

REVISITING AND RE-VISIONING WAR GENRE
CONVENTIONS ON FILM: *THE HURT LOCKER*

by

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Revisiting and Re-visioning War Genre Conventions on Film: *The Hurt Locker*

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ABSTRACT

Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 war film, *The Hurt Locker*, revisits many of the war genre's conventions and is quite unlike other war films from Hollywood's industry-made canon. Conventions were intentionally side-stepped or revised with respect to the Iraq War, which has also been unlike any other war in American history. This thesis examines the conventions of the war film and is structured around the narrative and formal aspects of the genre, offering an in-depth analysis of where and why *The Hurt Locker* stands in confrontation with those conventions. This thesis is particularly concerned with *The Hurt Locker*'s aversion to binaries and a political statement. I argue that *The Hurt Locker* intentionally avoids or revises generic conventions in order to convey political ambiguity, to analyze and develop a stronger sense of character, and to differentiate the realities of the Iraq War experience from other wars and war experiences.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

CONVENTIONAL WAR-GENRE FILM PRACTICES: A BRIEF LOOK AT GENRE AND POLITICAL HISTORY LEADING TO *THE HURT LOCKER*

The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) is a contemporary American war film following the fictional story of a three-man bomb-disarming team in Iraq. Set in Baghdad, 2004, *The Hurt Locker* follows Staff Sergeant William James, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team leader with arguably one of the world's most dangerous jobs: disarming home-made, roadside bombs (called Improvised Explosive Devices, or IEDs) in Iraq and Afghanistan. The film follows his dangerous missions around Iraq outlining his reckless, cowboy-like characteristics and his precarious love for war. Due to his recklessness, the team feels threatened by James' behaviour and count down the days until they can go home. Sergeant James feels alive because of his recklessness and counts down the days until his next tour of duty.

The Hurt Locker takes a close look at the issues surrounding the three men and their type of work, all of which have roots in war genre history. Collective and individual identity, dedication to the mission, masculine and heroic behavior, brotherhood camaraderie, a sense of purpose against the enemy, and the difficulties and rewards of returning home are all conventional narrative aspects of the war genre and each make an important appearance in the film. *The Hurt Locker* is a unique war genre film because it not only revisits and incorporates these generic conventions but it also revises and violates them. The film's biggest revisionist achievement is that it is careful to proffer neither a pro- nor anti-war statement within the film's diegesis.

Genre studies and the analysis of generic conventions are significant in film scholarship because they offer a way of approaching and categorizing the human experience within specific socio-historic contexts. Genre can function to express attitudes, feelings, and values around current and contemporary

issues and experiences as well as to influence historical memory, nostalgia, and feelings toward past events. Generic conventions help audiences to comprehend context, offering a point of identification by emphasizing formal characteristics, character archetypes, and narrative trajectories.

The war genre is especially notable, often functioning as a strong ideological and political tool. Films made after their respective historical wars have ended are able to have a very strong influence over the historical memory of those events. Films made contemporarily with the war they correspond to are often tools for sentimental propaganda. In both cases, the war film works to influence specific national attitudes toward contemporary or historical moments (Beck, 214).

The sub-genre of Iraqi war films, of which *The Hurt Locker* may be the most widely notable due to its success following the 82nd Academy Awards (discussed below), is important because the Iraq War was a contemporary reality at the films' release. It is the most recent American war to be put on film and each film, then, represented some facet of the war while it was still in progress—perhaps with propagandist intentions but without purposefully falsifying its history under the guise of nostalgia. *The Hurt Locker* shows a strong awareness of genre history, incorporating and side-stepping many of the common conventions of the war film so as to set the Iraq War experience apart from the clichés of the wider genre.

In his book *A 'Toxic Genre,'* Martin Barker explains that Iraq war films made between 2005 and 2008 were largely unsuccessful, both critically and at the box office. At least twenty-three films about the Iraq war came out of Hollywood during those years, with only a few catching any attention (Barker, 1). Only seven of the twenty-three films were shown on more than one thousand screens. Surprisingly, *The Hurt Locker* was not one of those seven (Barker 4). In fact, twelve of the films were released to less than fifty screens (see Table 1 below) (Barker 4). Barker explains why he believes *The Hurt Locker* found success while the others failed. *The Hurt Locker* combines a presentation of the “Iraq war experience” with a lead character who does not treat the Iraqi people with hostility (Barker, 156). The result, Barker declares, is that the film refuses to include any moments that could be viewed as political (*ibid*). The film

is without television news footage, debates about war politics and ethics, or soldiers behaving superiorly toward the locals (*ibid*).

| Title | Director/Date | Maximum Screens | Budget | US gross |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>American Soldiers</i> | Sidney J. Furie, 2005 | 0 | No info. | \$0 |
| <i>The Jacket</i> | John Maybury, 2005 | 1,331 | \$29 million | \$7 million |
| <i>Home of the Brave</i> | Irwin Winkler, 2006 | 120 | \$12 million | \$41,000 |
| <i>The Situation</i> | Philip Haas, 2006 | 2 | \$1 million | \$48,000 |
| <i>GI Jesus</i> | Carl Colpaert, 2006 | 12 | \$ 2 million | \$8,000 |
| <i>The Marine</i> | John Bonito, 2006 | 2,545 | \$20 million | \$18 million |
| <i>Badland</i> | Francesco Lucente, 2007 | 2 | \$10 million | \$1,900 |
| <i>Battle for Haditha</i> | Nick Broomfield, 2007 | 2 | \$3 million | \$7,000 |
| <i>Grace is Gone</i> | James C. Strouse, 2007 | 7 | \$2 million | \$50,000 |
| <i>In the Valley of Elah</i> | Paul Haggis, 2007 | 978 | \$23 million | \$6.7 million |
| <i>The Kingdom</i> | Peter Berg, 2007 | 2,836 | \$80 million | \$47 million |
| <i>Lions for Lambs</i> | Robert Redford, 2007 | 2,216 | \$35 million | \$15 million |
| <i>The Mark of Cain</i> | Marc Munden, 2007 | 0 | "Low" | \$0 |
| <i>Redacted</i> | Brian de Palma, 2007 | 49 | \$5 million | \$65,000 |
| <i>Rendition</i> | Gavin Hood, 2007 | 2,250 | \$27 million | \$9 million |
| <i>Day Zero</i> | Bryan Gunnar Cole, 2007 | 2 | No info. | \$13,800 |
| <i>Conspiracy</i> | Adam Marcus, 2008 | 0 | \$18 million | \$0 |
| <i>The Lucky Ones</i> | Neil Burger, 2008 | 425 | \$15 million | \$183,000 |
| <i>Stop-Loss</i> | Kimberley Pierce, 2008 | 1,291 | \$29 million | £11 million |
| <i>War, Inc.</i> | Joshua Seftel, 2008 | 33 | \$10 million | \$578,000 |
| <i>Body of Lies</i> | Ridley Scott, 2008 | 2,710 | \$70 million | \$39 million |
| <i>The Objective</i> | Daniel Myrick, 2008 | 1 | \$4 million | \$95 |
| <i>The Hurt Locker</i> | Kathryn Bigelow, 2008 | 535 | \$11 million | \$12.5 million |

Table 1. Details from Iraq war films, 2005 thru 2008 (Barker, 4).

The above table shows how unsuccessful *all* of the Hollywood films about the Iraq War have been at the box office. *The Hurt Locker* was the only film to gross over its budget and even that success did not come until after its big Oscar wins at the 82nd Academy Awards in Hollywood in 2010. Despite large budgets and quite a few big name directors, these numbers are evidence to show that American audiences simply are not interested in movies about the Iraq War. Throughout this thesis, I will show that *The Hurt Locker* is not really a movie about Iraq or about war. Rather, I argue that *The Hurt Locker* is a movie about character and is most concerned with exploring Sgt. James' psychology and disposition. The Iraq War is an important setting for understanding James, but James himself is at the center of the film. This is the most unconventional aspect of *The Hurt Locker* as categorized within the war film genre. However, it is only one of many ways in which Bigelow revised conventions.

We also see Bigelow exploring the inter-textual connections between the war genre and the Western. War films have commonly incorporated elements from the Western genre as a tool for creating mood and sentiment while influencing national attitudes. Westerns are a common genre to turn to during times of war and terror in the United States, specifically because the Western genre calls on the same ideologies of the war genre, but in a strictly American way. The popularity of Western films largely grew in the post-WWII 1940s as the United States was recovering from the trauma of the war. The Western is set in a distant time and place on which American filmmakers and audiences are free to project their current realities and work through nationally felt traumas and issues. As Robert Warshow famously wrote, “Where the Westerner lives it is always about 1870—not the real 1870 either, or the real West” (Warshow, 111). Instead, the West is an ideological fantasyland of American values and wistful memory.

Western films deal with the specifically American themes of the frontier, they often take place on American soil, and they often revolve around important American ideological themes—endless boundaries, the “civilizing” of the “barbaric” Native Americans, the settling of territories, and the law vs. the outlaw. The ease with which the Western genre creates binaries marks it as the quintessential metaphor for outlining US political debate in specifically American terms. In a time of war, the Western is effective because it creates both an “us” vs. “them” dynamic, and it forces us to question our own ethical morality surrounding this dynamic. Film historians Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor explain:

In our own era of terrorism, images from Westerns have often been invoked. During the cold war (1948-1989), President Ronald Reagan was labeled a ‘cowboy’ for his solo leadership style in the 1980s, a style that led to the demise of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989; after the 2003 preemptive attack on Iraq by the United States, President George W. Bush was branded as a ‘cowboy’ in foreign affairs... The point to be made is that the issue of the frontier, the West, justice, and violence are interconnected inextricably in the American mind—even after the classic era of the Hollywood Western (Rollins/O’Connor, 32).

The west is characterized as a difficult place for anyone to survive, where only the toughest will make it out in the end. Key characters traits are sacrifice and hard work. The Western calls upon many of the conservative and patriarchal values on which the country was founded. Thus, Western genre motifs serve

as a vehicle for arguing both for and against those very values, even in our more contemporary setting. For both the Western and the “War on Terrorism” the only laws are the laws of the man with the bigger gun.

In the spring of 2002, following the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington DC but preceding the invasion of Iraq, the media began making strong use of Western genre metaphors in the discussion of what, if any, action should be taken by the US government against Iraq. During the course of the discussion by media world-wide, President George W. Bush and his administration began to be portrayed with Western genre themes (see Figures 1 and 2). In their extensive study of this phenomenon in the media, Wendy M. Christensen and Myra Marx Ferree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison call particular attention to how the Bush Administration was painted by both pro- and anti-war factions. The arguments and policies from both sides of the debate employed and were criticized through archetypal characterization and terminology that categorized them into strict and dichotomous stereotypes of the Western genre. Bush was portrayed as a “cowboy,” either acting as the paternal “sheriff” looking after his country, or as the wild, out of control and out-lawed, gunslinger.



Figure 1. A cartoon of President George W. Bush printed in *The Denver Post*, March 26, 2002. A comment on the differences between the UN and the United States’ plan of action, Bush makes a move for his gun first (from Christensen and Ferree, page 301).



Figure 2. An example of world-wide media using cowboy imagery, this is a cartoon of George W. Bush from German magazine *Der Spiegel*. “Sheriff” Bush tramples on top of the Earth, wearing his patriotic boots, which he is too small to fit into properly, and blasting his guns (from Christensen and Ferree, page 300).

The cowboy and other Western genre images (along with many other similarly ideological images indicative of the myth of nationalism, including the superhero) began appearing in droves following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. Powell explains:

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the broadcast media were saturated with evocations of the Western. It is perhaps unsurprising that this genre, which centers on myths of national identity and which held significant cultural currency throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, should be employed at a time of intense national crisis; the familiar heroic characters and themes of victory and triumph typical of the Western provided traumatized citizens with a means to make sense of, and find comfort in, the aftermath of 9/11 (Powell, 164).

Media coverage and approaches toward September 11th were largely successful because they called on our patriotism, our feelings of trauma, and the types of ideological and mythic values and nostalgias that 9/11 asked us to remember.

Continuing along that point and specifically considering film's position as post-9/11 media, film professor, historian, and theorist Wheeler W. Dixon remarked,

While some contemporary films offer escapism, the bulk of mainstream American cinema since 9/11, whether the films were in production before or not, seems centered on a desire to replicate the idea of the 'just war,' in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare, are simultaneously inevitable and justified (Dixon, 115).

Kathryn Bigelow raises exactly this question in *The Hurt Locker* without, I would argue, making a clear pro- or anti-war statement. Although I do think there is evidence to suggest her anti-war positioning, she uses the film as a statement to neither justify the war nor condemn it. Rather she is trying to consider some of the issues surrounding the decision and consequences of going to war, by depicting a mostly realistic series of situations, leaving almost all of the moral and ethical elements ambiguous.

The Hurt Locker is the newest of the war genre films to win both Best Picture and Best Director at Hollywood's Academy Awards. It is notably the first (and at this point *only*) Iraq war film to attain admission into this industry-made canon. An independent production co-produced by Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal, *The Hurt Locker* cannot completely be considered a "Hollywood" production. However, the way in which the film is structured, the development of the plot and characters, and the use of conventions are clearly influenced by and taken from the Hollywood war genre.

After 1945, when the Great War had ended, Hollywood's war films began remembering and revisiting the war, creating and maintaining the set of important generic conventions that have endured to the present. From the industry's "Best Picture"/ "Best Director" canon we find WWI and WWII films that maintain and encourage those genre conventions: *The Best Years of our Lives* (1946), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Patton* (1970), *Schindler's List* (1993), and *The English Patient* (1996). This thesis will also grant attention to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which won "Best Director" but lost "Best Picture" to *Shakespeare in Love*. *Saving Private Ryan* is included because it is among the more-recent Hollywood war films to have revisited the war genre conventions, but it did so in a way that is quite different and interesting when compared with *The Hurt Locker*.

During and after the Vietnam War (1955-1975), a new sub-genre of war films (simply referred to as Vietnam War films) emerged with a new set of conventions, revising the war genre entirely. From the industry's canon, *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Platoon* (1986) took home the "Best Picture"/"Best Director" Oscars. Though highly successful and industry-praised, these Vietnam War films do not fit in easily with the conventions set by the films listed above. Like Vietnam, the Iraqi Wars have brought on new nationally felt attitudes toward warfare and left veterans and civilians confused and traumatized alike. However, unlike *The Deer Hunter* or *Platoon*, many Iraqi-war films have returned to the previous war genre conventions, leaving the Vietnam war film as a separate category. *The Hurt Locker* stands as the canonical Iraqi war film, which revisits and revamps those conventions set by the WWI and WWII Hollywood war films.

The war film has both formal and narrative conventions, which have been pointed to by many film historians and scholars. In his 2010 book *The Hollywood War Film*, Robert Eberwein of Oakland University offers a historical overview of war films from *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) to the more recent films looking both at Iraq and back to earlier wars. Eberwein points out many of the conventions of the war film and how they have evolved and been influenced from generation to generation. Eberwein points to early WWII films as introducing the long-standing conventions of the veterans' return home and readjustment, the difficulties faced by veterans coping with physical or psychological traumas, and the convention of moving between images of home and of the war itself.

Robert Burgoyne, professor and chair of film studies at the University of St. Andrews, has published multiple books that analyze genre and history.¹ Burgoyne makes an especially poignant argument on behalf of the counter-narrative of American history that many recent films have offered, going against the more common national narratives that had been falsified for the preservation of a certain national identity and nostalgia. *The Hurt Locker* can be seen as an example of a film offering a counter-narrative.

¹ His publications include *Film Nation: Hollywood looks at U.S. history* (2010) and *The Hollywood Historical Film* (2008).

Many other authors, including but not limited to Martin Baker (*A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films*), Wesley J. O'Brien (*Music in American Combat Films: A critical study*), and James Chapman (*War and Film*) take a more specific approach to their studies of war films. The authors from the first and second of these books, Barker and O'Brien, offer more narrowly defined criticisms of war genre films, looking at and analyzing specific conventions and aspects. Barker is most concerned with dissecting why Iraq war films have been a "toxic genre," completely failing at the box office while O'Brien offers an overview of sound design and music in combat films. In the third book, *War and Film*, Chapman approaches war genre films, not through genre history, but through an analysis of the representation of war on film and the political statements and sentiments that appear in "historical" works of war films.

In this thesis, the focus of chapters two and three is on narrative conventions. In chapter two, "Narrative Conventions: Behaviors at War," the focus is on plot, character archetypes, and setting, specifically analyzing issues of masculinity and heroic behavior, collective and individual identity surrounding the "mission," psychology of soldiers and trauma, the enemy, and brotherhood camaraderie. In this chapter, I will look at the conventions included in war films' portrayal of soldiers (specifically gendered male) and combat behavior in the field.

In the third chapter of this thesis, "Narrative Conventions: Behaviors at Home," I will analyze the treatment of "home" in war genre films. This includes a look at the conventional role of the woman (usually the girlfriend, wife, or lover) waiting at home, the difficulties of returning to civilian life and home for the soldier, and what it means for the war genre, national identity, and the national attitude at large to show soldiers' returning home in the movies. In this chapter I explore the hero's journey, making an argument that while the conventional war genre follows the trajectory of the hero's journey, often ending on the high note with the return home, *The Hurt Locker* is careful to not give the Iraq War or those involved such a quick and easy "happy ending."

In chapter four, "Formal Conventions," I analyze film form and the conventions that are staple to the war genre with a brief analysis of the formal conventions present in the previously mentioned Academy Awards' industry canon. A more in-depth analysis of the counter-treatment of those

conventions in *The Hurt Locker* will follow, explaining how those differences function and why they are important. In this chapter, I will discuss editing and cinematography, the musical and sound design, and mise-en-scene and their significance in the film.

Incorporating the long-standing conventions that were put in place by the canonical war films before it, *The Hurt Locker* makes a statement of war that demonstrates a soldier's personal and generically unconventional experience without relying on or making statements to reiterate any of the national attitudes, feelings, or nostalgic outbursts of patriotism that have previously flooded the genre. *The Hurt Locker* uses many of the formal and narrative conventions of the Hollywood war film in order to be easily recognizable and consumable by American audiences, while simultaneously re-decorating those conventions to show a new side of war that resonates deeper with a different, and perhaps truer, human experience of the war in Iraq.

