

Semiotic Simplification of the Holocaust: Pedagogical Prospects and Cognitive Constraints in Young Ecuadorian Audiences

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Abstract

Historical cinema can operate as a powerful mediator of collective memory, but its pedagogical use requires careful distinction between aesthetic fiction, historical knowledge, and classroom mediation. Drawing on Eco's interpretive semiotics, this study analyzes how *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* organizes a child-centered and affectively accessible representation of the Holocaust and examines how this representation is interpreted by young Ecuadorian viewers. The article does not evaluate the film as if it were a documentary or as if fiction were obliged to provide a complete historiographical account. Rather, it asks under what pedagogical conditions this fictional work may function as an introductory cultural artifact for critical historical inquiry. The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive design that triangulates semiotic film analysis, a historiographical baseline, and reception micro-analysis based on two focus groups with young Ecuadorian viewers (n = 20). The findings identify a semiotic trade-off: the film's symbolic condensation and narrative ellipsis foster empathy and moral engagement, while leaving the systemic, bureaucratic, and industrial dimensions of the Final Solution largely dependent on prior knowledge or pedagogical contextualization. The study concludes that the film may be useful as a pedagogical threshold, provided that educators explicitly frame its fictional status, supplement it with historiographical sources, and transform emotional resonance into historically grounded interpretation.

Keywords: historical cinema, Holocaust representation, semiotics, collective memory, youth reception

1. Introduction

The Holocaust remains one of the most harrowing historical events of the twentieth century, defined not only by the scale of the genocide but also by its profound and enduring ethical, social, and cultural ramifications. As documented by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2022), this process originated in 1933 with the ascension of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany, evolving through systematic policies of exclusion and persecution that ultimately culminated in mass extermination during World War II. Given its historical and symbolic complexity, the Holocaust has become a pivotal object of analysis and representation across diverse cultural fields, most notably within the realm of cinema. However, when mediated through popular cinema, this historical complexity may be transformed into simplified affective narratives that facilitate empathy while weakening structural understanding.

While some films adopt a starkly realist aesthetic, exemplified by *Schindler's List* and *Son of Saul*, others employ more accessible narrative frameworks, as seen in *Life Is Beautiful* and *Jojo Rabbit* (Medina, 2020). This distinction is not merely stylistic but fundamentally semiotic: it involves divergent regimes of signification, varying degrees of referential density, and distinct modes of historical intelligibility (Torres Estrada, 2024).

Within this latter tradition, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Herman, 2008), adapted from John Boyne's novel, frames the Holocaust through the lens of childhood innocence. This narrative choice should not be read as an aesthetic defect or as a failure of fiction to behave like documentary testimony. Rather, child focalization is treated here as a semiotic procedure that organizes what can be seen, known, and emotionally processed within the filmic universe. Its pedagogical significance lies in the tension between what the film makes affectively legible and what it leaves historically implicit.

Addressing this gap is essential for international scholarship because Holocaust memory circulates transnationally through cinema, school curricula, streaming platforms, and informal media consumption. The Ecuadorian case is not proposed as a statistically generalizable model of youth reception, but as a localized Latin American site from which to examine how geographical distance, curricular exposure, and cultural mediation shape the decoding of a European traumatic past. From the perspective of Umberto Eco's interpretive semiotics, every cultural artifact functions as a communicative system in which meaning is not inherent, but produced through codes, encyclopedic knowledge, and culturally constrained interpretive cooperation (Eco, 1979, 1995). Accordingly, cinematic representations of the Holocaust should be understood not as transparent reflections of history, but as semiotic constructions that mediate and reorganize historical knowledge.

In this context, the present study employs Eco's semiotic framework to analyze how *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* constructs an accessible fictional representation of the Holocaust and how that representation may be pedagogically mediated. The article therefore makes three delimitations explicit. First, it does not claim that the film should provide a complete account of the Holocaust. Second, it treats simplification as a representational and pedagogical problem only when the film is used as an introductory learning aid. Third, it examines audience reception in order to identify the interpretive consequences of that pedagogical use. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research question: How does *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* construct an affectively accessible semiotic representation of the Holocaust, and how is this representation interpreted by young Ecuadorian audiences when the film is approached as a learning aid?

