



## Semiotic Analysis of Absurdism Through The Main Character in The Film Trainspotting

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**Abstract:** *This study is entitled Semiotic Analysis of Absurdism through the Main Character in the Film Trainspotting. The discussion touches upon the concept of absurdism and how it is reflected through signs in the film Trainspotting (1996), directed by Danny Boyle. The film portrays the life of Mark Renton, a heroin addict living in 1990s Scotland, who struggles to find meaning in an indifferent world. This research analysed the denotative and connotative signs that reflect the main character's struggle with absurdism and how these signs portray the character's responses to the absurd, whether through escape or rebellion. This study employed Roland Barthes' (1991) theory of two-level semiotics to analyse the denotative and connotative meanings of signs, and Albert Camus' (1955) theory of absurdism to interpret the character's existential responses. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected by watching the film and analysing both verbal and non-verbal signs using Barthes' semiotic framework. These findings indicate that Trainspotting contains strong elements of absurdism that can be uncovered through semiotic analysis.*

**Keywords:** *Absurdism, Existentialism, Film studies, Philosophy, Semiotics*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the study of signs and how they convey meaning to their perceivers (de Saussure, 1959). Ferdinand de Saussure, a key figure in the field, introduced a theory in Course in General Linguistics that defines a sign as a dyadic relationship between a signifier (the material form) and a signified (the mental concept) (Cobley & Jansz, 2012). The link between the two is arbitrary, meaning that a sign's meaning comes from its relationship to other signs within a broader system.

Saussure's dyadic model laid the groundwork for later semioticians like Roland Barthes. Barthes analyzed the denotative elements of signs to reveal how their connotative meanings transform bourgeois culture into a universal norm. He developed a two-level semiotic system: the original sign becomes the denotative sign, which then serves as the connotative signifier, and interpretation completes the connotative sign as the connotative signified. Barthes argued that these connotations create 'myths' in the sign system.

Although Barthes initially used his framework to analyze how bourgeois myths naturalize themselves in society, his method has since been adapted to explore other topics in texts and films. For example, the study Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis in Turning Red Movie (Tanzil & Andriano, 2023) examines interpersonal communication between a mother

and daughter, while Noviana (2021) analyzes masculinity in Japanese men in film using Barthes' method. This demonstrates Barthes' method as a reliable tool for analyzing various topics.

Philosophy often addresses timeless questions, such as how one should live their life (Sellars, 1992). Absurdism, a concept developed by Albert Camus, examines the tension between humanity's search for meaning and a world that offers none (Mulagaleti, 2024; Permana & Kustanti, 2022). Camus argued that escape from this condition is illegitimate, whether through suicide or philosophical resignation. Instead, he advocated accepting and rebelling against absurdity to live authentically (Camus, 1955).

Camus' works like *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, written during or after World War II, reflect widespread feelings of meaninglessness. Other writers, such as Samuel Beckett with *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and earlier figures like Søren Kierkegaard and Franz Kafka, also explored absurdity. Thus, absurdism is a recurring theme in cultural works about the search for meaning in a meaningless world.

A more recent example is the film *Trainspotting*, directed by Danny Boyle and based on Irvine Welsh's novel. The film, which has become a cult classic, portrays Scottish youth grappling with addiction amid working-class struggles, reflecting the drug epidemic and economic hardship of 1990s Scotland (Goss, 2021; Stone, 2017). The protagonist, Mark Renton, and his friends turn to heroin as an escape, illustrating their philosophical struggle with absurdity and their response through philosophical suicide.

While studies like *Embracing The Absurd Condition of Existence in Samuel Beckett's Endgame Characters* (2022) have examined absurdism, they have not used a semiotic framework. Additionally, *Trainspotting* has not been analyzed semiotically for its depiction of characters struggling with absurdity. Despite the use of semiotics in film analysis, the intersection of absurdism and semiotics remains unexplored, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Previous research, such as Skalstad's Marxist analysis of alienation in *Trainspotting* (2020), offers valuable context on the film's socioeconomic background, highlighting issues of powerlessness and meaninglessness within the framework of Thatcherite neoliberalism. However, this study diverges by employing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to examine how denotative and connotative signs in the film reveal characters' rebellion or resignation in response to existential absurdity.

Research on absurdism, such as that by Sumapouw and by Permana & Kustanti, applies Camus' philosophy to literature and theater, illustrating how characters confront life's inherent meaninglessness. However, these studies typically use moral-philosophical approaches and seldom focus on film or integrate semiotic frameworks.