Just as with the myth of the Western, the myth of war offers a cruel reality. Bigelow wants her audience to understand that reality and she wants to bring that reality to the forefront. After all, as war correspondent Chris Hedges explains, the glories that war is supposed to offer—honor and respect—do not matter on the battlefield of a dishonorable, disrespectful, and un-glorified war such as the war in Iraq. *The Hurt Locker* is comprised of various vignettes showing the EOD's experiences in Iraq—a testament to the dishonorable and disrespectful nature of the Iraq War. Bigelow emphasizes that all sides of this war deserve criticism. In this thesis, I will argue that *The Hurt Locker* takes an intentionally revisionist approach to the war film, focusing more on character than combat, unpacking and uncovering the trauma and psychology of those involved in the Iraq War, while carefully avoiding to make a political statement and emphasizing the less-popular reality, rather than the popular myth, of warfare.

CHAPTER II
NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS:
BEHAVIORS AT WAR

In this chapter and in chapter three, I will look at the narrative conventions of war films in comparison with *The Hurt Locker*'s revisionist approach to those conventions. Narratives are comprised of six basic elements: setting, character, plot, conflict, climax, and resolution. I will begin this chapter with a succinct overview of *The Hurt Locker* in association with these broad narrative categories. Following, I will take a closer and more in-depth look at the more specific narrative conventions of the war film. The focus of this chapter is on the portrayal and treatment of war itself and behaviors at war (chapter three focuses on "home"). Within the broader categories mentioned above, the war film pays particular attention to narrative conventions of warfare such as the connection between masculinity and heroic behavior, brotherhood camaraderie, the creation of an "us" versus "them" outlook, and a focus on a collective mission and collective identity.

Patton is one of the more typical examples of the Hollywood war film that comes out of the Academy's industry canon. In this WWII film's opening scene, General Patton (played by George C. Scott) gives a speech to the Third Army highlighting each of these above-mentioned issues. Set in front of a huge American flag (Figure 3), Patton emphasizes patriotism and encourages a strong nationalist attitude in his soldiers. He specifically talks about masculinity in relation to heroism and later in the film we see him slap a "cowardly" soldier. He stresses the importance that his soldiers' believe that "we/us" are different from—and better than—"them." He also includes a bit about collective identity saying, "Now, an army is a team. It lives, eats, sleeps, fights as a team. This individuality stuff is a bunch of crap." His commands are highlighted by his own egocentric nationalism. *The Hurt Locker* revises and reworks these conventions, conveying little to no nationalist attitudes in its main characters.



Figure 3. General Patton is dwarfed by the American flag during his opening speech in *Patton*.

Setting and Character

The Hurt Locker is set in Baghdad in 2004, with a focus on the conflicts of the Iraq War. Shot on location in Amman, Jordan, the film's setting appears quite realistic. The film's title is meant to emphasize the dangerous reality of the setting, much as location names such as "Tombstone" or "Death Valley" emphasize danger and death in the Western. Reminiscent of this trope, the term "Hurt Locker" was coined during the Vietnam War as a way of describing having gotten hurt. It translates in the Iraq War as a place where one is bound to get hurt; where peril is more likely than unlikely; a place with horrible conditions and a gloomy outlook. To go to the "Hurt Locker" is to face death.

The Hurt Locker follows three primary characters, each of whom have a strong connection with one of three secondary characters. The three primary men belong to the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team of Bravo Company. Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner) is the film's surprising protagonist and the group leader. He is a dangerous adrenaline junky who has been so deeply traumatized by the war that he is incapable of maintaining meaningful human relationships. He is connected with the secondary character of Connie James (Evangeline Lilly), his ex-wife and the mother of his infant son.

Sergeant J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) is the second in command of their unit and is James' opposite in character. Sanborn was previously trained in intelligence, follows strict protocol, and is highly

distraught to be under the command of the reckless Sgt. James. Sanborn was close with the previous team leader, Staff Sergeant Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce), who gets killed in the opening scene of the film.

Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) is the final member of the unit, notably less brave and confident than James and Sanborn. His inability to take action during the opening scene caused Thompson's death. Eldridge is the most cynical in the group and suffers from severe battle fatigue and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Eldridge is very critical of the U.S. Army and of other soldiers out of spite for having been given one of the most dangerous jobs in the army. Eldridge is connected with an army psychologist, Lieutenant Colonel John Cambridge (Christian Camargo). After Eldridge convinces Cambridge that he must come out from behind his desk and see what the EOD team actually faces every day, Cambridge is killed by an IED. (For a more detailed dramatis personae see Appendix A, p 77-79.)

Plot, Conflict, Climax, and Resolution

The Hurt Locker opens with a scene of Thompson, Sanborn, and Eldridge on an IED mission. Although the scene begins on a light note with playful banter between the men, the scene quickly turns and results in the death of Thompson. James is introduced as Thompson's replacement and tensions develop between the men due to James' recklessness. The warfare plot takes place over thirty-eight days, counting down to the end of Bravo Company's rotation when the three men will go home.

During their tour, we see the men go on a number of missions. James disarms a daisy chain bomb, a car bomb at the United Nation's building, and as he detonates a bomb in the desert, Sanborn and Eldridge consider out loud the benefits and consequences of killing him. Driving through the desert on their way back to camp, the team happens upon a group of British contract mercenaries with a flat tire and they all end up in a shoot out with far-off Iraqi insurgents. The team begins to bond after the experience and the characters start opening up to one another.

Later, the team finds a body-bomb sewn inside the body of a young Iraqi boy when walking through a recently deserted warehouse. During this scene, Cambridge has joined the men on their mission, and dies unexpectedly by an IED, increasing Eldridge's anxiety and fear. James believes the body-bomb to have been inserted in a boy named Beckham whom James had befriended on base, though it later turns

out that he is actually alive and well. James becomes increasingly more bitter and reckless and he runs through Baghdad looking for those responsible for the boy's death. After returning to base, the team is called out to an oil-tanker explosion. James leads the men through the nearby suburbs where Eldridge gets captured by insurgents. James accidentally shoots Eldridge in the leg during a rescue attempt and Eldridge is simultaneously angry and relieved about being sent home early.

James and Sanborn are called to their final mission together, disarming a time-bomb that is padlocked to the chest of a repentant insurgent. James is unable to save the man's life and is barely able to run far enough from the bomber to survive the explosion himself. James then returns home to his wife and son and finds he is unable to cope with domestic duties and civilian life.

The film's climax does not take place in Iraq, but unexpectedly takes place after James has returned home from war. He plays with his infant son, revealing the emotional truth that he loves only one thing in the world. The next cut confirms that the one thing James loves is neither his son nor his wife. He is back in Iraq, re-enlisted into Delta Company, beginning a new three-hundred and sixty-five day rotation. As Bigelow described, "War's dirty little secret is that some men love it...I'm trying to unpack why" (quoted in Yabroff, no page). The film resolves with the revelation that the film's countdown has not tracked the days remaining for James' return "home" to his family, but James' returning "home" to war. (For a more detailed plot summary, see pages 80-88 in Appendix B.)

Masculinity and Heroism

The tragedy of September 11th, 2001 was a nationally-felt traumatizing event and was very widely covered by media and news footage. The myth of the hero was emphasized through the first responders and a renewed sense of national community seemed to sweep across the United States. This nationalism, of course, is a myth as the United States is far too vast, its populace too diverse, to actually agree to work in unity. But the myth of nationalism sells the myth of war and the myth of war sells the appeal of heroism (Hedges, 83). As mentioned earlier, following 9/11, images and metaphors in the media largely morphed into imagery of the "cowboy," a male-centered image with various implications. The media discourse around the plan to invade Iraq morphed into a debate about masculinity. Specifically, the

media called upon both positively and negatively valued stereotypes of masculinity that influence the appropriateness of the decision to go to war (Christensen/Ferree, 288). As Christensen and Ferree point out:

...fear and vulnerability in the aftermath of the [9/11] attack were associated with weakness and femininity, while the media constructed an assertively masculine alternative by playing up 'narratives of heroism' from New York City firefighters and rescue crews...[and] after 9/11 Bush was constructed as a 'father figure' for the nation with the responsibility to discipline those who invaded the safe space of the national family (*ibid*, 291).

Europe especially became "othered" here, as did the diplomatic and sophisticated language of the United Nations. Their rhetorical strategy directly opposed the simple straightforward language of the cowboy, which became a hallmark signifier of George W. Bush (*ibid*, 299). While the US was proposing war, Europe was offering an alternative, more diplomatic option opposed to waging war. In effect, Europe became represented in the media as "woman." Soon, the debate inflated around exaggerated gender extremes. The United States, caught up in the display of extreme masculinity, began to fear emasculation, needing to "'defend its honor' by a show of 'manly strength,' [because] a positive value is placed on shows of force without needing to explicitly consider the merits of alternative, non-military policies" (*ibid*, 293).

Gender was used here as a way of setting up binaries and the United States portrayal of masculinity was in logic with "protection" (*ibid*, 291). If this were the case, the United States would be representing itself as reacting "naturally" to the situation at hand by performing the role of a "good" man, one who protects the "fragile" women and children from the "bad," "uncivilized" men. (*ibid*, 291). This sets up Europe as a "bad" woman because "she" fails to accept the projections of her frailty and vulnerability, rejecting the protection of the masculinist United States. (*ibid*, 296). This also creates an "us" vs. "them" relationship with Iraq, turning Iraq into the "bad" man (discussed in full below).

In *The Hurt Locker*, Eldridge provides a constant reminder of this type of vulnerability. He is traumatized by the death of Thompson and obsessed with his own mortality. Eldridge has one of the most high-stress positions on the team. As a lookout, he is constantly scanning the surrounding area for potential threats and suspicious characters, making continuous judgment calls on individuals in the crowd.

Using four separate cameras on the film and setting up multiple camera angles in every scene, Bigelow was able to get a variety of perspectives on the characters and their surroundings, opening up and narrowing down our understanding of the space and of the character's psyche. Eldridge is fidgety, scared, and the nervous camera emphasizes his anxiety.

Eldridge, as the vulnerable "woman" or "Europe" metaphor and stereotype, cannot perform heroically because he does not have particularly strong sense of masculinity on the field. Eldridge only excels as "victor" and "hero" when childishly playing war genre video games. We briefly see Eldridge playing the video game *Gears of War* just after the team's first mission together. When Eldridge's game is interrupted by Cambridge, the Army psychologist, the connection between Eldridge's psychology and the game is made clear.

Gears of War is a third-person shooter game, set on the fictional planet Sera. The characters belong to Delta Squad, a troop sent to Sera in a final attempt to save the humans from a subterranean, alien-like enemy. Eldridge plays behind the angle of vision of Marcus Fenix, a burly, tough character who is both ex-military and ex-prisoner. He is fully equipped with large and destructive looking weapons, not used in real hand-to-hand combat (see Figures 4 and 5).

Like Eldridge's job in EOD, *Gears of War* emphasizes the strategy of taking cover, aiming, and firing at the unknowing or less-strategic enemy. Unlike Eldridge, Fenix is brave, un-fearing, and confident. Fenix is a masculine fantasy. He moves quickly and quietly, carrying weapons men can only dream of, which in real life would be impossibly heavy and difficult to use. Dressed in an armored body suit, Fenix looks more like James dressed in the bomb suit than Eldridge in his army uniform. *Gears of War* is the masculine outlet for his otherwise "effeminate" approach to combat. It is because of Eldridge's fear and cowardice in the opening scene, not taking the shot at the trigger man, that Thompson was killed. *Gears of War* reminds us that Eldridge desires to be the confident man in the suit, the man who thrives off of the adrenaline rush, the hero at the end of the day. Bigelow is making an overt statement about the discrepancies between the popular and fictionalized game of war and the psychologically challenging realities of war.



Figure 4. This shot shows the television from Eldridge’s point of view as he plays the video game *Gears of War*.² Eldridge is positioned to look and perform from behind the character, furthering his distance from the “action” and still positioning him in a secondary, almost passive role.



Figure 5. The XBOX cover art of video game, *Gears of War*. The main character, Marcus Fenix, shown here is burly, strong, well-equipped with seemingly impenetrable armor, and carrying a weapon indicative of male-fantasy, not combat reality. His costuming and demeanor look more like Sgt. James dressed in the bomb suit than Eldridge in his simpler, army issued uniform.

² As an aside, while *Gears of War* is an effective game to reference in the film in connection with Eldridge for the aforementioned reasons, it does not fit chronologically within the film’s setting. Set in 2004, Eldridge is playing a video game that was not actually released until the fall of 2006.

James, to the contrary, is the quintessential “cowboy” of the twenty-first century. James starts out as the “lone-ranger” type. He drinks whiskey, smokes cigarettes, takes risks, and prefers the “desert prairie” (in this case Iraq and Afghanistan), to the domestic home. As the “lone-ranger,” he is introduced during the second scene of the film in direct contrast to Thompson, who was introduced prior.

Sergeant Thompson had, in his short scene, been set up as the “sheriff” type cowboy. Sanborn and Eldridge had enormous respect for him, their relationship was cordial and friendly, and it is clear that both characters respected his authority. Although Thompson interrupts Sanborn while he is working, taking over the remote control operation of the robot in removing the trash from atop the bomb, Sanborn and Eldridge follow him because their role in this scene is to help set him up as the good sheriff type and show that “the sheriff is not questioned as a leader” and “the ‘posse’ he leads neither challenges nor limits his authority” (Christensen/Ferree, 299).

This directly contrasts the introduction of James who has been brought in as Thompson’s replacement. After Sanborn refers to Thompson as “a great team leader,” James explicitly states, “yeah, I’m not trying to fill his shoes, or anything, you know, I’m just gonna do my best.” James does exactly that throughout most of the film. He is not a great team leader; he often does not take the safety of his team into account when he makes decisions, but he does do his best when performing his part of the job: disarming the bombs.

Bigelow presents these stereotypes of masculinity through its most extreme and misogynist institution, military and war, as a way of encouraging a conversation about masculinity as a social construction. Bigelow’s commitment throughout the film of focusing on masculinity, specifically in a way that reminds us of Western genre masculinity, directly correlates with the wider media discourse surrounding the Iraq War. The media outlined the political debates leading up the invasion through Western genre and gendered categories to make both pro- and anti-war statements. This film makes use of those same types of discourse, focusing on men’s relationships with war, including love and hate for war, still without taking a pro- or anti-war political stance.

Although James plays the tough “John Wayne,” his generosity toward the Iraqi people and the statement that his son is “a tough little bastard, nothing like me,” imply that James’ rough exterior and risk taking, careless attitude are all a façade. It is all a persona that he wears to hide the real fears and depressions that he represses. War is James’ home. His fears and vulnerability might just revolve around the threat that the war will eventually end, leaving him to have to choose between homelessness and settling down in domesticity.

Brotherhood Camaraderie

Brotherhood camaraderie is one of the more important narrative conventions of the war film. In the heat of combat, camaraderie can sustain motivation, encouraging soldiers to continue in spite of their fears. The camaraderie of warfare is strong, and the bond formed between soldiers is comparable to family, to brotherhood.

The Hurt Locker opens with an introduction of brotherhood. Thompson, Sanborn and Eldridge work as a team. They banter about their future dreams for a grass business and joke about their job. When the time comes for Thompson to put on the suit, the men punch fists and encourage one another, continuing to joke around (see Figure 6). Brotherhood is carefully stressed in the opening scene and then swiftly comes to an end at the death of Sergeant Thompson. After Thompson’s death, as Sanborn stands above the box containing his last belongings, the strength of their brotherhood is apparent (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Sgt. Thompson, in the suit, smiles as Sanborn and they punch fists before Thompson makes his trek toward the bomb. The men have a clear sense of camaraderie, encouraging each other with respect and humor.



Figure 7. Sanborn crouches on the “grave” of his dead comrade, commanding officer, and friend, Sgt. Thompson.

In a conventional war film, camaraderie emphasizes a more melodramatic story of dedication and sacrifice for one's brother. Bigelow strips the film of this convention, revealing that the Iraq war is a different kind of war. *The Hurt Locker* takes a deeper look into the wounded psychology of soldiers; wounds which are beyond the healing power of human relationships.

James and his team do not develop a strong sense of brotherhood camaraderie. Sanborn and James only begin to open up to one another briefly, right before the end of their rotation. Their respect for one another comes too late in the game for any real bonds to form. James stands apart from the other men in the film, apart from the conventional protagonists of the war film. In fact, James does not fit easily into dichotomous categories. His character does progress throughout the film from the "lone-ranger" toward the "sheriff" type of cowboy, although this transition is not black and white. He maintains his "lone-ranger" qualities through to the end of the film, however, his leadership and respect for his team improves and his team's respect for him increases during the film. Even at the end of the film, James does not seek out the bond of "war brotherhood" with any of his fellow soldiers. The only person he truly seems to befriend is the young DVD merchant, Beckham.

James' transformation from "loner" toward "sheriff" is framed between two important bathroom scenes, which clearly mark the arc of James' character trajectory. In the first scene, it is the beginning of the day. Freshly showered, James and Sanborn are finishing their daily hygiene routines along the long line of bathroom sinks and mirrors. Sanborn, shaving, tells James that "yesterday," the team's first mission together in which James dropped the smoke bomb, disabling Sanborn's ability to cover him, "wasn't cool." James responds with an un-caring attitude, remarking, "you'll get it though, you'll get it." Although Sanborn expressed concern for James and his team's safety, James scoffs it off, unemotionally remarking about how danger is the nature of combat.

During this bathroom scene, James is well aware of his authority over Sanborn, patronizing him because James neither cares about Sanborn's opinion nor the consequences of his actions. Here, Sgt. James is an archetypal American "cowboy," the "loner." He is smart and resourceful, courageous and uncaring. Unfortunately, the "lone-ranger" cannot actually function and survive in war. Soldiers must rely

on one another and it is James' task in the film to realize this. This scene, the dialogue in particular, is important because it shows that James has no remorse for his attitude toward his team and his job.

