

Third Generation Warfare in Post-9/11 Cinema: A Socio-Political and Cultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Although a considerable body of literature examines military strategies and their portrayal in films, the way in which post-9/11 films mediate the principles of third-generation warfare remains under-examined in the literature. By analyzing the major themes and narrative structures of selected films, this study investigates this unexplored dimension and offers insight into their socio-political and cultural implications. It analyzes how third-generation warfare is represented in post-9/11 war films through a qualitative approach, conceptualizing these films as cultural markers that influence public understanding of modern warfare. The study focuses on three popular films, *Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *13 Hours*, selected for their visibility, narrative focus on U.S. military operations, and engagement with third-generation warfare tactics. These are examined using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase method. Five major themes are identified: heroism, moral ambiguity, media influence, political impact, and cultural representation. The analysis draws on ideology critique, cultural discourse theory, and media framing theory to explore how cinematic narratives construct dominant meanings around war and identity. This study contributes to media studies, sociology, and political science by connecting cinematic narratives to broader socio-political discourse.

Keywords: post-9/11; third-generation warfare; films

1 Introduction

Societies evolve, which consequently leads to changes in military strategies and technologies (Glowacki et al., 2017; Glowacki, 2025; Tooby & Cosmides, 2025). Third-generation warfare is a result of evolution in military strategies, which is a shift from conventional overpowering of the enemy through sheer force (Roberto, 2023; Gautam, 2024). Third-generation warfare, initially suggested by military analysts such as William Lind (1989) and later elaborated by Thomas X. Hammes (1994), signified a conceptual change from previous war generations by emphasizing initiative over hierarchy and maneuver over mass. While it originated from the German blitzkrieg doctrine of 1918, its relevance in the fast-changing, spread-out battlefields of today has increased significantly. This theory has progressively influenced contemporary military engagements, especially in instances of asymmetrical and hybrid warfare where conventional state-versus-state interactions have diminished (Mahmood & Azam, 2024). While third-generation warfare has been studied in military and strategic contexts, its cinematic portrayal remains underexplored. This study contributes to the paucity of research by examining how post-9/11 American war films mediate the tactical and ideological dimensions of third-generation warfare, while simultaneously playing a crucial role in shaping public understanding of modern conflict.

Cinematic representations of war extend beyond entertainment, mediating socio-political discourse and often informing or influencing public opinion and foreign policy stances (Groeling & Baum, 2009; Banerjee, 2024). As Burgoyne (2023) suggests, post-9/11 war films operate as cultural artifacts that reflect and construct national narratives, while Khan (2021) emphasizes the contrast between Western portrayals and Middle Eastern or South Asian perspectives within the same genre. However, despite a growing body of literature on military cinema and cultural memory, few studies have addressed how third-generation warfare principles, as defined by Lind and refined by Hammes, are specifically visualized and narrativized in film. There remains limited literature on how the specific principles of third-generation warfare are translated into cinematic form and how these portrayals shape cultural and political understanding.

The study examines how third-generation warfare is represented through the recurring themes of cultural representation, media influence, moral ambiguity, political impact, and heroism. These themes then serve as analytical lenses for understanding how films transform military doctrines into cultural narratives and how those narratives influence sociopolitical debate. To achieve these goals, the paper addresses three research questions. The first question asks how post-9/11 films depicting third-generation warfare help structure sociopolitical discussion of war, national identity, and military engagement. The second question examines the broad themes and sub-themes that emerge in the film's depiction of third-generation warfare. The third question is whether such stories construct cultural identities and portray different groups, both military and civilian, Western and non-Western, and whether they reinforce or challenge prevailing stereotypes. In making this, the paper crosses disciplinary boundaries in media studies, political science, and cultural analysis.

2 Literature Review

2.1 War Films as Cultural Narratives

Post-9/11 films have increasingly become an essential means of disseminating and legitimizing military interventions to the public; thus, they have become an opinion-shaping factor and a tool for third-generation warfare (Thomas & Tunney, 2024). The overlap of film, third-generation warfare, and politics shows that war movies are not merely entertainment because they render certain war tales more palatable to the masses, thereby becoming an opinion-shaping factor in political discourse (Gulenko, 2020; Shafie, 2022; Skladanowski et al., 2025). The cultural narrative that post-9/11 war films propagate is an emotionally charged depiction of military interventions, which is a reinforcement of a certain worldview, such as heroism, patriotism, and sacrifice (Casaregola, 2023; Singh, 2015). At the same time, these cinematic texts can oversimplify or distort the realities of conflict. *Black Hawk Down* has drawn criticism for dehumanizing Somali characters and reinforcing racial stereotypes (Dahlan, 2024), thereby promoting a unidimensional understanding of global conflict. *The Hurt Locker*, in contrast, has been lauded for its psychological depth, depicting the emotional toll of warfare on soldiers while interrogating the ethics of combat. Similarly, *13 Hours*, with its emphasis on American resilience, elevates themes of loyalty and valor, reinforcing traditional narratives of military heroism (Peters, 2020). Such films participate in the cultural framing of warfare, subtly defining who is portrayed as a threat, who qualifies as a hero, and what moral frameworks are prioritized (Soeters, 2024).

