



## Psychological Manipulation in Benoît Delhomme's *Mothers' Instinct* (2024): A Psychoanalytic and Behavioral Perspective

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### Abstract

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Manipulation as a psychological phenomenon often manifests through subtle emotional tactics that distort a victim's perception of reality. *Mothers' Instinct* (2024), directed by Benoît Delhomme, presents a compelling portrayal of this phenomenon through the complex relationship between two mothers, Céline and Alice. The research problem addressed in this study concerns how manipulation is constructed cinematically in the film and how such behavior psychologically impacts the victim. The primary data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, character expressions, and cinematographic elements from *Mothers' Instinct*, which were analyzed to identify both the manipulative tactics used and their psychological consequences. Employing a qualitative approach, the analysis integrates Sigmund Freud's (1923) psychoanalytic theory to explore unconscious motivations and George K. Simon's (1996) modern psychological framework to classify manipulation tactics. The study focuses on two analytical dimensions: (1) the internal psychological drives that shape Céline's manipulative behaviors, and (2) the external strategies she employs to exert control over Alice. The findings reveal that manipulation in the film is primarily conveyed through gaslighting and guilt-tripping, both of which operate covertly to destabilize the victim's emotional balance. These tactics result in significant psychological effects on Alice, most notably reality confusion and anxiety, which impair her ability to assess events objectively. The study highlights how cinema can effectively dramatize psychological manipulation and underscores the broader implications for understanding emotional coercion in interpersonal relationships, particularly within contexts of grief and trauma..

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## INTRODUCTION

Manipulation, as a psychological and social phenomenon, has long attracted scholarly attention across fields such as psychology, literature, and media studies. It refers to an act of influencing or controlling another person's thoughts, emotions, or behaviors through deceptive, coercive, or unfair means, often for personal benefit. In interpersonal relationships, manipulation frequently takes subtle and covert forms that can cause significant emotional harm. As Potter (2006) explains, manipulators often exploit others' emotional vulnerabilities to achieve their desired outcomes. Because manipulation involves both internal psychological dynamics and external behavioral strategies, it offers a rich area for multidisciplinary analysis.

From a psychological perspective, manipulation is closely tied to internal conflicts and unconscious motivations. Psychoanalytic theory provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. According to Freud (1923), unconscious impulses and unresolved emotional experiences can shape an individual's behavior, including a tendency to exert control over others. Complementing this internal perspective, modern psychological approaches categorize manipulation into identifiable tactics such as gaslighting, guilt-tripping, and intimidation (Simon, 1996). These tactics, when used in relationships, can distort a victim's perception of reality and destabilize their emotional well-being.

Although manipulation has been widely discussed in both literary and cinematic scholarship, previous studies tend to emphasize broad patterns of abusive relationships or pathological behavior without closely examining how specific films construct manipulation through narrative, character psychology, and visual design. This presents a research gap: the need for a detailed analysis of how manipulation is cinematically represented and how its psychological effects are dramatized on screen.

*Mothers' Instinct* (2024) provides a significant and timely text for such investigation. Unlike many thrillers that portray manipulation as fundamentally malicious or criminal, the film situates manipulative behavior within the context of maternal grief, trauma, and 1960s domestic life. This setting—marked by rigid gender expectations and a lack of psychological awareness—heightens the emotional stakes and makes manipulation appear both intimate and structurally reinforced. The dynamic between Céline and Alice, two neighbors and close friends, illustrates how grief can trigger complex psychological responses, including covert forms of emotional control. The film's nuanced portrayal of these behaviors offers fertile ground for examining the intersection between psychoanalytic motivation and observable manipulation tactics.

Given this context, the present study focuses on how *Mothers' Instinct* constructs manipulation through both internal psychological drives and external behavioral strategies. The study employs Freud's (1923) psychoanalysis to explore Céline's unconscious motivations and George K. Simon's (1996) framework to classify the strategies she uses to influence and destabilize Alice.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach within the field of film studies to examine manipulation as represented in a cinematic narrative. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex psychological phenomena, such as manipulation, because it allows an in-depth understanding of characters' motivations, emotional states, and interpersonal dynamics

(Flick, 2009). In the context of film, this approach enables the researcher to interpret how psychological processes are constructed through narrative structure, visual composition, and performance.

