

SILENT TERROR : DECODING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND HIDDEN VIOLENCE IN 'THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE' (2003) USING BURN'S MULTIMODAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the hidden violence behind non-verbal cues in *the Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003). Characters' nonverbal communication occurs through different channels: bodily movements, gestures and facial expressions. The analysis of these nonverbal signals relies on Burn's Multimodal theory of the moving image (2013), which is concerned with embodied modes: facial expressions, gestures and movement. It has been found that the villain's violence is displayed through his bodily movements, gestures and facial expressions, which contribute to playing on the viewers' fear. What is more, the frequency distribution test reveals that the Action Units of fear are more frequent than the Action Units of sadness, happiness and anger.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, *the Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Burn's Multimodal theory, embodied modes.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

It is argued that horror films often rely on the use of non-verbal cues to create suspense, fear, and tension in viewers. These cues can include things like camera angles, lighting, sound effects, music, the movements and expressions of characters on screen. Researchers, namely Ekman, Mehrabian, and Tomkins, have revealed that these non-verbal cues can be incredibly effective at eliciting strong emotional responses from viewers, even without the use of explicit violence or gore.

According to Michelino (qtd. in Mosbehi 13), verbal language is not the sole communication system as there is the paralinguistic one or "Kinesics." It is defined as a system where nonverbal communication is conveyed through gestures, bodily movements, facial expressions, etc. (Affini qtd. in Mosbehi 13).

Multimodality theory mainly revolves around nonverbal communication. It sheds light on non-verbal forms of communication, such as linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial modes (Mills qtd. in Mosbehi 13).

There are other system kinds, such as the paralinguistic or "Kinesis" system. The latter is described as a system where nonverbal communication takes place through several channels, including bodily movements, gestures, facial emotions, etc.
















It is claimed that modes "integrate spoken language, dramatized action, gesture and facial expression, lighting, symbolic objects, representations, and architecture" (Burn 5). These modalities cannot be separated. In other words, they work in harmony with one another and add to the process of interpreting media texts, including films, as well as the meaning-making of this "metalanguage" (Mills 106). In this light, according to Burn (1), a movie is "multimodal" since it uses both verbal and nonverbal cues. This is why a multimodal method will be used for the analysis of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Burn's Multimodal Theory of the Moving Image is an analytical framework that explores visual, linguistic, and aural communication channels in media texts, namely films (Burn 2013). The analysis of characters' nonverbal signals in The

Texas Chainsaw Massacre relies on Burn’s Multimodal theory of the moving image, which is concerned with embodied modes: facial expressions, gestures, and movements. Concerning gestures, they can convey specific meaning or add emphasis to a character's words or actions. In addition to that, body movement is an important element of characterization and can reveal a character's personality or intentions. Finally, facial expressions are embodied modes that reveal emotions and make them visible. They can convey a wide range of emotions and are a powerful tool for creating mood and atmosphere in film (Burn 8).

The present study will examine the facial expressions used by the characters in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. We will explore the movie's behavioral and emotional aspects using Ekman's Action Units. The latter are a comprehensive set of tools for analyzing facial expressions and movements. Table 1 represents Ekman’s Action Units and their facial changes (Tan Nareyek 14)

Table1: Ekman’s Action Unis and their facial changes.

AU1  Inner brow raiser	AU2  Outer brow raiser	AU4  Brow Lowerer	AU5  Upper lid raiser	AU6  Cheek raiser
AU7  Lid tighten	AU9  Nose wrinkle	AU12  Lip corner puller	AU15  Lip corner depressor	AU17  Chin raiser
AU23  Lip tighten	AU24  Lip presser	AU25  Lips part	AU26  Jaw drop	AU27  Mouth stretch

Note: Reprinted from *Integrating Facial, Gesture, and Posture Emotion Expression for a 3D Virtual Agent*, by Shawna Tan and Alexander Nareyek. Copyright (2009) by Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, National University of Singapore. Retrieved from <http://www.ai-center.com/publications/tan-cgames09.pdf>.

With reference to Table 1, Table 2 (Mosbehi.16) explains the six basic emotions and the AUs included.

Table 2: The six basic emotions and the AUs involved

Basic Expressions	Involved Action Units
Surprise	AU1,2,5,15,16,20,26
Fear	AU1,2,4,5,15,20,26
Disgust	AU2,4,9,15,17
Anger	AU2,4,7,9,20,26
Happiness	AU1,6,12,14
Sadness	AU1,4,15,23

Note: Reprinted from **INTEGRATING FACIAL, GESTURE, AND POSTURE EMOTION**

1.2 Statement of the problem

The driving force of this paper is to examine the hidden violence behind non-verbal cues in *the Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) via a multimodal semiotic analysis of the film using Burn's multimodal theory of the moving image.