However, Sanborn is not entirely wrong about James and as “shadow figures” the two characters represent opposite psychologies; they both will benefit from a meeting in the middle, becoming a little more like the other. From Jungian psychology, one's “shadow” is comprised of the unconscious aspects, fears, and desires that a person is unaware of or unwilling to address in him/herself. In film and literature “shadow figures” are characters who bring one another's unconsciousness to life. Because Sanborn and James are one another's “shadow,” they force each other into confrontation with the undesirable aspects of themselves and are eventually able to learn and grow from that uncomfortable confrontation.

In the next bathroom scene, James has come full circle. Following the scene where he accidentally shot Eldridge in the leg after putting both of his men in an unnecessarily dangerous situation, we see James enter the bathroom, fully dressed in his uniform, at night. He walks into the shower fully clothed, turns on the water, and blood flows into the drain. In this bathroom scene, James now understands the consequences of his actions. As he falls to the floor of the shower, he is literally sitting in the blood of his teammate, whose life he has put in danger, and whose blood is on his hands. It is significant that it is not while wearing the eighty-pound suit or the heavy artillery that James feels any weight of responsibility, but is in the shower, where one commonly sheds everything exterior and cleanses himself, that James finally begins to understand. He must cleanse himself of his selfish and reckless “lone-ranger” behavior, because in the context of war, it has very serious consequences.

“Us” versus “Them”

While a strong “us” (as both the first person plural and a poetic acronym for the United States) versus “them” narrative and sentiment arise in conventional war films, *The Hurt Locker* offers a more well-rounded view of both parties. “Us” is not always presented positively and “them” is not always presented negatively. As mentioned above, the larger media discourse positively supporting the Iraq war “othered” the Iraqis as “bad” men; “bad” because they were the attackers of the “innocent” and “frail” women-and-children of the homeland whom the “good” men necessarily needed to defend against.

It is important that James stands apart, not only from the protagonists of the war film, but also from the other men in *The Hurt Locker*. It is important that he has no political motivation himself for serving in the war (this point will be emphasized in chapter three during the discussion of the music and sound design) because we, the audience, are able to feel more compassion for all the people involved. We are asked to approach the film in the mindset of “us” and “them,” and we see the war from a broader perspective *because* James is not a “patriotic hero.”

The “us” versus “them” binary has been a very important trope of the war film preceding *The Hurt Locker*. Creating a clear sense of good versus evil, right versus wrong, victor versus loser is a political tool for encouraging patriotic values and instilling a sense of national identity in U.S. audiences. Of course, because the film’s focus is on three U.S. soldiers, theirs is the primary perspective of the film. However, Bigelow also shows the reciprocated suspicion and anger from the Iraqi citizens toward the U.S. soldiers. We see their fear, their confusion, and we empathize with their situation, primarily through James. Their perspective is represented through the Iraqi citizens who are constantly being rerouted and evacuated from the streets and from their businesses; Beckham, the young DVD seller on base, and the older merchant who he works for; the Professor whose house James invades; and from the bomb-makers and Iraqi insurgents themselves.

The Iraqi citizens play an important role starting from the film’s opening scene. Almost always in the background, the Iraqi men and women are shown in both their traditional garb and in the more western style of jeans and buttoned down t-shirts. They are herded through the streets like cattle, pushed along by the guns and tanks of the U.S. soldiers. Although their Arabic is not translated, we hear the women crying and screaming with fear. In the opening scene, Bigelow also pays attention to a meat merchant arguing against leaving his cart. We feel sorry for these seemingly innocent people and their situation. The sense of confusion and distress is increased through the hand-held camera, disorienting us, the audience, in keeping with the ambiance of the setting.

From our initial introduction of the EOD unit, we only see the men interacting with one another. James is especially distanced from his teammates and other soldiers, painting him as the “Lone-Ranger”

type of American cowboy figure. However, when James buys a DVD from a young Iraqi boy, Beckham, it suggests that he sees the Iraqi people as the victims of the war. They have felt the effects of war and globalization in a similar way to, if not in a bigger way than, citizens of the USA were victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Beckham and the older DVD merchant on base provide us with two additional perspectives about the Iraqi people.

Beckham is twelve-years old, selling boot-legged DVDs of popular and pornographic movies to the U.S. soldiers. He speaks English and his provocative language is both humorous and empathetic. When James is nice to him, paying extra money for the DVDs, playing soccer with him, and offering him the big-brotherly advice not to smoke, we see a kinder side to James. When they are interacting with one another, as representatives of the U.S. and of Iraq, we see their best sides come out. Instead of seeing one another as “other,” as opposite, as threat, they see one another as friends. James does not seem genuinely interested in the DVD, but he does seem genuinely interested in helping the kid. The two characters are complete strangers but James is able to empathize with his situation and wants to play a small part in supporting him.

Although it is funny to hear the boy curse and talk to James about the different types of DVD he can get for James (such as donkey porn), and despite James’ laughter at his comments, the reference to pornography reminds us of the hard-hitting reality of 2004 Iraq. This merchant is a kid; he is a young boy, more than likely working to supplement his family’s income. Although he has learned English, it is not helping him to get a respectable or well paying job. Knowing English only helps him to sell black market DVDs to American soldiers. James seems to be sensitive to this reality and Bigelow asks us to as well.

The merchant speaks no English and communication is not easy between him and James. During their encounter when James forces the man to drive him into Baghdad to Beckham’s house (after believing Beckham to have been murdered), their misunderstandings of one another lead to “othering” and mistrust. The merchant is clearly afraid and confused during the drive, taking James to the only place he can think of, where James might be able to communicate his intentions—the house of a respected English-speaking Iraqi professor.

The Professor, who speaks Arabic, English, and French, represents the educated, upper-middle class demographic of Iraq that often goes unnoticed in the larger media discourse from the U.S. concerned with the Iraq War. He is kind to James, referring to him as a guest in his house. Despite having a gun pointed at him, the professor effectively helps James come back to his senses, realizing that the Professor and the merchant are both innocent men. They are equally, if not more, traumatized by the war, especially because it is set on their home ground. James suddenly realizes that he is in the wrong place and stutters that he is “looking for the people responsible for Beckham.” He becomes hyper-aware of his surroundings, and being in a middle-class family home is the exact space in which he most feels out of his comfort zone. James starts backing up, looking all around him and is startled by the professor’s wife. She throws a tray of dishes at him while shouting in Arabic, causing him to hit his head on an archway leading into their living room before leaving their home.

The Professor directly juxtaposes most all of the Iraqi citizens we encounter throughout the rest of the film. Most people do not speak English and—except for the brief use of a translator in the scene with the suicide bomber at the end of the film—their words are never translated for us. We see them as the U.S. soldiers see them. Although it could be argued that the Iraqi people are, in some ways, presented as “uncivilized” or “barbaric,” it is through characters like James and Cambridge who try to befriend them, that we get an alternative way of viewing these characters.

Though the insurgents never speak and in the film they have no real voice, they do have a face and we do see from their point-of-view and their angle-of-vision (see Figures 8 thru 12, found at the end of this section). Some critics have accused *The Hurt Locker* of following the “faceless enemy” cliché of the war film (Flom, 325). Although they are not the main characters of the film and they are not given names, Bigelow still ensures that we identify with them. Just as we identify and sympathize with Beckham, the merchant, the professor, and the innocent people on the streets, we must sympathize with the “enemy.” “Enemy” is not synonymous with “villain” in *The Hurt Locker* and we are asked to think about the perspectives from all sides of the war.

Bigelow reveals a new perspective and draws attention to a phenomenon of twenty-first century warfare during the scene at the United Nations building, this phenomenon being YouTube. The internet has played an important role in the Iraq War because, although people have been filming war combat for over one hundred years, YouTube provides a new and instantaneous medium for uploading and sharing that footage. The videotape of an IED explosion could be uploaded and spreading globally within a matter of minutes following the event. At the UN building, Eldridge is directly confronted by an Iraqi man with a video camera (Figure 11). The availability of inexpensive video cameras and the ease of uploading to YouTube meant that soldiers from all sides of the war took coverage of their experiences. Unfortunately, this meant that a lot of footage was taken from the point of view of the USA's enemies, as they recorded U.S. soldiers being blown up and experiencing other horrors. Eldridge knows exactly what it means to be video-recorded in Iraq and he is terrified by the idea that he might become the next big "hit" on YouTube. He admits to Sanborn his discomfort with being video recorded, believing that this is a sure sign that the bomb will explode and that they will all die.

James is not as concerned about his teams' safety because he does not view Sanborn or Eldridge's lives as being any more important than the Iraqis' or their enemies'. James' sensitivity to the Iraqi peoples' victimization in the war has elevated him out of conforming to the ideological "us" versus "them" binaries of the genre. Instead he sees the wider reality of the Iraq War and the influence of the global, westernized world. The Iraqi people have been flooded with Western ideologies and values and in trying to defend their own values against the encroaching Western philosophy, have only become further oppressed by a terrible war.

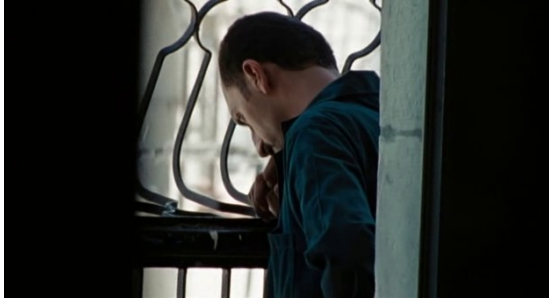


Figure 8 a (left). We see the insurgent look down as James disarms his daisy-chain bomb on James' first mission with his team. Figure 8 b (right). We look through the point of view of the insurgent watching James. The point of view shot puts the audience in the "shoes" of the insurgent. This shot was used in the film's promotional posters.



Figure 8 c (left). We see the insurgent face-on, but not from the point of view of James. Because we do not see from James' point of view, we do not identify with James. Figure 9 (right). We see the face of the insurgent responsible for the car-bomb at the UN building. We had previously seen the back of his head, looking from his angle of vision as he shot at the vehicle. Now we see his face.



Figure 10 a (left). We see the face of one of the insurgents of the desert shoot-out scene. Figure 10 b (right). We see the face of the same insurgent a second time as he takes cover from the EOD's fire.



Figure 11 (left). We see from the point of view of Eldridge, looking down through the scope of his gun. This man is video-taping the car-bomb scenario. The self-reflexive nature of this shot suggests that Bigelow is asking us to remember that we have a fetish for war films and commoditizing war, reminding us that this war is not on our soil. This man is not making a fictional film to be shown in the safety of an American theatre but is filming the "real" Iraq war. Figure 12 (right). We also see the shooter on the railroad tracks from the desert shoot-out scene. None of the insurgents are "faceless enemies." We are also granted their perspective and identity, if only for brief moments at a time.

Collective Identity and the Mission

The war genre often emphasizes teamwork, protocol, collective goals, and objectives organized around a specific team-dependent mission. In conventional Hollywood war films, there is either only one mission or the film is limited to two major missions. Although the over-arching mission of many war films is to return home, the main plot follows the accomplishment of the one or two long and arduous mission(s) related to combat. This can be seen in *Saving Private Ryan*, where the team's first mission is to work together traversing through France in search of a specific soldier and then later when their second mission becomes to either defend or blow up a bridge. More recently in *Stop Loss*, the main character's mission is to avoid returning to combat through being "stop-losses" (an involuntary extension of active duty). He explores every possible option of escaping his fate of leaving home and returning to war. The explosive ordinance disposal unit of the military is specifically designed around teamwork and mission-based goals, although somewhat unconventional, because there is no single mission to accomplish. The EOD are responsible for multiple, relatively short, missions.

In *The Hurt Locker*, like in many war films, the over-arching mission is also to return "home." However, "home" means different things to each character. Home for Sanborn and Eldridge means the comfort of the United States. They long to return to their families and to continue their post-combat lives as normally as possible. For James, "home" is the war itself. His goal is to continue disarming bombs and find a meaningful life in combat. The combat-missions of *The Hurt Locker* are quite unlike those of the conventional war film. The team has no large objective except to survive each day, counting down to the end of the tour. The film is made up of many short, somewhat disconnected vignettes of their various missions. There is no single bomb that, when disarmed, will result in the accomplishment of all their goals. For this reason, the climax of the film could not take place in the war, a convention of the genre detailed in the following chapter, but must take place at "home." With no goal to achieve except to return home, James' confession of his love for war replaces the conventional explosions and mission-based climax typical to the war film.

Collective identity plays an important role in conjunction with the “mission” convention. The military emphasizes community and collective identity, stripping soldiers of their sense of individuality. Individuality is seen as a threat to the greater goals of the armed forces. The military can only have control over their goals and their soldiers’ actions if the soldiers see their own identity as that of the collective. Collective identity is most easily created through the use of uniformed clothing and the ordered behavior of soldiers. All of the armed forces rely on this technique for molding the specific identity of each individual to that of the whole.

James rejects these conventions of the collective by constantly emphasizing his individuality. His blatant disregard for uniform and basic behavioral protocol outraged many veterans of the Iraq war when they saw *The Hurt Locker*. Katie Hoit, a veteran of the Iraq war who had served in 2004, the same year of the film’s setting, wrote for the Huffington Post that the film’s inaccuracies—which she mentioned were incorrect uniforms, uniforms worn incorrectly, incorrect patches on uniforms, wrong accompanying personnel on EOD missions, improper weapons, and the display of noncommissioned officers drinking on base—had alienated most veterans and military personnel from enjoying the film (Hoit, no page). She also notes that smoking, drinking, and rolling up the sleeves of one’s uniform in a combat zone completely violates protocol and is especially unfitting with the behavior of a Sergeant.

James does all of these things. In their first mission together, James steps out of the HumVee with his sleeves rolled up, lighting a cigarette (Figure 13). His disregard for participating in the military mandated collective identity and behavior is an intentional act of rebellion on his part. Although the other alienating details for service personnel (the wrong uniform, the misplacement of patches, etc) are the fault of the filmmakers, James’ behavior is completely fitting to the development of his character.



Figure 13. James rejects participation in collective identity. His sleeves are rolled up and he lights a cigarette while on a mission—behaviors that are both unheard of and strictly forbidden in military rule. This detail enraged many veterans of the Iraq war because of how ridiculous it looked to them that a sergeant would behave this way (Hoit, no page). This detail further emphasizes James as an unconventional character, distancing his identity from that of other Sergeants and soldiers.

These details are important and are meant to be seen. The fact that they are more noticeable to veterans than to civilians suggests that *The Hurt Locker* goes deeper than many other Iraq war films in addressing a wide-ranging audience. Although the inaccuracies have distanced some veterans from appreciating James as a character and not a military prototype, the knowledge that these small details are in direct violation of military code only enhances James' character with the civilian audience. After all, James' entire disposition is meant to contrast with typical military behavior; it is only fitting that real soldiers took issue with James in the same way that Sanborn takes issue with him throughout the film. Their outrage proves that Bigelow and Boal did something right in outfitting James outside of the collective norm.

James is outwardly disrespectful of collective identity and he rejects fitting in within the larger restrictions and rules of the community. This trickles down into the smaller collective of his EOD team and results in James' similar disrespect for the sanctity of the team and their missions. In *Saving Private Ryan* team leader Captain John H. Miller (Tom Hanks) works hard to develop a sense of community with

his team, insisting that each person has value and importance in their mission. In one emotionally charged scene, Miller opens up about having been a school-teacher back home. Like James, he was “nobody” back home and the war turned him into someone more important. However, unlike James, Miller reveals this point to emphasize equality between him and his team. Although Miller has the most authority, his life is no more valuable than any other.

James takes exactly the opposite approach to Miller. At the mention of his wife and child (brought up by Eldridge and Sanborn), James quickly turns the conversation around, showing off his pride for his work in the EOD. He rejects connecting with his team on a personal level. He is dependent on his authority to be able to survive the war and behave in his non-collective style, making no effort to find equality with his teammates. James’ disrespect for his team and their missions is eventually returned by Sanborn.

During their mission to disarm the car bomb at the United Nations building, James exercises his authority over Sanborn, both disrespecting Sanborn as a teammate and disrespecting Sanborn’s insistence on following military protocol. After Sanborn orders Eldridge to take top cover, James orders Eldridge to stay put. He punishes Sanborn for expressing authority forces him to take top cover, running to the roof of the building. James puts distance between himself and Sanborn, the biggest threat to his operation, by forcing him to go to the roof. With Sanborn out of the way, James is able to remove his bomb suit and headset, violating protocol, in order to more successfully achieve his independent goal. Even after the building is evacuated and the team is able to leave, James refuses to let the bomb sit still armed. At the end of the scene, Sanborn punches James in the face for violating protocol and disrespecting his authority. Sanborn makes the point that if James refuses to respect the collective—their objectives and their identity as comrades—Sanborn refuses to respect James’ authority.

Stripping *The Hurt Locker* of these two important conventions (participation in the collective identity and the mission) reinforces the point that James is an unconventional war hero. His approach to combat is the result of a new, unconventional type of war. In 2004, the EOD had no guidebook for disarming bombs. They only had basic training about the nature and variety of IEDs and were largely left

to their own devices when it came to performing their duties (Bigelow). Disarming bombs in 2004 required a sort of fearlessness and confident attitude that James reflects. James is an extreme example of this type of soldier, being so completely confident and seemingly fearless that he is beyond the ability of functioning in normal society. He has become so good at using adrenaline to his advantage with his extreme job of problem solving that he is, as the film's epigraph indicated, addicted to the drug of war.

James is like any other drug addict. He found a way to make his boring and meaningless life more exciting, and in doing so, he also found himself doing more important and meaningful work. Like many great artists, poets, and musical composers, James' work is benefited by his addiction. In this case, James is addicted to adrenaline and there is no person, including his son, wife, or his brothers at war, who is more important than his addiction. Presenting James as a passionate addict like this is completely unconventional to the war film. He definitively cannot and does not achieve the goals of the war hero: developing a sense of brotherhood camaraderie, identifying as part of the "us" that is fighting against "them," and participating in the collective. James also cannot easily return home.