The primary data of this study were taken from Benoît Delhomme's *Mothers' Instinct* (2024). The data included selected scenes, shots, dialogues, character expressions, scene compositions, camera angles, and other cinematographic elements that contribute to the depiction of manipulation and its psychological impacts. Screenshot-based visual data were used to capture key frames from the film so that important visual details—such as facial expressions, body language, spatial arrangements, and framing—could be examined repeatedly and systematically. These screenshots also functioned as visual evidence to support the analytical claims made in the discussion.

Because qualitative film analysis is interpretive, the researcher's subjectivity plays an important role in reading and organizing the data. The researcher draws upon theoretical knowledge, previous studies, and personal viewing experience to identify and interpret scenes that indicate manipulation. This subjectivity is acknowledged as part of the analytic process and is guided and constrained by the theoretical frameworks of Freud's psychoanalysis and Simon's theory of psychological manipulation.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was carried out through several steps:

1. Watching the film carefully, intensively, and repeatedly to understand the plot, character relationships, and emerging psychological conflicts.
2. Identifying scenes that explicitly or implicitly depict manipulative behavior, emotional coercion, or psychological tension between characters.
3. Taking screenshots of selected scenes that show important visual cues (e.g., gaze, posture, distance between characters, and significant objects) and noting the corresponding time codes and lines of dialogue.

In this study, the units of analysis consisted of:

- specific scenes and shots,
- segments of dialogue, and
- identifiable manipulation tactics (such as gaslighting and guilt-tripping).

### **Data Reduction**

After the initial collection, the data were reduced by selecting only those scenes and screenshots that clearly indicated manipulation or its psychological effects on the victim. Repetitive or less relevant scenes were excluded. The remaining data were then organized into thematic categories based on:

1. types of manipulation tactics used by Céline, and
2. psychological impacts experienced by Alice (e.g., reality confusion and anxiety).

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis followed a descriptive qualitative method using thematic and scene analysis. First, each selected scene and screenshot was described in detail, focusing on dialogue, facial expressions, body language, camera angle, and spatial arrangement. These descriptions were then interpreted using Freud's (1923) psychoanalytic theory to explore unconscious

drives such as grief, loss, and internal conflict that may motivate Céline's manipulative behavior. Next, Simon's (1996) framework of modern psychological manipulation was applied to classify the observable tactics (e.g., gaslighting, guilt-tripping) and to examine how these tactics function within the interpersonal dynamics of the film.

Finally, the findings were synthesized into two main analytic dimensions: (1) the portrayal of manipulation through narrative and visual strategies, and (2) the psychological impacts on the victim. The results are presented in descriptive form, supported by selected dialogues and screenshots that illustrate and strengthen the argument.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

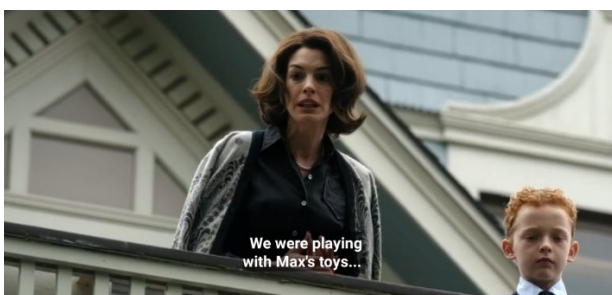
This section presents the findings of the study and the discussion of manipulation in Benoît Delhomme's *Mothers' Instinct* movie (2024). The analysis is divided into two parts: (1) portrayal of manipulation in *Mothers' Instinct* (2024) by Benoît Delhomme, and (2) the impacts of manipulation on other character in *Mothers' Instinct* (2024) by Benoît Delhomme. The discussion depicts manipulation of the character and the impacts on other character.