2.2 Media's Influence on Public Opinion and Policy

Cinema holds substantial power in shaping public discourse and political sentiment. As Hobbs and McGee (2014) argue, media narratives can significantly affect public attitudes toward war, sometimes justifying state actions or military interventions. Emotional storytelling, such as that found in *The Hurt Locker* or *13 Hours*, can serve as a persuasive medium for cultivating public empathy, support for troops, or acceptance of controversial military decisions (Singh, 2015; Peters, 2020). Through aesthetic choices and narrative framing,

films do not merely reflect political ideologies; they help produce and disseminate them. Thematic studies of war films identify recurring motifs, heroism, moral ambiguity, national duty, and identity construction as central to how audiences interpret modern conflict (Jing, 2023; Peters, 2020). Films can thus mobilize political ideologies while masking the complexities of international diplomacy and conflict. Caldwell (2016) and Lakra (2024) suggest that such narratives contribute to broader cultural scripts that shape national self-perception and international outlooks. Non-western war films challenge the hegemony of Hollywood-centered representations. Films like *Phantom*, *Omar*, and *Theeb* highlight local experiences and cultural contexts, offering critical alternatives to dominant Western narratives of terrorism and intervention (Bajuwaiber, 2023). These cinematic perspectives widen the scope of war discourse by integrating regional histories, sociopolitical tensions, and indigenous forms of resistance. Similarly, the Indian film *Uri: The Surgical Strike* illustrates how third-generation warfare tactics can be embedded within nationalistic narratives outside the Western frame, reflecting broader geopolitical trends (Sternbeck, 2024).

2.3 Representations of Warfare and Third-Generation Warfare in Cinema

While a substantial body of literature has analyzed war cinema's ideological and cultural functions, much of this work concentrates on general depictions of warfare across eras, from World War I and II to Vietnam and the Gulf conflicts, primarily focusing on recurring motifs such as heroism, trauma, propaganda, and national identity (Binns, 2013; Stojanova, 2009; Raza, 2024). These studies emphasize cinema's role in shaping collective memory and reinforcing state narratives, often through traditional portrayals of conflict and linear battle structures. Films like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Patton*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Jarhead* are frequently examined for their cinematic techniques, ideological symbolism, and sociopolitical framing of war (Binns, 2013). Similarly, early wartime propaganda films are analyzed for how they harnessed the visual power of cinema to support nationalistic sentiment while slowly evolving into more complex cinematic languages (Stojanova, 2009). Scholars have also highlighted how popular cinema becomes a tool of political pedagogy, embedding elite ideologies within mass culture and constructing hegemonic narratives that shape public consciousness (Raza, 2024).

However, despite this extensive literature, relatively little attention has been paid to how films portray specific military doctrines such as third-generation warfare the growing relevance in both historical and contemporary military operations, where its emphasis on bypassing enemy forces, collapsing positions from the rear, and executing operations with speed, initiative, and strategic fluidity marks a significant departure from conventional, linear warfare (Roberto, 2023; Nair, 2025). Defined by its shift from attrition-based warfare to maneuver-oriented tactics, third-generation warfare prioritizes decentralization, small-unit autonomy, and disruption. Rather than closing in to destroy enemy forces directly, third-generation warfare emphasizes rapid mobility, superior situational awareness, and the psychological dislocation of adversaries to undermine their cohesion and will (Mahmood & Azam, 2024). These principles, first conceptualized during World War I and operationalized through blitzkrieg strategies in World War II, represent a doctrinal evolution rarely explored in cinematic studies. Films such as *The Hurt Locker*, *13 Hours*, and *Black Hawk Down* increasingly engage with themes aligned with third-generation warfare, non-linear urban combat, psychological warfare, fluid command structures, and tactical improvisation, yet the academic literature has yet to fully interrogate how such films translate these doctrines into cinematic form. While some scholars have begun to consider how post-9/11 warfare has brought fluid, decentralized strategies to the forefront (Roberto, 2023; Mahmood & Azam, 2024), a significant lack of literature remains in understanding how these doctrines are visually and thematically constructed within mainstream cinema.

This study examines how the strategic principles of third-generation warfare are conveyed through narrative, visual aesthetics, character agency, and mise-en-scène. In doing so, it not only connects contemporary military theory with cultural production—showing how complex tactical paradigms are rendered intelligible

through film and absorbed into broader public understanding of modern warfare—but also examines how public discourse and narrative are shaped by the stereotypes these films construct, whether reinforcing dominant ideologies or subverting them.

3 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from cultural theory, media studies, and ideology critique. These lenses collectively inform the analysis of post-9/11 war films, enabling a critical reading of how cinematic narratives mediate military doctrines and shape socio-political understandings of conflict, identity, and national purpose. At the core of this analysis lies the concept of cinema as cultural discourse (Febri et al., 2025; Roy, 2003). This approach understands films not simply as entertainment products, but as cultural texts that reflect, negotiate, and reproduce dominant ideologies. War films are surfaces on which national anxieties, military ethics, and geopolitical narratives are written and contested (Chubb et al., 2024). For Coëgnarts (2023), the meaning-making potential of cinema is conditioned by embodied cognitive schemas—schemas of cognition that stem from the way we bodily experience the world, and which condition both the representation of ideas by filmmakers and the interpretation of ideas by audiences. This framework treats filmic representations as embedded in broader structures of meaning-making, following the interplay between state discourses, media institutions, and popular sentiment (Coëgnarts, 2023).