CHAPTER III

NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS: BEHAVIORS AT HOME

The home front provides the war film with the opportunity to explore both the justification for fighting and the aftermath of war. Many war films over-emphasize the trauma and difficulty of returning home after the war. The reintegration of soldiers into American society and the suffering from physical and psychological injuries has been the plot of entire war films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives*. The woman is a helpful character in the soldier's return home, easing him back into the routines and changes of life on the home front. *The Hurt Locker* spends a full one hundred and twenty-five of the one hundred and thirty minutes of screen time in Iraq, detouring home for only five very crucial minutes.

The Return Home and Reintegration into Society

The Hurt Locker does not spend any time transitioning James between the war and home. We do not see him preparing to return home in any way; he does not pack any bags, sit contemplating the difficulties of returning, look longingly at pictures of his family, or make any phone calls. A sudden cut to an American grocery store is made after James and Sanborn drive back to base in the HumVee, distraught from the failed attempt of disarming the suicide bomber. Sanborn opens up to James about his longing for a son and family of his own though James makes no mention of his own family. James only tells Sanborn that he does not know why he is the way that he is. Shot from inside the vehicle, we see young Iraqi children throwing rocks at their HumVee and running alongside it. A match-on-action cut is made to show James pushing an empty shopping cart through an American grocery store.

Initially at the cut, we see only the reflection of James through the glass doors of the refrigerated aisle. The "real" James is kept out of view. He is only the reflection of an American person, suggesting that he is not yet integrated into society. This first shot of James back in the United States implies that the "real" James is back in Iraq; he is not made whole by returning home.

James comes into view, meeting up with his wife and child. While his cart is empty, her cart is full. The empty cart suggests that James is not the head of his household or the provider for his family. Connie's cart is not only full of groceries and diapers but she also has the baby. She acts as the provider. Connie is in control of the domestic sphere, taking charge and delegating tasks. James is in the passive role at home, appearing more like the fearful and uncomfortable Eldridge than the hot-shot soldier he had been in Iraq.

Although nothing is directly said between Connie and James concerning his culture shock in returning home, Connie seems sensitive to his anxiety and discomfort. She behaves with a sensitive manner toward his reintegration, moving through her life without acknowledging any disruption. Taking on the bulk of the shopping and allowing him to peruse the store, she can move easily through her routine while he alone reacquaints with American luxuries. Asking him to pick up a box of cereal and meet her at the checkout line, she disappears into the background. He looks around, lost and confused, before begrudgingly moving toward his new, boring assignment.

The cereal aisle is shown in long-shot from a slightly low-angle, emphasizing the length of the aisle and the overwhelming variety of brands, grains, and flavors (Figure 14). James stands in the center of the aisle, looking right and left and then grabbing whatever box is directly in front of him. He walks away from the camera, down the aisle, irritated and hitting the side-displays in frustration. The moment happens and then is gone, never mentioned again.



Figure 14. James is overwhelmed, standing in the expansive the cereal aisle. The huge selection of the grocery store is one of the more potent aspects of culture shock for persons returning to America after being abroad, especially when returning from a developing country.

Bigelow does not spend screen time examining his psychological trauma in depth. Instead, James' return home is made up of several short vignettes, which imply his struggle and discontent with American life. James spends no time in "recovery." He only barely and briefly talks about his experiences with Connie, he does not seek therapy, and he pursues no forms of "self-help" such as alcohol or drugs. He only performs his boring routine as husband, father, and home-owner. He cleans out the gutter in the rain, he helps his wife cook dinner, and he plays with his baby. The only sign of his psychological injury comes right after the grocery store and gutter-clearing vignettes. For six seconds only, James sits in profile in close-up, deep in thought and staring into space, while the static T.V. plays in the background (Figure 15). Shot in profile, we are distanced from James's psychology. We can only infer that he is remembering and longing to return to Iraq as the white-noise plays behind him. But, as an audience comprised mostly of people who have never participated in warfare, we cannot know exactly what he thinks and feels.



Figure 15. James sits in contemplation in front of the static, white-noise, television.

What follows is a one-way conversation in the kitchen about his eagerness to reenlist. James opens up to Connie about the horrors of the Iraq War and the reasons why it is necessary for him to return to his real “home.” James tells her that he needs to go back because his job in the EOD is very important to the war efforts. However, it is clear from the snippets of his home-life that he needs to return to the war because he has been too psychologically damaged to survive the monotony of life as a family-man.

The conversation is hardly even a conversation. James explains his reasoning while Connie stands silently, chopping vegetables and peeling carrots. She makes subtle facial gestures in reaction to his speech, slightly rolling her eyes or tilting and shaking her head. She knows that his mind is made and makes no attempt to change it. The way she smiles at him and asks him to cut the carrots, not reacting to his story about a horrific IED explosion, implies that they have probably discussed this too many times before and to no avail. Connie seems just as comfortable about James leaving again because she too will be able to return to her preferred life after he is gone. Connie and James both know that he is too far traumatized by the war. Rather than forcing him to reintegrate into his American role, she tacitly complies with his death wish.

The last scene of home shows James playing with his infant son in the son's bedroom. They play with the jack-in-the-box and the mobile while James begins the film's climactic monologue. He says to his son:

You love playing with all your stuffed animals. You love your mommy, your daddy... You love everything, don't you? But you know what buddy? When you get older, some of the things that you love are not so special anymore. Like your jack-in-the-box. Maybe you realize it's just a piece of tin with a stuffed animal... By the time you get to my age, its only one or two things. For me I think it's one.

He stares at his son with a guilty look, sad in his honesty and disappointed at the truth. He is beyond his ability to even have a relationship with his own flesh-and-blood son. His confession is the climax of the film, when all of the evidence of James' irreparable trauma is verbalized. Another blown convention of the war film, this climax is subtle and emotionally rich. Conventionally, the climax of a war film is something big, loud, and adrenaline rich. The climax is usually an explosion, such as the blowing up of the bridge in *Saving Private Ryan*.

The Hurt Locker offers no explosion or adrenaline rush. Instead, we get the look in James' eyes as he confesses his "dirty little secret." As the mobile spins above the baby's head, a sound bridge of a helicopter comes over the soundtrack, matching up with the final piece of music in the film. The film cuts to show a Chinook helicopter landing on base in Iraq with James in tow.

James is not like other war heroes. It is not only difficult for him to return home, it is impossible. He does not heal through a series of PTSD reactions, re-living his traumas and moving on with the comfort and love from his family. He does not drink away his problems or act out inappropriately with friends, family, or strangers. This war is a different kind of war, with different consequences and different soldiers. Bigelow ensures that her protagonist be presented with the respect and acknowledgment that Iraq War soldiers do not fit into the categories set by Hollywood.

The Woman at Home

As shown above, the woman herself is an important character archetype in the war film. The woman waiting at home, often a fiancée, pregnant wife, or a wife with children, represents the object of desire for the male characters at war. As the "warm hearth," she is juxtaposed with the male characters

and acts as their reason for fighting, staying alive, and coming home. Important for the man's ability to reintegrate, comes with a loving reunion with wife and child. The expression of their need for each other—the man's need for his wife and the woman's need for her husband—justifies both his participation in “protecting” her through engagement with military and his returning home to “protect” her more directly.

The Hurt Locker shows no romantic or loving reunion between James and Connie. As mentioned above, there is no transitional scene between war and home. We do not see the family in the threshold space of the airport, reuniting with hugs and kisses. No children run to hug James in his military uniform, fresh off the airplane. We never see or hear mention of proud parents, siblings, or other family. James just shows up, back at home, going through the motions.

Connie and James do not express any real emotion toward one another. Neither of them seems to have missed the other and they clearly do not want to be together. Their interactions suggest that they have become more of nuisance to one another's preferred lifestyle than a partner. They never kiss, hug, or even touch. And, as will be explored in the mise-en-scene section of the next chapter, Connie does not need James in anyway. She can cook, clean, shop, and raise their child completely on her own. There are no signs of economic or other struggle for her as she is, essentially, a single parent. Interestingly, their baby never once cries—he is taken care of and content without his father.

Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal make use of the woman-at-home convention in completely unconventional ways in order to highlight the bigger issues at hand. James' story and character are unlike other war heroes because James is unable to be made whole again by returning to the all-good “home.” The film's political agenda is most strong here, although it is still unsettling because no statement is made overtly. We are left to see James as a product of the American system, which has bred men who thrive at war. Unfortunately, they have been sent into a war from which they will never be able to recover. Not even the lure of the woman can help these soldiers return and reintegrate to a “normal” life.

The woman and child at home are essential elements of the justification for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as explored in the introduction of this thesis. George W. Bush was presented as the patriotic father of

the country, invading Iraq out of necessity to protect “her”—the United States—from the threat and danger of the “other.” Bigelow’s choice to present the woman and child as unthreatened and in no need of being taken care of, debunks that media discourse. In reality, the war is not on our front steps; the threat is not imminent. Although 9/11 was a horrible event, far fewer American citizens were killed during 9/11 than during the Iraq war, not to mention the number of insurgents and innocent Iraqi peoples.³

³ The count shows that roughly 3,000 American civilians were killed by the 9/11 attacks along with the 19 hijackers. Well over 100,000 people have died and are dying as a result of the Iraq War since 2003.

CHAPTER IV: FORMAL CONVENTIONS

Formal analyses of film are concerned with four elements: editing, cinematography, the musical score and sound design, and mise-en-scene. This chapter will analyze the conventions and uses of these four formal elements and compare them between the industry's canonical war films and *The Hurt Locker*. Form is important in film analysis because the look, feel, and sound of the film add much of the necessary dimension in establishing characters, settings, and situations.

Formal elements speak more loudly to the subconscious mind of audiences, quietly pushing the filmmaker's agenda and assisting audiences in drawing connections. In *The Hurt Locker*, the formal design of the film supports the narrative goals, continuing to reject political sentiment or forced feelings of sentimentality in the audience. The journalistic aesthetic of the hand-held camera replaces the conventional use of television news footage in the war film, making the film look like live footage without overwhelming it with political agenda. The musical score is subtle, creating mood without manipulating the audience into feelings of extreme sentimentality. Similarly, the mise-en-scene is unconventional, emphasizing Bigelow's revisionist approach to the war film.

Editing and Cinematography

Editing—the shot-by-shot trajectory of the film—and cinematography—camera work, angles, lighting, and types of shots—are important for understanding the conventions of the war genre and *The Hurt Locker*'s revisionist approach. From the film's opening to the surprise turn-ending, *The Hurt Locker* uses and violates conventional editing practices and cinematography. The opening scene introduces many conventional approaches to editing and cinematography while simultaneously introducing the audience to the revisionist approaches that will prevail throughout the film.

A sound bridge of a small vehicle moving over a dirt road transitions the black screen to the opening shot of the film. The film opens, not with a high-angle establishing shot of Baghdad as would be

expected, but with a moving close-up of the rubble on the ground. High-angle establishing shots are commonly used for orienting the audience. Films often begin with an extreme birds-eye-view shot of a city or landscape, slowly narrowing down into the neighborhood of the narrative's focus and then to the lead characters. However, the first visual images of *The Hurt Locker* are exactly the opposite. We begin on the ground, moving along the rubble as the images self-reflexively call attention to the apparatus itself, orienting us in the point of view of a military robot's live video feed. We quickly learn that the robot is being controlled remotely by a small group of US soldiers with the live feed transmitting directly to the soldiers behind their HumVee.

Within this first scene, we get a great introduction to the editing style and cinematography that prevails throughout the rest of the film. Three characters are introduced: Sergeant Thompson, Sergeant Sanborn, and Specialist Eldridge. Thompson is the team lead, giving Sanborn instructions on how to operate the "bot" (the unit's short-hand slang for the robot), while Eldridge remains in the background. Through the friendly banter between the soldiers, it is clear that they feel a strong sense of camaraderie and friendship toward one another. As the "bot" approaches its destination, Sanborn controls the claw, uncovering a bomb from overlying trash. This team is revealed to be EOD—their job is to disarm dangerous road-side bombs.

However, Thompson's approach to "disarming" bombs is not to disarm them at all. Thompson's attitude toward his job and toward IEDs, as he states, a mere five minutes into the film, is that he wants to "Give these people something to think about. Want them to know if they're going to leave a bomb on the side of the road for us, we're just going to blow up their little fucking road."

Actor Guy Pearce, the only recognizable actor in the group at the time of the film's release, plays Thompson. His recognition as a popular celebrity calls the audience to sympathize with him as the film's protagonist. The film starts out as if it is coming from a conventional Hollywood perspective, and as such, it would be natural for us to relax into the comfort of trusting Pearce's character to be the "good" guy. However, what Thompson is suggesting, to blow up the road, is neither a necessarily "good" (as in moral) approach to the situation nor is it technically his job. On the moral point, the explosion of the bomb would

more than likely result in the damaging of innocent people's homes and community, not actually harming the bomb makers themselves, who would know enough to leave the area. On the technical point, Thompson's job is to disarm bombs first, only blowing them up as a last resort.

However, the film intentionally takes this seemingly pro-war, conventional Hollywood stylization as its starting point. Not only are we presented with a hero played by a star actor with the "let's-teach-these-people-a-lesson attitude," but we are also given a faceless enemy. The use of the hand-held camera and the medium shots of the locale, distances the audience from identifying with Iraqi culture or the community. Iraqi women and men are running through the streets, goats are roaming freely, merchants sell large pieces of meat that hang from their food carts just off the street, and they are all presented in a chaotic and faceless way. On the soundtrack, Arabic is coming over a loud speaker but none of it is translated or subtitled into English. This all comes together as a tool for distancing the audience from the Iraqis.

In direct contrast, the US soldiers are shown in close-up with a slightly steadier, though still hand-held, camera. We identify with them because we see their faces and eyes, hear their voices, listen to and understand their conversations, and we can read their names—an obvious marker of identification—on their uniforms. We are also directly put into the point of view of the US military through three mediations: we look through Sanborn's eyes (#1) viewing the screen on the back of the military HumVee (#2), which is showing the video feed from the robot (#3). The point of view shot is the oldest and easiest trick in the movies for building audience identification with characters. In this opening scene, we are forced to identify with the military.

During the scene, Eldridge sets up a C4 detonation in a small wagon, which the "bot" will transport to the bomb so that the team can blow it up from behind the safety of their HumVee. Following a typical Hollywood plot, the wagon breaks down and Thompson must play the hero, confronting the danger head on. Thompson gears up in the bomb suit with the intention of carrying the "det" (the unit's slang, referring to the "detonator") to the bomb and then returning back before it is set off. Although the

film has followed a largely conventional and pro-war sentiment during these first few minutes of the film, Eldridge makes the first anti-war statement, criticizing the US Army for making such a cheap wagon.

Thompson approaches his task in the heroic fashion. He is not worried, and makes an off-hand and light hearted remark about craving a hamburger. As he walks down the road, the team follows protocol in communicating Thompson's distance from the bomb but Eldridge and Sanborn are relaxed. We see Thompson's point of view from inside the bomb suit, again, an editing technique used to increase identification.

Eldridge and Sanborn have the job of providing the lookout while our supposed hero, Thompson, is wearing the suit. While looking around for potential threats, the two preoccupy themselves with a light-hearted conversation about a grass-growing business. In the meantime, Eldridge notices a local man carrying a cell phone, a potential trigger for the bomb, turning the scene very quickly from light and humorous to chaotic and dangerous. For the safety of his team, Eldridge needs to shoot the man but is unable to take the shot.

The editing pace changes with the growing chaos of the scene. The editing becomes more fast-paced with quick cuts emphasizing the escalation of danger and suspense. As the situation becomes increasingly more dangerous, the hand-held camera also becomes more shaky and chaotic, an aesthetic that is very disorienting. The hand-held camera, present from the beginning of the scene, opens the film with an intentionally journalistic aesthetic. Almost never still, the camera is always moving, zooming in and out, tracking along with the actors, and rack focusing. The film looks like it could be actual war footage, calling attention to the Iraq War, not in a stylized Hollywood way, but in a way that reflects what the soldiers themselves may have seen and faced. Still in Hollywood conventional fashion, this scene introduces us to the soldier's psychology plot, in which the battle-fatigued soldier is unable to cope with the requirements of war and later experiences PTSD. Eldridge is unable to overcome his psychological block, and misses his opportunity to shoot the potential trigger-man. The bomb explodes, sending a shockwave through the entire area.

The special effects team created a real, four-story high explosion for the scene. They neither resorted to computer generated imagery (CGI) nor to studio controlled gasoline explosions, which look nothing like the real IEDs that explode in Iraq. The crew used a High-Speed Phantom camera to shoot the explosions. This camera allowed for the team to move beyond the conventional way of filming explosions, that is, simply showing the character(s) being blasted backward by the invisible shockwave. Instead, we see the shock wave on a granular level as the rust is blasted from atop an old car and the rubble is shot a few feet up off the ground (see Figures 16 and 17). Thompson is not only blasted forward once for effect, but we see him transition from life to death from multiple angles, repeating the blast to increase the magnitude of the loss of our hero. The special effects team takes their time to show his death in full, the initial blast off the ground, a short burst through the air, the pressure from the explosion causing his head to explode inside his helmet, and his final fall to the earth (Figure 18).



Figure 16. The rust from the car is blasted from the roof, shot with the High Speed Phantom camera.



Figure 17. The rubble from the ground is blown up, also shot with the High Speed Phantom camera. These shots emphasize the impact of the explosion, nothing is left unaffected by the blast.



Figure 18. Thompson's death from the IED explosion, notice the blood inside his helmet.

Thompson dies, and with him the expectation that this will be a conventional pro-war, “patriotic” Hollywood war film. Our point of identification has been stripped away, punished for his actions and hubris. The film necessarily takes a turn, preparing the audience for a continued revisionist experience.

It was important for Bigelow to hire unknown actors to play the lead roles in her film because she did not want the audience to be distracted by familiar faces and expectations for those characters (Bigelow). Using unknown actors gave her the ability to set up all of her characters, Sergeant James in particular, with the potential for more complexity. Our sympathy is not directed any which way, nor is it predetermined for us. We have no expectations of these characters. They are allowed to develop, contradict themselves, and disappoint us, all because they have no star persona, they owe us nothing.

