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Black Hawk Down: Adaptation and the Military-Entertainment Complex

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Abstract

This article investigates the non-fiction book *Black Hawk Down* (1999) by Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down* the movie (2001) directed by Ridley Scott, and the computer game *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (2003). The article suggests that while the movie and the game must be studied as adaptations of the first text, the tools developed by adaptation studies, and that are typically used to study the transfer of narratives from one media form to another, do not suffice to fully describe the ways in which these narratives change between iterations. To provide a more complete account of these adaptations, the article therefore also considers the shifting political climate of the 9/11 era, the expectations from different audiences and industries, and, in particular, the role that what James Der Derian has termed the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-Net) plays in the production of narrative. The article thus investigates how a specific political climate and MIME-Net help to produce certain adaptations. Based on this investigation, the article argues that MIME-Net plays a very important role in the adaptation of the Black Hawk Down story by directing attention away from historical specificity and nuance, towards the spectacle of war. Thus, in *Black Hawk Down* the movie and in *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, authenticity is understood as residing in the spectacular rendering of carnage rather than in historical facts. The article concludes that scholarly investigations of the adaptation of military narratives should combine traditional adaptation studies tools with theory and method that highlight the role that politics and complexes such as MIME-Net play within the culture industry.

Keywords: Adaptation studies, War, Black Hawk Down, Military-Entertainment Complex, MIME-Net, Popular culture.

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Introduction

The field of cultural studies has developed several useful approaches that can help to explain the ways in which culture in its many forms mediates and shapes the global landscape. Since its emergence, the cultural studies field has encouraged investigations that go beyond the established cultural canon into popular genres, that study new emergent art and media forms such as video games and social media, and that consider the cultural aspects of all mediated expressions in society. This article builds on this endeavour: it focuses not on a single media type, but on how a narrative is adapted from one media form into another. This is often understood to be the concern of the field known as "adaptation studies", an area of study that has developed complex theoretical tools for understanding how stories and characters move between media. These tools are concerned with the description of such aspects as the "fidelity" of the adaptation text (Stam 2012), the "gains" and "losses" a new media form produces when it adapts a narrative (Linda Hutcheon 2006), and the relationship between the original text, the adaptation, and the political climate (Andrew 2012).

This article uses these tools to investigate the relationship between three texts that concern a historical event. The article seeks to widen the discussion by considering not only what may be termed the internal limitations and possibilities of each media form, and the relationship of these forms with the political context, but also the location of the texts relative to a vast network of agents that fund and promote particular narratives. The article achieves this by combining tools from adaptation studies with theory and methods developed by James Der Derian and Mackenzie Wark. These focus on the relationship between cultural expressions and the specific production circumstances, which—it is argued—affect how a certain text is adapted. The texts that we study in this way are the documentary narrative *Black Hawk Down* (1999) by Mark Bowden, the Hollywood film adaptation *Black Hawk Down* (2001) by Ridley Scott, and the computer game adaptation *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (2003). We show how each of these adaptations is subject to certain limitations and possibilities that characterise the media forms, and we examine how the different political climates and production circumstances affected the three texts. In particular, the article focuses on how the post-9/11 political climate, the militarization of US culture and society, expectations from different audiences and industries, and the specific production conditions of certain media, all play crucial roles in this adaptation process.

The Many Stories of the Battle of Mogadishu

The three narratives that this article discusses all have a relationship to a historical development that took place between 1992 and 1995, when the UN stationed

a multi-national military force in Somalia in response to the ongoing civil war. This led to a series of violent confrontations between local militia forces and UN personnel, most of whom came from the US or Pakistan. The most well-known of these battles is known as the "Battle of Mogadishu" and occurred October 3-4, 1993. An attempt by US forces to seize key enemy personnel associated with a faction named the "Somali National Alliance" resulted in a prolonged confrontation with Somali militia, and with armed and unarmed civilians. In the fighting, 18 American soldiers and 1 Malaysian were killed (BBC 1993). The figures for the number of Somali casualties differ greatly between various sources. General Mohamed Farrah Hassan Aidid (hereafter General Aidid), head of the Somali National Alliance at the time, claimed that only 315 people had been killed during the fighting. By contrast, institutions and organizations in the US claim that the Somali death toll ranged from 500 (Cassidy 2004: 152) to 2000 (Frontline 2014). At the time, it was the most intense fighting that American soldiers had been involved in since the end of the Vietnam War (Bowden 2002: 481). During the battle, some of the dead American soldiers were mutilated by angry Somali mobs. Images of bodies dragged through the streets were disseminated on US television and caused a foreign relations crisis for President Bill Clinton, who withdrew American forces from Somalia.

While the images of mutilated American soldiers were hotly debated at the time (and images of the many dead Somali were not), the battle was largely forgotten in the following years. The military, political and humanitarian context in which this battle was fought was not the object of any form of extensive narrative until the publication of Mark Bowden's documentary *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*. This was published initially in installments by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1997, and then expanded into a book in 1999. In 2001, director Ridley Scott adapted Bowden's text into a major Hollywood film also named *Black Hawk Down*. The success of the film spawned a third text, the computer game *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, in 2003.

The creation of a narrative describing these historical events, and the subsequent adaptation of this narrative into a film and subsequently into a computer game, raise a number of crucial theoretical and practical concerns. What prompted these adaptations? How do the three texts differ, and to what can the differences be attributed? How do the three texts present the events that took place in Somalia, and how do they reflect the period during which they were produced. What theoretical paradigms are most useful for describing these concerns?

The field of adaptation studies provides a set of useful theoretical tools that make it possible to understand and describe the process that occurs when a narrative is transferred from one medium to another. We will use these tools to begin outlining the theoretical and methodological framework. The article also

considers the pressures that outside agents and forces exert on the adaptation of a text. In the case of the US-produced *Black Hawk Down* narratives, it is important to consider not only the film or video game medium, but also the shifting political and material contexts that the post-9/11 era brought with it.

