

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Representation

In cultural studies, representation is not understood as a neutral reflection of objective reality, but as an active process of meaning production. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that meaning is not inherently embedded in objects, individuals, or events; rather, it is constructed through systems of representation that operate through language, signs, discourse, images, and symbolic practices. Meaning emerges within specific cultural contexts and is shaped by dominant power relations that determine which interpretations become naturalized as “common sense” (Vaara & Whittle, 2021). Therefore, representation is always selective and ideological, as it privileges certain perspectives while marginalizing others (Ferreira & Ganito, 2024).

More specifically, Hall (1997) explains that representation can work through a structured system of signs within a particular cultural context. This system not only describes reality, but also organizes the way in which reality can be understood. Because the sign system exists within a broader discourse formation, representation actively shapes the possibilities of interpretation. Thus, the practice of representation can produce different perspectives on certain actors, identities, or events, and shape the audience's position in understanding the narrative presented. Drawing on Hall's (1997) theory of representation, media texts can be understood as offering particular subject positions to audiences. These positions, particularly in popular culture forms like video games, can significantly influence how audiences perceive and interpret geopolitical narratives and the roles of various

national actors within them (Rianto, 2024). From this perspective, representation frames global conflicts through certain values, such as global security, military stability, and even order and the legitimacy of the use of military force (Robinson, 2019, p.6). The positioning process is very important in determining from which perspective an event is viewed, who is considered rational, who is considered threatening, and what actions are considered legitimate or illegitimate.

In the context of popular media, representation can play an important role in shaping meaning, which can influence the understanding of players, especially gamers who play the game. Representation can also shape understandings such as national, social, and even geopolitical identities embedded in the game (Ferreira & Ganito, 2024, p. 62). In the context of war games such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023), representation plays an important role in shaping players' understanding of global conflicts, political actors, and international enemies. Characters, settings, dialogue, and visual symbols are not present by chance, but are constructed to build a specific narrative about threats, security, and the legitimacy of violence. Thus, this game can be analyzed as a cultural text that represents national identity and geopolitics through a specific ideological framework (Mantello, 2017). This framework provides an analytical basis for examining how representations within games such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 may construct particular national identities and shaping player perceptions of geopolitical realities.

2.2. Stereotyping as a Tool of "Othering"

Stereotyping in cultural studies is not understood merely as a simplistic generalization, but rather as a practice of representation that operates within power

structures. As stated by Hall (1997), stereotyping is reducing people to a few simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature. In this sense, stereotyping operates as a reductionist representational method that turns complicated social identities into simplified, fixed, and hierarchically ordered categories. This reductionist process is fundamentally tied to significant discrepancies in power dynamics, where the discursive practices of one culture establish norms and dictate which groups are excluded or governed, thereby perpetuating a stigmatizing knowledge of the Other” (Grapa, 2022).

Furthermore, this reduction is often carried out through a process of symbolic selection, whereby only certain characteristics are highlighted while other aspects are ignored. Through this selective emphasis, representation constructs a simplified, often negative, image of a group that gradually becomes normalized as a dominant narrative, particularly evident in the depiction of antagonists in media (Travlos et al., 2023). Thus, stereotyping does not merely simplify social reality, but actively structures how certain groups are seen and positioned within broader cultural narratives.

This reductionist production is also closely related to the mechanism of symbolic differentiation between “us” and “them.” As stated by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), this symbolic practice separates the social world into a binary opposition between “us” (the Self) and “them” (the Other), a division that not only produces difference but also establishes hierarchy. Within this framework, stereotypes function as "mental shortcuts" that simplify information processing, often exploiting negative emotions to enhance their "stickiness" in the public consciousness (Zhabotynska & Ryzhova, 2022). Therefore, stereotyping can be

understood as a representational mechanism that contributes to processes of othering, where complex identities are reduced, fixed, and symbolically differentiated in ways that sustain hierarchical distinctions.

Stereotyping works through reduction, freezing of meaning, and hierarchical differentiation, so it is important to also consider how these historically constructed mechanisms can shape the portrayal of certain national subjects (Briggs et al., 2021). In Western popular media (films, novels, and video games), “Russian Enemy” figures are often represented through limited and repetitive characteristics that simplify geopolitical complexities, creating narratives that are easily recognizable to consumers (Valeriano & Habel, 2016). This reoccurring representational pattern, frequently referred to as the “Evil Russian” cliché, reveals how reductionist representations can persist and evolve throughout historical periods and media platforms.