This is the perfect scenario for setting up a cowboy figure, because the cowboy is not dichotomously good or bad, is simultaneously good *and* bad, and he is both hero and outlaw (Christensen/Ferree, 291). Bigelow sets up her main character, Sergeant James, exactly this way. It becomes clear that James is a “cowboy” figure in the scene following Thompson’s death. After removing the plywood from his bunker window, James refers to his room, a dull, off-white, aluminum box, as “home sweet home,” and relaxes on his bed, cigarette in mouth, with no irony in his expression. The war *is* James’ home, the place where he finds comfort and safety, an ironic idea for those of us not in war.

Sound Design and Musical Scoring

Sound design is often overlooked in film analysis as film is primarily a visual medium. However, sound is important to film in general and the war film in particular, as it plays a role in actively influencing audience interpretation and perception of image and narrative. Sound is categorized two ways in film studies. Diegetic sounds are those, which come from the film’s world and story, the film’s diegesis, including dialogue, and other sounds that the characters are aware of and interacting with. Non-diegetic sound consists of the sounds outside of the narrative of the film including the musical score and voice-over narrations.

Beginning with live piano performances in the late nineteenth-century, musical accompaniment to film is as old as the movies themselves. The musical score of the film provides an extra-diegetic opportunity for communicating mood, emotion, and sentiment between the film and the audiences’ filmic experience. Music is also often ideological and cultural, increasing audience identification with characters and adding more dimension to characters, settings, and situations (O’Brien, 5).

Many war films are accompanied by large, orchestral musical scoring. This non-diegetic music is there purposefully and solely to guide audience reaction and understanding of the other sounds that they are hearing (such as dialogue) and what they see on the screen. Scores in combat films are often representative of heterosexual masculinity (just as scoring in the melodrama is representative of femininity) (O'Brien, 9). A gendered aesthetic in musical scoring parallels the personality and actions of the characters. In classical Hollywood, a well manicured lady might be paired with a smooth melody and light harmony while a macho-man might be paired with harsh contrasting sound, deep drums, and music with a loud and robust tenor (Laing, 40). Often structured as an ensemble, this kind of scoring practice reflects the narrative conventions of the war film, which include collective objectives, brotherhood, and working together (O'Brien, 11). The music usually functions to manipulate audience emotions and sentimentality, positively representing the power of patriotism and unity.

The Hurt Locker has a different kind of musical score. The original score for the film, combining music and sound design, is more reminiscent of some of the great and well known Western genre films than of war genre films. Composers Marco Beltrami (famous for his horror film compositions) and Buck Sanders stylized their composition similarly to Ennio Morricone's famous scores for Spaghetti Westerns (O'Brien, 125). The score's main theme is heard after the desert shoot out scene, in which the team joins up with a group of British mercenaries and James and Sanborn act as snipers against a group of far off Iraqi shooters. During this scene we also see dust devils, train tracks, and the vast Iraqi desert, suggesting the inter-textual correlation between this film and the Western. Thus, the score does not only indicate setting or mood, but calls upon cultural associations and meaning that exists outside the war genre but within the Western genre (O'Brien, 126).

Many conventional war-films also use non-diegetic scoring to create a leitmotif for their protagonists and other important characters. A specific melody or tune is used in conjunction with those characters and their acts of heroism and victory or in times of doubt and trouble. *The Hurt Locker* does not use scoring in this way. Although there are diegetic pieces of music associated with James, there is no

non-diegetic score specific to him or the development of his characterization. The music that is specifically identified with James is a compilation of pre-existing music.

Conventionally, war films will also use a compilation of popular music in the soundtrack to help identify the characters. Popular music is formulaic, predictable, and structured, so when pop-music is used, we can expect the characters to be formulaic, predictable, and structured as well (O'Brien, 118). For example, in *Jarhead*, a 2005 film about the Gulf war, the popular music of Kanye West, Stevie Wonder, and The Doors overlays and parallels with the very conventional narrative of the film. When used within the diegesis of the film, pop-music can explain a lot about how characters see themselves and can help audiences to identify with them. When used non-diegetically, popular music can be used to clarify the situation or enhance a certain mood around the characters and events. In the case of *The Hurt Locker*, the majority of what we hear in the film is a compilation of a *different*, much less popular kind of music existing within the film's diegesis.

The sound design and music that accompany Sgt. James move away from the conventional scoring of the Hollywood heroic protagonist (O'Brien, 119). Sgt. James is introduced shortly after the death of Sgt Thompson. As we see Sanborn walking through base toward the camera, heavy metal quietly enters the soundtrack. The music enters the scene before the audience is able to identify or place where it comes from. The song, "Fear (Is Big Business)" by the band Ministry, belongs to a vein of heavy metal called industrial metal (O'Brien, 120). Virulent and rebellious in nature, industrial metal music does not fit the already established character profile of Sgt. Sanborn, indicating that the music belongs to a new, different kind of character. As Sanborn and the camera move us into a new space, the heavy metal transitions into the film's diegesis, booming through the bunker that is home to the film's new protagonist, Sergeant First Class William James.

James crouches in a close-up as the music fills the space around him. He holds a cigarette between his clenched fists. Seeing him sitting in this position, with the accompaniment of the music, we can already begin to form a character profile of James. His sitting position indicates controlled aggression while the close-up showing his clenched fists, face, and cigarette suggests that there is something

traumatic or unusual happening within his internal psychology. As a profile shot, there is an established distance and mystery built up between what we can already assume about his psychology and the things we do not know about him that are kept hidden from us. He is introduced as a versatile character. To confirm, complicate, and enhance this, the blasting metal music is there to juxtapose with his quiet concentration. He is simultaneous still and calm, rebellious and transgressive.

Conventionally, as pointed to above, there is often a wild card, “John Wayne”-like character in the war film. He is a bit rebellious and might even break a rule or two, but he always comes out heroic and praise-worthy in the end. In many ways, James fits this profile. However, heavy metal, especially industrial metal, is not generally perceived as the music of the quasi-rebellious or the “John Wayne.” Instead, heavy metal is seen as the music of extreme violence and self-destruction, often pointed to for influencing those types of superfluous and irrational acts (O’Brien, 120). Heavy metal is also commonly associated with alienation, loneliness, and thrill seeking: a hint toward James’ later adrenaline addiction and incapacity for meaningful relationships. This also looks back to the film’s epigraph, which explained that “the rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug” (a quote by war correspondent, Chris Hedges). As the film’s protagonist, James’ character profile is established by very unconventional means, leading to an also unconventional character arch.

Immediately following James’ introduction, James continues to present himself as an unconventional character, reiterating both his rebellious side and softer, more controlled side. His insistence on taking the plywood off the walls, despite Sanborn’s warning about mortars coming through at night, suggests that he is, as the song indicated, somewhat self-destructive. By saying that plywood on the windows would not stop a mortar from coming through the roof, and besides, he tells us, he likes the sunshine, James also surprises us. He presents himself as more well-rounded. Now shown in a medium shot standing in the light of the window, James is shown exactly the opposite from how he was introduced (sitting in the dark room, close-up, with clenched fists). The use of musical accompaniment to the introduction of the protagonist is among the first indicators in *The Hurt Locker* that we can continue to expect to be surprised by James.

The band Ministry is used within the diegesis of a second scene in which the team drinks heavily in James' bunker. James and Sanborn outwardly express their masculinity and strength, punching one another in the stomach. In this scene, the song, "Palestina" plays in James' room. Finally, Ministry is used at the film's end, with James returning to duty, walking away from the camera in his bomb suit, and beginning a new 365-day tour in Iraq. This scene is again reminiscent of the Western, as the protagonist walks into the sunset after he has realized that he is ill-equipped for civilian life. The film wraps up its two metaphors, that of the Western and of rebellious heavy metal, the third Ministry song, "Khyber Pass" plays over the soundtrack. However, this Ministry song is less violent and virulent than the previous two. "Khyber Pass" was influenced by Arabic history and carries with it a more Middle-Eastern style (O'Brien, 128-9). This song indicates that James is both the aggressive, adrenaline junkie that he was introduced to be, but is also the lonely Western-hero, expatriated from society (*ibid*).

The lyrics from the songs used by Ministry have strong anti-government and anti-US content and messages. The three songs used in the film all come from Ministry's album, *Rio Grande Blood*, the second album from the band's anti-George W. Bush trilogy (see Figures 19 a, b, and c). The lyrics from the third verse of "Fear (Is Big Business)" are: "Fear on the television always the same/ Terrorists everywhere including my brain/ I was never frightened of Saddam Hussein/ The US government's the one to blame." The lyrics from "Palestina," tell a story of a nice, young girl driven to become a suicide bomber as revenge for experiencing a life full of oppression and rage. The final song, "Khyber Pass," has only six lines of lyrics: "Where's Bin Laden/ Where's Bin Laden/ He's probably runnin'/ Probably hidin'/ Some say he's livin' at the Khyber Pass/ Others say he's at the Bush's ranch."

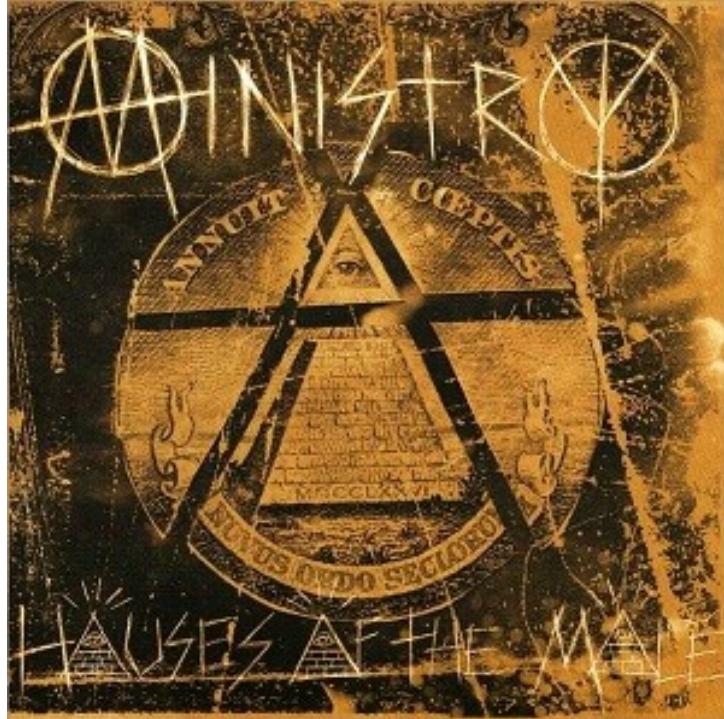


Figure 19 a. *Houses of the Mole*, the first album of the band's anti-Bush trilogy. Note the "anarchy symbol" cut through the pyramid seen on the U.S. dollar bill.



Figure 19 b. *Rio Grande Blood*, the second album of the band's trilogy. The mise-en-scene around George W. Bush connects the war with oil, implying that the intentions behind the Iraq war stemmed from greed for oil. Bush wears the symbolic head dress of the all-powerful pharaoh, the biblical Christian symbol of the crown of thorns, and his arms are extended, reminiscent of Jesus on the cross. This imagery suggests that Bush is an icon for the all-powerful dictator under the façade of the sacrificial lamb.

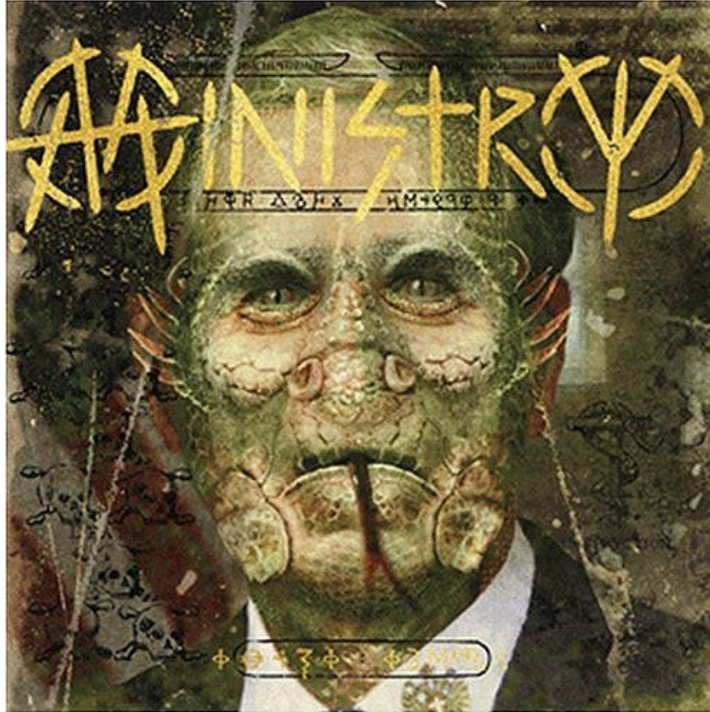


Figure 19 c. *The Last Sucker*, the final album of the trilogy. George W. Bush's face has been superimposed with the face of a snake, appearing alien and threatening. This image also reminds us of the character Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series, suggesting a connection between Bush and "pure evil" and casting Bush in the role of the villain.

Although the lyrics are not heard in the film, the use of the songs and the potential resonance and recognition of the songs by the audience functions to complicate and add dimension to James' character profile. O'Brien points out that the use of such music indicates that James' motivation for serving in Iraq does not stem from patriotism, loyalty, or a longing to defend his homeland, but from his desire to get as far away from the lifestyle of the United States and his identity as a family man as he possibly can, rejecting the safety of the norm (O'Brien, 121).

The rejection of a loud and sentimental original musical score in *The Hurt Locker* and the use of heavy metal compilation are unconventional. The musical sound design is never predictable and adds a great deal of meaning and complexity to James' character. The composed and compiled music is still used with the same intention of establishing mood and influencing audience identification and the sound design has a similar desired effect as conventional war films. However, the music in *The Hurt Locker* operates without manipulating audience emotions and feelings of sentimentality. *The Hurt Locker's*

musical design moves away from ideas of brotherhood, unity, and patriotism, suggesting instead, the lonely, traumatic, and un-patriotic results of participating in war.

The non-musical side of *The Hurt Locker*'s sound design is also complex, enhancing the overall feel of the film. From the sounds of the explosions to the background call to prayer to the flawless transitioning between the diegetic and non-diegetic, the sound design is near perfect and quite unconventional. *The Hurt Locker*'s sound design is much more subtle and personal than many other Hollywood war films. We not only get an understanding of space and time from the sound track but we also go inside the bomb suit with Thompson and James, joining them in their sensual experience of that space and time.

The sound of a helicopter overhead subtly introduces the film's first explosion, a leitmotif that appears later in the film's diegesis. First heard by Thompson (and us) from inside the bomb suit, a helicopter flies over Thompson as he walks slowly toward the broken wagon. He looks overhead and we see the helicopter from his point of view. Just under three minutes later, the bomb explodes. The helicopter sound is emphasized for us when we identify with Thompson, seeing and hearing from his first person perspective. When he dies by the bomb, the shock is greater because of the identification built from the helicopter point of view shot. In turn, there is a subtle connection built between the explosion and the helicopter.

In a later scene, Bigelow and sound editor Paul Ottosson utilize this previously introduced technique to build suspense around James' safety. At the transition between Eldridge leaving base in a helicopter with a broken leg and James and Sanborn going on their last mission together, the sound of the helicopter is overwhelming and loud, dramatically cut off at the cut to the next scene. This final mission, the scene in which James is unsuccessful in disarming the bomb strapped to the repenting suicide bomber, mirrors the film's opening. James announces a seventy-five meter "kill zone" perimeter, the radius from the bomb in which, in any direction, the blast from the explosion would be fatal. Like Thompson in the opening scene, James and the suicide bomber are of course the only two within the "kill zone." James realizes that he will not be able to disarm this bomb or save the man. He runs, mirroring Thompson again,

and when the bomb explodes, the suspense has been built to suggest that his fate has mirrored Thompson's. Where James and Thompson differ, is that James tried to disarm the bomb first and is truly sorry for being unable to save the man. Thompson most likely would have left the man to die with no apology. Fortunately, James is rewarded for his compassion, surviving the blast, and sparing us from the death of a second protagonist.

The explosions themselves sound differently than most conventional war film explosions. When bombs explode in *Patton* they happen in rapid succession and are short, small explosions. The explosions happen during raids and little attention is paid to each one (Figure 20). These raid scenes are long and loud, emphasizing the quantity of the bombs being dropped. In *The Hurt Locker*, because there are only three bomb explosions throughout the entire film, they are given a greater deal of attention. As mentioned earlier, the effects of the bomb are shown with overlapping editing so that the screen time of the explosions exceeds the real-time. The sound design matches this. We not only felt the effects of the bomb through the visual, granular stimulation provided by the High Speed Phantom camera, but we also heard the explosions from multiple perspectives.



Figure 20. Explosions in *Patton* are numerous and emphasize the *quantity* of the smaller bombs. This shot alone includes over a dozen. In *The Hurt Locker*, the approach is to emphasize the impact of a single, large bomb.

The final explosion with the suicide bomber is given three perspectives with four distinct repetitions of the blast. The initial sound of the explosion comes from the source, as we watch the man

being blown up. Second, James is hit with the blast and is blown back with the rubble. Third, Sanborn and the other soldiers who are out of the “kill zone” perimeter feel the blast as we hear a fainter but still distinct sound of the explosion. And finally, as James is being blasted to the ground mirroring Thompson, an even fainter, but still distinct sound of the blast is given from his point of view. The sounds of the blast are replaced by the rubble falling to rest around James’ still and quiet body. Everything is quiet except for Sanborn’s yelling for James. The moment lingers without any dramatic music. The sound then transitions to James’ perspective in the bomb suit. He is temporarily deaf and after coming to and taking a few deep breathes, the scene ends.