One of the theoretical directions in this study is ideology critique, which has its roots in critical theory (Bilgin, 2023). It is concerned with the ways cultural products, such as films, naturalize certain power relations and militaristic or nationalistic worldviews (Lapsley, 2024). For post-9/11 films, this involves interrogating how films reinforce or complicate hegemonic narratives of war, heroism, and the "enemy." These include the moral dichotomies that can be expected to be included in such films, as well as the implicit legitimization of military interventions and counterinsurgency efforts in accordance with third-generation warfare doctrines. Media framing theory has been employed in this research, which examines how media constructs meaning through the processes of selection, emphasis, and exclusion (Borges, 2024; Fuhat et al., 2024). Applied to film, the theory helps clarify how narrative frame, character construction, and visual aesthetic shape audience attitudes toward war and military strategy. It helps identify such ubiquitous themes as moral nuance, soldier heroization, and abstraction of civilian suffering. From this perspective, the films are interpreted as edited experiences that construct good and cognitive reactions to conflict. The study is informed by cultural representation theory (Hall et al., 2024; Syafira, 2024; Angelina & Suprajitno, 2025), particularly the work that examines how identities national, cultural, and racial, are constructed and circulated through media. This is crucial for analyzing the depiction of non-Western characters, landscapes, and ideologies in the selected films. By attending to these representational dynamics, the study examines how war cinema contributes to the reproduction of cultural hierarchies and the construction of the "Other." Narrative theory (Summers, 2022; Yamori, 2025) supports the analysis by attending to how stories are structured to evoke emotional engagement and ideological closure. The deployment of narrative devices, such as the lone hero, the sacrifice motif, and the temporal compression of complex conflicts, contributes to the legibility and persuasiveness of the films' political messages.

This study engages post-9/11 war film as a strategic cultural apparatus rather than entertainment or visual journalism. It queries how movies narratively and visually translate complex tactical concepts such as third-generation war into ideologically legible narratives and how this impacts private perception and public political imagination. As one can see from Figure 1, such theoretical sources serve as appraisal lenses to analyze the five overarching themes: Heroism, Moral Ambiguity, Media Influence, Political Impact, and Cultural Representation, through the cinematic depiction of third-generation warfare. These themes are not only central to the internal analysis of *Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *13 Hours*, but they are also important for broader humanities debates on collective memory, national identity, and ideological formation. For

instance, portrayals of heroism in these films intersect with cultural narratives of valor and sacrifice, reinforcing or challenging dominant memories of war. Moral ambiguity raises questions about ethical agency in asymmetric conflicts, while cultural representation and stereotyping reveal how identity is constructed and “othered” through visual media. Meanwhile, the influence of media and narrative framing highlights how ideology is disseminated and normalized through cinematic language.