Cinematic representation operates through a complex interplay of narrative, visual, and semiotic strategies that mediate historical meaning. From a semiotic perspective, the study of signs and their processes of signification, film functions as a structured communicative system governed by culturally shared codes. In this framework, Umberto Eco posits that a sign is any element which, by virtue of social convention, stands for something else (Eco, as cited in Bondanella, 2005, p. 84). Consequently, cinema does not neutrally reproduce historical reality; instead, it reconfigures it through deliberate aesthetic and narrative choices that require active decoding by the spectator.

Within this framework, several mechanisms shape the cinematic representation of the Holocaust. Iconography plays a central role in constructing meaning through culturally recognizable symbols; as López (2005) notes, it operates as a form of "writing in images" (p. 2). Eco (1995) further contends that icons are governed not only by perceptual resemblance but also by established cultural conventions. In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, elements such as the striped uniforms and the barbed-wire fence function as condensed signifiers, reframed through the naïve focalization of the child protagonist. Narrative ellipsis is equally pivotal: understood as the strategic omission of elements within a representational structure (Guizado, 2019), it resonates with Eco's conceptualization of the text as a "lazy machine" (*macchina pigra*) that necessitates interpretive cooperation from the spectator (Eco, 1979, pp. 39–40).

In the film, the omission of explicit brutality accelerates the narrative tempo while simultaneously streamlining historical complexity. Narrative perspective and focalization further delineate meaning: Eco conceptualizes cultural works as "open," inviting a plurality of interpretations (Eco, 1979, as cited in Argüello Guzmán, 2020, p. 8). By restricting the diegetic world to Bruno's circumscribed viewpoint, the film filters historical reality through the prism of childhood ignorance. Finally, aesthetic style, defined as the nexus of formal and thematic elements that characterize a work, reinforces this semiotic system. As Eco (1985) suggests, style functions as an expression of the artist's worldview; in this instance, a restrained visual register and the deliberate avoidance of explicit violence sustain a semiotic regime of innocence.

These strategies are far from neutral; they constitute the formal conditions through which the Holocaust is symbolically constructed and rendered intelligible. Cinema thus plays a decisive role in shaping historical consciousness, particularly in contemporary contexts where direct testimony is increasingly at risk of vanishing (Mendieta Rodríguez, 2020, p. 185). As Galán (2018) contends, film provides students with a vital medium for perceiving both social and historical realities (p. 66), while Bevilacqua (2022, as cited in Rubira-García, 2023) emphasizes that cinematic works actively forge collective understandings of the past (p. 340).

In this study, historical understanding is conceptualized as a dual process. On one hand, it involves a cognitive-informational dimension through which viewers acquire factual knowledge; however, when cinematic narratives are oversimplified or historically imprecise, such knowledge risks becoming distorted (Lorente & Romero, 2021, p. 153). On the other hand, it entails an ethical-emotional dimension, as cinema can foster empathy and provoke critical reflection. Testimonial traditions, particularly those associated with Primo Levi, underscore the pivotal role of memory in confronting human violence (Langer, 2019). Consequently, cinema emerges as a powerful yet ambivalent pedagogical tool, the effectiveness of which depends heavily on critical mediation (Noboa, 2024, p. 24). Moreover, as Lénárt (2023) contends, film constitutes a central pillar of historical memory, profoundly shaping the ways in which

societies internalize and interpret the past (p. 3).

Within this context, narrative and historical simplification functions as a mediating mechanism between cinematic representation and historical understanding. Defined here as the selective reduction, omission, or condensation of historical complexity to enhance narrative accessibility, simplification may facilitate initial comprehension while also requiring contextual supplementation. This does not mean that fiction is deficient because it privileges emotion, character, or restricted viewpoint. Art often invites spectators to experience another consciousness rather than to receive a complete explanatory apparatus. The problem arises only when an artwork is transferred into educational settings as if it were self-sufficient historical knowledge. In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, simplification manifests through the prioritization of an emotionally driven narrative centered on childhood friendship, a choice that fosters accessibility but requires mediation if students are expected to understand the Holocaust as a systematic process of persecution, deportation, forced labor, and extermination. Thus, the pedagogical value of the film depends not on simplification itself, but on whether such simplification is critically framed within historically informed educational practices.