The other pieces of the sound design help to orient the audience and smooth the transitions between scenes. In the film’s background, the call to prayer can often be heard. Whenever the call to prayer is heard on the soundtrack, it is a real diegetic sound (that is, it comes from within the space of the film’s action), due to the location shooting in Jordan. This detail is there to insist that this film is not being shot in a Hollywood studio and reiterating the point that this is not a conventional Hollywood film.

Ottosson also worked the sound design to make clean transitions between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Among the most notable examples is in the post-climactic transition between James talking with his son and returning to Iraq. After his heartfelt admission, another sound bridge of a helicopter is overlaid on the soundtrack, orienting us back in Iraq, reminding us again of the danger of the EOD and James’ love. A cut is made, matching the sound with two Chinook helicopters landing in Iraq with James in tow. At the cut, the hard drums from the final Ministry song, “Khyber Pass,” enter the soundtrack. The guitar and other drums are subtly introduced, matching the action of James’ gait as he leaves the helicopter and is welcomed to Delta Company. The helicopter sounds slowly fade as the song grows louder. The close up tracking shot of his feet, walking away from the helicopter and to his next tour, is match-cut with his feet in the suit walking toward his next mission. This cut is made on beat with the song as all of the instruments come together and the diegetic sounds have completely faded away.

The transition is smooth and yet deceptively complex. The song reminds us of James’ attitude and recklessness; his adrenaline addiction and fearlessness. At the same time, the helicopter sounds remind us

of the trauma associated with Thompson's death and therefore the potential of James' death. In some ways, the film has a "happy ending," James and his team mates are all alive and James has happily returned "home." However, with the attention paid to the helicopter sounds yet again, and the match between those sounds and the non-diegetic Ministry music, a certain intensity and suspense grows. This may be the last time James ever walks in the bomb suit. This may be his walk toward death. The sound design leaves the ending open and unclear, exciting and scary.

Mise-en-Scene

Mise-en-scene, French for "put in the scene," is concerned with the relationship and composition of all of the elements within the frame. From the background architecture to the placement of props, the camera work and lighting, the movements of the actors, etc, mise-en-scene is essentially the director's job. When analyzing mise-en-scene, nothing is arbitrary and it is assumed that every single thing within the frame was intentional, chosen, and serves a purpose. Analyzing and speculating about the relationship between objects within the frame can be very telling about the psychology of the characters and can orient the audience cross-textually with other genres. Much of this section will look at the Western genre motifs within the mise-en-scene and why their appearance is important.

The second scene of the film follows directly after the traumatic death of Sgt. Thompson. The scene opens with a high-angle shot of the corner of a white box, showing Thompson's name, our point of identification with what this box signifies (Figure 21). The box opens to reveal Thompson's last few belongings, his helmet set neatly atop his folded uniform. Behind his uniform lies a folded American flag. Sanborn stands over his box among a sea of sterile white boxes, in a sterile white room, emphasizing the impersonal nature of the military.

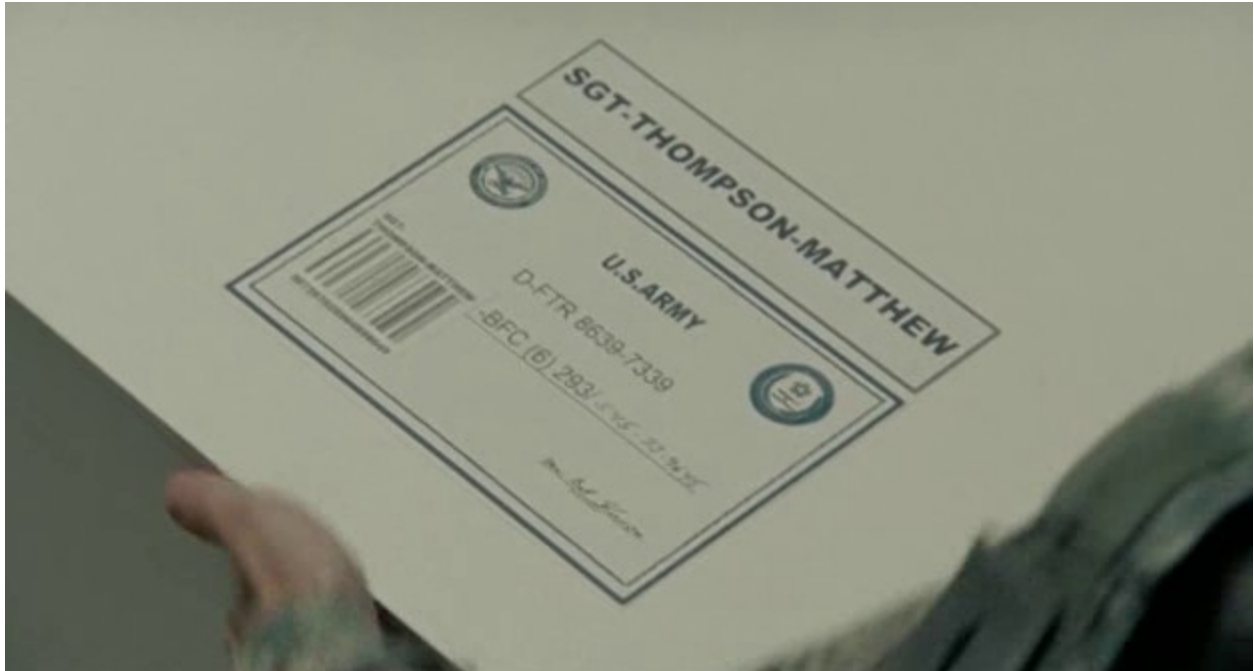


Figure 21. Sgt. Thompson is degraded to a dehumanized white box and barcode.

As far as the army is concerned, Thompson is just another barcode, indicated by the serial number and barcode labeling his box. Thompson's life has been given on behalf of his country, along with the sea of other nameless, identity-less soldiers represented by the vast sea of white boxes. This scene takes the place of the veteran's cemetery scene, which is commonly used in war genre films to invoke a similar emotion (Figure 22). However, because the veteran's cemetery *is* so huge, the number of white crosses appearing in such perfectly arranged high masses, it often takes on an air of sentimentality.

Sentimentality, a forced and manipulated emotional effect, means something very different from what Bigelow is doing with *sentiment*. Bigelow's shot of the boxes is just sentimental enough to get the point across, evoking a response from the audience, without forcing the response onto them. The American flag in the background of the scene is also the only flag (aside from the folded flag in Thompson's box) shown throughout the entire film (Figure 23).

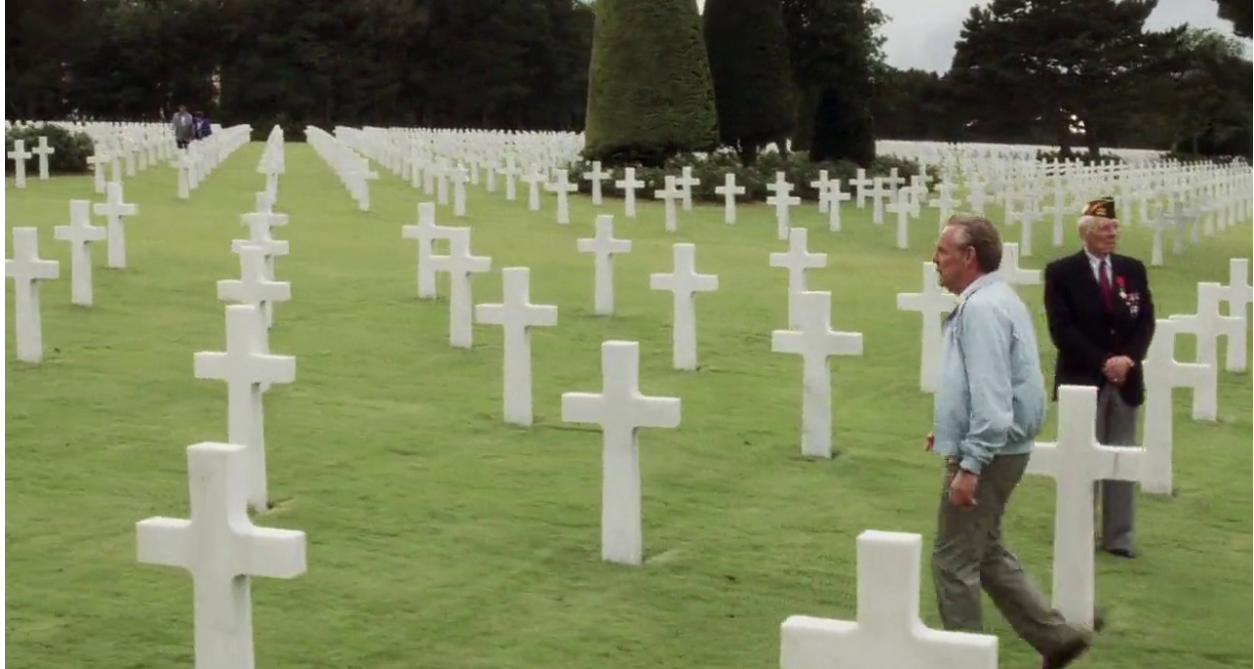


Figure 22. From the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan*, the older Ryan walks through the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. The shot opens with Ryan in close-up walking into the cemetery while the camera slowly tracks back to dramatically reveal the vast number of graves.



Figure 23. Sanborn stands at the “grave” of Sgt. Thompson. Note that this is the first and last time we will see an American flag in the film.

Conventionally, American flags fly high and proud in the Hollywood war film. Bigelow keeps patriotic symbols such as this to a minimum, deemphasizing any political agenda or sentiment in the film. Similarly to what we saw earlier with *Patton* (Figure 3, page 12), the opening and closing shot of *Saving Private Ryan* is a good example of the conventional use of the flag in Hollywood war films. The flag is used in both films to express outright and openly the patriotic agenda behind the film. *Saving Private Ryan* opens with an American flag flying high, waving in the breeze (Figure 24). It is oversized to the 1.85:1 standard aspect ratio overfilling the frame. Bigelow's choice to include only a single American flag in the film (we also never see Iraqi or other flags), is the clearest visual piece of evidence to suggest the film's apolitical stance. The flag that we do see is a prop, small and nearly unnoticeable. Set in a static position in the background of a short scene, *The Hurt Locker's* flag is the exact opposite of the flag opening (and closing) *Saving Private Ryan*. *Ryan's* flag has movement, takes up the entire frame, and is the subject of the shot. As an object, the American flag evokes an incredible amount of meaning, emotion, and sentiment from audiences. Bigelow intentionally keeps this object out of her film, denying those manipulated feelings from her audience.



Figure 24. The opening image of *Saving Private Ryan*. Whereas this flag flies high and proud as the main character of this shot, the flag in *The Hurt Locker* is merely a small decorative piece in the background.

In a later scene, Bigelow chooses to call attention to a different meaningful object within the mise-en-scene. This object, James' wedding band, is full of cultural significance and has roots within the war genre, however, it is quite unlike the American flag. While the American flag would usually fly high in the war film and the wedding band would be a subtle detail of the mise-en-scene, Bigelow switches the emphasis of these objects in *The Hurt Locker*. The wedding band is an important and conventional detail to the war film because of the connections it draws between soldiers and "home." It reminds audiences that the soldier has something to fight for, that he has a reason for living and staying safe. However, James' wedding band does not carry this same significance. Rather than drawing a connection between himself and his family, James's ring draws connections between himself and the "Lone-Ranger" cowboy.

Like the "Lone-Ranger," James has very little in the way of possessions. Sanborn finds a box in James' room and remarks with surprise, "What do we have here?" pulling the box from under the bed. James reacts nervously by running his hand through his hair as Sanborn continues, "Will has possessions. I didn't know you owned anything, Will." James refers to this box of objects as "things that almost killed me." In it is an assortment of souvenirs (what he refers to as "components") that he has taken from the most impressively designed bombs, which he has disarmed. Poking through the box, Eldridge finds something unexpected. Eldridge asks, "And what about this one? What's this one from, Will?" pulling James' wedding ring, attached to a chain, from the box. The chain suggests James' attitude toward the institution of marriage as though it were a prison in which he is chained and not a happy-haven to which he will someday return. Domesticity and marriage are more dangerous to his character and personality than disarming bombs. Domesticity is his weakness and it holds him back.

Paying close attention to the fore grounded and background objects is clearly very important to understanding the mise-en-scene of *The Hurt Locker*. It is also interesting to note the specific objects that are missing from the film's diegesis, which conventionally play an important role in war films: maps and blueprints. Many war films, for example *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, very purposefully include maps and blueprints within the plot to the extent that they almost become characters in and of themselves. In *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, the blueprint for the bridge is an essential object toward the outcome of the

film. The blueprint changes hands, gets re-written, and is used by the British Commander to help build camaraderie and morale between his men. The map is also used as a tool for orienting the audience within the unfamiliar space of western Thailand. The map is used to show where we are and where we are going. The map is a plot device used to offer a rough itinerary which we (the audience) can expect to follow. Suspense and excitement are built in the film when that itinerary goes differently from what was planned.

The fact that *The Hurt Locker* does not use maps or blueprints—not to mention that there are no EOD or IED handbooks for James to follow when disarming bombs—increases the film’s suspense. At no point do we have any idea about what is coming next. Each segment is its own somewhat disconnected vignette. Though they all fit together to follow a general plot, we are not given the luxury of a map or blueprint to help us figure out the film’s plot. As mentioned above, in 2004, the real EOD had no handbooks to guide them in disarming bombs and their missions came day-by-day as IEDs were encountered. The exclusion of these types of aides within the film’s diegesis is unconventional to the war film but more realistically reflects the experiences of the soldiers who did serve in Iraq in 2004.

Clearly, Bigelow and Boal found realism to be of huge concern to their film. Although there were quite a few chronological errors in the mise-en-scene with the costume design and the video game, much thought was put into revising the conventions of the war film in order to open up a more realistic conversation about soldier experience. It also works to differentiate between the war in Iraq and other Hollywood-exploited wars.

In another scene, we see an example of the complicated relationship between James and his family. This scene opens at dusk, directly following the death of Lieutenant Colonel Cambridge (the psychiatrist). James is on base, pacing back and forth, and holding a telephone. He pauses, dials, and we hear the phone ringing. The film cuts to a shot inside an American family home, suggesting that this is James’ home back in the United States. A beautiful young woman with a baby in her arms answers the phone and this is the first time we see James’ wife and son (Figure 25). The woman answers, “Hello? Hello?...Will?” but James makes no response. She knows it is him and he uses the silence to get his point across: he wants to know that she is safe and well and now she knows that he is still alive.



Figure 25. James' wife and child back home. Connie is well dressed, the house is clean and well kept, and the baby is playing. Looking closely, one can see that she too does not wear her wedding ring on her ring finger, but rather around her thumb.

James stands in silence between two realities and two types of “home.” One is “safe” and manicured, represented by the domestic home life and his roles as husband and father. The other is thrilling and, as he finally sees, legitimately dangerous, represented by the harsh and horrific nature of IEDs. James stands silently; he is unable to face either reality, while simultaneously standing in confrontation with both.

This scene also shows us that Connie (James' wife) appears perfectly able to take care of herself and her son without James around. The little bit of their house that we see, a low-angle shot from inside the kitchen through a doorway into the dining room, looks clean and tidy. In her arms she is carrying a young and happy baby boy who is content to play with the telephone cord and make baby sounds. Connie herself is well dressed and put together. She does not look like a struggling single parent, even in the slightest.

From the few scenes that we do get of Connie, it seems that she is emotionally strong and perfectly able to take care of herself and their son on her own. Again, pointed to here as an important part of the mise-en-scene, we never see the baby crying in the film. This is interesting because, as we have

seen, women and children and their perceived innocence and frailty are often used as a narrative strategy in war and Western genre films, victimized by some outside “threat,” allowing for the need to defend the homeland (Christensen/Ferree, 289). In the case of *The Hurt Locker*, a paradox is set up. Sergeant James has both a wife *and* a child at home, but he neither seems to be at war to defend them nor do they seem to be in actual need of defending.

After this scene where Connie is revealed for the first time and just before the discussion of James’ wife and wedding ring, Western imagery and references begin to creep into the mise-en-scene. The Western genre connection is continued throughout *The Hurt Locker’s* mise-en-scene and as mentioned in the sound-design section, there are many shots of the vast Iraqi-desert and dust devils, there is almost always sand blowing through the air in the shots of the army base, and we see train tracks—clear visual symbols from the Western.

In one particular scene, the men are wrestling one another in James’ bunker. Western motifs enter the mise-en-scene both to highlight James as a “John Wayne” figure and to compare James’ experience in Iraq to that of the cowboy in the wild-west. John Wayne was a film director, actor, and producer well known for his performances as war and Western film heroes. Like Wayne, James is characterized as a tough, no-nonsense loner. In Westerns, Wayne was the ultimate cowboy, taming wild horses and upholding his ethical code. In war films, Wayne was the ultimate warrior. Unlike James, however, Wayne was famous for exemplifying patriotism and strong American values in his characters. In this scene James acts out and plays “John Wayne,” but without his ethical code. He finishes the fight by pinning Sanborn to the ground and riding him like a wild horse or a mechanical bull.

Also in this scene, the men drink whiskey and smoke cigarettes. Whiskey is the quintessential symbol of two different characters in the Western. Whiskey is the drink of the outlaw or the gunslinger, but it is also the drink of the loyal and reliable town drunk. Usually no one has much respect for the town drunk, but it is almost exclusively he who comes to the aide of the sheriff when times get tough. As a symbol, whiskey is clearly calling out to the Western genre, and it does so, as many other elements in the

film do, to shed ambiguity onto the situation instead of light. James could be the gunslinging outlaw, the reliable drunk, or both.

James acts as the reliable town drunk in the earlier shoot-out scene in the desert. This is the scene where the team encountered the group of private British contractors, hunting down wanted men for cash reward. The British group is stranded with a flat tire and after searching the EOD's HumVee for a wrench, one of the men is shot by an unknown sniper and the scene turns to chaos.