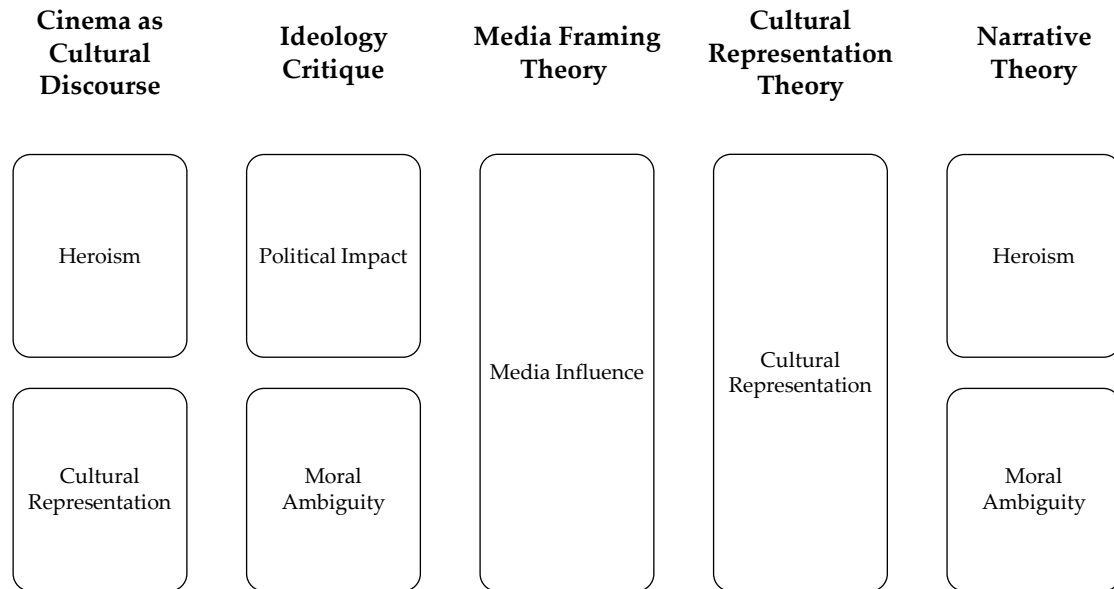


Figure 1: *Theoretical Frameworks & their Connection to the Analytic Themes*

Each theoretical perspective outlined in Figure 1 directly informs the thematic analysis by offering specific interpretive tools that help decide how third-generation warfare is rendered in post-9/11 war cinema. The lens of cinema as cultural discourse positions films as ideological texts that both reflect and shape dominant narratives, particularly informing the themes of Heroism and Cultural Representation by highlighting how cinema reinforces national ideals and constructs identities. Ideology critique focuses on the naturalization of power and the reproduction of hegemonic worldviews, which directly supports analysis under Political Impact and Moral Ambiguity, revealing how films either legitimize or question military authority and ethical norms. Media framing theory aids the investigation of Media Influence by illuminating how selective storytelling and visual emphasis manipulate audience perceptions of war and strategic doctrine. Cultural representation theory provides an analysis of non-Western characters in these films as faceless enemies. Finally, narrative theory is concerned with utilizing character growth and emotional tools to either authorize or complicate the portrayal of war efforts.

4 Review Criteria

4.1 Methodological Approach

This study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis approach to examine how third-generation warfare is represented in post-9/11 war films and how these representations inform socio-political narratives. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), provides a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within cultural texts. This approach is particularly suited to the aims of the present research, which seeks to uncover how cinematic narratives not only depict but also

construct discourses around modern warfare, heroism, and cultural identity. Hence, all three films (*Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *13 Hours*) were viewed multiple times to become familiar with the data. Critical reviews, audience reactions, and scholarly commentary were also consulted to gain a multilayered understanding of each film's narrative, stylistic, and ideological dimensions. Then, all recurrent narrative elements and motifs were coded manually across the dataset. Codes captured both overt themes, such as battlefield tactics and leadership structures, and latent content, including representations of the "enemy," as well as emotional tone. These codes were then clustered into provisional themes based on conceptual similarity and relevance to the research questions. Each theme was then carefully reviewed, as it was checked against the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness. The final themes were carefully refined and named to clearly convey their interpretive significance in the context of cinematic third-generation warfare portrayals. Lastly, a thematic map was generated to visualize the interrelationships between major and minor themes, which informed the analytical structure of the findings section.

The Braun and Clarke six-phase process was crucial in ensuring systematic data engagement from familiarization to reporting. While the dataset consisted of only three films: *Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *13 Hours*, it was justified in terms of information power rather than saturation, recognizing that the depth and richness of each film provided sufficient insight into the research questions. Intercoder reliability was reinforced through independent coding by a second researcher, with disagreements resolved through a consensus-based approach. Triangulation further supported interpretive validity by incorporating reviews, scholarly commentary, and audience responses. To manage the inherent subjectivity of qualitative interpretation, the study emphasized reflexivity as a continuous and deliberate methodological practice (Braun et al., 2022). Recognizing that meaning is not fixed within the data but co-constructed through interpretation, the researcher actively engaged in reflective journaling during coding and theme development. This process involved noting interpretive decisions, emotional reactions, and potential biases, particularly those influenced by cultural, political, or disciplinary perspectives. Regular peer debriefing sessions provided further opportunities to interrogate assumptions and refine emerging insights. In line with Adeoye and Omiwole (2023), introspective analysis was treated not as a supplementary gesture but as a critical layer of the research design. Their work highlights the importance of integrating self-reflection at every stage, from methodological choices to ethical implications, to ensure a transparent, ethically sound, and critically engaged inquiry. Introspective analysis allowed the researcher to confront personal investments in the subject matter, particularly when interpreting politically sensitive representations of warfare and national identity. Together, these strategies enhanced the transparency and accountability of the analytic process, aligning with the principles of a rigorously reflexive research design.

4.2 Film Selection and Rationale

The primary data corpus consists of three post-9/11 war films: *Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *13 Hours*. These were selected based on three core criteria. First, there is their thematic relevance as all three films prominently feature elements of third-generation warfare, including speed, maneuverability, decentralized command, and tactical flexibility. Second is the cultural significance, as each film generated significant public discourse and shaped popular understanding of military intervention and heroism in the post-9/11 context. The third criterion was the critical acclaim these films received, including notable recognition from critics and institutions (e.g., Oscar nominations and wins), which ensured their visibility and relevance within both academic and popular debates on war cinema (Peters, 2020). Other films, such as *American Sniper* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, were initially considered but ultimately excluded. While relevant to post-9/11 military narratives, their central focus tends to be more personal and character-driven, offering limited engagement with the strategic and operational aspects of third-generation warfare. These exclusions were based on the need to maintain a clear thematic and methodological focus on films that directly engage with broader tactical and geopolitical frameworks.