The field of cultural studies has been very sensitive to shifts in context, especially as theorized in international relations studies and in critical theory. Central to this discussion have been the forms that the war on terror has taken in popular culture, as discussed, for example, by Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"* (Birkenstein, Froula and Randell 2010). The concurrent emergence of new relationships between the culture industry, the military-industrial complex, and government institutions such as the US Department of Defense has also been the subject of attention. This relationship, discussed in detail below, has been termed the "military-entertainment complex" by McKenzie Wark and the "military-industrial-media-entertainment-network" by James Der Derian.

This article discusses three texts that represent the same historical events. The discussion seeks to bring adaptation theory into close contact with recent work in critical theory, international relations and cultural studies. Such a discussion is important for many reasons. Critical theory has developed theoretical paradigms that are capable of stimulating more politically oriented cultural studies. At the same time, international relations studies help us consider the material and political dimensions that also influence the way in which narratives are adapted between media. Finally, the discussion of how narratives are adapted to different media helps to explain in more depth the role that popular culture plays in the political process, and the way that politics and the military market infiltrate and inform popular culture. The referendum on Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election, is sometimes said to have begun a "post-truth" era. In view of this, it is more important than ever to consider the ways in which certain political views are made manifest in society. In this very complex discursive landscape, popular culture serves an increasingly important role and significant academic analysis of popular culture is necessary.

Representing the Battle of Mogadishu

An adaptation is, in the words of Hutcheon, "[a]n acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works" (Hutcheon 2006: 8). Since the three *Black Hawk Down* narratives all claim a relationship to a historical sequence, it is possible to consider this sequence to be the original text. However, history, in the meaning of "an unfolding of time within a bounded space as experienced by tens of thousands", cannot be perceived as a text or even as a number of texts. If there is

an origin text that precedes Bowden's documentary book, it is not the event itself in all its complexity, but rather the material collected by Bowden. This consists of a very large number of narratives, including the military record of the battle, the journalistic reporting, the UN documentation, and interviews with some of the participating soldiers and civilians from both sides.

Given sufficient time, and access to this material, it would be possible to study Bowden's book as an adaptation of this plethora of narratives. It is, however, more useful to consider Bowden's text as the origin text that seeks to represent, rather than adapt, these previous narratives. We can then understand the subsequent two texts as, on the one hand, adaptations of Bowden's original text, and, on the other hand, attempts to represent a historical sequence. Thus, this article considers the first text as doing the work of representation, while the other two texts are involved in two interrelated processes, one being the representation of the historical events, and the other the adaptation of the previous texts.

As Linda Hutcheon has stated, an adaptation from one medium to another always involves a balance between "gains" and "losses", since the content must be adapted to the system that the new medium offers (Hutcheon 2006: 16). This way of understanding how an adaptation is balanced is important when discussing the three texts that this study considers, and the study pays attention to the gains and losses that Bowden's narrative is subjected to as it moves from one medium to another. Robert Stam has argued that it is not possible for an adaptation to be completely faithful to its source. A text has an open structure that can generate many different interpretations, and there is thus no single "core" that can be transferred to another medium (Stam 2012: 76). Should the adaptation follow the plot in every detail, or should the characters have exactly the appearance that they are described having in the source? The fidelity perspective also implies that the main objective of an adaptation is to reproduce the original, and that it fails if it does not do so in a satisfactory way. Stam argues that a more productive way to study adaptations is to examine the relationship between the source and the adaptation, and to try to understand how the adaptation differs from the source and why it has been changed (Stam 2012: 87). The issues Stam raises are important to this study for many reasons. All of the adaptations make strong claims about fidelity, sometimes to previous texts, and sometimes to the historical events. At the same time, the texts are vastly different from each other in many ways: the events they represent, the perspectives they assume, the way in which they engage with the reader/consumer, and the elements of the previous texts that they seek to reproduce. These similarities and differences will be discussed throughout the analysis.

Adaptations are affected by the political and material circumstances that surround them. As early as 1980, Dudley Andrew argued that adaptations are not

created in a political or historical vacuum, but reflect the time and the society that produced them. Adaptations include parts from the source that are considered to be worth preserving or are interesting and relevant for the present. Some parts will change, depending on the purpose of the adaptation. Hence, a film adaptation "depends as it is on the aesthetic system of the cinema in a particular era and on that era's cultural needs and pressures" (Andrew 2012: 72). Andrew argues that scholars should treat adaptations as discourses that are influenced by outside forces, and he believes that scholars need to be more responsive to the forces that motivate these discourses. Andrew's contention is important to this study as we argue here that the differences in content between the versions of *Black Hawk Down,* are due not only to the specific properties of the media, but also to the context in which a version was created.

This study will shift the focus towards these outside forces, by considering in particular the role that outside agents, such as the Department of Defense and the military-industrial complex, play in the production of popular culture in the US. Seminal scholarly work by James Der Derian (2001), Timothy Lenoir (2003), McKenzie Wark (2005), David L. Robb (2004) and Richard King and David Leonard (2009) has shown that there is an intimate economic and political relationship between the military, the entertainment industry, arms manufacturers, and what may be termed an aggressive American foreign policy. Previous authors have named this relationship the 'military-entertainment complex" or the military-industrial-media-entertainment-network.[1] In essence, this relationship can be described as a symbiosis in which the entertainment industry, often partially funded by arms manufacturers or by the US Department of Defense, produces narratives that construct a sense of global insecurity. These narratives argue that this insecurity can be countered only by the military (Wark 2005).[2] In the words of King and Leonard, this makes an entertainment product, such as a military game, into a "powerful pedagogical vehicle, providing youth, and perhaps all users, with ideological, political, historical, and racial lessons that guide U.S. hegemony around the globe" (King and Leonard 2009: 94).

