



Reconstructing the Traumatized Subject: a Lacanian Psychoanalytic Research of Identity Formation in Scott Derrickson's *The Black Phone* (2021)

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-25 Revised: 2026-06-29 Accepted: 2026-06-29 Keywords: identity reconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis; subjectivity; <i>The Black Phone</i>; trauma DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11474 Corresponding Author: Dina Amelia amelia.dina@teknokrat.ac.id Sastra Inggris, Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia, Bandar Lampung, Lampung	<i>Scott Derrickson's The Black Phone (2021) presents a compelling site for examining trauma not as purely destructive, but as a catalyst for identity reconstruction. While existing psychoanalytic studies of horror cinema have largely focused on trauma as a source of psychological damage, limited attention has been given to how traumatic experience may reshape and reconstitute subjectivity, particularly within contemporary horror narratives. This study addresses that gap by examining Finney Blake's psychological transformation through Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. Employing a qualitative descriptive method and a literary psychoanalytic approach, the study analyses selected scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements through close viewing and textual analysis. The findings reveal that Finney's traumatic captivity manifests as the Real through uncontrollable fear, isolation, and helplessness. The black phone functions as a Symbolic medium, enabling language-based communication with deceased victims that reorients his subjectivity. Through the Imaginary, Finney's self-image shifts from passivity to agency. This study contributes to Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism and film studies by demonstrating that trauma in horror narratives can serve as a transformative process through which a new, empowered subject emerges.</i>

1. Introduction

The Black Phone is based on a short story written by Joe Hill, the son of famed author Stephen King. It is a horror movie directed by Scott Derrickson and released in 2021. Interestingly, the film employs established horror themes, challenging the conventions of traditional horror films. This is obvious in the representation of ghosts who, rather than induce fear, assist. The film is typical of modern horror films, as it depicts not only dread and violence, but also human psychology in terms of trauma, survival, and self-identity creation (Cherry, 2021; Wetmore, 2022).

In general, the premise is like that of the short story, although considerable alterations were made to adapt the plot for film. The plot revolves around a boy named John Finney who is kidnapped by a kidnapper known as The Grabber. Previously, the kidnapper abducted several other boys. Finney was held captive in The Grabber's basement. The basement was dark and damp. There was just one window, and it was rather high, making it difficult to access. The Grabber said that the black telephone in the room was broken. Finney did, however, receive calls from the dead from other victims of The Grabber.

In each call, the previous victims told him various ways and methods to defeat The Grabber and escape from the room with the help of The Grabber's brother, but unfortunately, he also lost his life because he was killed by his brother. Finney did try to escape once, but he was apprehended and held captive by The Grabber. The depiction of captivity and psychological endurance reflects a recurring concern in contemporary horror narratives, where victim characters are often positioned as agents who negotiate fear, trauma, and survival rather than merely experiencing helplessness (Hantke, 2021; Lowenstein, 2022).

It is said that before the kidnapping, Finney was an insecure, powerless, fearful, and weak boy. He couldn't stand up for himself when bullied by his schoolmates. On one occasion, it was even his younger sister, Gwen, who fought them. Finney and Gwen lived with their father, who, since their mother's death, had become an abusive alcoholic, liked to hit, shout, and also disliked noise. Finney grew up to be a person who lacked self-confidence at all. At school, he liked a girl named Donna who became his partner in a science project, but Finney didn't dare to show his feelings. Because of this environment and the high social pressure, he withdraws into himself and is terrified to be at home or school.

However, the terrible kidnapping episode serves as a turning moment for Finney. Finally, he sees his buried potential and learns to resist. Herein is the problem: Finney's horrific experience (being abducted, held captive, and threatened with death) does not render him a helpless victim, but rather a process that allows him to manage himself, make decisions, and act effectively. In other words, his character transforms. This transformation corresponds with contemporary discussions of trauma narratives in which traumatic experiences may reshape identity, agency, and personal development, particularly in coming-

of-age horror stories that explore children confronting violence and fear (Kaplan, 2021; Balaev, 2022).