Historically, this construction can be traced back to the Cold War era, when Hollywood consistently portrayed the Soviet Union as an ideological and even military threat to the West. Films such as *Rocky IV* and the James Bond series often featured Soviet antagonists who were depicted as cold, brutal, unemotional, and highly militaristic. In this case, representation works by simplifying national identity into a number of fixed and easily recognizable characteristics, thereby facilitating the formation of a symbolic opposition between the “Rational West” and the “Threatening East.” As stated by Gregory (1994, under Dempsey & McDowell, 2018) representation is indeed not innocent, the ways in which others are described can contribute to the production of stereotypes and may also shape how geopolitical conflicts are interpreted.

Although the global geopolitical context changed completely after the Cold War, stereotyping patterns remained. Stereotyping of post-Cold War Russia underwent a transformation, so that in some popular cultural products it was often still represented as an aggressive force or a political actor with the potential to disrupt global stability (Cronin, 2019). In this context, the “Evil Russian” trope is no longer necessarily tied to communist ideology, but rather to narratives about threats to international security and global order.

In contemporary interactive media, including military-themed video games, narrative structures that simplify enemy identities into clear and identifiable categories remain dramatically effective devices. As argued by Mantello (2017) shows that in popular media, representations of foreign enemies are often framed through visuals and narratives that emphasize brutality and inhumanity, so that violence against them appears normal and unproblematic. Within this broader historical and representational framework, such patterns may provide a relevant lens for examining how national identities are framed in contemporary digital texts.

2.3. The Visual Of Grammar Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen as Analytical Tool

Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar is used in this research as an analytical tool to examine how visual elements in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) construct meaning. This framework of Visual Grammar is one of the analytical tools of theory used to analyse visual communication and understand how visual elements convey a meaning in various contexts. Visual grammar functions as a socially constructed system of meaning-making shaped by the shared cultural practices and knowledge of a particular group, particularly within the context of Western visual communication (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:3). For the context

itself, Visual Grammar operates similarly to linguistic grammar, as it provides a framework of elements and structures that enable meaning-making within specific cultural context. A collection of ideas and guidelines for evaluating and interpreting visual signals is set together by the Visual Image Framework. It highlights that, like written or spoken language, images are active participants in communication, forming and communicating meanings rather than being passive depictions of reality (Le Hoai, 2023, p.47).

The Visual Grammar is an adaptation from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic. It proposes that language is a system of meaning potential, organized around three metafunctions: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function (Xu & Cao, 2025, p.33). These three original metafunctions have been extended by scholars to not only analyze linguistic text but also other semiotic, such as visual, image, and also gesture from the film, video game or even commercial poster. Kress and van Leeuwen is one of the scholars who adopt these three original metafunctions from Halliday into a social semiotic function as a system communication for the visual itself such as: Representational metafunction, Interpersonal metafunction and Compositional metafunction.

2.3.1. Representational Metafunction

The Representational Metafunction is one of the adopted Visual Metafunction from Halliday's SFL. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), the Representational Metafunction is the visual structure to represent people, animals, objects and also places; connecting their action and relationship toward the image. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen there are two types of Representational structure. Narrative representation and Conceptual representation. Narrative representation is used when an image depicts something that is an ongoing action, event, or process, rather than simply showing what something looks like or what category it belongs to. This type of representation is usually marked by vectors, such as the direction of a weapon, a character's movement, a pointing gesture, or a line of sight (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 59–63). Vectors are similar to the action verb in visual grammar, according to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) Vectors can be represented in many other ways, such as limbs, finger, road, and other to form diagonal lines of action (p. 59). In this sense, vectors function in a way that is comparable to action verbs in language because they show that something is being done by one participant toward another participant or object.

Narrative Representation can be divided into two categories of process for this research such as action process and reactional process. The first type of process structure is the action process, which denotes a vector formed by a depicted element or an arrow that comes from a participant (Yang & Zhou, 2022, p. 7). The participant who performs the action is called the Actor and partially forms the vector, while the participant or object affected by the action is called the Goal. The second type is the reactional process, which is associated with vectors that are formed by the eye of one or more of the player's gaze. Reactional processes contend

for two represented participants, Reactor and Phenomenon. Reactor is the one who does the looking or takes the action itself, as the Phenomenon is one of the processes that may be formed by another participant which the Reactor is looking for (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The second one is Conceptual Representation, one of the representations that does not mainly present action or movement toward participant in the visual. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) conceptual structures represent the participant through their identity, category, structure, or symbolic meaning. In contrast to narrative processes, these conceptual structures delineate static traits and characterize the stable, generalized, or timeless essence of the participants (Hariyatmi, 2023, p. 231). Conceptual representation can be divided into three main processes, classificational, analytical, and symbolic. Classificational process organize the participants into a shared category or group. Classificational processes establish a type of link among participants, or a taxonomy: At least one group of participants will act as subordinates to at least one other participant, known as the supervisor (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79). A taxonomy will be used when participants are placed, symmetrically, shown in equal size, and positioned at equal distance, and presented against a neutral background.