This study is grounded in two main theories, semiotics and absurdism. Semiotics was first developed by de Saussure (1959) was later expanded by Barthes, adding upon how signs produce meaning through denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1991; Barthes & Heath, 1977). Absurdism, based on Camus' philosophy, explores the conflict between humanity's quest for meaning and the indifferent nature of the world, highlighting responses such as rebellion, escapism, or as what Camus considers as the most grave, suicide (Camus, 1955; Foley, 2014).

The theoretical framework of this study combines Barthes' semiotic model and Camus' theory of absurdism to analyze *Trainspotting*. Barthes' framework is used to decode the denotative and connotative meanings of signs, while Camus' philosophy interprets the existential struggles depicted in the film. By integrating these approaches, the study aims to reveal how *Trainspotting*'s characters navigate and respond to the existential absurdity of their reality, either by seeking escape or by embracing rebellion. This approach fills a gap in previous research by providing a structured semiotic analysis of absurdism in film.

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a semiotic analysis to examine the film *Trainspotting* (1996), directed by Danny Boyle and adapted from Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel, focusing on its thematic exploration of addiction and absurdism. The film was selected due to its rich portrayal of existential struggles faced by working-class youths in 1990s Britain, and also for its cultural renown in its time (Stone, 2017). The full film serves as the primary data source, supplemented by key clips accessed via YouTube for efficient scene identification, and the official screenplay by John Hodge was used as a reference for verbal data.

Data collection involved multiple viewings of the film to understand its narrative context and identify relevant signs. The existing transcript provided verbal signs, while key scenes were chosen for their thematic relevance to absurdism and the characters' responses, such as escape or rebellion. Visual elements were noted and screen-captured to analyze non-verbal signs. These collected signs were then classified using Barthes' semiotic framework, focusing on their denotative and connotative meanings and the underlying myths.

The analysis follows a qualitative approach, emphasizing the exploration of complex themes rather than numerical data. Denotative signs were identified and linked to specific film timestamps. Their connotative meanings were interpreted through Barthes' two-level semiotic system, highlighting cultural, emotional, and social associations. The characters' reactions to the absurd were examined through the lens of Camus' absurdism theory. To ensure reliability, data verification was conducted by repeatedly checking and cross-referencing the classifications and interpretations.

For presentation, the study treats each selected scene as a *lexia*, following Barthes' concept, allowing a focus on semiotically significant moments rather than traditional scene divisions. Each scene was analyzed according to Barthes' components of a sign: the denotative sign (signifier and signified), the connotative signifier, and the connotative signified, with attention to the myths these signs convey.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which are divided into a results section and a discussion section. The results section shows the summary of data findings found from the film *Trainspotting* in relation to Roland Barthes' two-level model of signification and absurdism. They are presented numerically in the form of a table. The discussion section focuses on the in-depth semiotic analyses of the scenes where the main character has to deal with his absurd circumstances. The analyses explore how signs reflect the existential absurdity depicted in the film and how the main character responds to such occasions..

##### **Philosophical Suicide**

One of the possible responses towards the absurd is finding an escape without resorting to physical, designated by Camus as philosophical suicide. These following scenes show the main character and his friends resorting to sensory addiction to find meaning in life or indulging in philosophical abstractions.

##### **1. Scene [3-1]: "Choose Life"**

**(00:27-02:04)**

Renton: *"Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family, choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin openers."* ... "I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who need reasons when you've got heroin?"

The opening scene shows the Mark Renton being chased by policemen while he begins a monologue in the form of a voice-over. The scene alternates into a part where Renton and his friends are playing five-a-side football. Another part of the scene shows Renton slowly falling into his back while under the influence of heroin. These three parts intersperse and cut into each other to form a single scene. The scene is accompanied an upbeat rock song entitled “Lust for Life” by Iggy Pop.

On the connotative level, Renton’s monologue is sarcastic remark on the capitalistic and consumerist culture that was rampant in Scotland in the 1990s. Neoliberal economic policies of the Thatcher era from 1979 to 1990 had caused hardships for the British lower classes due to stripping of welfare programs while consumerist culture flourished (Goss, 2021). He suggests that such a lifestyle does not fit him, and justifies his use of heroin with a nihilistic attitude by saying that his choice does not need any reason. The way he falls on his back while under the influence of connotes the resignation of his life to drugs and the crime that comes with it. The song upbeat “Lust for Life” brings the connotation that despite his resigned and hopeless attitude to life, Renton has a passion, albeit for his heroin addiction. Thus, the choice to indulge in heroin and not seek any further meaning to his life reflects on Renton’s negative philosophical suicide.