Ultimately, the interplay among cinematic signification strategies, narrative simplification, and audience reception determines whether the film serves as a superficial cognitive shortcut or as a meaningful catalyst for critical historical understanding.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive design, structured as an interpretive case study grounded in semiotic analysis. The design is appropriate because the article does not seek statistical generalization, but rather an analytically bounded explanation of how a specific filmic text organizes historical meaning and how a localized group of viewers interprets that organization. The study is therefore limited to one cultural artifact, one national audience context, and a small purposive sample; these limits are acknowledged as conditions of interpretive depth rather than as grounds for population-level inference (Maxwell, 2005).

The research is theoretically anchored in Umberto Eco's interpretive semiotics, which conceives of film as a system of signs organized through culturally shared codes. This framework facilitates an analysis of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Herman, 2008) as a semiotic artifact that constructs a specific historical imaginary of the Holocaust through narrative, visual, and aesthetic strategies. The unit of analysis is organized into two interconnected dimensions:

- The cinematic text: analyzed as a structured system of signification.
- Audience reception: examined as a dynamic process of interpretation and meaning-making.

The study population consisted of young adults aged 18 to 25 from the province of Loja, Ecuador. This cohort was selected for three reasons: first, it corresponds to an age group commonly exposed to historical cinema in secondary and university education; second, participants are old enough to distinguish fiction from documentary discourse, allowing the study to examine not naïve belief but interpretive framing; and third, the Ecuadorian context offers a geographically and culturally distant site from the European memory regimes in which Holocaust cinema has most frequently been studied. A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants capable of discussing complex audiovisual narratives. The final sample comprised 20 participants ($n = 20$), divided into two focus groups of ten individuals each. The sample is therefore a convenience and criterion-based qualitative sample, not a representative sample of Ecuadorian youth.

Data collection was executed in two sequential and complementary phases. First, a semiotic film analysis was undertaken. The film was segmented into 35 scenes, from which six were purposively selected for their high semiotic density: Scene 1 (The Yellow Star), Scene 9 (The Barbed Wire), Scene 9 (The Striped Pyjamas), Scene 22 (The Smoke), Scene 32 (Bruno's Transformation), and Scene 35 (The Absence). These scenes were not treated as substitutes for the full filmic experience, but as analytical units through which the film's broader signifying operations could be examined. They were selected because they concentrate the film's principal mechanisms of historical condensation, including cultural codification, cognitive ellipsis, iconic condensation, re-semantization, indexical minimalism, symbolic displacement, and the construction of absence as a signifier.

Second, two focus groups were conducted with the selected participants. The semi-structured protocol included open-ended questions organized around four analytical dimensions: (a) recognition and interpretation of the main visual signs; (b) perceived historical information and perceived omissions; (c) emotional and moral responses to the scenes; and (d) reflections on the usefulness and limits of the film as a pedagogical introduction to the Holocaust. The questions were open rather than closed, allowing participants to explain their interpretations in their own terms. The focus group format was chosen because it allows collective processes of meaning-making, contrast, disagreement, and negotiated interpretation to emerge in a dialogical setting.

All discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and processed through qualitative content

analysis. The coding procedure combined deductive categories derived from Eco's semiotics (icon, index, symbol, code, Model Reader, interpretive cooperation, and textual openness) with inductive categories emerging from participants' responses. The analytical process followed three stages: initial coding of recurrent meanings, axial grouping into reception themes, and comparison between semiotic operations, historiographical baseline, and audience interpretations. Table 2 reports qualitative themes rather than per-scene frequencies; therefore, $n = 20$ refers to the total number of participants in the study, not to identical responses by all participants for each scene.

All research instruments underwent expert validation by specialists in social anthropology and audiovisual communication to ensure theoretical and epistemological consistency. Ethically, informed consent was obtained from all participants, guaranteeing confidentiality and voluntary participation. Because the manuscript uses anonymized reception themes rather than full transcript reproduction, any verbatim quotations to be inserted in the final version must be drawn from the original focus group transcripts, identified with participant codes, and, if translated from Spanish, accompanied by the original Spanish wording in a footnote or appendix.

3. Results

The semiotic analysis of the selected scenes identified the nodes of greatest symbolic density and narrative significance in the film's construction of Holocaust memory. The findings indicate that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* systematically privileges highly legible visual signs, such as barbed-wire fences, striped uniforms, smoke, spatial segregation, and absence, which function as symbolic condensers of horror while avoiding explicit representations of violence. From a semiotic perspective, these elements operate as culturally codified signs that trigger rapid recognition and emotional engagement. This does not invalidate the film as fiction; rather, it clarifies the specific semiotic economy through which the film becomes available for pedagogical use.