### Portrayal of manipulation in *Mothers' Instinct*

In the case of manipulation, an individual engages in manipulative behavior towards others for a various of reasons, there are multiple factors that contributed to do manipulation. The phenomenon of manipulation has been shown to have multiple causes, such as grief (sense of loss or trauma). The experience of loss serves as a significant catalyst, prompting the main character to engage in manipulative behaviors. The manipulation can be portrayed by the tactics employed by the perpetrator against the victim. Manipulation tactics refers to covert and devious methods employed by manipulators to influence the thoughts, feelings, or actions of others, without the knowledge of the target, for the manipulator's personal gain. According to Simon (1992) there are several types of manipulation tactics, some of which are gaslighting and guilt tripping.

Gaslighting is the most common tactic in manipulation cases. Gaslighting is a form of manipulation tactic where a person consciously makes others doubt their own sanity, reality and memory. Gaslighting was a threat to the victims' emotions, because gaslighting behavior is difficult to recognize. Gaslighting can be done verbally and non-verbally, verbal is done through direct words, while non-verbal is done with direct actions. According to Simon (in Sommer podcast, 2022) "gaslighting as a certain kind of crazy-making, where makes the victim believe and mistrust themselves".

One of the earliest instances of gaslighting occurs when Céline let Theo play near the balcony where Max fell and stand up to see Alice is screaming to her son to move away from the edge of the balcony. Then Céline said that she had accompanied Theo upstairs and that they were just playing. Céline says, "*We were playing with Max's toys...*" [00:40:56].



Picture 1. Céline looked toward the bushes in shock.

Gaslighting can happen anytime by anyone. “Gaslighting was a threat to the victims’ emotions” (Sweet, 2019). The scene shows that Céline’s attempt to minimize Alice’s legitimate concern and to make her feel irrational for reacting, by framing the situation as innocent play, Céline subtly implies that Alice is overreacting. The word “*just*” is a minimizer, implying that Alice’s reaction is excessive or unwarranted, thereby planting the first seeds of self-doubt. Gaslighting, as defined by Simon (1996), is a form of covert aggression that seeks to make the victim doubt their own memory, perception, or sanity. This moment marked the beginning of Céline’s manipulative behavior. From that point on, she began to change from a grieving mother into someone who tried to control those around her.

The next scene of gaslighting is follows by Céline looks at Alice reaction to her being shocks, and she says, “I’m sorry we scared you. We’ll be right down.” [00:41:08].



Picture 2. Céline looked at Alice and apologizes.

The expression and also an apology she made. Céline used as a trick to make Alice not to think it was one of her ways of controlling her actions in the future. Céline’s apology was a subtle strategy to ease Alice’s suspicions. The apology establishes the template for all future interactions, Céline provokes, Alice reacts. This cycle of provocation and pacification becomes a feedback loop that normalizes Alice’s self-doubt and entrenches Céline’s control. The apology is not a moment of resolution, but a strategic reset and a soft reboot of the relationship. Therefore, this strategy became a catalyst for Céline to exert control over the situation and their relationship.

The following manipulation tactics by a main character is guilt-tripping. Guilt-tripping is a manipulation tactic that aims to make others feel guilty for their actions towards the perpetrator. This technique capitalizes on the victim’s feelings of guilt so that the victim is forced to fulfill the perpetrator’s wishes to alleviate the guilt. According to Simon (1996) “the more conscientious the potential victim, the more effective guilt as a weapon. This tactic is also one of the most common in cases of manipulation, as making others feel guilty through their emotion is an effective way for the perpetrator to fulfil their desires.

There are both direct and indirect statements in this guilt tripping techniques. Direct statements will blatantly state that the victim’s actions are wrong or indifferent, whereas indirect statements the perpetrator uses statements through comments that make the victim doubt their own actions or intentions. In this film, most of the statements Céline used is indirect, which she only uses several words to make Alice fall for her trick. The first display of guilt-tripping is when Céline approached Alice to find out if something was wrong because Alice was acting cold towards her. Alice looked annoyed and asked Céline, if she had put Theo on the balcony just to test her.

Céline feigned tears as a strategic measure to reinforce the tactic she was employing and



said “*I use him to test you?*” [00:46:46].



Picture 3. Céline cries to makes Alice feels bad for her words.