4.3 Limitations and Scope

While this study offers a detailed qualitative analysis of three prominent post-9/11 war films, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the focus on a select set of films means that broader cinematic representations of third-generation warfare remain unexplored. Excluding films such as *American Sniper* and *Zero Dark Thirty* narrows the scope but allows for a more focused and in-depth examination of explicit themes related to third-generation warfare. This study is limited to three films; other media, such as television or documentaries, remain outside its scope. Second, thematic analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation. While efforts were made to enhance reliability through intercoder checks and triangulation, the researcher's positionality inevitably shaped the coding and theme development. Recognizing this, the study adopts a reflexive stance, acknowledging that alternate interpretations may arise from different cultural or theoretical perspectives. Finally, this research centers primarily on Western-produced films, which may limit insights into non-Western cinematic responses to post-9/11 warfare. Including films from Middle Eastern, South Asian, or other regions could further diversify understanding of third-generation warfare's cinematic mediation and its cultural implications. Nonetheless, the current focus provides a foundational analysis of how mainstream war cinema reflects and shapes socio-political discourse around modern military doctrines.

5 Analysis & Results

5.1 Thematic Analysis of Post-9/11 War Films

Qualitative thematic analysis emphasizes five major recurring themes in the selected films shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Recurrent themes in selected films.*

Theme	Description
Heroism	Depicting individual bravery, sacrifice, and camaraderie, this theme highlights soldiers' valor and the social ideals they embody, often amid complex moral challenges.
Moral Ambiguity	Highlighting ethical dilemmas, the psychological toll of combat, and split-second decision-making, this theme exposes the internal conflicts soldiers face when duty clashes with personal conscience.
Media Influence	Exploring how narrative techniques and media framing shape public perception and support for military actions, this theme interrogates the role of war films in influencing national discourse.
Political Impact	Critiquing government policies, military leadership, and interventionist strategies, this theme positions war films as commentaries on contemporary political debates surrounding warfare.
Cultural Representation	Examining stereotypes, cultural identities, and enemy portrayals, this theme considers how films construct and reinforce social narratives about "us" versus "them," impacting cross-cultural understanding.

The five themes discussed in Table 1 have been mapped using thematic analysis, analyzing how each theme is closely related to key third-generation warfare attributes.

Table 2: *Mapping Thematic Emphasis in Selected Films Across Third-Generation Warfare Attributes.*

Film	Key Third-Generation Warfare Attributes Depicted	Linked Themes
Black Hawk Down	Non-linear urban combat; small unit autonomy. rapid mobility	<p>Heroism – Emphasizes camaraderie and sacrifice under fire.</p> <p>Moral Ambiguity – Ethical strain in high-pressure decisions.</p> <p>Media Influence – Frames U.S. military action as necessary and valorous.</p> <p>Political Impact – Minimizes geopolitical context, reinforcing interventionist logics.</p> <p>Cultural Representation – Depicts Somalis largely as faceless enemies.</p>
The Hurt Locker	Psychological warfare; fluid command; tactical improvisation	<p>Heroism – Explores flawed, complex protagonists.</p> <p>Moral Ambiguity – Central focus on psychological strain and conflicting motivations.</p> <p>Media Influence – Challenges dominant war narratives with a subdued tone.</p> <p>Political Impact – Critiques the endless nature of modern conflict.</p> <p>Cultural Representation – Iraqis are often shown through distant or ambiguous framing.</p> <p>Heroism – Highlights the valor and resilience of military contractors.</p>
13 Hours	Rapid mobility; strategic fluidity; bypassing enemy positions	<p>Moral Ambiguity – Briefly questions the political context of intervention.</p> <p>Media Influence – Reinforces patriotic narratives and urgency.</p> <p>Political Impact – Points to failures in leadership and response.</p> <p>Cultural Representation – Presents Libyan characters mostly as hostile or peripheral.</p>

5.2 Expanded Analysis of Key Themes

5.2.1. Heroism

The film 13 Hours glorifies heroism via physical bravery but also acknowledges the psychological hardships these individuals endure, hinting at the human costs behind heroic acts. Black Hawk Down similarly reinforces traditional hero narratives by portraying U.S. soldiers engaged in perilous missions, emphasizing sacrifice and solidarity. However, The Hurt Locker introduces complexity by portraying soldiers who are flawed, traumatized, and psychologically vulnerable. This film problematizes simple glorification, instead of presenting heroism as a conflicted and sometimes destructive impulse.

5.2.2. Moral Ambiguity

In The Hurt Locker, the protagonist's thrill-seeking behavior in bomb disposal tasks questions traditional notions of bravery and heroism, underscoring the psychological and ethical toll warfare exacts on individuals (Jones & Smith, 2024). This portrayal aligns with Burgoyne's (2023) observation that such films expose

the tensions between military duty and personal morality. *Black Hawk Down* and *13 Hours* also depict moments of ethical tension, such as split-second decisions in chaotic combat, though these moments are less central than in *The Hurt Locker*.

5.2.3. Media Influence

Films function as cultural artifacts that frame military interventions within ideological logics (Groeling & Baum, 2009; Kerrigan, 2024). For example, *Black Hawk Down*'s portrayal supports a narrative legitimizing U.S. interventionist policy, often emphasizing heroism and sacrifice to galvanize public support (Prats, 2024).