The work by these scholars ultimately focuses on revealing how (popular) culture is engineered by a number of outside actors with clearly identifiable political and capitalist agendas. The identification of the military-entertainment complex, and the location of different texts relative to this complex, shed important light on the way that culture is being manufactured with very specific ends in view. An essential aspect of this is that the US military-entertainment complex produces the stories that rationalize a politics of global US hegemony, and that make the production of military hardware reasonable. The military interventions that seek to maintain US global control can then form the context for new stories disseminated by the entertainment industry. In this way, the mi-

litary-entertainment complex is a form of self-sustaining, cultural and material loop (Höglund 2012: 179-81). This article participates in a general, critical investigation of the militarization of popular culture through a discussion of three texts, all of which have a relationship to this complex. At the same time, and in the context of adaptation theory, the article focuses on the role of the military-entertainment complex, and stresses a need to identify the connections that exist not only between adaptations, but also between adaptations and the context in which they were produced, and which produced them. Considering the role that the military-entertainment complex in its different forms plays in the production and adaptation of certain stories, is thus a way to explore a crucial but so far neglected aspect of the creation and transference of narrative. With this in mind, this study will consider the ways in which the adaptation of a narrative is informed not only by the previous iteration, but also by the material and political context in which the adaptation occurs. In other words, we argue that differences in a new adaptation are produced not only due to the demands of a particular medium, but also as a result of the economic, political and historical context in which it is created. In view of this, all three narratives that this study considers are attempts to represent historical events as media-specific stories, as the products of a certain political climate and of certain government agencies, and as the result of expectations from different audiences and industries.

Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*

When Mark Bowden set out to write the series of articles for *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, he was struck by the lack of previous work on this conflict. Even the Pentagon seemed to have decided to forget the incident, and had not bothered to archive any after-action reports (Bowden 2002: 482). This allowed Bowden to produce the first historical account of what happened in Somalia in 1993. To gather material for his text, Bowden first contacted a retired U.S. Army captain whose son died in the battle of Mogadishu, and through him Bowden came in contact with soldiers who had participated in the battle (Bowden 2002: 499-500). When Bowden had come this far, the US military, which had at first been uncooperative, supplied video and audio recordings from Somalia (Bowden 2002: 501).

Any attempt to write history is deeply complex and necessarily involves a certain editorial intent by which some information is included and some omitted. All histories are representations of other sources and experiences, and written history thus produces the past, rather than simply mirroring it. In this sense, Bowden's book enters into "an extended intertextual engagement" with the many narratives that he has uncovered, even if we cannot collect these narratives into

a coherent origin text. It is also clear that Bowden's intention was not simply to collate these narratives into as accurate a history as possible of the events. Thus, while we cannot consider his text to be a proper adaptation, the production of his book was informed by a number of important considerations concerning how to treat the material he had collected. It was also necessary that Bowden consider what Hutcheon terms "losses" (Hutcheon 2006:8).

A journalist rather than a historian by trade, Bowden wanted to "combine the authority of a historical narrative with the emotions of the memoir, and write a story that read like fiction but was true" (Bowden 2002: 482). *Black Hawk Down* is thus not written like a history book, but like a *novel,* and it is designed to entertain as much as to educate. This has profound consequences for the narrative Bowden produces, and leads to a series of "losses". Bowden never discusses why he wants his story to read like fiction, but his aim is similar to that of the New Journalism movement in the 1960s and 70s. The term "New Journalism" is from the 1880s, but the current meaning was established by Tom Wolfe with his anthology *The New Journalism* (1973). Wolfe argued that the American novel was dying as a consequence of moving away from realism, and he called for a more journalistic approach. Wolfe argued for a style of investigative reporting that borrowed techniques from literary fiction to bring factually accurate scenes to life. In particular, Wolfe argued for the use of scene construction, point-of-view descriptions, and third-person narration focused on an identifiable protagonist. He claimed that this would result in non-fiction reports that read more like novels.

This tradition of American journalism is very much alive, and Bowden's representation of the events in Somalia is colored by this paradigm. In addition to this, his intent signals that he believes his readers to be not a group of historians tied to academic or military institutions, but American citizens who are interested in the subject matter, but are more used to consuming fiction than history texts.

Bowden is very careful to contextualize and explain the political situation in depth and the reasons for the American soldiers' presence in Somalia. His interest in entertaining his readers means that the focus is on the personal destiny of individual US soldiers. Even so, Bowden's text also acknowledges some African voices, and it does not immediately collapse into a vehicle of patriotism. Bowden describes in some detail how General Aidid terrorized the people, stole food supplies and killed UN soldiers (Bowden 2002: 138-148), but he also describes events that took place on July 12, 1993, when US attack helicopters bombed the building in which the leaders and intellectuals of the Habr Gidr clan had gathered in order to discuss their position on the peace treaty that the UN had presented (Bowden 2002: 143-148). In addition to this, Bowden lists several mistakes that US troops committed in their eagerness to seize General Aidid (Bowden 2002: 49).

Bowden succeeds in telling an information-rich story that still works as fiction for the reader. He often interrupts the story with lengthy sections of information, which function as cliffhangers and raise tension. In addition to this contextual information, the reader is given a reasonably complex image of the general conflict and of the cataclysmic Battle of Mogadishu, thanks to the many different points of view that the omniscient narrator presents. The reader follows approximately sixty American soldiers and around ten Somalis through the conflict. This gives the reader a relatively nuanced picture, and while the destinies of the American soldiers are at the center of the story, the writer makes it clear that he sympathizes also with the Somalis. In this, as we will discuss below, Bowden's text is very different from later adaptations.

In addition to this, the story makes it clear that US soldiers broke the rules of engagement during the Battle of Mogadishu, and fired into crowds of people where some were armed and some were not:

> At first they shot only at armed Somalis who were moving toward the target area, but as the volume of fire intensified they'd begun targeting anyone with a weapon. Since many of the armed men stayed in crowds, pretty soon Dowdy was mowing down whole crowds of Sammies. He felt justified (Bowden 2002: 120).