The word “*I use him to test you?*” [00:46:46], Céline use a word to made Alice felt guilt for what she thought, to make it more realistic Céline used a crying as her weapon, by phrasing her response as a question, Céline subtly shifted the burden back onto Alice. This made Alice doubt her judgment and feel guilty for suspecting Céline. Céline's tears were intended solely to reinforce her actions. According to Simon (1996), “guilt-tripping is a kind of intimidation tactic”. This technique capitalizes on the victim's feelings of responsibility so that the victim is compelled to fulfill the perpetrator's wishes in order to reduce the guilt.

In social psychology, guilt tripping is often identified as an interpersonal influence mechanism that utilizes the social and emotional norms of the victim to create internalized pressure. In a systematic aspect, the perpetrator will consciously or unconsciously create a scenario where the victim will feel responsible for a situation that is not in their control, “the more conscientious the potential victim, the more effective guilt as a weapon” (Simon, 1996)

Another display of guilt-tripping is when Alice searching for a proof in Céline house, but she got caught by Céline. Céline felt that Alice had crossed the line, and she used the self-pity strategy to make Alice feel guilty for doing the wrong thing again, she says “*I just lost my son, my only child*” [01:04:59].



Picture 4. Céline pity herself in front of Alice.

The gaze shown by Céline conveys true sadness for the death of her child, but it is also a way for her to regain control of Alice's emotion. According to Humeny (2013), guilt trip elicited sympathy from others superficially through self-pity or use an insincere display of sadness. Alice's suspicions of Céline are already in place, which in turn causes Céline to experience a degree of weakness. However, as the scene progresses, Céline regains the upper hand, allowing her to resume her manipulation of Alice. This occurrence transpires when Céline anticipates Theo's well-being, and once again she makes Alice doubt her own perception.

These subtle manipulations precede the more overt forms of gaslighting and guilt-

tripping, laying the foundation for the mental and emotional pathways that ultimately result in Alice's decision to refrain from speaking up. Therefore, the seemingly arbitrary emotional outbursts are, in fact, a deliberate method of controlling Alice. It is evident that every word, pause, and tear is a deliberate move in the long process of taking away Alice's freedom.

### **The impacts of manipulation on other character in *Mothers' Instinct***

The impact of manipulation is the result of the ways the manipulator affects the victim. The impact on the victim can occur due to the instinctual drive of the super ego by the outside world which is influenced by the tactics of the perpetrator. In psychoanalysis, the super-ego is the part of the human personality that controls the ego through guilt and moral standards. This makes the victim of manipulation instinctively think that they must reciprocate the perpetrator's tactics in accordance with the provisions learned since childhood, which will have an impact on them. These impacts led to the confusion of reality and anxiety for the victim and a goal for the perpetrator. According to Simon (1996) "victims of manipulation often experience anxiety and confusion, which makes it difficult for them to think or act clearly and rationally".

Reality confusion is a psychological condition in which victims of manipulation experience confusion in distinguishing between reality and their memories (Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024). This effect arises as a result of consistent lies and the systematic planting of doubt about the victim's reality through strategies such as gaslighting, causing the victim to question their own memories and decisions. In psychoanalysis, this condition occurs when conflicts arise between the id, superego, and the external demands of reality, disturbing the ego, which the conflict between these aspects arises due to the strategies used by the manipulator. According to Freud (1923) "the ego is not master in its own house", this shows that if the ego fails to balance these three aspects, it will result in confusion about reality.

This phenomenon, illustrated in the film, where Alice starts to question her decision not to blame Céline and feels guilty for what she have done to her. It can be seen on the display, when Alice starts to doubt her own words and actions towards Céline. This happens when Céline uses guilt-tripping tactics, causing Alice to lose control and feel guilty about her behaviour towards her. [00:47:01].



Picture 5. Alice feels terrible and apologized.

In this scene Alice expression showed that she felt sorry for what she had done to Céline, not knowing that this just one of Céline trick to get Alice attention and make her feel guilty for everything. Alice's sentence in this scene describe how Alice emotion confuses to the reality. In the context of psychological manipulation, reality confusion is an internal condition that blurs the line between fact and fiction, not just a momentary confusion. The changed in Alice's behavior is an illustrative example of the manner in which manipulation exerts its influence, thus affording the manipulator a distinct advantage in their capacity to control the victim.