5.2.4. Political Impact

Black Hawk Down has been critiqued for implicitly endorsing U.S. military interventions by dramatizing soldier heroism and downplaying geopolitical complexities (Melkumyan et al., 2024). Meanwhile, *The Hurt Locker* offers a pointed critique of military command and the futility of prolonged conflict, engaging viewers with the psychological consequences of war and leadership failures (Peters, 2020).

5.2.5. Cultural Representation

Black Hawk Down uses us-versus-them when depicting Somali fighters in the film, strengthening stereotypes supported post-9/11 Western agenda (Mahmood & Azam, 2024). On the other hand, *The Hurt Locker* and *13 Hours* try not to portray locals as 'others' but eventually cater to Western viewpoint.

Table 3 summarizes the link between themes and sub-themes that are used in the three post 9/11 war films to harness public opinion in favor of any and all military interventions.

Table 3: *Summary of Major Themes and Sub-Themes.*

Themes	Key Third-Generation Warfare Attributes Depicted	Summary
Heroism	Individual Bravery, Sacrifice, Camaraderie	Reinforces political and social ideals through portrayals of brave, selfless soldiers (often facing moral dilemmas).
Moral Ambiguity	Ethical dilemmas; Psychological toll; Split-second decisions	Highlights soldiers' internal conflicts and the ethical dilemmas of duty versus morality.
Media Influence	Public Perception, Narrative Techniques, National Interests	Demonstrates how media-driven narratives impact public support for or against military actions.
Political Impact	Policy Influence, Leadership Critique, Military Interventions	Offers commentary on government and military leadership decisions, shaping political discourse.
Cultural Representation	Stereotypes; Cultural identity; "Enemy" portrayal	Shapes public perception by either reinforcing or challenging cultural stereotypes of friend and foe.

Figure 2 shows the intricate application of war film plots of *The Hurt Locker*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *13 Hours* actively employ attributes of third-generation warfare to enhance themes of heroism, moral ambiguity to shape opinions of the public.

