superego's influence also appears in his consistent protection of innocent civilians during action sequences, where despite mission urgency, he deliberately maneuvers to avoid pedestrians and minimize casualties, demonstrating automatic ethical influence on decision-making processes.

Ego Defense Mechanisms Analysis

Rationalization

Rationalization emerges as Toretto's primary cognitive defense mechanism when experiencing conflict between his actions and core moral values. The psychological pressure

of being forced to betray his team while participating in Cipher's operations creates significant cognitive dissonance that requires logical frameworks to justify morally conflicted actions. This manifests clearly in his confrontation with Cipher: "Since I'm alone, I got no choice!" (00:53:30), representing rationalization in action by creating a logical framework that makes compliance seem inevitable rather than chosen. The controlled delivery and measured tone indicate conscious construction of rational justification, allowing him to maintain his self-concept as a protective family man while engaging in behavior that superficially contradicts this identity. The psychological function of rationalization serves as a cognitive bridge between Toretto's values and actions, reducing cognitive dissonance and preserving psychological coherence necessary for effective functioning under extreme moral pressure.

Suppression

Suppression operates as conscious emotional regulation when overwhelming emotions threaten operational effectiveness or risk revealing true intentions to Cipher. This mechanism appears most dramatically following Elena's execution (01:23:12), where cinematography captures immediate emotional response followed by visible effort to contain reactions through controlled breathing, deliberate facial control, and strategic silence despite extreme emotional provocation. The extended close-up reveals both initial emotional response and subsequent conscious control, demonstrating suppression's tactical function in maintaining operational effectiveness despite intense emotional trauma. During interactions with his team, Toretto consistently employs suppression to manage emotional responses that would compromise his cover, particularly when Letty confronts him with "I know you love me, and you are not gonna shoot me" (01:19:31), responding with complete silence accompanied by visible emotional restraint captured through micro-expressions before reasserting control.

Displacement

Displacement occurs when Toretto cannot safely express emotions toward their true target without compromising his mission or endangering his son, requiring alternative outlets that don't reveal true feelings or intentions. This manifests primarily through redirected physical aggression in his driving behavior during the New York sequence (01:13:50), where his driving becomes notably more aggressive and destructive than his typical controlled style. Dynamic cinematographic shots capture increased intensity and force in vehicular actions, representing displaced emotional energy channeled into physical performance. Another significant instance occurs in his confrontation with Rhodes after Elena's execution (01:23:00), where unable to directly confront Cipher, he redirects rage toward her subordinate with "That was for Elena," representing displaced retaliation that satisfies emotional expression needs while maintaining strategic position.

Isolation of Affect

Isolation of affect emerges when Toretto faces traumatic events requiring emotional detachment to prevent psychological overwhelming. The execution of Elena, threats to his son, and forced betrayal create emotional content too intense for direct processing without psychological disruption. This appears most clearly in his ability to continue strategic planning immediately following Elena's execution (01:25:22), where cinematography captures transition from momentary emotional response to operational detachment, showing him discussing tactical matters with controlled composure despite traumatic loss. His ability to maintain tactical conversations about hostage situations involving his son while experiencing parental anxiety demonstrates sophisticated psychological compartmentalization that separates emotional content from cognitive processing, preserving strategic thinking abilities while protecting against overwhelming psychological content.

Sublimation

Sublimation represents the most adaptive defense mechanism, transforming potentially destructive emotional energy into constructive strategic action. Toretto's grief, rage, and desperation require transformation into productive strategies advancing his goal of protecting his son and defeating Cipher rather than remaining purely destructive impulses. This operates through his secret collaboration with Deckard Shaw, revealed through flashback sequences (01:48:29), demonstrating how he channels emotional distress into methodical problem-solving and strategic planning. During the submarine sequence (01:58:19), his driving

demonstrates sublimation through transformation of emotional intensity into precise vehicular control, with cinematography capturing focused concentration and masterful technique that shows how psychological pressure enhances rather than disrupts performance.

Integrated Defense System and Psychological Adaptation

The analysis reveals that these five defense mechanisms operate as an integrated psychological system enabling Toretto to navigate impossible circumstances while maintaining both operational effectiveness and psychological integrity. The dynamic interaction between Id, Ego, and Superego creates sustained psychological pressure requiring active management through defense mechanisms, with each mechanism serving specific functions while contributing to overall adaptation strategy. The cinematographic representation of these psychological processes aligns with Prabowo's analysis of how visual signs and symbols in cinema carry deeper psychological meaning, as the film employs specific visual techniques—close-ups capturing micro-expressions, controlled camera movements during emotional suppression, and dynamic action sequences representing displaced emotions—to externalize Toretto's internal psychological states. The most significant example occurs during the sequence following Elena's execution, where Toretto's Id demands immediate retaliation, his Superego condemns actions endangering his son, while his Ego must find realistic solutions managing both demands without compromising his secret plan. This three-way psychological tension appears through controlled emotional expression and strategic silence, as he cannot satisfy all demands simultaneously.

The integration of defense mechanisms demonstrates sophisticated psychological complexity that enhances character development within action cinema constraints. Rather than simple psychological survival, Toretto achieves personal development through adversity, with sublimation representing the most adaptive mechanism that transforms overwhelming emotions into enhanced capability and strategic effectiveness. This psychological resilience under extreme pressure reflects contemporary audiences' desire for sophisticated character development even within action-driven narratives, demonstrating how defense mechanisms can be effectively portrayed in fast-paced action contexts without compromising entertainment value or genre expectations.

5. Conclusions

This psychoanalytic analysis of Dominic Toretto's character in "The Fate of The Furious" demonstrates how sophisticated psychological complexity can be effectively integrated into action cinema without compromising entertainment value or genre expectations. The study reveals that Toretto's personality structure operates through dynamic interaction between Id (primal protective instincts), Ego (strategic mediation), and Superego (moral constraints), creating sustained psychological pressure that necessitates five primary defense mechanisms: rationalization, suppression, displacement, isolation of affect, and sublimation. These mechanisms function as an integrated psychological system enabling Toretto to navigate impossible circumstances while maintaining both operational effectiveness and psychological integrity, with each mechanism serving specific adaptive functions through cause-effect relationships that transform psychological distress into strategic advantage. The analysis contributes significantly to film studies by establishing a systematic framework for applying psychoanalytic theory to action film character analysis, demonstrating that contemporary action heroes can embody complex psychological depth while maintaining genre conventions for fast-paced entertainment. Furthermore, this research bridges theoretical psychological concepts with practical application in popular cinema, revealing how defense mechanisms reflect broader cultural attitudes toward family loyalty, moral conflict, and emotional resilience in modern society. The findings establish methodological approaches for future investigations of psychological elements in action films, suggesting that the integration of psychoanalytic complexity enhances rather than detracts from audience engagement with action narratives. However, this study is limited to a single character and film, indicating the need for comparative analysis across multiple action protagonists and franchises to establish broader patterns of psychological complexity in the genre, while future research could explore audience reception of psychologically complex action heroes and their cultural impact on contemporary masculine identity representations.

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