The second type of Conceptual representation is the Analytical process. Analytical process represents the participant through a part-whole relation, which means the whole itself is called the Carrier, while the parts that belong are called Possessive Attributes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This part of the process can be used to research maps, diagrams, uniforms, weapons, military equipment, and headquarters can be analyzed through analytical structures that function as a Carrier, while weapons, soldiers, and vehicles can function as Possessive attributes.

The third type is the Symbolic Process. Symbolic process concerns what a participant means or represents. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) Symbolic process can be divided into two types, there is Symbolic Attributive and Symbolic Suggestive. This structure, the Symbolic Attribute, symbolizes the meaning or identity itself, while the Carrier is the participant whose identity is fulfilled through that attribute (Le Hoai, 2023). For example, a cigarette, uniform, medal, flag, weapon, or military insignia can function as a Symbolic Attribute when it gives meaning to a character or group. Meanwhile, the Symbolic Suggestive process only involves one participant that functions as the Carrier. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that Symbolic Suggestive process often depends on mood, atmosphere, lighting, colour, and also visual abstraction. This means that symbolic meaning appears to come from the overall visual impression rather than from a specific object attached to the participant.

2.3.2. Interpersonal Metafunction

Interpersonal Metafunction, is one of Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar metafunction that can be analyzed to explain the relationship between the represented participants and the viewer. This metafunction can be analyzed through several visual resources, such as contact/gaze, social distance, perspective, and modality, which construct how the player and the participant are positioned in relation to what is depicted in the visual (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Contact is one of the visual resources that is closely related to image act and gaze, where image creates a demand because the player itself is invented to enter into an imaginary relation with the participant, while offer images present the participant as an object of contemplation rather than direct interaction (AbdAllah, 2023). That means Contact refers to whether the represented participant looks directly at the gamer or

not, creating either a demand imagery or an offer image from the visual data. Contact is useful for analyzing how the characters in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2023) visually interact with the player because the game does not only show conflict through action, but also through how the player is visually positioned in relation to the characters.

Another visual resource that has been used to analyze this game is social distance. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, social distance refers to the degree of closeness between the player and the represented participant, they also explain that social distance is mainly realized through the size of frame, such as close shot, medium shot, and long shot. A close shot may create intimacy or tension, a medium shot may create a social relation, and a long shot may create distance or detachment (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Dong et al., 2024). In this research social distance is used to analyze how the game creates closeness, fear, or emotional distance between the player perspective and the character perspective.

Another visual resource is Perspective or angle. According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) Perspective or angle shapes how power and involvement are perceived, angles also shapes power relations such as a high angle can suggest weakness, and an eye-level angle can create equality, over-the-shoulder angle is to make a perspective of the character itself. Perspective concerns how the viewer is positioned toward the represented participant. A frontal perspective may suggest involvement, while an oblique perspective may create detachment between the viewer and the represented participant (Rondon & Heberle, 2022).

Lastly for visual source is modality, according to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) modality is part of interpersonal meaning because it influences how viewers judge whether a visual representation seems believable or reliable. Modality can be analyze through several visual markers, such as colour saturation, colour

differentiation, colour modulation, lighting, background detail, and contextualization (Yao & Zhuo, 2018). So modality is useful for analyzing how *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) creates a realistic military atmosphere through detailed weapons, uniforms, tactical maps, surveillance screens, prison spaces, explosions, and battlefield environments. Therefore, modality helps this research explain how the game's visual realism supports the construction of Russian and Russian Ultranationalist characters as threatening figures.

2.3.3. Compositional Metafunction

Lastly, Kress & van Leeuwen's three metafunction is Compositional Metafunction, Compositional Metafunction refers to the way visual and verbal elements are organized to create a connection within visual text. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) Compositional Metafunction does not focus only on what is connected, separated, and emphasized within the frame. Compositional Metafunction also helps determine how visual and verbal elements achieve a coherent whole through three interrelated systems such as information value, salience, and framing (Alyousef, 2020). Information values concern how the placement of represented participants gives them different roles within the image, such as given/new, ideal, and center/margin. The element that is placed at the left of the image may be read as familiar or given information, while the elements that are located on the right may read as new information, another element in information values is at the top of the image represent ideal meaning, meanwhile elements at the bottom often represent more practical or factual meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In the context of this research information values is useful to analyze how characters in the game are positioned within the frame.