The reason behind the selection of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* stems from the fact that it involves violence, suspense, and gore through non-verbal cues. For instance, according to Clover, the selected film seeks to generate the viewers' fear and tension through the killer's physical violence and the heroine's emotional and physical pain (1992). Clover further suggests that the villain's aggressiveness is not simply gratuitous but is used to convey hidden gender stereotypes.

Using Burn's multimodal theory of the moving image to analyze *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* can uncover the hidden implications of the non-verbal cues and their relationship with violence. Additionally, this semiotic approach enables to delve deeper into the victimization of the female character in the film.

1.3 Research questions

The specific research questions can be summarized as following:

1. What are the non-verbal cues in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003)?
2. How do embodied modes represent violence in the selected film?
3. How does violence represent female powerlessness in the film under scrutiny ?

2. Methodology

This section sheds light on the research qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, It also focuses on the general framework used to analyze the selected film. The present study relies on Burn's multimodal theory of the moving image.

Therefore, the corpus under survey consists of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which is an American horror film released in 2003. It hinges around a group of friends traveling through rural Texas who stumble upon a family of cannibalistic murderers, including the chainsaw-wielding Leatherface. The friends are hunted and killed one by one, with Leatherface dismembering his victims using his chainsaw.

With reference to the website <https://rarbggo.org/torrents.php?category=movies>, it appears that the selected film is among the most violent horror films released in 2003, and hence comes the claim that it has influenced the horror genre, serving as the model for other horror movies to follow.

The analysis of the film relies on Burn's s multimodal theory. What is useful about this approach is that it enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the hidden violence behind characters' gestures, bodily movements and facial expressions.

Moreover, analyzing the selected horror film relies on a quantitative method. It shows the most frequent Action Unit in the movie under examination. Thus, the frequency distribution test is used in order to guarantee the reliability of the analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Results

Leatherface terrorizes his female victims by using a range of violent gestures in the film under examination . As an illustration, Pepper and Morgan are among the female characters that Leatherface attacks with a chainsaw. He uses the chainsaw in the purpose of terrorizing and killing his victims.

Several female characters, namely Pepper and Andy ,are pulled across the ground by the killer. The idea that the women are defenseless and at the attacker's mercy is reinforced by this move. In point of fact , he hides his identity and intimidates his victims by wearing a mask fashioned of human flesh. The mask, a representation of his violent and cruel tendencies, heightens the tension and horror in the movie.

The Table below illustrates a manual frequency distribution test to count Ekman's Action Units (AUs) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), along with their corresponding emotions:

Table 3: A frequency distribution test to count Ekman's Action Units (AUs) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)*

AUs	Frequency	Emotion
1	32	Fear/Surprise
2	17	Anger
4	12	Anger
6	7	Happiness
12	5	Happiness

As illustrated in Table 3, the most frequent Action Units in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)* are fear and anger. However, there are also instances of Action Units of ,happiness, and, which are denoted by AUs 6 and 12. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003)*'s most frequent action units (AUs) of fear may be due to the horror genre to which the movie belongs. The selected film is a horror movie that uses graphic violence and gory details to terrorize and frighten viewers. This creates a frightful environment that makes spectators feel anxious and fearful.

In addition to the facial expressions of fear, characters' gestures and movements incorporate into the film a sense of violence and terror. As an explanation, Leatherface attacks violently his victims. For instance, in one scene, he uses his chainsaw to kill Erin' boyfriend with his chainsaw without mercy. In another scene, Pepper and Erin are attacked and killed by the villain in a fierce manner. He uses his chainsaw to slash through their bodies. By doing so, the killer uses his chainsaw to please his sadistic desires for killing his female victims. That is why he reveals his pleasure of murdering them by aggressively swinging it.

Characters' facial expressions of fear and Leatherface's violent gestures are used to evoke the viewers' feelings of terror and convey female helplessness and vulnerability. They are portrayed as simple prey for the killer's lust for violence. They are depicted as passive, weak and defenceless in the face of Leatherface's masculine power. By painting this picture of a subservient woman, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* unwraps the gender stereotypes within a Western patriarchal society.