The fact that Bowden mentions this is important when considering the adaptations. Relying on US protocols, some Somali gunmen would hide behind unarmed women and children, hoping that this would prevent US forces from firing back. The reader is encouraged to understand the breach of protocol that followed, which led to the vast civilian death toll, as a desperate attempt to save individual American lives and to manage an extremely complex battlefield. When this description of the conflict has been accepted, the lingering impression left by the book is one of considerable admiration for the Americans who fought on the ground that day—the same US soldiers, it must be added, who supplied most of the content of the story, and for whom Bowden claims he wrote the book (Bowden 2002: 503):

> No matter how critically history records the policy decisions that led up to this fight, nothing can diminish the professionalism and dedication of the Rangers and Special Forces units who fought there that day. The Special Forces units showed in Mogadishu why it is important for the military to keep and train highly motivated talented, and experienced soldiers. When things went to hell in the streets, it was in large part the men of Delta and SEALs who held things together and got most of the force out alive (Bowden 2002: 502).

The final product is a sometimes conflicted narrative that gives the reader a good overview of a chaotic battle, that praises the bravery of the US soldiers involved, and that also describes mistakes committed by the US command in Somalia. At the same time, the book is an attempt to provide a Somali perspective. While it may be difficult for the reader to identify with the Somali civilians and soldiers, they are depicted as thinking people with agency, driven by reasonable motives. As discussed above, this biased but not entirely one-sided narrative arises from of a long tradition of American journalism, but it also reflects the era during which it was written. In the post-cold war and pre-9/11 era, the violence of the Somali conflict was arguably both anomalous and sensational. The Battle of Mogadishu was the deadliest confrontation for US soldiers since the Vietnam War, and a comparably large loss of American lives in combat was not recorded until the invasion of Iraq in 2003. With this in mind, Bowden's text is an attempt to document and explain the challenges facing the US during the post-cold-war era.

Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*

Even before Bowden's book was published, film producer Jerry Bruckheimer had bought the rights to turn it into a film (Davidsson 2013). What appealed to Bruckheimer was apparently the strong and dramatic narrative, and the way in which Bowden told the story through a journalistic perspective:

> We had a great book to follow that gave a moment-by-moment account ... [It takes you] through the history of events, [introduces] the soldiers, then takes you actually into the mission. The book is one of the best war books ever written" (contactmusic.com).

A concern for everyone involved in the production of the film was authenticity. Bowden had not previously written a screenplay, but even so was initially given the job. It then evolved into a collaboration between professional screenwriter Ken Nolan and Bowden (Davidsson 2013). In order to adapt Bowden's non-fiction narrative into a two-hour film, the history told in *Black Hawk Down* had to be compressed. Like Bowden, Bruckheimer was interested in a sense of authenticity, and asked the filmmakers to make the film as realistic as possible. Director Ridley Scott shared this vision, and attempted to give the film a realistic, documentary feel (Davidsson 2014). In many ways, the challenge was not to make a documentary and historically accurate text read like fiction, but to make a clearly fictional product that involved Hollywood actors seem like reality.

Black Hawk Down the film is an acknowledged adaptation of Mark Bowden's book, and an attempt to retell part of the history that Bowden writes about.

Hutcheon's argument that an adaptation is "[a] creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging" works on many levels here (Hutcheon 2006: 8). The film has salvaged many of the characters, events and environments both from the historical events and from Bowden's book. However, the complex history presented by Bowden is condensed into the two days of the Battle of Mogadishu, and the multiple narrative perspectives are reduced to a focus on some 30 American soldiers. Instead of Bowden's historical contextualization, the film's very brief prologue shows Africans who have died from starvation. The prologue informs us that 300,000 have died in this way and that war lord General Aidid is using "hunger as a weapon" to seize control over Somalia. The film then opens inside a US helicopter from which American soldiers observe the massacre of civilian Somalis as they try to obtain food from an aid convoy. In this way, the film encourages the audience to understand the frustration of the American soldiers as protocol prevents them from engaging the brutal thugs below.

The film economizes by cutting back on contextualization, which creates very specific problems that can be discussed with the help of adaptation tools and with theories that highlight the political content. Hutcheon argues that a person who is familiar with the source will experience its constant presence when meeting the adaptation, which, in turn, changes the way that the person perceives the adaptation (Hutcheon 2006: 8). Thus, a person who is familiar with the original narrative will probably be struck by the way in which the film skirts and reduces the historical context. As noted by critics of the film, this adaptation focuses exclusively on the confusion and chaos that the soldiers experienced on the battlefield. In the words of Dennis Showalter:

> [C]onfusion is exacerbated by *Black Hawk Downs's* structure. Director Ridley Scott keeps his viewers looking over the participants' shoulders. We seldom know more than the men on the spot, and that knowledge is usually vitiated by the fast cuts among settings and events" (Showalter 2002: 649).

Thus, the overview of the conflict that the narrator of the book conveys to the reader, which helps him/her to contextualize the events, is lost in the film. Just like the soldiers in the film, the viewers do not really know what is going on.

Many critics perceive this as politically problematic. Connecting the film to the geopolitical concerns of the era during which it was made, Stephen A. Klein has examined how the "cinematic simulacrum of the Battle of Mogadishu constitutes the legitimacy of political and military institutions and the possibilities for efficacious, responsible political agency within the context of increasingly unconventional 21st-century warfare" (Klein 2005: 428). While *Black Hawk Down*

was produced, filmed and completed before the events of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, it clearly raises themes pertinent to these developments. The release of the film was originally scheduled for March 2002, although the date was changed to the end of 2001 to take advantage of the rising national mood (Wapshott 2001). As observed by Klein, *Black Hawk Down* is ultimately a "pro-soldier anti-war film [...] that celebrates the camaraderie, sacrifice, and heroism of the fighting soldier even as it depicts the deplorable brutality and even futility of war" (Klein 2005: 428). Thus, by focusing on the individual soldier, and by suggesting that US soldiers are willing to experience the violent crucible of war—even to sacrifice themselves for their nation and to make the world a safer place—the film depicted the presence of US military on foreign soil as natural.