A central mechanism identified is narrative ellipsis, through which the film leaves the most brutal, bureaucratic, and industrial dimensions of the genocide largely outside the visible field. Following Eco's concept of the text as a structure requiring interpretive cooperation, these absences invite the spectator to complete meaning. However, when the film is used in educational settings, such interpretive cooperation depends heavily on prior historical knowledge. Consequently, the representation may shift from a historically grounded process to a primarily moral and affective experience unless the omitted structures are supplied through critical mediation.

Collectively, these findings substantiate the identification of a semiotic trade-off: the film's rhetorical strategy enhances emotional engagement and ethical identification while leaving structural, political, and industrial dimensions only partially visible. This trade-off should not be interpreted as an aesthetic accusation against the film, but as an analytical description of what happens when a fictional narrative is mobilized as a learning aid. Semiotic simplification functions as a reorganizing logic of representation that shifts emphasis from systemic processes to individualized and affective experience.

Table 1. Analytical-semiotic dimension of the film

Scene	Dominant Semiotic Operation	Reconfiguration of meaning
Scene 1 (yellow star)	Cultural codification + cognitive ellipsis	The sign operates as a historical marker of exclusion; however, child focalisation introduces a rupture in interpretive competence, displacing the sign from an ideological system into an innocent perceptual frame.
Scene 9 (barbed wire)	Iconic condensation	The structural division of Nazism is reduced to a visible and tangible boundary, transforming a systemic logic into an accessible spatial metaphor.
Scene 9 (striped pyjamas)	Re-semantisation of the sign	The symbol of dehumanisation is reappropriated through innocence, weakening its historical gravity and producing an affective rather than political reading.
Scene 22 (smoke)	Structural ellipsis + indexical sign	The index (smoke) points to industrial violence; yet its non-explicit visualisation shifts comprehension toward an incomplete inference dependent on the viewer.
Scene 32 (Bruno's transformation)	Symbolic displacement of identity	The sign ceases to function as a historical marker and becomes a vehicle of empathy, generating dramatic irony and reorienting meaning toward individual sacrifice.
Scene 35 (absence)	Icon of absence + interpretive openness	Extreme visual omission converts genocide into an incomplete symbolic experience, where meaning is constructed through emotion rather than historical structure.

Note. This table deconstructs the analytical-semiotic dimension of the film, examining the technical operations and signifying strategies that reconfigure the historical meaning of the Holocaust through symbolic displacements and narrative ellipses.

Table 1A. Historiographical baseline for the semiotic analysis

Historical dimension	What the film foregrounds	What historiographical sources require for contextualization
Antisemitic exclusion	Visible signs of separation, especially the yellow star and spatial distance.	Nazi persecution developed through legal, bureaucratic, propagandistic, and social mechanisms that progressively excluded Jews from citizenship, work, education, property, and public life (Friedländer, 1997; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2022).
Camp system	The camp appears mainly as a fenced space perceived through Bruno's restricted viewpoint.	The camp system involved forced labor, surveillance, administrative classification, violence, hunger, disease, and systematic dehumanization; it cannot be reduced to spatial separation alone (Hilberg, 2003).
Industrial extermination	Smoke, smell, and absence operate as indirect signs.	Extermination depended on coordinated bureaucratic and industrial procedures, including deportation, selection, killing centers, crematoria, and administrative coordination across institutions (Browning, 1992; Hilberg, 2003).
Memory and testimony	The narrative privileges innocence, friendship, and family tragedy.	Testimonial and historiographical traditions emphasize the plurality of victims' experiences, the gray zones of coercion, and the ethical obligation to connect affective memory with historical explanation (Levi, 1987; Langer, 2019).

Note. establishes the historical baseline needed to interpret the film's semiotic signs without reducing Nazi persecution, the camp system, extermination, and memory to purely visual or emotional motifs.