In this manner, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is about the power of non-verbal communication to generate fear, uncover the hidden violence and convey female subservience. Thus, non-verbal cues can be more powerful than words. Consequently, embodied modes, such as movement, gestures, and facial expressions, can significantly influence how viewers perceive and respond to a horror movie.

3.1 Discussion

The results of the manual frequency distribution test on Ekman's Action Units

(AUs) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) shed light on the predominant emotions portrayed in the film. Fear and anger emerge as the most prevalent AUs, resonating with the horror genre's intention to elicit anxiety and terror among viewers. However, the inclusion of happiness AUs suggests a nuanced emotional palette, perhaps reflecting the complexity of characters and narrative arcs within the film.

The recurring theme of fear aligns with the visual elements presented in the film, where Leatherface employs violent gestures to terrorize his female victims. The chainsaw, a recurring motif, becomes a tool not only for physical harm but also for intensifying the emotional distress of the characters and, by extension, the audience. The aggressive and sadistic nature of Leatherface's actions exemplifies the power of non-verbal communication to evoke terror and heighten suspense.

The violent acts committed by Leatherface, particularly against female characters like Pepper, Morgan, and Erin, contribute to the portrayal of women as helpless and at the mercy of the male aggressor. The film employs gender stereotypes, depicting women as passive, weak, and defenseless in the face of masculine power. This portrayal aligns with broader societal expectations and norms, revealing the underlying gender dynamics within a Western patriarchal context.

The embodiment of fear through characters' facial expressions and Leatherface's violent gestures serves a dual purpose in the film. On one hand, it generates a visceral response from the audience, immersing them in the horror experience. On the other hand, it conveys a socio-cultural commentary on power dynamics and gender roles. By choosing non-verbal cues, the film communicates the unspeakable horrors of masculine violence and female vulnerability, transcending the limitations of verbal language.

In addition to that in the selected film, the exploration of Leatherface's body language unveils a complex interplay of dominance and power dynamics. Through meticulous analysis of his posture, movements, and physical presence during violent encounters, we can discern how these non-verbal cues contribute to the portrayal of masculine power. Leatherface's imposing stature serves to accentuate the vulnerability of his female victims, underscoring the physical dominance inherent in the perpetuation of violence. By scrutinizing these subtleties, we gain insights into the nuanced ways in which non-verbal communication shapes the narrative around masculinity and its implications for gender dynamics.

Beyond the evident fear and anger depicted in the characters' facial expressions, an examination of Leatherface's non-verbal cues reveals a more insidious layer of emotional manipulation. Instances where facial expressions are employed to instill confusion or intensify the terror experienced by victims provide a deeper understanding of the psychological aspects of violence. The

film's deliberate use of non-verbal emotional cues adds a nuanced dimension to the narrative, showcasing how the face becomes a canvas for the manipulation of emotions and contributing to the overall impact of the horror depicted.

Furthermore, silence, as a non-verbal cue, plays a significant role in perpetuating gender stereotypes in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The limited vocalization of female victims, whether stemming from fear or imposed silence, reinforces the narrative of their helplessness. The deliberate silencing of women in the face of violence contributes to the broader societal stereotype of women as voiceless and powerless. This aspect of non-verbal communication becomes a poignant tool in shaping the gender dynamics within the film, portraying women as lacking agency and struggling to assert their voices in the face of brutal aggression.

The film employs silence as a visceral element to underscore the vulnerability of female characters. The limited vocalization of these women, whether it emerges from genuine fear or is imposed by external forces, becomes a powerful visual metaphor for their perceived helplessness. This intentional silence resonates not only within the diegetic world of the film but also extends its reach, symbolizing a broader societal expectation that seeks to confine women to a role of passivity. The absence of their voices amplifies their vulnerability, reinforcing the notion that women, particularly in the face of violence, are expected to remain mute and powerless.

The deliberate silencing of women within the narrative contributes to the perpetuation of broader societal stereotypes that depict women as voiceless and lacking agency. This silence becomes emblematic of the historical suppression of women's voices, reflecting a patriarchal construct that attempts to keep women confined within predefined roles. By strategically utilizing silence as a non-verbal cue, the film becomes a mirror reflecting the societal norms that have perpetuated the idea of women as subservient and unable to assert themselves, especially in moments of crisis.

By doing so, silence underscores the complexities of power dynamics and gender roles. The film under examination suggests that the silence imposed on female characters is not just a consequence of individual fear but is a reflection of systemic forces that limit their capacity to vocalize their experiences and resist violence. In this way, silence transcends its immediate function within the plot, transforming into a nuanced commentary on the societal expectations that have historically muffled women's voices.