Trauma is typically portrayed as destructive, but in this research, trauma is viewed as a means of shaping a new identity. Trauma is often a bad experience that produces psychological discomfort, but it may also affect, shape, and, in this case, reshape Finney's identity. A person's mental state is considered damaged if they experience trauma; psychological wounds, fear, and loss of safety can influence their thoughts and behaviour. Some of Finney's traumatic experiences included loss of freedom due to captivity, isolation from the outside world, the threat of death, and a state of helplessness.

However, this research aims to present a different perspective. In the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, trauma can be a moment that encourages someone to confront themselves and rebuild their understanding of their identity, rather than leading them toward destruction. This means that Finney underwent a process of identity transformation (Balaev, 2022; Luckhurst, 2021).

According to Lacan, a person's identity is never fixed or complete, but is constantly in the process of being formed through experience, language, and symbols. Experiences can help a person understand themselves, while language and understanding of the world can shape how a person sees themselves, and certain symbols give life meaning (Žižek, 2022; Homer, 2021).

Finney begins the film as a quiet, passive, and insecure figure. Bullying, fear, and cowardice are some of the social experiences that have shaped his identity. After the kidnapping, his basic identity structure experiences a rupture, which in Lacanian psychoanalysis is dubbed The Real, or in Finney's case, he encounters something he cannot control. Through communication with prior victims or The Symbolic, he gains fresh knowledge, methods, and self-awareness. Finney is ultimately 'able' to see himself after acquiring these three things, which is known as The Imaginary Process.

According to Lacan, human life is divided into three domains: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The Imaginary encompasses our direct experiences with the universe, such as imagination, dreams, and nightmares, the realm of appearances, in which things appear to us as they truly are. Meanwhile, the Symbolic addresses what Lacan refers to as the 'great Other', an invisible system that influences our perception and experience of reality. This includes language patterns, norms, and social meanings, all of which influence how we interpret what we see and miss (Homer, 2021; Žižek, 2022; Johnston, 2024).

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a literary psychoanalytic approach to analyze Finney Blake's psychological transformation in *The Black Phone* (2021). Qualitative research focuses on understanding and interpreting meanings from textual and visual data rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Therefore, this method is appropriate because this study examines film scenes, dialogues, character actions, and symbolic representations related to trauma and identity formation. The study applies Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concepts of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, to explore how unconscious experiences shape subjectivity (Lacan, 2006). The primary data are obtained from *The Black Phone* (2021), while secondary data are collected from books and journal articles related to Lacanian psychoanalysis and literary studies.

The data are collected through close viewing by repeatedly watching the film and identifying significant scenes related to Finney's traumatic experience, communication with previous victims, and identity transformation. The selected scenes are then analysed based on Lacan's three concepts: the Real, which refers to trauma, fear, and feelings of helplessness; the Symbolic, which focuses on language, voices, and the black phone as systems of meaning; and the Imaginary, which examines the transformation of Finney's self-image from a powerless victim into a subject with agency. This analysis follows Fink's (1995) explanation of Lacanian subjectivity, which emphasizes that identity is constructed through language, symbolic relations, and unconscious processes

3. Result

Trauma is portrayed in *The Black Phone* as a complicated psychological process. Finney's journey illustrates how horrific experiences can serve as a conduit for the emergence of a new subject, one with self-awareness, resistance, and agency, through Lacan's Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary (Balaev, 2022; Homer, 2021).

The analysis identified four key findings: (1) Finney's experience of captivity manifests as the Lacanian Real through physiological and psychological responses to uncontrollable terror; (2) the black phone functions as a Symbolic medium that enables language-based reconstruction of subjectivity; (3) communication with previous victims facilitates a reconstituted Imaginary, wherein Finney's self-image shifts from passivity to agency; and (4) the cumulative effect of these three registers is the emergence of a new, empowered subject who actively resists rather than passively endures.