Klein makes another important claim: the film's focus on the soldier and on the personal sacrifices made by those in the field signifies a general shift in the media during this period. Klein locates this shift to television, arguing that this is a medium that always seeks a personal perspective (Klein 2005: 427). In other words, inspired by television, Hollywood film had at this time begun to disregard the political and general, in favor of the personal. While Bowden is certainly interested in the personal perspective in his book, this perspective is always set into a broad and comparatively inclusive social and historical context. Thus, the fact that *Black Hawk Down* the film makes little effort to frame its very intense and personal imagery with the general, contextual observations made by the omniscient narrator in Bowden's book can be understood as a result of the pressure exerted not by the film industry but by the medium of television.

It is also important to observe that when adapting *Black Hawk Down* into film, the script writer, the producers and the director made use of the dramatic structure that typically characterizes Hollywood action war films. Previous studies of the film have pointed out that historical context is lacking and that the story relies on Manichean binaries. John McGuigan argues in "On the Danger of Heroes: *Black Hawk Down's* Transformation from Narrative Journalism to Cinematic Spectacle" (McGuigan 2011) that Bowden's contextualization has been replaced by what he calls a "Buddy cop narrative logic", and that the film "effectively erases the political and historical concerns of the book and replaces them with the character-driven concerns of an action plot" (McGuigan 2011: 230). He furthermore claims that this "leave no one behind mentality" makes the film into a stereotypical Hollywood film that negates what made Bowden's book so complex and information-rich: "While the book makes clear the number of misunderstandings that contribute to key tactical mistakes—some avoidable, some not—the screenplay relies on tensions easily recognized by action film aficionados. Action heroes, after all, don't make mistakes." (McGuigan 2011: 227).

There are certainly both heroes and villains in Bowden's book, but they tend to get lost in the confusion of battle, and the many Somali perspectives prevent an overly simplistic view of the conflict. In place of these Somali perspectives, Scott's film transforms the character of Mo'alim – one of those interviewed by Bowden and portrayed by him as an emaciated soldier with a goatee who shoots down a helicopter but then saves the life of the American pilot Durant from another helicopter crash—into the film's muscular main villain. As McGuigan notes, Mo'alim is portrayed as a stereotypical gangster in the film, and McGuigan argues that this contributes to "Hollywood's well-traveled negative stereotypes of African-Americans" (McGuigan 2011: 233). McGuigan concludes that "[f]or many white Americans, Mo'alim is instantly placed as a 'bad guy' because he looks like the dangerous men in their media, whether the 'urban ghetto thug' of crime drama or the bad-boy rapper pushed in music videos" (McGuigan 2011: 233). Along with General Aidid himself, Mo'alim thus personifies the force against which the American soldiers struggle in the film, just as Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein became emblematic of terrorism in the wake of 9/11.

In addition to considering the narrative conventions that accompany Hollywood action war films, it is necessary to consider the financial dimension of the adaptation. A Hollywood film is a multi-million dollar investment, and the estimated cost of producing *Black Hawk Down* was USD 92 million (Box Office Mojo). This means that many producers, script writers, stake-holders and test-audiences were involved in the creative process.[3] It also means that the primary focus of the people who make an investment of this size is that it should return a profit, and it is unlikely that a film be released onto the market until it is believed that it will accomplish this. Obviously, Bowden also wanted to recuperate the financial investment that had gone into the research and writing of the book, but this was a small sum. Further, there was no need for the enormous production and marketing apparatus that is attached to major Hollywood productions. In this way, the adaptation of *Black Hawk Down* the novel into *Black Hawk Down* the film was colored by concerns other than staying true to Bowden's text or to the history behind it. Thus, *Black Hawk Down* the film must be considered also as a commodity on a fiercely competitive market.

Finally, there is a need to consider the concept of the military-entertainment complex as described by Der Derian and Wark. *Black Hawk Down* was partially funded by the Pentagon and the Department of Defense (DoD).[4] Initially wary of the film, these institutions supplied military training for the actors, technical advisors, eight helicopters, and more than 100 soldiers as extras (Miller 2002). In exchange, the DoD was allowed to oversee the manuscript and suggest changes, resulting in an almost "page-by-page negotiation" of the manuscript, as Scott Ridley himself admitted during an interview (Machin and van Leeuwen

2007). Some of the changes that the DoD recommended have been described by members of the production team. Actor Brendan Sexton observed in an interview that "any sort of questioning character that existed in the film beforehand was just wiped out" through a series of rewrites (Democracy Now! 2002). Other changes made in exchange for hardware and advice included the removal of the historical character John Stebbins from the narrative, and replacing him by the fictional character John Grimes (Goldberg 2002). The reason for this was that Stebbins had been convicted for child molestation in 2000 and sentenced to 30 years in jail (The Guardian 2001). Unable to personify the high moral standards that the creators wanted to be associated with the U.S. troops, he was removed from the film. In addition to this, the soldiers that are portrayed in the film always observe protocol. Civilian casualties occur, but we do not see American soldiers breaking the rules of engagement. The only time when an American soldier is seen to shoot a civilian is towards the end of the film, when a distraught woman picks up her dead husband's rifle and begins to fire at the US troops.

It is clear that the funding from the DoD has had a profound impact on the adaptation of Bowden's book into a film. The involvement of this government agency prompted what can best be described as a "whitewashing" of the events, from a US military perspective. The film turns away from the historical specifics of the events as they unfolded and as portrayed in Bowden's book, towards a veneration of individual acts of heroism. The film thus makes possible a much more patriotic narrative that does not shun away from the carnage of war, but describes this carnage as a furnace that hardens an individual into a soldier hero.