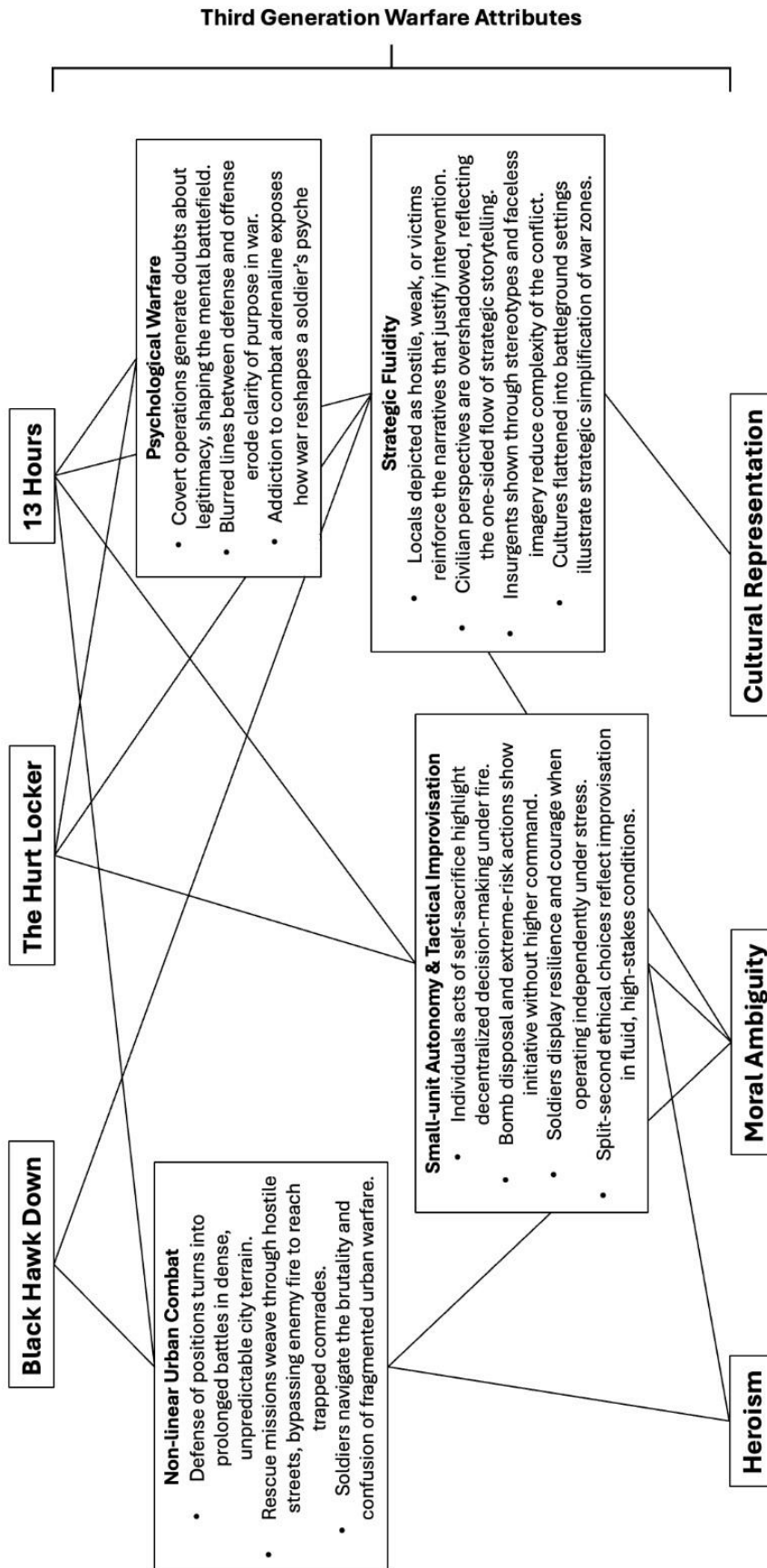


Figure 2: Mapping third-generation warfare attributes across themes for selected films

6 Discussion

6.1 Connecting Findings to Broader Socio-Political and Cultural Dynamics

Post-9/11 war films were not merely a source of entertainment but were a political instrument to promote nationalist ideology, provide legitimacy to military interventions, as identified by Singh (2015) in his observations. The depiction of moral ambiguity in *The Hurt Locker* shows how heroism is not very simple and that there are unintended consequences, i.e., the psychological toll that it has on the soldiers (Burgoyne, 2023; Mahmood & Azam, 2024). Media influence was employed to shape public opinion through cinematic narratives that spilled into everyday political debate (Groeling & Baum, 2009; Taubaldiyev et al., 2024). Kalu et al. (2024) argue that related media forms, such as digital war games, perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Muslims as “mythical enemies,” reinforcing Islamophobia and patriarchal militarism in the context of the US-led Global War on Terror. Their analysis extends to the cinematic domain by highlighting how these stereotyping dynamics contribute to the shaping of public attitudes toward Muslim populations and justify military violence. Extending their analysis into the cinematic domain, we argue that post-9/11 films not only recycle these stereotypes but recast them within the strategic logics of third-generation warfare, presenting Muslim populations as obstacles to networked, agile military strategy.

Cultural representation remains a contested terrain where stereotypes and reductive portrayals, particularly of non-Western “others”, continue to pervade despite some attempts at nuance (Mahmood & Azam, 2024; Singh, 2015). Hüppauf (2023) further elucidates this challenge by revealing the structural dilemma modern warfare representations face: the tension between the abstract, often inhuman reality of contemporary conflict and the visual codes required for cinematic or photographic representation. Building on this, our analysis reveals that third-generation warfare cinema exacerbates this tension, employing technology-driven, rapid combat sequences to alienate the “other,” thereby replacing the older hero-versus-villain paradigm that was more transparent and easier to critique. While it may be credited that such films sometimes challenge stereotypical portrayals of certain cultures through depictions of moral courage of local civilians or showing nuanced interactions between soldiers and non-combatants, they nevertheless reproduce ethnocentric perspectives under the guise of innovation, shaping collective identity in ways that naturalize exclusionary or antagonistic political attitudes. This results in a dissonance where images of warfare rely heavily on humanizing faces or simplified narratives, which can mystify the brutal and complex nature of modern combat. This dynamic reveals the persistence of ethnocentric perspectives in popular culture, shaping collective identity and potentially reinforcing exclusionary or antagonistic political attitudes.

6.2 Comparison with Prior Studies

Our findings align with and extend existing literature on war films and third-generation warfare narratives. The recurring emphasis on heroism supports Singh’s (2015) argument that war cinema valorizes individual bravery to sustain nationalistic sentiment. However, this study also observes a thematic shift in post-9/11 films, particularly in *The Hurt Locker*, which presents a protagonist whose bravery is marked less by patriotic purpose and more by personal compulsion and emotional disconnection. This supports and deepens Burgoyne’s (2023) argument in *The New American War Film* that contemporary war narratives have turned away from ideals of heroic sacrifice and national glory. As Burgoyne notes, films like *The Hurt Locker* capture the procedural violence of advanced military technologies and the psychological toll on soldiers, emphasizing the embodied vulnerability of protagonists within disillusioning and morally ambiguous contexts. Our analysis reinforces this view, showing how the film’s aesthetic choices, close-range camerawork, sensory overload, and disjointed narrative tempo reflect a broader breakdown in cultural coherence regarding war’s purpose and justification. Psychological conflict, highlighted by Mahmood and Azam (2024), is central to these narratives; however, instead of addressing internal struggles through duty or resolution, characters continually revert to

war as a place of lingering trauma. Inner turmoil defies traditional linear victory or redemptive plots, replacing instead a pattern of return and estrangement. In that regard, these films adopt Burgoyne's idea that the contemporary American war film operates on a framework of unease and discomfort, in which the enemy is undefined, and the line between moral duty and existence survival becomes blurred.