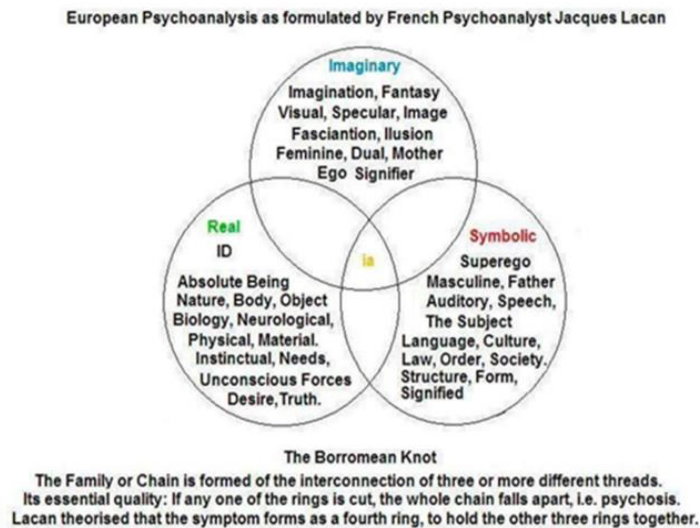


Figure 1. Borromean Knot

The Real.

The Real is not ordinary objective reality, but rather what Lacan refers to as the 'impossible', something that cannot be fully expressed or experienced. One example is a terrible experience that is too strong to comprehend or explain, disrupting and cracking the order of meaning as we know it. The Real may thus only be understood through the traces, affects, or upheavals it left in the structure of human experience. According to Lacan, "the real is impossible", it cannot be adequately conveyed in language. The act of entering language represents an ultimate and irreversible severance from the Real. Nonetheless, the Real is present and significant in adult humans' lives, a shaking element that dismantles the symbolic and imaginative constructions we have constructed (Homer, 2021; Johnston, 2024).

The Imaginary

The "mirror stage" is a process that defines the imaginary. This stage occurs between the ages of 6 and 18 months. According to Lacan, humans are born prematurely, which means they cannot coordinate their actions and body organs until they reach a specific age. The mirror stage involves libidinal dynamism, which is created by the child's connection with the "I ideal" or "ego ideal." This is the stage of early self-recognition as "I" before it enters the world of language. This stage marks the transformation from a fragmented body to a complete image. Self-recognition in the mirror leads to a narcissistic sense of self-unity.

When a child sees his picture reflected in a mirror, he will form an imaginary identification with the image (Lacan 1988). The youngster is then delighted and

amazed to see himself in the mirror. This is an exploration of himself. However, what appears in the mirror is warped, implying that the child relies on others for physical security and well-being. His body remains fractured and uncoordinated. This level must be passed by the subsequent individuation. The Imaginary stage continues with traps and distortions, repeating itself with others (Homer, 2021; Žižek, 2022; Johnston, 2024).

The Symbolic

The Symbolic Challenge is a reality portrayed in language. It is an impersonal framework that applies in society, where all persons are developed into whole human beings. This stage occurs in children aged 18 months to four years. The Symbolic Order is the area of social meaning, logic, and acceptable difference in which the child begins to express desires and so shapes the human subject (Julieta, 2017; Homer, 2021). If real corresponds to "need" and imaginative to "demand," then Symbolic corresponds to "desire." When we enter the realm of language, our desire is associated with language games. Because humans aspire to exceed language, such as love, the symbolic order cannot limit its movement. Love in the human community is limited to the symbolic system between humans, but people aspire to move beyond that (Johnston, 2024; Žižek, 2022).

One of the previous studies that serves as a foundational reference to support the current research is from Lukas Konstantin Krupka's thesis, *"Approaching the Ideal Self through Love: Lacan's objet petit and Representations of Love in The Color Purple, Poor Things, and Oscar Wao"* (Krupka, 2018). This thesis focuses on the Lacanian psychoanalytic method for interpreting literary works. This thesis explains the fundamental flaws of mankind that have existed for generations. This motivates the subject to become a better person, so they do everything they can to improve their self-image. Lacan used the Imaginary concept to demonstrate subjectivity as a specific image, as well as the Symbolic and the Other concepts to demonstrate subjectivity as a language-directed process.

Although earlier research has examined trauma and psychoanalysis in fictional works, less focus has been paid to how traumatic events contribute to the reconstruction of subjectivity, particularly in current horror films. As a result, this research seeks to illustrate how Finney's traumatic experience serves not only as a cause of suffering, but also as a process of identity reconstruction, using Lacan's categories of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary.