Delta Force: Black Hawk Down

In March 2003, *Black Hawk Down* the film and the book were adapted into the computer game *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* by developer and publisher NovaLogic. This game is the sixth installment in the *Delta Force* gaming franchise, and while it is not officially tied to either Bowden's book or the film, the use of the same title signals that there is a close relationship between the game and previous *Black Hawk Down* narratives. Indeed, the game is clearly based on Bowden's book and on the aesthetics of the film, and the soundtrack that accompanies many of the more intense sequences sounds very much like the film soundtrack. Most reviewers of the game discuss it as, in effect, an adaptation of the book and the film.

The game covers essentially the same chronological and geographical territory as Bowden's book, and thus it covers considerably more chronological ground than the film. The game takes place in many locations around Mogadishu, and consists of 16 missions between February 16, 1993 and October 4, 1993, with one

final mission taking place on July 24, 1996. Before each mission, the player is able to read a few lines about the context and the goal of the mission.

According to NovaLogic's Head of Public Relations Marcus Beer, the time span used by the game comes from a desire to give a more truthful and complete account of what happened in Mogadishu than that given by the film adaptation:

> What we want to do is not only put across … the 24 hours in Mogadishu but the full twelve to eighteen month campaign beforehand. A lot of good work was done in that time that's been glossed over or totally ignored by various sections of the media. If we can give people a little more food for thought by showing them helping with aid convoys or taking out gun runners, that makes it worth it (Butts 2002: 3).

In other words, NovaLogic claims that its game has a more direct relationship to history than the film, and that the game expresses historical truth by showing acts performed by US soldiers in Mogadishu before, during, and after the Battle of Mogadishu. In order to lend some credence to this claim, Novalogic employed two US soldiers, one of whom had fought in Mogadishu, who gave advice during the creation of the game. The soldier who had served in Mogadishu has explained in an interview that he wanted to be a part of the development for two reasons. First of all, he was not satisfied with the way the battle had been depicted:

> As a member of Task Force Ranger who fought in Somalia, I take great umbrage at the way that event is generally portrayed, almost universally as a failure or a bungled mission or a debacle. It's hard to pick up any print media about that that doesn't refer to it like that. The facts are totally different. The mission for that day was successful, albeit with a tragic loss of life (Butts 2002: 1).

The second reason was that "in order for me to come aboard, NovaLogic had to agree to give a percentage of profits to a couple of Special Operations charities that are tied to the veterans of Task Force Ranger" (Butts 2002: 1). Thus, the game was created in a context in which an ex-soldier, who had served in the battle of Mogadishu, functioned as a "subject matter expert" for the game. This cooperation reflects the way in which this game attempts to adopt the previous texts while at the same time adding to the way in which the historical events are represented.

Just as the format of a Hollywood film puts certain demands onto an adaptation, the computer game genre of the first person shooter also requires

that certain elements be present. The most significant difference between *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* and the previous adaptations is, arguably, the interface with which the player accesses the narrative. Game scholar Espen Aarseth has argued that the player of a computer game becomes an active part of the game's fiction in a way that the viewer/reader of a novel or a film never will. It could be argued that such interactive fiction as an adventure game is even less fictive than a staged drama, since the user can explore the simulated world and establish causal relationships between the encountered objects in a way denied to the readers of *Moby Dick* or the audience of *Ghosts* (Aarseth 1997: 50).

In other words, the consumer of a book or a film reads or observes a text but cannot manipulate the action. Even though both *Black Hawk Down* the book and *Black Hawk Down* the film make great efforts to encourage the audience to identify with the American soldiers depicted, the audience is not the soldier. When a trigger is pulled, or not pulled, there is nothing the audience can do about it. When a soldier dies, the audience watches in horror, perhaps, but through the eyes of the narrator or the camera. By contrast, the gamer is not simply an audience member in the game *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*; he or she is also an important participant. It is the gamer who pulls, or does not pull, the trigger. If civilians are shot, they are shot by the gamer. If missions are accomplished, they are accomplished by the gamer. Furthermore, the gamer's avatar dies when shot, and the narrative is suspended until the gamer revives and can begin to fight again.

This level of independence gives a certain sense of freedom. The gamer can leave the narrative to some extent. He or she can start to shoot his or her fellow soldiers or abandon the mission, or concentrate gunfire onto the hostile but unarmed civilians. The game, however, punishes such independence harshly. While it is true that the game will tolerate some friendly fire and some shooting of civilians, if this gets out of hand the game will abruptly end. The book thus tells a very different story from the film and the game in this respect. While Bowden's text acknowledges that the rules of engagement were broken throughout the Battle of Mogadishu, and that the very idea of adhering to them eventually became "preposterous" to the soldiers (Bowden 2002:304), the film never shows US soldiers shooting at children or unarmed civilians. Similarly, the game, despite its relative freedom of action, disciplines any attempt to indulge in civilian carnage. A few Somalis may be shot accidentally, but a systematic targeting of unarmed civilians will force a restart of the mission.

The Somali perspective seen in Bowden's book is lost in the computer game and in the film, and the only option the player has is to play as an American soldier. According to Beer, this was an important decision:

> One of the things in the single player game is that you don't shoot US soldiers and during multiplayer, you don't get to play as the Somalis. You're always playing as the US soldiers. There's no way that we would let people take on the mission from the view of the Somalis. That's not right for us (Butts 2002: 3).

Furthermore, the game differs from both the book and the film in that there are no children in the game. Some women are present, all of them civilians, but the space that the gamer enters is primarily masculine and overtly hostile.

The game conforms to a number of other post-9/11 war games where, as King and Leonard argue, military games set in the Middle East tend to construct "scenes where there are virtually no civilians present", which in turn "engender spaces where you are able only to kill soldiers" (King and Leonard 2001: 100). In this way, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* renders Somalia as a space where war is the only form of human exchange and interaction possible. The book makes a different reading of Mogadishu possible, as a marketplace, a home, a place of teaching; while the game views the city and the nation as only a site of death, of starvation and of violence.