Media influence as a theme similarly corroborates the conclusions of Groeling and Baum (2009) on the role of film in shaping public opinion and political ideology. Our study finds that films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* and *13 Hours* employ documentary-style realism and embedded journalism techniques that create an illusion of objectivity while subtly reinforcing state narratives. These techniques often frame the viewer as a witness to real-time operations, encouraging emotional alignment with American military actors and framing violence as inevitable or reactive. While some films, such as *The Hurt Locker*, maintain a more ambivalent tone, others work to naturalize the militarization of foreign policy through stylistic choices that simulate transparency and urgency. With respect to cultural representation, our findings reflect the ongoing patterns of stereotyping identified by Ching (2024) and Townsend (2024), while also resonating with Bajuwaiber's (2023) detailed analysis of neo-Islamophobia in post-9/11 cinema. As Townsend (2024) emphasizes, such stereotypes are not new but are part of a long-standing tradition in American cinema, where Latin Americans, and by extension, many marginalized groups, have been persistently reduced to caricatures that shape public perception. As Bajuwaiber argues, the shift from overt Islamophobia to more coded forms of neo-Islamophobia is characterized by the internalization of Western values against a backdrop of Muslim otherness. Muslim characters are consistently portrayed as monolithic threats, often denied narrative complexity or moral ambiguity. Even when films attempt to differentiate between civilians and militants, this is done through quick visual cues or limited dialogue, reinforcing the perception of a threatening and unknowable cultural Other. In this manner, entrenched hierarchies are reproduced. As Bajuwaiber argues, American soldiers are shown to be aligned with modernity, progress, and emotional depth, juxtaposed against faceless enemies cast in shadows or behind veils. In this manner, these films carry "subtle and sophisticated" prejudice that conforms to evolving socio-political discourses without challenging their underlying assumptions.

6.3 War Films, Public Memory, Political Ideology, and Cultural Identity Post-9/11

Post-9/11 war films function as significant sites of public memory, where collective understandings of conflict are constructed and contested. Through selective portrayals of heroism and moral ambiguity, these films influence how societies remember and interpret military engagements, shaping narratives that can either glorify or problematize warfare. As our analysis shows, these cinematic narratives contribute to the formation of political ideology by reinforcing or challenging dominant discourses around patriotism, sacrifice, and military necessity (Frank, 2017; Groeling & Baum, 2009). Doostdar & Hayek (2024) highlight how popular cultural texts like the *Call of Duty* video game franchise operate as mythmaking devices reflecting elemental societal anxieties and the evolving ambiguity of the post-9/11 "War on Terror," illustrating the blurring of clear enemy identities and the complexity of modern conflict narratives. These ideological constructions are not merely cultural but have direct implications for political discourse and policy formation. The continued use of cultural stereotypes in depicting "enemies" and local populations contributes to the symbolic production of "Otherness," delineating rigid boundaries of "us" and "them" that privilege Western perspectives and justify interventionist agendas (Singh, 2015; Mahmood & Azam, 2024). Serdouk (2021) critically discusses how Hollywood films produced after 9/11 have been instrumentalized as political tools to perpetuate demeaning stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, reinforcing Islamophobic narratives that align with broader governmental agendas. In this context, war films emerge not just as cultural reflections but as powerful discursive agents that intersect with policy imperatives, including mobilizing public sentiment, reinforcing legal exclusions, and facilitating the expansion of surveillance and military interventions under the guise of moral or civilizational necessity. These dynamics echo broader trends in post-9/11 discourse, where Islamophobic language and

stigmatizing media representations, as discussed by Holland (2021), fundamentally define world politics and support racialized security practices.

7 Conclusion

This review study highlights that distinct features of third-generation warfare, such as psychological disruption, decentralized command, and rapid maneuver, have been employed to create a cinematic narrative in post-9/11 war films, including *Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *13 Hours*. These findings contribute to the literature by explaining how films about war reproduce or contest strategic logics. This links film form and military doctrine with greater precision than prior analyses of war cinema. The study's implications extend beyond film studies into political science and cultural analysis, since cinematic portrayals both sustain nationalist ideals and reveal the ethical and psychological burdens of combat. By situating these films within the ideological landscape of third-generation warfare, the research underscores their role as cultural texts that actively mediate public understandings of national identity, foreign policy, and the lived realities of asymmetric conflict. Hence, post-9/11 war films are not just entertainment but serve as political tools influencing both collective memory and political discourse.

8 Declarations

8.1 Study Limitations

This study examined three U.S.-produced post-9/11 war films using qualitative thematic analysis, facilitating in-depth interpretation while simultaneously constraining the cultural and geopolitical context of the results. Consequently, the findings ought to be interpreted as illustrative rather than universally applicable to all contemporary war cinemas. The singular emphasis on American cinema constrains the consideration of diverse cultural viewpoints, and the dependence on thematic analysis devoid of supplementary audience or quantitative metrics hinders the triangulation of findings. These limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings; instead, they underscore the imperative of interpreting them as context-specific contributions to the comprehension of the portrayal of third-generation warfare in film.

8.2 Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

8.3 Disclaimer

The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and not of publisher and/or the editor(s).

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