In *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), the deliberate use of silence not only amplifies the vulnerability of female characters but also renders them as speakless bodies within the narrative. The strategic limitation of vocalization transforms these women into more than mere victims; it encapsulates them as entities whose voices are systematically suppressed, reducing them to silent figures in the face of brutality. The film's choice to make these characters speakless bodies transcends a mere absence of dialogue; it symbolizes their

reduction to passive vessels, unable to articulate their experiences or resist the aggression imposed upon them.

The speakless bodies become a representation of the societal norms that dictate the roles women are expected to play. The deliberate silencing of these characters contributes to the film's thematic exploration of gender dynamics, portraying women not only as victims of physical violence but also as individuals stripped of their agency to communicate and resist. The enforced silence becomes a forceful tool that reinforces traditional stereotypes, portraying women as silent witnesses to their own victimization and reinforcing a narrative that renders them voiceless in the face of male aggression.

In this way, the transformation of female characters into speakless bodies through the strategic use of silence adds a layer of complexity to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* exploration of gender dynamics. By portraying women not just as victims but as individuals systematically denied the ability to articulate their experiences, the film underscores the broader societal constraints that perpetuate gender stereotypes and limit women's agency. The speakless bodies stand as a stark visual representation of the systemic forces that have historically stifled women's voices, contributing to the film's profound commentary on the multifaceted nature of gender oppression.

What merits attention that the non-verbal cues depict the masculine dominance and control in the physical confrontations between Leatherface and his female victims. The film reveals scenes where the villain physically subdues and overpowers his targets, utilizing his strength and the menacing presence of the chainsaw as extensions of his masculine power. Analysis of these physical encounters unveils the gratification derived from exerting dominance over the helpless and defenseless female characters, emphasizing the non-verbal language of control and sadistic pleasure.

Furthermore, examining Leatherface's facial expressions during violent acts reveals a disturbing blend of ecstasy and male violence, providing critical indicators of the sadistic pleasure he derives from inflicting harm. Close-ups and framing techniques capture the nuanced emotions on the villain's face, emphasizing the emotional pleasure derived from the visual and psychological impact on his victims. Through these non-verbal cues, the narrative explores the intertwining of masculinity, violence, and the perverse enjoyment that underscores the chilling character dynamics within the film.

By doing so, the film adopts a theatrical approach to violence, where Leatherface's sadistic pleasure is heightened through performative gestures. The intentional blending of horror and spectacle transforms acts of violence into a macabre performance. Leatherface's theatricality in wielding the chainsaw or wearing the human-flesh mask emphasizes the connection between the sadistic pleasure derived from female fear and the visual dramatization of his actions. This theatricality becomes an integral aspect of the non-verbal language

employed in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, adding layers to the portrayal of the villain's perverse enjoyment in the cinematic narrative.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the present study brings to light the symbolic value of non-verbal clues in uncovering violence and depicting female subservience. It communicates gender dynamics in *the Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The semiotic analysis of the film clarifies the movie's examination of power relationships and its depiction of gender roles in the horror genre. Examining Leatherface's body language in 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' (2003) reveals a disturbing portrayal of dominance and power dynamics, emphasizing the vulnerability of his female victims. Beyond overt expressions, the film intricately delves into the subtleties of Leatherface's emotional manipulation, adding psychological depth to the narrative. Silence emerges as a poignant non-verbal cue, perpetuating gender stereotypes and symbolizing the broader suppression of women's voices within societal constructs. This deliberate silence becomes a powerful tool, shaping gender dynamics by portraying women as speechless bodies grappling with imposed quietude. The deliberate theatricality of violence becomes integral to the non-verbal language, transforming horrifying acts into a macabre performance that heightens the impact of masculine violence and underscores the vulnerability of women. In this intricate symphony of non-verbal cues, 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' transcends verbal limits, effectively communicating the unspeakable horrors ingrained in the fabric of gendered violence and the chilling essence of the horror experience. The paper's overall contribution is to highlight the significance of non-verbal cues in horror films like 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre'. It demonstrates the role that characters' facial expressions, bodily movements and gestures have in inspiring fear, exposing covert acts of violence, and delivering underlying messages about gender and power relationships. Consequently, through the language of the body, the film transcends limits of words to communicate the unspeakable horrors of the masculine violence and the female weakness via non-verbal cues.

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