Suddenly, the empty desert becomes a dangerous space and the men react in a somewhat surprised and chaotic fashion. A sense of disorientation envelops the scene as they cannot identify exactly where the bullets are coming from. Eventually, they locate the direction of the bullets and are able to get themselves to the safety of a ditch. The British team leader and one of his men set up a sniper rifle, becoming a sniper team with one man behind the gun and one man acting as the gunman's eyes looking through a separate scope.

Their group leader is played by Ralph Fiennes, the second and only other big-name actor to appear in the film. Like Guy Pearce, Fiennes faces a similar fate and is quickly shot dead. *The Hurt Locker* insists on eliminating the potential Hollywood-inspired associations that spectators might make with the star persona. Just because a character is portrayed by a well known actor does not ensure their safety. War does not favor celebrities and neither will *The Hurt Locker*.

Sanborn and James quickly take over control of the situation, replacing the dead-duo as the new sniper team. James and Sanborn switch roles; James is now eyes and protection for Sanborn, while Sanborn performs the job at hand. This switch is significant because it places Sanborn in the vulnerable position, now forcing him to trust and rely on James (Figure 26). James steps up the challenge, proving himself a worthy team leader and honorable "town drunk."



Figure 26. James and Sanborn have switched roles. Notice the wild-west mise-en-scene: vast desert landscape, train tracks in the background, and the scorching afternoon sun. However, the mise-en-scene is somewhat unconventional to the Western because in this shot we see more land than sky whereas the Western emphasizes empty horizons by showing only a little land below the huge sky.

Eldridge is most overcome by the situation and he begins to break down, sitting passively and surrounded by dead bodies while Sanborn and James take on the active role of shooting the enemy. Now proving himself as a reliable leader, James helps Eldridge through his battle fatigue and fears. James asks him to clean the blood off of the bullets, which are clogging the rifle, but Eldridge is so anxiety-ridden that he is unable to perform the task. James comes down from his post to comfort Eldridge out of his anxiety until he gains some confidence and is successfully able to actively help his team by cleaning off the blood.

Soon after, Eldridge notices movement on a set of railroad tracks behind James and Sanborn's post. James does not give Eldridge any direct orders to take or not take the shot, but only tells him to do what he thinks is best to take care of the situation. Neither forcing Eldridge into taking the shot, nor offering Eldridge a second option other than taking the shot, James again proves to show good leadership skills. Eldridge has the opportunity to take on the active role, to finally play "Marcus Fenix." The film makes a cut to a shot on the railroad tracks, revealing to the audience an Iraqi insurgent crawling into position with a sniper rifle in hand (shown in Figure 12 on page 27). Eldridge is given another chance to

take his shot. This shot carries the weight of life or death for his teammates, and he takes it, killing the sniper on the tracks before the sniper can kill him. His slight smile and James' quiet utterance, "Good job," indicate that Eldridge has made huge progress in overcoming his psychological block.

Bigelow and her cinematographer, Barry Ackroyd, increased the film's feeling of realism by shooting this scene in real time. More of a choice with editing than *mise-en-scene*, the use of real time is very important to *The Hurt Locker* and to this scene in particular (therefore, it will be discussed in this section rather than in "Editing and Cinematography"). They used this formal challenge as a way of giving the audience a more realistic vantage point. Real time is especially important to convey senses of fear, urgency, and confusion involved with the attack. In a conventional Hollywood film, the characters would be able to pin point exactly where the bullets were coming from and would orient appropriately. In this scene, however, it takes a small bit of time and the death of a few comrades, before the soldiers can figure out where they need to position themselves. Keeping the threat at a far-off distance and making them barely visible to the EOD team, was also an effect used in this scene to keep the situation seeming realistic from the US soldiers' view.

The formal use of real time ends, and a shot of Sanborn and James, still attentive to their positions, show them covered in sand, indicating the passage of time. Their skin looks dry and cracked and we can see Sanborn's bloodshot eye through the lens of the gun. James makes his final show of leadership in this scene, asking Eldridge to find him a juice packet. Eldridge looks around and the number of empty plastic bottles surrounding him and the few remaining British men, suggests that they may have drunk everything in their supply. (The bottles also act as evidence of the passing of time, probably of a few hours or more.)

Eldridge is able to find a juice packet and hands it off to James. Although limited by the dexterity of his painfully dry hands, James un-packs the straw from its plastic casing, and pushes it through the packet. Pausing for a moment, it appears that James is about to take a drink. Instead, he crawls toward Sanborn, putting the straw directly into Sanborn's mouth until he has finished drinking the entire packet. James then tosses the packet back down toward Eldridge and gets back into his position.

James has proven himself as a self-less leader where it really counts. Although his team may be in danger during the bomb-disarming missions, James' confidence in his own skills allows him to feel comfortable in taking more risks and acting more recklessly. Here, the situation is different and the threat to his team is completely out of his control. He follows protocol, remains calm, and ensures that his men are okay, psychologically and physically.

One of the most memorable scenes having used real time as a formal element is the scene with the suicide bomber at the end of the film. The use of real time in that scene emphasizes the urgency of the situation. The timer is counting down and we can feel exactly how desperate those last forty-five seconds really are. It also de-emphasizes James' self-perceived heroism. This is his chance actually to help somebody and he cannot do it. There is not enough time and he does not have the strength or skills to break all of the locks. His apology is sincere and while he is giving it, we see James really struggling. He has a deep sense of humanity that we have never seen before, not quite like this.

In addition to these larger, formal aspects of the film, many of the smaller details of the film's mise-en-scene contributed to the feeling of realism. For example, the smoke bomb that James let off during the team's first mission together was not a Hollywood prop with safety measures taken, but was a real US military smoke bomb. The dirt, dust, and sweat on all the actors' faces was real dirt, dust, and sweat and the average temperature in which they were shooting was about 115 degrees Fahrenheit (Bigelow). Even going smaller, the spit falling grossly from Eldridge's mouth, or the fly moving along James' eyelid during the desert shoot out, were real, "happy accidents." Boal even made a special point to ensure that the juice that the men drank in the desert scene looked just like the real juice packets that the US military had in Iraq (Bigelow).

Throughout this section I have discussed the major ways in which *The Hurt Locker* takes a revisionist approach to the formal aspects of the war film. The musical score and sound design were carefully worked to convey an ambiguous sentiment toward the war. Much of the sound design revolved around James with each piece working to set him apart from our expectations about the war genre protagonist. The editing and cinematography helped to increase the emotive and sensual experience of

working and living in a war zone. The hand-held camera and the mix of both long takes and quick cuts create a journalistic aesthetic which heightens our feelings of anxiety and fear, with which we can more easily identify with the characters. The mise-en-scene is approached equally unconventionally. The American flag and other symbolic objects are downplayed, while unexpected objects, such as the wedding ring, are given attention and care. All of the formal aspects work together to more sincerely reflect the Iraq War experience.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have outlined the conventions of the war genre and I have shown how *The Hurt Locker* does not easily fit within the conventions of the genre's corpus. In this thesis, I have discussed how *The Hurt Locker* fits within the category as a revisionist war film, specifically explaining the context of the Iraq War. Director Kathryn Bigelow side-stepped and revised many war genre conventions throughout the film, exploring and focusing on many important issues other than combat. The result is a film with an ambiguous political statement. It seems clear that Bigelow may have had her own political stance concerning the war; however *The Hurt Locker* itself proffers no political sentiment or agenda. Within the confines of the film and the frame, the emphasis is weighted most heavily on exploring James' character, not on justifying or condemning the war. The apolitical stance of the film exists in the background of the larger character-based issues at hand.

The thrust behind almost all war films—starting with one of the earliest examples, *The Birth of Nation* (1915), through World War II, Vietnam, and the most current Iraq War films—is a specific political agenda often clouded in patriotic and nationalist values. As we have seen, this statement is encouraged through the use of both narrative and formal conventions. War behaviors include the connection between heroism, masculinity, and psychological “strength;” camaraderie and the formation of a brotherhood; the dichotomous “us” vs. “them” outlook; and the stripping of individuality in favor of collective identity for the successful completion of the mission. Behaviors at home are concerned with the soldier's return home, the difficulties of reintegrating into civilian life for the soldier, and the reconnection with the family, most particularly with the soldier's wife or girlfriend.

The Hurt Locker explores each and every of these conventions, but comes out in the end without making a pro- or anti-war statement. *The Hurt Locker* purposefully includes each of these conventions as a reference point to satisfy audience expectations, but it revises and side-steps those expectations to

accomplish something new. In the section on masculinity and heroism, I focused on the juxtaposition between Eldridge and James; two characters with war-related psychological suffering who are presented as heroic (and therefore masculine) opposites. James is the “cowboy” type of hero: a strong, alpha, man’s man in the desert who cannot survive the domestic sphere. Eldridge to the contrary, is presented as the more “feminine” male, unable to perform his masculine, heroic duties in the field. Eldridge is specifically compared to Marcus Fenix, the protagonist of the war genre video game that Eldridge plays, who looks more like James than Eldridge himself. Bigelow presents masculinity in concert with the larger war genre convention, but she does not use James’ heroism, Eldridge’s weaknesses, or their wounded psychologies to make a political statement about the war itself. Rather, she uses them to open up a conversation around the genre’s conventional gender discourse.

The display of strong camaraderie and brotherhood are introduced in *The Hurt Locker*’s opening scene and then stripped away immediately at Thompson’s death. Camaraderie and brotherhood are an important convention in emphasizing the war at hand as either a “good war” or a “bad war.” In films about the “good war,” WWII, camaraderie is at the forefront, displaying heroic and courageous men who make sacrifices for one another and their team. Films about the “bad war,” Vietnam, often display more selfish characters within the “brotherhood.” These films tend to emphasize boot camp, where the characters often still work as a team, but not for ethical or moral reasoning, usually only to avoid group punishment. *The Hurt Locker* displays both kinds of camaraderie, showing that the Iraq War is very different from the other wars of American history.

The “us” versus “them” mentality of the war film is very important in the creation of a political statement. By turning the enemy into a villain and an “other,” conventional war films work to mask American egocentrism in the more holy façade of patriotism. In *The Hurt Locker*, “enemy” is specifically not synonymous with “villain” and the perspectives from both “us” and “them” is presented. This can be seen through James’ interactions with Beckham, the older DVD merchant, Professor Nabil, and even the insurgents.

The stripping of individuality in soldiers is a key component to the war genre. It is necessary in all of the armed forces for the successful completion of their goals. The film revises the mission plot, stripping the characters of a specific war-based mission (such as destroying a bridge or seeking out a character) and implying instead that their overall mission is to return home. However, “home” means different things to different characters. If “home” only meant the United States, there might be evidence that the film was making an anti-war statement, that the goal of the entire Iraq War *should be* to return home. But we know that “home” for James is the war itself and so the political agenda is unclear and ambiguous. Collective identity is also revised because James rejects participating in it; he smokes cigarettes on his missions, he drinks alcohol on base, and he disrespects his uniform.

Reintegrating into civilian life after returning home is an important and conventional plot-line for exploring the physical and psychological damage of soldiers caused by war. James returns home for only five minutes during the film, of which the only suggestion of real trauma is the six seconds he spends sitting in front of the static television. James’ return home clarifies that any reintegration will be impossible for James. The chain around his wedding ring seen in his box of “things that almost killed me,” suggests—not that he dislikes his wife or child—but that he feels enslaved by the institution of marriage and is incapable of surviving the domestic sphere. The woman who waits at home is usually the character who helps the soldier reintegrate. In the case of *The Hurt Locker*, Connie makes no attempt to help James because she understands that there is no hope for him staying. James’ home is the war; he is more desperate to survive the home front than to survive in Iraq.

Justification for warfare is often made through the war films’ argument that there are “weak” women-and-children on the home front who are in need of protection. The fact that James does not care to return home to his “woman-and-child;” that Connie does all of the shopping, cooks dinner, and takes care of herself and the baby; and that the baby is always happy during the film strips this war of that justification. James is not in Iraq to protect anyone; he is there to live his life. Manipulating each narrative convention, *The Hurt Locker* proves itself to be more interested in character than in politics.

The film's form also supports the narrative's political ambiguity and revisionist argument. The formal aspects of film are concerned with editing and cinematography, sound design and musical scoring, and mise-en-scene. In the conventional war film, each of these elements is used to communicate mood and enhance dimension, usually in support of the larger political statement. In *The Hurt Locker* these elements are also used to enhance mood, however, they are used to confuse the political statement and to help clarify James' characteristics and motivations.

Through editing and cinematography, Bigelow treats the trauma of Thompson and Cambridge's death with more care and respect than in many war films. The explosion that killed Thompson is shot with the High-Speed Phantom camera, detailing the physical impact of the bomb. Bigelow takes the time to give his death attention and forces us to feel the emotional impact. The editing also helps to add a dimension to James' character. The countdown of the film's structure falsely leads us to believe that the film will end upon James' return home. However, James has been set up as a "cowboy" figure throughout the film and in keeping with his character, the film ends at the beginning of a new countdown when he returns for an additional tour of duty in the desert.

In the section on sound, I argued that the music and sound design were specifically intended to portray James as a maverick, stripping him of any patriotic values that might drive his behavior. The industrial heavy metal band Ministry is used a leitmotif for James. Their strong anti-government and anti-George W. Bush content and lyrics indicate that James is not a typical patriotic hero. He is in Iraq because it is the farthest he can get from the United States and the identity as a safe, normal, family man. The musical score recalls Ennio Morricone's famous spaghetti western scores, helping the audience to make the inter-textual connections between the war and Western genres. Within the sound design, particular attention is paid to bombs and helicopters.

When read correctly, the mise-en-scene can tell you more about what the film actually is about and who the characters are than any other narrative or formal aspect. War films use and display certain objects within their mise-en-scene to encourage feelings of patriotism, move the audience through the narrative while adding suspense, and to ease the audience into agreement with film's overarching political

statement. Of course in *The Hurt Locker*, these images are used in an unconventional way. In this thesis, I analyzed the canonical cemetery shot, the use of the American flag, the exclusion of maps, the implications and suggestions of James' wedding ring, James' family, and the Western landscape.

Although *The Hurt Locker* has been accused of following a political agenda, it explores both pro- and anti-war perspectives, leading it to be politically ambiguous. The film pays attention to James' psychological disposition. As Bigelow herself said, she was most interested in exploring men's precarious love for war than in making any large political statements (Yabroff, no page). In doing, Bigelow opened up a new door for the war genre and especially for the Iraq War sub-genre.

As we explored in the introduction of this thesis, Iraq war films have fared very poorly at the box office. Audiences simply were not interested in those films. It was only after Hollywood gave its stamp of approval at the Academy Awards that *The Hurt Locker* became a success. Although it is still not a widely known film among the average movie-going audience, the filmmaking community has noticed it. Since the release and success of *The Hurt Locker* a few new and successful war films have been released. In 2009, we saw the WWII fantasy-film *Inglorious Basterds* and more recently, *Argo* (2012), swept the Oscar's. Kathryn Bigelow herself released a new Iraq war film, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which in many ways follows within the trajectory set by *The Hurt Locker*.

When Bigelow took the chance with *The Hurt Locker*, breaking out of many of the conventions of these new Iraq-focused war films, did it become the Iraq war film to end all Iraq war films? Or has it set a new bar and opened the door for the beginning of a successful line of Iraq war films? This thesis has shown how *The Hurt Locker* fits within the context of past canonical war films, but what about the future? How will *The Hurt Locker* influence the war films that are yet to come and how has it had an influence already? Although it might be too soon to fully answer these questions, it is clear that *The Hurt Locker* has made an important impact. The film's revisionist approach, looking at all angles of the war without forcing a strong political agenda onto the audience, marks a huge step forward for the genre and its potential.

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APPENDIX A

DRAMATIS PERSONAE (In order of appearance)

SERGEANT J.T. SANBORN (Anthony Mackie) is the second-in-command of Bravo Company's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team of the United States Army, serving in Iraq in 2004. In the team, Sanborn is responsible to providing the "eyes" and cover for the first in command who wears the bomb suit. Sanborn was previously trained in intelligence, serving for seven years before joining the EOD. Sanborn was close with his team leader Sergeant Thompson and finds it difficult to work under the new and alternative leadership of Sergeant James.

STAFF SERGEANT MATTHEW THOMPSON (Guy Pearce) is introduced during the opening scene of the film. He is the team leader of Bravo Company's three-man Explosive Ordnance Disposal team. As first in command, Thompson is the one who wears the bomb suit, responsible for disarming the bombs. Thompson is killed on a standard mission by a radio-controlled Improvised Explosive Device in the opening scene of the film. Thompson represents the conventional Hollywood sergeant: a well-liked though ego-centric caricature with a seemingly low regard for the Iraqi people. Thompson's team includes Sgt. Sanborn and Specialist Eldridge.

SPECIALIST OWEN ELDRIDGE (Brian Geraghty) is the third member of Bravo Company's Explosive Ordnance Disposal team. He specializes in detonation and is responsible for both providing cover for the first in command wearing the bomb suit and for setting up the C4 and explosions. Eldridge suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and is very cynical of the United States Army. He is the least courageous and the most anxiety-ridden of his team and is resentful about being placed in the very dangerous position of an EOD member. Eldridge is very afraid of dying and when he is shot in the leg by Sergeant James shortly before the end of his tour, he is both angry for being shot and relieved for being sent home early alive.

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS WILLIAM JAMES (Jeremy Renner) is Sergeant Thompson's replacement as the team leader of Bravo Company's Explosive Ordnance Disposal team. James was an Army Ranger, sent to Afghanistan after 9/11, eventually becoming a Sergeant and continuing service in Iraq. James takes a different approach to his position as first in command to Thompson, an approach to which Sanborn and Eldridge have a hard time adjusting. James takes great satisfaction in disarming bombs. He enjoys the thrill of the danger, appreciates the intelligent designs of the IEDs, and likes the intellectual challenge, the "solving the problem," of disarming the bombs. James has a wife, Connie, and child back in the United States but considers the war to be his true home. James is deeply psychologically affected by the trauma of war and cannot make the transition back to civilian life. He serves not for patriotism or respect for the military but because he only feels alive and sees his self-worth when in the danger-zone.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN CAMBRIDGE (Christian Camargo) is the Army psychologist of Camp Victory where the EOD team is based in Bagdad, Iraq. Cambridge is assigned to help Eldridge, though we only see them meet informally. Although Cambridge has already served his field duty and remains strictly on base for his work, he is convinced by Eldridge to join the team on a standard mission to check out a potential IED. As the team is leaving the site, Cambridge is unexpectedly killed by the explosion of an IED.