A central pattern emerging from the data is the alignment between semiotic condensation and affective reception. Across the analyzed scenes, highly codified signs such as the yellow star, barbed wire, striped uniforms, smoke, and absence enabled immediate recognition while also requiring additional contextual knowledge for structural comprehension. In Eco's terms, these signs operate within restricted codes that privilege rapid decoding, but their fuller historical meaning depends on the viewer's encyclopedic competence and on pedagogical framing.

The most significant implication of this configuration is an epistemic asymmetry. Participants tended to identify moral categories such as injustice, suffering, discrimination, and loss, but they found it more difficult to articulate the ideological, bureaucratic, and industrial mechanisms that made the Holocaust possible. This does not mean that participants confused fiction with documentary truth; rather, it shows that affective decoding was more immediately available than historical reconstruction.

Each semiotic strategy distinctly contributes to this asymmetry. Cognitive ellipsis, as observed in Scene 1, disrupts the continuity between the sign and its historical referent, producing recognition without full comprehension. Iconic condensation, evident in the barbed wire of Scene 9, translates systemic violence into a spatial metaphor, simplifying complex structures into perceptual immediacy. Furthermore, the re-semantization of the striped uniform illustrates how signs of dehumanization are reframed through the lens of innocence, shifting the interpretive focus from political violence to emotional differentiation.

Particularly salient is the role of indexical minimalism and omission in Scene 22. The indexical sign of smoke retains its referential connection to industrial extermination; however, its lack of explicit contextualization renders interpretation dependent on the spectator's prior historical knowledge. This confirms Eco's notion of the "open work" while simultaneously exposing its limitations: interpretive openness does not inherently guarantee interpretive adequacy. Instead, it may generate fragmented decoding outcomes. Subsequent scenes intensify this mechanism: semiotic dramatic irony (Scene 32) displaces the locus of meaning from the historical system to the individual subject, fostering empathy at the cost of structural awareness. Finally, the icon of absence in Scene 35 condenses genocide into a symbolic residue, where the absence of bodies becomes the primary signifier of loss. While this amplifies emotional resonance, it collapses the historical process into a singular narrative of personal tragedy.

In synthesis, these findings demonstrate that semiotic simplification operates both as a representational strategy and as a cognitive regulator of interpretation. The film constructs a Model Reader oriented primarily toward emotional identification and moral recognition. This orientation can be pedagogically productive when it opens a first route toward inquiry, but it can also remain historically insufficient if not accompanied by documentary, testimonial, and historiographical sources. The result is a mediated historical understanding in which affective intelligibility precedes structural knowledge, reinforcing the need for critical pedagogical mediation rather than suggesting that the film itself must provide the whole historical picture.

Table 2. The effect on the subject, the young spectator

Scene	Semiotic Strategy	Reception theme (n = 20 total participants; thematic reporting)	Epistemic Consequence
Scene 1 (yellow star)	Cognitive ellipsis + restricted focalisation	Participants recognized injustice and exclusion, but most did not articulate the ideological mechanism of antisemitic racial policy.	Fragmented historical comprehension (symbol without system)
Scene 9 (barbed wire)	Iconic condensation of structural violence	Commonly interpreted as separation, distance, or danger rather than as a material sign of a camp system and racial segregation.	Reduction of ideology to spatial metaphor
Scene 9 (striped pyjamas)	Re-semantisation through innocence	Frequently associated with difference, sadness, or poverty; less often connected to institutional dehumanization.	Emotional decoding replaces political decoding
Scene 22 (smoke)	Indexical minimalism + omission of violence	Generated unease and uncertainty, especially among viewers with less prior knowledge of extermination processes.	Dependence on prior knowledge for meaning completion
Scene 32 (identity inversion)	Semiotic dramatic irony	Produced strong empathy toward Bruno, sometimes displacing attention from the structural victims of genocide.	Moral displacement toward individual tragedy
Scene 35 (absence)	Icon of absence + open work structure	Read primarily as a sad ending centered on loss and family tragedy.	Collapse of genocide into personal narrative

Note. This table systematises the empirical findings derived from the reception micro-analysis, evidencing how the affective reactions of young spectators translate into specific epistemic consequences and limitations in their historical comprehension of the genocide.

The analysis presented in Table 1 demonstrates that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* constructs Holocaust memory through a semiotic architecture of high affective legibility. The selected scenes concentrate culturally stabilized signs within the contemporary audiovisual imaginary: the yellow star, barbed wire, the striped uniform, smoke, symbolic transformation, and material absence. These elements function as codified cultural units capable of activating historically sedimented meanings through immediate recognition. Their pedagogical effectiveness, however, depends on whether viewers are helped to connect these signs to the wider historical system they index.