Therefore, this research examines Finney Blake's psychological metamorphosis in *The Black Phone* through Lacan's psychoanalytic principles. It investigates how Finney's horrific experience reflects the Real by tackling fear, solitude, and loss of control. It also examines how symbolic elements, like language and the black phone, aid in his identity reconstruction. Finally, this research examines how Finney grows from a helpless victim to an empowered subject through her self-awareness, resistance, and agency.

The following elaboration summarizes the key scenes identified in each Lacanian register:

4. Discussion

The Real: Finney's Encounter with Trauma

Lacan's concept of the Real, which refers to an event that cannot be entirely defined or controlled through language, can be used to understand Finney's painful experience in *The Black Phone*. When the person comes across anything that challenges their preconceived notions of reality, the Real appears. Finney experiences a traumatic condition where he loses his sense of security, autonomy, and control as a result of being abducted by The Grabber (Homer, 2021; Johnston, 2024).

The Grabber was imprisoned in the basement. Finney's first experience with the Real occurs during the kidnapping. Finney is thrust into a foreign environment after being assaulted and pushed into the truck, where he is unable to rely on his former identity as a typical schoolboy. The Grabber tells him:

"I know you're scared, but I won't hurt you anymore."

(00:27:59–00:28:01)

Despite The Grabber's best efforts to portray himself as innocuous, Finney's painful circumstances are actually made worse by this statement, which affirms that his captor has all authority over him. Finney is put in a situation where another person's choice determines whether or not he survives.

Because the basement transcends Finney's prior conception of safety and identity, it serves as a metaphor for Lacan's Real. His initial response demonstrates psychological paralysis since his fear keeps him from coming up with a solution. But because it makes him face his fragility, this painful encounter also marks the start of his metamorphosis (Luckhurst, 2021; Balaev, 2022).

The Symbolic: The Black Phone as a Medium of Transformation

The second discovery illustrates how Finney uses the black phone as a symbolic tool to reassemble his identity. Language, signs, and communication are the means by which the Symbolic order is established, according to Lacan. The phone establishes a symbolic link between Finney and the earlier victims despite his physical isolation in the basement (Homer, 2021; Johnston, 2024).

When Finney hears the phone ringing, even though he knows it shouldn't work, that is the first significant moment. As he picks up the phone, he hears someone say:

“Finney.”

(00:38:56–00:38:58)

The second discovery illustrates how Finney uses the black phone as a symbolic tool to reassemble his identity. The phone becomes more than just an item; it becomes a conduit for the memories, insights, and experiences of the past victims.

Bruce goes on to discuss the significance of the phone:

“I was calling to say he left you a way to fight him.”

(01:02:48–01:02:50)

According to the statement, Finney gains knowledge via the phone that he did not previously have. The former victims impart their survival techniques and experiences to him through language. As a result, the phone serves as a symbolic framework that gives Finney direction and meaning.

According to Lacanian theory, the Symbolic order is the domain of the “Other”, the external system of language and law that constitutes the subject (Homer, 2021). In this film, the black phone literalises this function: the voices of the dead victims collectively serve as the Other whose language interpellates Finney into a new subject position. This is not merely about receiving practical advice; each call restructures Finney’s relationship to knowledge, agency, and his own capabilities.

Language becomes the vehicle through which his traumatised self begins to reconstitute itself. Unlike purely physical survival narratives, *The Black Phone* insists that transformation is fundamentally discursive, it is through being named, addressed, and instructed by the Other that Finney ceases to be merely a victim. This reading extends Krupka’s (2018) Lacanian analysis of desire and the Other by demonstrating that the Other’s voice need not be tied to romantic longing; it can equally function through collective, posthumous solidarity to reconstruct a traumatized subject.

The Imaginary: From Weakness to Agency

The third discovery centres on Finney’s metamorphosis via Lacan’s notion of the Imaginary, which is connected to self-image and how people view themselves. Finney considers himself to be weak at the start of the movie. He is reserved, stays out of conflict, and frequently relies on other people, particularly Robin and his sister Gwen (Homer, 2021; Johnston, 2024).