## **2. Scene [3-2]: “You Never Have Enough”**

**(41:20-43:05)**

Renton: *“Because no matter how much you stash or how much you steal, you never have enough. No matter how often you go out and rob and fuck people over you always need to get up and do it all again.”*

Renton reflects on the scene of the baby’s death. He remarks that Sick Boy was likely the father based on his intense grief. Renton notes that not even Sick Boy had a theory to explain what just happened. The group is then shown running through the streets after shoplifting, as Renton monologues that no matter how much they steal or hurt others, it is never enough.

This scene mixes internal monologue and physical movement to show both emotional collapse and the continuation of destructive behavior. Sick Boy’s silence contrasts with his usual arrogance, signalling a break in his detachment. Renton’s comment that no one can explain what happened shows the characters’ failure to construct meaning from their suffering. The shoplifting sequence that follows serves as a return to routine, harm and theft as automatic responses. The myth challenged here is that pain leads to insight or growth. In this case, it simply leads to more running.

Renton's voiceover reveals the emotional emptiness of their lives. Even a tragedy like the death of a child cannot produce understanding or rebellion, only silence and continuation. Renton's line about never having enough points to a deeper void that heroin, crime, or control cannot fill. The characters recognize the absurd, but rather than face it, they continue in avoidance. Their choices reflect yet another instance of negative philosophical suicide, the refusal to create meaning where none exists.

## **Rebellion**

These following scenes represent moments where Renton actively confronts the absurdity of his condition and attempts to regain agency over his life. Unlike philosophical suicide, which is characterized by escape and illusion, rebellion is marked by a willingness to endure suffering with full awareness and without resorting to false meaning. These scenes illustrate Renton's efforts to face reality on his own terms, even when the outcome is uncertain or painful. The following examples of rebellion are analysed using Barthes' two-level semiotic theory, supported by existential interpretation grounded in Camus' concept of the absurd.

### **1. Scene [3-3]: "Relinquishing Junk"**

**(06:15-08:13)**

Renton: *"We called him the mother superior on account of the length of his habit. He knew all about it. On it, off it, he knew it all. Of course I'd have another shot: after all, I had work to do... Relinquishing junk. Stage One: preparation. For this you will need: one room which you will not leave; one mattress; tomato soup, ten tins of; mushroom soup, eight tins of, for consumption cold; ice cream, vanilla, one large tub of; Magnesia, Milk of, one bottle; paracetamol; mouth wash; vitamins; mineral water; Lucozade; pornography; one bucket for urine, one for feces, and one for vomitus; one television; and one bottle of Valium, which I have already procured, from my mother, who is, in her own domestic and socially acceptable way, also a drug addict."*

Renton boards himself inside his room in an attempt to quit heroin on his own. He nails his door shut with wood planks and lists supplies such as soup, a mattress, soft drugs and even containers for bodily emissions. The tone of the scene is ironic but determined, highlighting Renton's commitment to isolating himself from all temptation yet teasing the fact that he will succumb to his desires soon. In voiceover, he reflects on his dealer's long experience with heroin and justifies his own decision to take one final hit before locking himself in, describing it as a necessary task to face what's ahead.

The scene is framed as a moment of personal confrontation. Renton's preparations transform his bedroom into a symbolic battleground, where he intends to face pain and clarity without escape. His voice remains ironic and distant, suggesting emotional detachment, but the effort itself speaks to something sincere. By choosing to withdraw from heroin in isolation, Renton attempts to reclaim control over his life and body. The myth challenged here is the belief that addicts are powerless, incapable of action, or indifferent to change. Renton's behaviour contradicts this, revealing that awareness and good intentions are not foreign to a person struggling with addiction.

This moment marks a clear attempt at rebellion in the existential sense. Rather than blindly continuing his deadly habit or simply despair, Renton chooses to endure his reality directly. Though infused with a sarcastically humorous tone, his decision represents a refusal to continue numbing himself. It is an act of rebellion against the absurd reality of addiction, wherein the addict realizes the depravity of his habit yet is almost powerless to escape its grip. In this scene, he chooses to confront suffering consciously, embodying the first signs of positive existential rebellion.

## **2. Scene [3-4]: "When The Real Battle Starts"**

**(50:50-57:45)**

Renton: *"It seems, however, that I really am the luckiest guy in the world. Several years of addiction right in the middle of an epidemic, surrounded by the living dead, but not me -- I'm negative. It's official. And once the pain goes away, that's when the real battle starts. Depression. Boredom. You feel so fucking low, you'll want to fucking top yourself."*

As Renton's parents bring him back from the hospital, they lock him in his room to make him quit heroin cold turkey. Renton begins to hallucinate vividly in his bed as the physical withdrawal from heroin intensifies. He sees disturbing manifestations of his guilt and trauma, including visions of Baby Dawn, Tommy, and others he has hurt or lost. The hallucinations merge with memories and surreal imagery, turning his bedroom into a mental prison. After enduring intense physical and emotional suffering, the scene shifts quietly to a clinic where Renton receives an HIV test. He is told that his result is negative. He processes the news with a flat voiceover, acknowledging the improbability of his survival, and reflecting that the real struggle only begins once the pain fades. He mentions his depression, boredom, and the desire to die without a chemical escape.