The central finding emerging from this matrix is that the film performs a semiotic translation of genocide into an individualized affective experience. In other words, the Holocaust is reorganized at the level of signification: the narrative shifts emphasis from the political, bureaucratic, and industrial structures of extermination toward a moral narrative centered on innocence, friendship, and loss. This operation is evident in Scene 1, where the yellow star functions as a historically charged marker of exclusion. Bruno's child perspective introduces a cognitive ellipsis that interrupts ideological readability: the informed spectator may recognize persecution, whereas the character does not.

Scene 9 is structurally pivotal, as it articulates two foundational signs: barbed wire and the striped uniform. The fence operates as both a spatial delimiter and a semiotic boundary between two regimes of existence, the protected German domestic sphere and the concentration camp system. Yet, by embedding this division within a narrative of childhood friendship, the film transforms a structure of racial domination into an emotionally accessible narrative obstacle. Similarly, the striped uniform, arguably the most recognisable icon of Holocaust imagery, is re-semantised through innocence, as Bruno interprets it as "pyjamas," thereby attenuating its historical gravity while preserving its symbolic trace for the informed viewer.

Scene 22 introduces a more complex operation through indexical minimalism and structural ellipsis. Smoke and smell function as indices of industrial extermination, but the absence of explicit contextualization displaces part of the interpretive work onto the spectator. In line with Eco's notion of the text as a 'lazy machine,' the film activates interpretive cooperation; however, such cooperation remains uneven. For viewers with limited prior historical knowledge, the sign may remain ambiguous, producing an epistemic gap rather than a fully realized understanding. Ellipsis thus operates not merely as a narrative device, but as an epistemological filter that regulates what can be inferred.

Scene 32 constitutes the film's most significant symbolic inversion. When Bruno dons the striped uniform, the sign is partially emptied of its historical referent within the diegesis, yet intensified for the spectator. This generates what may be termed semiotic dramatic irony, wherein the divergence between character knowledge and spectator competence produces heightened emotional impact. Scene 35, characterized by abandoned clothing and space, functions as an icon of absence: genocide is represented not through bodies, but through their disappearance, compelling the viewer to reconstruct meaning from prior knowledge. The result is a condensation of genocide into a material trace of loss, privileging affective resonance over structural comprehension.

The focus group reception data corroborate this semiotic configuration at the level of thematic interpretation. Participants repeatedly framed the Holocaust in terms of suffering, injustice, loss, and separation, while offering fewer references to state bureaucracy, racial ideology, deportation, forced labor, and industrialized extermination. For instance,

highlighting the emotional displacement toward individual tragedy, one participant noted: “Sadness, mostly at the end, because they also killed children who had nothing to do with it” (P2). Another participant explicitly recognized how the film’s focalization limits historical understanding while maximizing moral reaction: “The innocence of seeing things from that perspective leaves you without the full context of what happened, but it does leave you with the central idea of how these people, having so much power, could do something so horrific” (P3)¹.

The scientific contribution of this analysis lies in demonstrating that simplification should not be understood merely as narrative reduction, but as a transformation in the regime of historical signification when fiction is used pedagogically. While the film gains emotional accessibility, immediacy, and introductory value, it simultaneously requires supplementary historical framing to restore causal depth, systemic intelligibility, and historiographical density. This dynamic constitutes the core semiotic balance identified in the study: the transformation of the Holocaust from a historically situated system of organized extermination into a narrative of emotionally mediated individual experience. Without critical mediation, this reconfiguration may stabilize a dehistoricized form of memory, in which ethical impact persists while structural understanding remains limited.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* constructs an affectively accessible representation of the Holocaust through highly legible visual and narrative signs. These signs are iconic, culturally stabilized, and immediately recognizable, and they privilege moral readability and emotional identification. The key point is not that the film fails as fiction, but that its use as a pedagogical artifact requires careful framing. Fictional works create their own narrative universes and do not owe spectators the totality of historical explanation; however, once they are used as educational entry points, their omissions and emphases become methodologically relevant.