However, Finney starts to see himself differently after speaking with the earlier victims. Finney’s self-image is significantly altered by Robin. He reminds Finney:

"You were always afraid to throw a punch, but you always knew how to take one."
(01:20:47–01:20:51)

The tension between Finney's previous identity and his new one is reflected in this conversation. Finney used to think of himself as weak because he shied away from violence. But Robin shows him that survival and endurance are also types of strength.

When Finney gets ready to battle The Grabber, the metamorphosis becomes more apparent. He learns how to use the phone as a weapon from the victims:

"Now fill the phone with dirt like I told you."
(01:22:08–01:22:10)

Finney is no longer a helpless victim awaiting rescue. He becomes an active participant who uses acquired knowledge to make decisions and defend himself. In Lacanian terms, this marks a reconstitution of the Imaginary register: Finney's ego-ideal undergoes a fundamental shift. Where his previous self-image was anchored in inadequacy and submission, an identification formed through bullying, social marginalization, and parental neglect, his new ego-ideal is formed through identification with the courage and resilience of the deceased victims.

This is not simply the acquisition of confidence; it is the construction of a new "I" through misrecognition with an idealised other, precisely the dynamic Lacan identifies in the mirror stage. Finney does not merely gain courage; he identifies with a new image of himself as a survivor and agent, an identification that enables him to act (Homer, 2021; Žižek, 2022).

Trauma as Identity Reconstruction

The last result emphasises the primary value of this study: trauma in *The Black Phone* helps to reconstruct a new subject rather than just destroying Finney's identity. Finney's story shows that trauma may become a transformational process, in contrast to classic horror narratives that frequently depict victims as inert figures. His initial state of helplessness following his abduction symbolises Lacan's Real. However, Finney learns new things and comes to understand himself better through symbolic communication with the victims, symbolised by the black phone (Homer, 2021; Johnston, 2024).

Finney's metamorphosis is completed in the final confrontation. Rather than being subject to The Grabber's control, Finney seizes initiative, a decisive inversion of the power dynamic that has structured the entire narrative. His victory is acknowledged in a news report near the film's conclusion:

"I heard he beat him to death with a phone."

(01:37:36–01:37:39)

This statement reverses the power dynamic that has structured the entire film. The object that initially symbolised isolation and the proximity of death, the black phone, becomes the instrument of liberation and survival. This inversion is significant psychoanalytically: the very medium of Finney's encounter with the Symbolic order (the phone as conduit to the Other) is weaponised in the Real, collapsing the distinction between register and material reality. Compared to other psychoanalytic readings of contemporary horror, such as Lowenstein's (2022) analysis of identity crisis in horror film, this study demonstrates a more optimistic trajectory: rather than the destabilisation of the subject, *The Black Phone* presents its reconstitution.

This distinguishes it from traditional horror representations of the victimised child and offers a distinctive contribution to the study of trauma and subjectivity in twenty-first century genre cinema. The study's limitation lies in its focus on a single film through a single theoretical framework; future research might profitably compare trauma narratives across multiple horror films or incorporate alternative psychoanalytic frameworks, such as Winnicottian object relations theory, to provide a more comprehensive account.

5. Conclusion

According to the study's findings, Finney Blake's horrific encounter in *The Black Phone* symbolises both a period of pain and a process of reconstructing his identity. Finney's change starts with his contact with trauma, which is symbolised by his captivity, loneliness, and fear of dying, according to Lacan's conceptions of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. His prior perception of himself as a helpless and frail person is upended by this encounter. But thanks to the black phone's symbolic purpose and his conversations with the earlier victims, Finney learns new things, formulates plans, and eventually realises how capable he is of surviving.

This study also shows how pain can become a transforming process that gives rise to a new subject. Finney's trip illustrates the growth of agency through self-recognition and resistance, in contrast to usual horror depictions that present victims as passive figures. His transition from a terrified victim to an empowered subject demonstrates how identity is constantly formed by experiences, language, and symbolic connections rather than being fixed. Therefore, rather than just producing psychological harm, *The Black Phone* portrays trauma as a complicated process that might aid in the restoration of subjectivity.

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