The fact that space and the physical operations that take place in this space are rendered by a piece of code interacting with a computer makes it possible to turn certain practices that are common in real life into an impossibility. To observe the rules of engagement is transformed from policy into a virtually unbreakable rule. Any attempt to recreate the killing of civilians that occurred during the battle will result in a (temporary) suspension of the game. Interestingly, it is not always easy to distinguish which characters are civilians and which are enemies in the game. The civilians have the same or similar clothing as the hostile soldiers, and cry out and throw stones at the player's character when they come close to him. Hence, the player must always be careful of what he/she shoots at, something that can be difficult when rockets and shots are being fired from all directions. While this conveys the chaos of battle and shows the player how difficult it must have been for the real soldiers to identify civilians in the chaotic streets, it also implies that the soldiers were as careful as the player must be in order to complete the mission. Bowden's text does not support this implication.

Like the film, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* is closely tied to the military-entertainment complex, but in slightly different ways. While US soldiers did participate in the construction of the game, no records suggest that the Department of Defense funded its development. The connection of the game to the complex is less direct but still important. In *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial Media-Entertainment Network* (2001), James Der Derian discusses the relationship between the virtualisation of society and the militarization of US

foreign policy. He argues that the virtualisation of cultural and social processes and of the practice of war makes it possible to think of war as "virtuous". Bombing appears clinical and surgical when experienced through the haze and static of the television screen. It would have been possible to allow the fierce and personal gunplay that the player performs in *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* free reign, thus making it possible for the gamer to re-enact the carnage of the original, historical event that was the Battle of Mogadishu. However, by introducing the rule that aborts the game if too many civilians are killed, the game participates in the construction of virtuous war. The player is forced by the game mechanics to fight a virtuous campaign, virtually without civilian casualties. The game mechanics ensure that to play *Black Hawk Down* is to inhabit and perform within a military virtualisation in which war is always clinical and just, and carnage only afflicts those who deserve, even demand, it. Even this carnage is, of course, virtuous, because it takes place within the computer.

As an adaptation, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* draws from both previous texts and from the historical background, as recorded by other sources and as conveyed by the soldier who had been stationed in Somalia. The differences between the game and the previous texts is primarily a consequence of the use of a different medium, one that allows the player to interact with the fictional world in new ways. Another important difference is that the game was produced in a post-9/11 political climate in collaboration with two US soldiers, with the purpose of showing the military's good work in Somalia. Just as Bowden's story is a post-cold war text, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* is a post-9/11 text informed by the War on Terror launched by the Bush administration. In fact, the game was launched three days after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In this way, the military action in which the gamer participates is also intrinsically linked to this effort at extending US global influence and control over Middle Eastern oil through a military campaign.

Conclusions: Adaptation and the Modern War Narrative

The three texts discussed in this article were produced during three different historical periods. Bowden's book was written pre-9/11 and, while it is patriotic, it recognizes a level of political and moral complexity that the film and the game do not come close to. In the case of *Black Hawk Down* the film, this lack of complexity can be primarily attributed to the nature of the medium, and to the financial and ideological pressures under which Hollywood film productions operate. The film was largely produced before the events of 9/11, so it cannot be suggested that the basic text is a response to the post-9/11 political climate. However, the launching of the film in late 2001, rather than in early 2002, certainly suggests that the

producers saw their product as being able to channel a post-9/11 political climate. Finally, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* is firmly a post-9/11 and post-Afghanistan-invasion narrative. Even more than is the case for the film, the pervading sense that the US is under siege, that the enemy is Islam, and that the only solution to this present and future crisis is military violence permeates the game. Malinda S Smith has argued that the post-9/11 period was characterized by a suspension of historical memory and a denial of political complexity (Smith 2010). Similarly, Der Derian observed as early as 2002 that:

> Unless one is firmly situated in a patriotic, ideological, or religious position (which at home and abroad are increasingly one and the same), it is intellectually difficult and even politically dangerous to assess the meaning of a conflict that phase-shifts with every news cycle, from 'Terror Attack' to 'America Fights Back'; from a 'crusade' to a 'counter-terror campaign'; from 'the first war of the 21st century' to a fairly conventional combination of humanitarian intervention and remote killing; from infowar to real war; from kinetic terror to bioterror (Der Derian 2002).

In the absence of historical and political complexity, political and societal discourse began to rely on the Manichean binaries that the Bush administration repeatedly evoked in public speeches. *Black Hawk Down* the film and, even more so, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* are characterized by the same suspension of political and historical complexity.

This suspension depends to a certain extent on the transfer between media forms. Indeed, the exact same story cannot be told in a 2-hour film as in a 400-page book. Also, the film and computer game media place the viewer or gamer into a different relationship with the characters of the narrative. Even so, the film and the game could tell much more complex stories than they do. Thus, in order to understand the adaptation of a historical war sequence into a documentary book, a film and a game, it is necessary to consider also how these texts respond to a series of extra-medial pressures. Again, it is crucial to note the shifting discursive landscape of the immediate post-9/11 era. As argued by Der Derian, the post-9/11 discourse did not tolerate the political and historical complexity of the pre-9/11 period. Thus, when the film and the game reduce the battle between Somali forces and US elite soldiers into a fight between good and evil, it can be argued that this occurs not because films and games cannot accommodate complexity, but because the discourse of the period discouraged such complexity. This discourse became dominant after 9/11, but it certainly existed before this date and informed the production of *Black Hawk Down* the film. Thus, the film easily found its place in the post-9/11 media and entertainment landscape.

It is important to note that the film and game were produced in close proximity to the workings of the military-entertainment complex. This complex is a machine in which the various parts feed each other. The complex allows the entertainment industry to subsidise the production of narrative, thus creating a society that is more friendly to US military geopolitics. Such a society is more likely to generate new military recruits inspired by the narratives, making it possible for the weapons industry to expand both its military and civilian market.[5] Finally, such narratives encourage an increasingly expansive American foreign policy that, when put into practice, constitutes the foundation of new events that can then be commodified by media and the entertainment industry. These events become the next rotation of this circle.