This study aligns with previous research indicating that historical cinema for younger viewers tends to prioritize empathy and identification (Mendieta, 2016; Bevilacqua, 2022). Its contribution is to show, through Eco’s interpretive semiotics, how the film’s semiotic architecture conditions the boundaries of historical knowledge available to viewers. The reception data suggest that participants interpreted the narrative mainly through individual tragedy and moral injustice, while struggling to articulate the Holocaust’s ideological, bureaucratic, and industrial dimensions. This pattern supports the argument regarding the ethical-emotional force of cinematic learning (Lorente & Romero, 2021) while also confirming the need for contextual historical mediation (Halldén, 1998; Hueso, 1991).

From an Ecoian perspective, the film operates as an open work that requires interpretive cooperation. Nevertheless, openness does not guarantee historically adequate interpretation. Eco’s Model Reader is a theoretical construction that presupposes a certain encyclopedic competence, but empirical viewers may resist, complicate, or incompletely actualize the textual strategy. The focus group data show both alignment with the preferred affective reading and moments of interpretive uncertainty, especially around signs such as smoke, absence, and the institutional meaning of the striped uniform. These moments are analytically important because they reveal the difference between textual openness and historical literacy.

The study thus contributes to the field by conceptualizing simplification not as mere narrative reduction, but as a pedagogical and semiotic reconfiguration of signification. A possible counterargument is that the film’s simplification is appropriate for younger audiences because it introduces traumatic history through a morally accessible narrative. This objection is valid, provided that accessibility is not confused with historical sufficiency. Another possible interpretation is that seeing horror through the restricted consciousness of a child can intensify ethical perception rather than weaken it. The present analysis accepts this possibility, but argues that ethical perception and structural understanding are different dimensions of historical literacy. Although the sample size and single-case design limit generalizability, they provide interpretive depth and open a research agenda for comparative studies with other audiences, films, and pedagogical mediation strategies.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* can operate as a semiotic gateway to Holocaust memory when it is used as an introductory learning aid rather than as a self-sufficient source of historical knowledge. Its child-centered focalization, visual condensation, and narrative ellipsis foster emotional engagement, moral reflection, and accessibility. At the same time, these same strategies leave many structural dimensions of the Holocaust dependent on prior knowledge or explicit pedagogical contextualization.

¹Quotations translated from Spanish by the authors. Original text from the focus group transcripts: “Tristeza más al final porque también mataban a niños que no tenían nada que ver” (P2); “La inocencia de ver las cosas desde esa perspectiva pues te deja no todo el contexto de lo que pasó, pero si te deja como que la idea central de cómo estas personas al tener tanto poder pueden hacer esto tan feo” (P3).

The findings confirm that semiotic simplification functions as a double-edged mechanism. On one hand, it facilitates initial comprehension and sensitization among young audiences; on the other, it may constrain historically grounded interpretive competence if consumed in isolation. The film therefore does not simply reduce the Holocaust; it reconfigures its regime of signification, translating a system of organized extermination into an individualized moral narrative centered on innocence, friendship, and loss.

Crucially, this transformation is not determined by the cinematic text alone, but by the interpretive frameworks available to the audience. The reception data indicate that emotional comprehension is achieved more readily than structural explanation. This underscores the need for critical pedagogical mediation through which cinematic narratives can be contextualized, questioned, and supplemented with historiographical knowledge, survivor testimony, documentary evidence, and comparative audiovisual materials.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, the study recommends integrating historical cinema into educational settings as a discursive trigger for inquiry rather than as a substitute for historiography. Educators and communicators should make explicit the difference between fiction, testimony, documentary discourse, and historical explanation. In this way, students can value the affective and ethical force of cinema while also recognizing the limits of any single cultural artifact.

Ultimately, the contribution of this research lies in demonstrating that semiotic simplification should not be dismissed outright, but understood as a pedagogical threshold. When critically mediated, it can support the development of more rigorous and reflexive historical literacy. Future research should expand the comparative analysis of cinematic representations, incorporate diverse audience contexts, include verbatim reception data, and test specific pedagogical strategies capable of transforming affective engagement into sustained critical understanding.

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Author contributions

MSc. Z and Lic O Comms. Lic O- were responsible for study design and revising. Lic. O- was responsible for data collection. Dr. H-M and MSc. S-P drafted the manuscript and Dr. H-M revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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