The victim that experiencing reality confusion may doubt their memory and lose control over their own decisions, this condition will usually question past events and accept narratives

or events fabricated by the manipulator. Therefore, reality confusion is not just a momentary state, but rather a form of damage to the victim's perception of reality. This damage makes the victim vulnerable to external control.

The next impact of manipulation is anxiety. Anxiety is a complex emotional state characterized by feelings of fear and worry. In psychoanalysis, anxiety is not merely a normal emotional response; rather, it is a warning mechanism generated by the ego when confronted with threats from the id, moral demands from the superego, or pressure from external reality. According to Freud (1923) "the ego is the actual seat of anxiety". It described that the ego functions as the primary locus for the experiential manifestation of anxiety. The ego, which functions as a bridge between the instinctual drives of the id, the morals of the superego, and external reality, finds itself in a state of internal conflict, grappling with divergent pressures. When the ego is unable to maintain equilibrium between these demands, internal conflicts emerge and cause anxiety.

The persistence of these feeling can disrupt daily activities and relationship, and leaving the individual caught in a cycle of fear and uncertainty. In this section the display will show how the anxiety influenced the character. The scene showing, after Alice had a big argument with her husband about her belief, that Céline had killed her mother-in-law, because she found something to proof. This triggered Alice's worries that Céline might also kill her child. Alice mumbling with herself, she says "*I know I did*" [00:59:09].



Picture 6. Alice breathed heavily and mumbling.

This scene described that anxiety does not merely stem from doubt, but involves into a profound fear that heavily burdens both her emotions and thoughts. Alice's breathing sound showed how the anxiety affect Alice's reality. The sentence "*I know I did*", means that Alice tries to deal with her own mind, and showed that anxiety can be a damage to someone's mind and reality. This moment underscores the destructive power of anxiety, which traps Alice in a cycle of uncertainty.

Common symptoms include persistent anxiety without an identifiable cause, physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, and muscle tension. Individuals with this condition experience a decline in confidence in their own perceptions and judgments, which significantly hinders their ability to think clearly. In conclusion, anxiety has the potential to impact the psychological defense mechanisms of victims. In the long term, this condition has the potential to result in an increased susceptibility to external control.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Benoît Delhomme's *Mothers' Instinct* demonstrates how cinematic narrative and visual composition can effectively dramatize the complexities of psychological manipulation. Through the combined application of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Simon's



framework of modern manipulation tactics, this study reveals that Céline's manipulative behavior is rooted in deep unresolved trauma following the loss of her son. Her grief becomes an unconscious drive that shapes her interactions, leading her to employ covert strategies such as gaslighting and guilt-tripping to regain emotional control and stability. These tactics are not portrayed as isolated acts of malice, but rather as psychological mechanisms emerging from profound internal conflict.

The findings also highlight the significant psychological consequences experienced by the victim, Alice, who gradually develops reality confusion and anxiety as a result of Céline's persistent manipulation. These impacts underscore how emotional coercion can destabilize a person's sense of judgment, disrupt their ability to interpret events accurately, and erode their psychological resilience. The film thus offers a compelling illustration of how manipulation functions both internally—through unconscious impulses—and externally—through deliberate behavioral strategies.

This study contributes to film-based psychological analysis by demonstrating how manipulation can be read through a dual theoretical lens that integrates unconscious motivation with observable tactics. It also shows how cinematic techniques—such as framing, expression, and spatial arrangement—play an essential role in representing psychological tension and emotional control.

However, this research is limited to one film and a set of selected scenes. It does not account for broader comparative patterns across similar cinematic works or different cultural portrayals of manipulation. Future studies may expand this analysis by comparing *Mothers' Instinct* with other films that depict trauma-based manipulation, or by applying additional theoretical frameworks such as feminist psychoanalysis or cognitive film theory to enrich the interpretation.

Ultimately, *Mothers' Instinct* illustrates how grief, psychological vulnerability, and interpersonal dynamics can intertwine to create a powerful narrative of manipulation—one that speaks to the emotional fragility of human relationships and the unseen consequences of unresolved trauma.

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