This scene captures a deeper layer of Renton's internal transformation. Unlike previous moments of avoidance or numbness, he fully confronts the consequences of his past: the

damage done to others, the fragility of his own body, and the weight of survival. His hallucinations externalize the internal cost of addiction, presenting guilt not as an idea but as an overwhelming sensory assault. The sterile, quiet tone of the HIV test scene contrasts sharply with the chaos before it, symbolizing the return of clarity and control. Renton's recognition of his own luck does not lead to celebration, but to a moment of sobering reflection. The myth exposed here is that surviving hardship guarantees peace or clarity. Survival alone is not enough to create meaning.

This is a clear act of rebellion. Renton not only endures the physical withdrawal, but also refuses to seek false comfort afterward. He acknowledges the traumatizing situations he had been through, as well as the emotional and existential anguish that he will have to confront. In this moment, he demonstrates that a rebellion is not just about breaking habits or escaping people, but about staying conscious through pain, boredom, and despair. Renton accepts that without heroin, he will face himself and still chooses to continue. The visualisations of his friends as a manifestation of his guilt also hints a sense of solidarity, where he realizes that all their lives are equally absurd. This moment reflects Camus' idea of rebellion as living in full awareness of the absurd, refusing to escape through illusion. Despite the unpleasant nature of the scene, it depicts Renton coming to terms with the absurd and paving the way for a meaningful positive rebellion.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study explores how absurdism is depicted through the main character's perspective in the film *Trainspotting* by employing Roland Barthes' two-level semiotic framework. Specifically, it aimed to identify the denotative and connotative signs in the film that reflect the absurd condition of the main character's life, and to explain how these signs signify his responses to that condition either through philosophical suicide or rebellion.

The findings reveal that the character Renton and his friends are shown grappling with absurdity in various forms throughout the film. Most of the scenes depict Renton and his friends choose to escape from the absurd condition of their lives through heroin addiction, nihilism, or illusion. This is often expressed through signs that connote a rejection of responsibility, avoidance of pain, or surrender to habit. The myth that escape provides relief, or that addiction is a form of identity, is frequently exposed and challenged. In these, Renton begins to confront the absurd without relying on illusion or narcotic comfort. On the other hand, a few scenes reflect his struggle to regain agency through conscious withdrawal, social reintegration, or reflection. Through signs such as determined actions, introspective narration, and symbolic

imagery, these moments express rebellion not as victory, but as a lucid decision to continue living without guarantees of meaning.

Therefore, this study concludes that *Trainspotting* presents a layered semiotic narrative of absurdism through the character of Renton. Barthes' semiotic theory successfully reveals how denotative and connotative signs carry deeper ideological myths about addiction, resistance, and meaning. The character's journey illustrates both philosophical suicide and rebellion as existential responses to the absurd, with the film ultimately portraying rebellion as a fragile but conscious act of agency.

Future research on absurdism and semiotic analysis in film could benefit from expanding the object of study beyond a single character or narrative. While this study focuses on the main character in *Trainspotting*, future research may explore how absurdism is expressed through multiple characters or even across different films. This broader scope would allow for comparisons of how various personalities respond to the absurd and whether certain character types tend to express philosophical suicide or rebellion more consistently.

Another suggestion for future research is to incorporate additional modes of analysis beyond verbal and visual signs. Since films are multimodal texts, including elements such as soundtrack, sound design, editing rhythm, or color grading could offer deeper insights into how absurdism is communicated. These elements may carry symbolic weight or emotional cues that enhance the connotative meaning of a scene. A more comprehensive multimodal approach would enrich semiotic analysis and reveal further layers of meaning that may not be visible through visuals and dialogue alone.

Lastly, expanding the theoretical framework to include other existential thinkers could deepen the philosophical reading of film texts. While this study focuses on Camus' view of absurdism, future research could compare this with perspectives from Sartre, Nietzsche, or Kierkegaard, particularly in relation to rebellion, freedom, and authenticity. This comparative approach could highlight different philosophical attitudes toward meaninglessness and human agency, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how existential themes are constructed and expressed in cinema.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The researcher expresses their upmost gratitude towards the second and third writers of this article. This article was written as part of the author's undergraduate thesis, in which the kind assistance of the second and third writers are instrumental in their guidance.

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