From this perspective, adaptation and media scholars should be conversant with the military-entertainment complex and to the demands it puts on the adaptation of narrative. In the wake of *Black Hawk Down* the film, several non-fiction texts have been adapted into very successful war films, many of which have been sponsored by the Department of Defense. The most recent include *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (2007), which was turned into the blockbuster *Lone Survivor* in 2013, and *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (2012), which was released as the film *American Sniper* in 2014.

The fictionalization and commodification of the war narrative, and the simplification of these narratives through various adaptations, deserve further scholarly attention. As argued in this article, the representation of a historical sequence of war in various entertainment forms shifts attention away from historical specificity and complexity. In the film and game adaptations, truth is not necessarily understood as a direct relationship between historical events and a text, but rather in the vivid imagery of the adaptations, and their spectacular rendering of carnage. The fact that these adaptations manipulate the progress of historical events, removing politically fraught elements such as massive civilian death, and portraying the death of US soldiers as selfless and patriotic sacrifice, while at the same time portraying the palpable violence of war very realistically, makes it increasingly difficult to locate the border between historical violence and fictional/mediated violence. In other words, because the violence of, in particular, the film is so realistic, it is easy to disregard the patriotic discourse that informs the script as such, and to assume that what is presented to the audience is the truth of the Battle of Mogadishu.

Interestingly, this discrepancy between violent reality and violent, realistic imagery struck the American soldiers who took part in the fighting in Mogadishu in 1993, but in reverse: a situation that was very real to them seemed like fiction. Bowden writes that:

> In my interviews with those who were in the thick of battle, they remarked again and again how much they felt like they were *in a movie*, and had to remind themselves that this horror, the blood, the deaths, was real. They describe feeling weirdly out of place, as though *they did not belong here*, fighting feelings of disbelief, anger, and ill-defined betrayal. *This cannot be real* (Bowden 2002: 503).

In other words, the only frame of reference that these soldiers had for the kind of situation that they faced during the intense battle was cultural, and the narratives present in this framework had not prepared them for the sense of destruction, the desperation, the injuries and death, and the killing of civilians that the situation entailed. This is the basis of the feeling of betrayal and confusion that the soldiers describe.

It is perhaps not surprising, considering the violence of the battle, that the testimony given by the soldiers of this experience a few years later became first a novel, then a film, and finally a game. In this subsequent representation of the historical incidents, culture removes the sheer sense of destruction, turning the events into yet another story about the soldier hero, about white masculinity, and about the necessity of noble sacrifice. In the film and game, the narrative is cleansed of the civilian carnage that makes it possible to think of the conflict as, in the words of Der Derian, essentially virtuous despite the blood and gore.

In this way, all three texts, and in particular the film and game, disturb the sense of tragedy that the violent loss of human life—military and civilian—should engender. Thus, what fuels these texts is not, we argue, an effort to accurately portray war or a historical incident. Furthermore, the evolution or transformation of the original historical event, and of Bowden's first documentary text, cannot be fairly accounted for by simply looking at the demands that the subsequent media forms put upon the narratives, or the general political climate at the time these adaptations were produced. These demands are, of course, important, and this article attempts to account for the effects that they had. However, to be able to fully understand the way in which each adaptation manages the narrative and the characters of the story, it is necessary to examine also the role played by the increasingly ubiquitous military-entertainment complex.

As discussed above, this complex is much more than the political climate, and it must be perceived as an engine that seeks to perpetuate a cultural, political, and material loop in which narratives of war generate military recruits and a general acceptance for (US-initiated) war as an instrument of positive global transformation. These recruits and this willingness can encourage military conflict that initially stimulates the military-industrial complex and then produces new narratives that sustain the loop. With this in mind, discussing the adaptation of

war narratives without considering the role played by the military-entertainment complex not only risks turning work on adaptation into little more than a debate about the internal nature of different media, but also risks preventing such work from engaging with the larger, and arguably increasingly important, geopolitical issues of our time.

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Notes

[1] James Der Derian's 2001 book *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* concerns the general militarization and commodification of war in US media, from iterant virtual reality shows put on by the military to computer games and US news media. The work of Timothy Lenoir has focused primarily on the video game industry (2003), as has the more theoretical work of McKenzie Wark (2005), and of Richard King and David Leonard. Finally, the David L. Robb polemic *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (2004) discusses the relationship between the US Department of Defense and Hollywood producers.

[2] James Der Derian terms this relationship the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network, Lenoir refers to it as the military-industrial-entertainment complex, while Wark simply calls it the military-entertainment complex.

[3] According to the IMDB entry for *Black Hawk Down* the film, this film had 9 producers at different levels, 2 writers, 1 director, 6 art directors, 1 cinematographer, and approximately 2200 actors and staff. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0265086/full-

credits?ref_=tt_ov_st_sm.

[4] As noted by David L. Robb in *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (2004), the producer of *Black Hawk Down* was Jerry Bruckheimer. One of Hollywood's most successful film makers, Bruckheimer has been responsible for such blockbusters as *Flashdance, Con Air, Armageddon, Pirates of the Caribbean* and, importantly, *Top Gun*. This film, which premiered in 1986 with Tom Cruise in the lead role, changed the way that Hollywood related to the Department of Defense and the US military. Heavily sponsored by the US Air Force, the film became relatively cheap to produce despite the expensive hardware needed. As discussed by Robb, *Top Gun* boosted the public's confidence in the military in general, and in the air force in particular. Recruitment booths were set up in theatres and Hollywood producers told their directors and screenwriters to get the military on board or "forget about doing the picture" (Sirota 2011).

[5] Following the release of the DoD-sponsored film *Top Gun*, military recruitment reportedly rose by 500% (Mirrlees 2016: 175). Similarly, the release of the DoD-funded first person shooter game *America's Army* provided the US army with a recruitment tool that had more impact on recruits than "all other forms of army advertising combined" (Mead 2013: 75).

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