BECKHAM (Christopher Sayegh) is a twelve-year old Iraqi boy who sells DVDs at the Camp Victory base. He sells a pirated DVD to Sergeant James and they begin to form a friendship. He is a clear example of the influences of Westernization on young people in the Middle East from the vast number of United States military bases and soldiers. Beckham enjoys playing soccer and has taken his name after the famous soccer player, David Beckham. He also speaks fluent, vernacular English, full of curse words and American slang and wears Western clothing. Beckham is presented in contrast to the older DVD merchant who does not speak English and who wears more traditional garb.

BRITISH MERCENARY TEAM LEADER (Ralph Fiennes) is the leader of a five-man team of British private military contractors dressed in traditional Arab garb. The team has captured wanted Iraqi

insurgents for monetary reward. James, Sanborn, and Eldridge encounter the men stranded in the desert with a flat tire. They all come under the fire of far off insurgents and the team leader along with two of his men is killed by the enemy snipers.

CONNIE JAMES (Evangeline Lilly) is Sergeant James' ex-wife and the mother of his infant son. Although James reveals that he and Connie had gotten divorced, throughout this thesis Connie is referred to as James' wife (not ex-wife) because she lives her life as though they were married. She still lives in their house, keeps his name and they live together when he takes leave. In addition, although it is unclear whether or not Connie works, I believe the film suggests that she and their son live off of James' pay from the army (when James calls the home telephone during the middle of the day, she is at home alone with their son).

APPENDIX B

DETAILED PLOT SUMMARY

SCENE ONE opens with silence and a black screen. White words appear, “The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug. –Chris Hedges.” All of the words fade into the black screen, holding onto “war is a drug” for a moment longer. A sound bridge of a small vehicle moving over a dirt road transitions the black screen to the opening shot of the film, orienting us in the point of view of a military robot’s video feed. Three characters are introduced, Sergeant Thompson, Sergeant Sanborn, and Specialist Eldridge. Thompson is the team lead, giving Sanborn instructions on how to operate the bot, while Eldridge remains in the background setting up a C4 detonation in a wagon. The wagon will carry the “det” to the bomb so that the men can explode the IED without Thompson needing to put on the bomb suit to disarm it. The wagon hits patch of rocks and one of the wheels of the wagon falls off. Thompson gets dressed in the bomb suit and carries the wagon the rest of the way to the IED. He places the C4 on the bomb. While walking back toward the HumVee, Eldridge notices a street merchant with a cell phone and begins running toward him, yelling for him to drop his phone. The man dials and triggers the bomb to explode. Still in the “kill zone” radius, Thompson dies and the bomb suit does nothing to save him.

SCENE TWO opens with a shot of the corner of a white box, showing Thompson’s name, our point of identification with what this box signifies. The box opens to reveal Thompson’s last few belongings, his helmet set neatly atop his folded uniform. Behind his uniform lies a folded American flag. Sanborn stand over his box among a sea of sterile white boxes, in a sterile white room, with an American flag hanging in the background.

SCENE THREE opens on an outside shot of the military base in the middle of the day. Sanborn is walking toward camera and heavy metal music enters on the soundtrack. The film cuts to a shot of a door from inside a dark room on which we hear Sanborn knocking. A cut is made to introduce a new character,

whose name we can hear Sanborn shouting from outside, Sergeant James. Shown in close up, sitting with his head down, cigarette in hand, he takes a drag, sits up, and shouts, “Come in.” The men introduce themselves and James asks Sanborn for his help in removing the plywood from the window, despite Sanborn’s warning that the plywood is there to keep mortars from coming through the windows at night. James informs him that mortars could still make their way through ceiling, and besides, as opens the window and steps into the window’s light, he likes the sunshine. After ensuring Sanborn that he is not trying to fill Thompson’s shoes, who Sanborn has described as a great team leader, James moves away from lighted window, turns his music back on, lights a cigarette, and lies on his bed. He utters, “Home, sweet home.”

SCENE FOUR shows the team’s first mission together. After sojourning around in search of the U.S. soldiers who called in the coordinates of their mission, James suits up and begins walking toward the bomb. Sanborn is tense and cautious after the death of Thompson, and takes the mission very seriously. James is less concerned and drops a smoke bomb, clouding Sanborn’s view of him. As James continues to walk toward the bomb, an insurgent drives his car at James, perhaps with the intention of triggering the IED. Fearlessly, James walks up to the man and puts his gun to the man’s head until the man finally backs his car away. James approaches the IED, discovering a daisy chain—multiple bombs are connected to a single trigger, and each bomb must be disarmed. The insurgent who, it seems, is responsible for the bomb, watches overhead as James works. James disarms the bomb successfully and he holds the trigger up to show the insurgent, as if he just won the game.

SCENE FIVE opens with a shot of the popular war video game on a television screen, Gears of War. Eldridge is sitting comfortably on a couch, playing the game. This scene introduces the Army base psychologist, Colonel Cambridge, who has entered the screen to talk with Eldridge through his psychological trauma. Eldridge opens their conversation by calling to reference the “Be All That You Can Be” Army recruitment campaign. He scoffs, “What if all I can be is dead on the side of an Iraqi road?” Eldridge then picks up his gun and displays that the difference between Thompson being dead and alive is nothing more than the pull of the trigger, which he had been too afraid to pull when it counted.

SCENE SIX opens with a young, approximately twelve year old Iraqi boy trying to sell DVDs to the US soldiers on base. None of the soldiers give the kid any consideration, passing by him as if he were not even there. James comes toward the kid and at the boy's suggestion, he buys a DVD. James offers the kid a cigarette, quickly pulling back after the boy almost grabs one. James tells him, almost like a mentor or older brother, that he should not smoke because cigarettes are bad for him.

SCENE SEVEN is the first of two important bathroom scenes. While James and Sanborn are both washing up at the sink, Sanborn confronts James about their first mission together. Sanborn very seriously tells James that his behavior was unacceptable but James only scoffs it off. Sanborn then reveals that he was in intelligence for seven years, calling James an easily recognizable piece of trailer trash. Unaffected by the comment, James gives a half smile and tells Sanborn that he is on the right track.

SCENE EIGHT opens at the United Nations building (indicated by the blue "UN" lettering on the building) as people are evacuating. The team arrives in their HumVee. James asks an Iraqi policeman about the situation and is told that a car is illegally parked with its suspension sagging. James makes an inappropriate joke with the officer, suggesting that the officer go to the car, peak in and tell him what he sees. The officer does not understand that James is joking, and the joke itself indicates that James is taking the situation incredibly lightly. Sanborn tells Eldridge to take top cover, meaning he would have to run to the roof of the building but James intervenes telling Sanborn to take top cover instead. As James is approaching the vehicle fully suited up, an Iraqi sniper fires at the car, causing it to catch fire. Without hesitation, James orders Eldridge to grab the fire extinguisher from the HumVee and James gets to work putting out the fire. He is then able to open the trunk where he finds another daisy-chain like scenario; the trunk is full of seven bombs. While James is going to work on finding the initiation device, the UN building finishes their evacuation, the point in which the team is able to leave the site. However, James is determined to disarm the bomb, removing his headset and continuing his work. Eldridge and Sanborn get nervous by the growing number of on lookers, but James is successful in disarming the bomb. Another company's sergeant approaches James and congratulates him. James relaxes into the HumVee while

Eldridge cleans up the scene, bringing the bomb suit back to the vehicle. As James lights his cigarette, Sanborn approaches and punches him in the face.

SCENE NINE open with James sitting on a bench on base, smoking and drinking water, admiring a green computer chip, probably from his latest IED mission. The kid who had previously sold the DVD to James kicks his soccer ball in James' direction. James picks it up, but refuses to give it back because, as he complains, the DVD he bought was shaky and out of focus. James makes a deal with Beckham that if he is able to make a goal against Beckham playing goalie James gets to keep the ball, but if Beckham blocks it, James will give him his soccer ball back and five dollars. He kicks the ball lightly enough that there is no real challenge, Beckham is able to block it, and James gives him ten dollars instead.

SCENE TEN shows Eldridge doing mechanical work on the team's HumVee. He is approached by Colonel Cambridge. Eldridge expresses to Cambridge that he should come out from behind his desk and see what the EOD actually face. Cambridge is resistant.

SCENE ELEVEN opens in a vast and empty desert, the only space where the team will do no damage by detonating the bomb, Sanborn, Eldridge, and James are hovered around their HumVee, Eldridge squatting over the detonator. Although the three men are completely alone in the middle of endlessly empty valleys of sand, Sanborn is still following protocol. As Eldridge anticipates the "go ahead" of setting off the det, Sanborn yells the warning call into the emptiness, "Fire in the hole! Fire in the Hole!" The det is interrupted by James, telling them to hold off because he accidentally forgot his gloves down by the bomb. He gets into the HumVee and drives down to look for them. Sanborn and Eldridge begin a conversation in which they contemplate "miss-firing" the det, killing James and ridding themselves of the threat that his danger and reckless persona represents. They do not fire the "det."

SCENE TWELVE opens with a shot of the HumVee driving alone through the desert. The team comes across a group of men dressed in hajji gear and carrying weapons. Assuming them to be a threat, Sanborn and James approach the men slowly telling them to drop their weapons. The leader of the group uncovers his face, revealing himself to be a British contractor who is on their same side. He reveals that their truck has a flat tire and as they begin to fix it, the group comes under fire. Though disoriented for a

moment, they quickly take cover in a ravine and two of the British mercenaries set up as a sniper team. The team lead gets shot dead and Sanborn and James quickly take their place. For hours, the men sit, shooting back and forth and looking for any signs of movement. Eldridge is finally able to take his own shot, discovering and shooting a sniper on the distant train tracks.

SCENE THIRTEEN shows James, Sanborn, and Eldridge wrestling in James' room, drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes. Eldridge and Sanborn find a box under James' bed. James describes the belongings as the things that almost killed him. The box contains the components from every IED he disarmed, his wedding ring, and a picture of his infant son. The men talk about kids and families about which Sanborn says he is not ready.

SCENE FOURTEEN opens as the team is leaving base on a mission, Cambridge approaches them saying, "I'm sick to death of sitting behind a desk all the time," inviting himself along in re of Eldridge's recommendation. Eldridge explains to Cambridge that this is a very standard mission. They come upon an abandoned warehouse that has not yet been cleared by security. The men gear up and move as a silent team, clearing and checking the building. The men get to the final room to find a kettle that is still hot and a cigarette freshly burning; the bomb-makers have only recently left. Sanborn notices English-language bomb books on the table, amidst a plethora of military-grade explosives and bomb-making equipment. James continues to explore the room, moving toward a make-shift space on the far side of the room, separated from the rest of the room by clear plastic walls. He enters to find a bomb sewn inside the body of a young Iraqi boy who he mistakes for Beckham. James orders a detonation and then changes his mind, carrying the dead body out of the building. The men pack into the HumVee while Cambridge talks with locals, trying to convince them to leave the area. An IED explodes and Cambridge is killed while the men, only a few yards away, are safe in the HumVee.

SCENE FIFTEEN opens at dusk on base. James calls home to his wife, Connie, but says nothing when she answers the phone. We see her on the phone in their kitchen, holding their baby. He hangs up and walks away.

SCENE SIXTEEN opens as James stands nervously spying on the merchant vendors on base, paying specific attention to the DVD vendor. James is smoking a cigarette and constantly looking over his shoulder. Beckham is not around. James approaches the DVD stand and asks where the boy is. At dusk, we see James hiding behind a HumVee. He is wearing his army pants and boots with a dark, navy blue hoodie. Watching the DVD merchant load up his truck, James jumps into the passenger seat with a gun in his hands, just as the merchant begins to drive away. The man stops his truck in front a house and James asks if it is Beckham's house. The merchant, scared and unable to understand what James is says, says yes. James peaks through the windows and enters the house through the open front door. James makes his way through the living room and into kitchen. A middle-aged, Iraqi man, who is nicely dressed in a button down shirt and vest, stands stunned. Pointing his gun toward the man, James asks if he can speak English, to which he replies, "English, French, Arabic." James begins interrogating him, asking about Beckham and what he knows about the twelve-year old boy body bomb, however, the man is clearly confused. In his confusion and trying to diffuse the situation, the man invites James to sit down. He explains that he is Professor Nabil, this is his home, James is a guest, and again asks if he will please sit down. James suddenly realizes that he is in the wrong place and stutters that he is "looking for the people responsible for Beckham." James makes a run for it, heading down the busy city-street back toward base. He is heckled by the military guards and only gets allowed back in by promising to tell one of the guards where the warehouse is that he pretends to have visited.

SCENE SEVENTEEN opens as James returns back to his room after running through Baghdad all night, Sanborn is calling over the radio. The team leaves base in full gear with the assignment of performing a post-blast assessment for an oil tanker explosion. Their goal is to try to determine whether or not it was a suicide bombing. At the scene of the explosion, there is complete chaos. Iraqi women are shown running, crying, sitting, and praying in Arabic. There are people carrying dead bodies out. An orange fire glows just in background of the otherwise dark night. Emergency vehicles are arriving, their sirens calling over the soundtrack. Iraqi soldiers, police, and civilians are all running around. We see shots of a person trapped under a car and a different man lying on the ground with a missing leg. The scene is

complete chaos and disaster. James explores the scene, moving in toward the explosion and then away from it, finding the blast radius on an orange tree. Part of the tree is burnt and dead, part is unscathed and there is a distinct line where the oranges are still growing. James shines his light into the darkness beyond the explosion, challenging his team to follow him into the dark and go find the trigger men, believing that it was *not* a suicide bomb. Eldridge agrees, saying, “I could stand to get into a little trouble.” However, Sanborn disagrees. James asserts his authority over the situation, shouting at Sanborn, “You don’t say no to me, Sanborn. I say no to you,” and leads them into dark. The men come to a lot full of oil-tankers, evidence of where the tanker from the explosion came from. James instructs for the men to separate, each will run down one of the alley-ways, flushing them out in case the triggerman has run through them. James instructs that they will meet at the intersection of the roads, but before giving a rough time-frame for the rally-point, James starts running and the men disperse. James and Sanborn meet at the rally point but Eldridge is not there. They find two men dragging Eldridge down toward the end of the alley. While in pursuit, James fires his gun without hesitation and hits all three men, killing the two Iraqis and shooting Eldridge in the leg. Coming to his side, Eldridge screams, believing that is dead or dying.

SCENE EIGHTEEN shows James walking into the bathroom on base. He is fully clothed in his uniform, from his helmet to boots, and he walks to the sink. His hands are too dirty and covered in blood to wash at the sink. He takes a look at himself in the mirror and then walks into the shower stall. Without undressing, he turns on the water and bright red blood washes down the drain. The blood is not from the “enemy” but from his own teammate, Eldridge. Emotionally, James falls to the floor of the stall, allowing the water to wash over him.

SCENE NINETEEN opens on base. Sanborn is dressed in a more casual uniform (no helmet or gear) and is sitting in the HumVee. James approaches, also in a casual uniform. He looks screen left, reacting to something in surprise. He quickly turns his head back, looking straight at the camera, with a serious look on his face. Off-screen we hear Beckham’s voice say, “Hey, what’s up man.” Beckham runs into frame with a soccer ball and a DVD in his hands. James ignores him and walks away. Beckham walks off looking surprised, disappointed, and slightly hurt. A sound-bridge of a helicopter transitions us

to a new setting where two soldiers are carrying Eldridge on a stretcher onto a helicopter. Sanborn and James run up to him where Eldridge yells at James for shooting him, breaking his leg, being reckless and putting his life in unnecessary danger just to get his kicks in. Sanborn interrupts and they have a friendly fare-well. Eldridge is upset at James, but he is happy to be going home.

SCENE TWENTY opens with an unknown US soldier aiming his rifle and yelling, "If you keep walking we will shoot you." An Iraqi man walks toward him slowly with arms raised. James and Sanborn arrive at the scene. In the bomb suit, James approaches the soldier to ask about situation. He explains that the man has a bomb strapped to him but he is sorry and doesn't want it to go off. The translator is worried, saying that he is not a bad man. The man slowly opens his shirt to reveal a complex cage padlocked to his body with bombs underneath. Sanborn gets personal with James, acknowledging that they have had differences, calling it water under the bridge, and cautioning him out of disarming this bomb thinking it suicidal on James' part. James responds, "Let's do this," and goes toward bomber. James realizes that there is a timer and tries to cut the locks, but is unable to get them all off before the time will go off. With less than a minute left, James sincerely apologizes to the man and runs away from him. The bomb explodes and James survives.

SCENE TWENTY-ONE opens inside the HumVee. James and Sanborn have again switched roles; now James is driving and Sanborn is the passenger. Sanborn finally breaks down, revealing that he hates Iraq and the war because he is not ready to die. He admits that he wants to have a son, realizing that if he died, no one would care. His face is scraped and bloodied; this may have been his closest call, too. Sanborn explains, "Every time we go out its life or death. You roll the dice." Neither of the men knows why James is the way he is and the men share a sincere, contemplative moment.

SCENE TWENTY-TWO opens with James in the grocery store back at home in the United States. He walks around with an empty cart while Connie (with the baby) does all of the shopping. The scene is made up of somewhat connected vignettes of James' home life. He cleans out the gutters, sits in front of a static television, and helps Connie cook dinner. He tries to convince her that he needs to re-enlist and she listens passively, without agreeing or arguing. The scene ends with James playing with his

baby boy in the baby's room. James confesses to the boy that he only has one love in the world, implying that that love is the war.

SCENE TWENTY-THREE concludes the film as James returns to Iraq, re-enlisted in Delta Company. He walks in his suit, away from the camera, toward his next mission. The screen reads that he has three-hundred and sixty-five days left in his new rotation and then cuts to credits.