The second system is salience. Salience concern on how certain elements become visually dominant in the layout of the image. This dominance can be shaped by size, focus, tone contrast, colour contrast, position, perspective, and also cultural factors including symbols that hold specific cultural significance (KNOLL & Cristiane FUZER, 2019). An element may become salience because of its size, , focus, color, lighting, contrast, placement, or sharpness. In visual texts, salience creates a hierarchy of importance by making some elements appear more significant than others. Salience becomes useful for this research to analyze how the game directs player attention toward visual signs and guiding the player to recognize which elements should be interpreted as dangerous, authoritative, or morally important.

The third and last system is framing, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) Framing refers to how elements in an image are visually connected or separated through the use of frames, lines, boundaries, or other visual divisions. This system helps show the meaning of inclusion and exclusion by showing whether certain elements belong together or should be separated. Through framing, specific information can be grouped into a meaningful unit, while other elements may be visually differentiated or emphasized to varying degrees.

So compositional metafunction is used to analyze visual arrangement in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023) player's interpretation of Russian and Russian Ultranationalist figures. Therefore, compositional analysis allows this research to examine how visual organization produces ideological meanings, especially in constructing Russian Ultranationalists as threatening, dominant, or destabilizing forces.

2.4. Cultural Hegemony and the Military-Entertainment Complex

Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony

2.4.1. Cultural Hegemony

The discussion of representation and stereotyping in media cannot be separated from broader structures of power that shape how certain narratives become dominant. Within cultural studies, one of the most influential concepts for understanding this process is Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony refers to the process through which dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion but also through consent, by presenting their worldview as natural and common sense (Gramsci, 1971).

Hegemony also works through institutions such as education systems, political discourse, and cultural production. These institutions play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of social realities by circulating certain narratives and values that support dominant power structures (Ahmed et al., 2022; Rana, 2020). This process entails the establishment of a collective consciousness in which the dominant group's interpretation of reality is internalized by subordinated groups, thereby stabilizing hierarchical power relations (Rana, 2020; Gramsci, 1971). Through repeated circulation in media and popular culture, these ideas can gradually become normalized within public consciousness.

In today's contemporary media, films, social media, and music often shape how audiences interpret global events, political actors, and national identities (Thussu, 2021). Media institutions frequently function as vehicles for propaganda, propagating the cultures and ideologies of dominant elites while inducing the populace consciously or subconsciously to internalize and normalize these values

within their everyday practices (Bennis & Ghourdou, 2024). Thus these representations within popular media do not merely reflect reality but may also contribute to constructing particular interpretations of geopolitical conflicts.

2.4.2. Military-Entertainment Complex

One concept that explains the relationship between popular media and military institutions is the Military-Entertainment Complex. According to Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in *Games of Empire* (2009) modern digital games, particularly military shooters, often exist within a broader network that connects entertainment industries, technological development, and military institutions. This symbiotic relationship between military and entertainment sectors facilitates the embedding of military perspectives and narratives within popular culture, potentially influencing public perception of conflict and international relations (Hammar, 2019; Ukka, 2020).

Military-Entertainment-Complex does not imply direct control over media content, but it highlights the connection between military organizations and entertainment production. U.S national state military began to adopt civilian games for training purposes but also collaborated with private-sector studios to create customized war games (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Through these collaborations, media products may incorporate authentic military tactics, weapon systems, and strategic frameworks that mirror real-world military practices. This integration effectively blurs the lines between entertainment and military training, potentially normalizing militarized perspectives among civilian audiences (Dunnage et al., 2019).

Therefore, examining military-themed videogames through the perspective of cultural hegemony and the Military-Entertainment Complex provides a

theoretical foundation for understanding how narrative of war and global threats are constructed within popular media.

2.5. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023)

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2023) is the third installment in the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare reboot series, developed between 2019 and 2023 for its latest iteration, created by Sledgehammer Games and published by Activision. This game continues the storyline from the previous series, which tells the story of Task Force 141, consisting of Captain Price, Soap MacTavish, Ghost, and Gaz, as well as Farah Karim as the leader of the ULF (Uzbekistan Liberation Force) who is in the Western side because he is indebted to Task Force 141 for helping Urzikstan become a country free from threats in the previous game. She assisted Task Force 141 who will try to stop Russian ultranationalist company called “Konni Group” and his leader Vladimir Makarov from making World War 3 (*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III (PS5) Review - CGMagazine*, 2023). The campaign features open-combat missions across various locations, focusing on preventing Makarov's Konni Group from framing allied forces.

Within the narrative structure, the United States and its allies are positioned as the central playable perspective. represented by characters from Task Force 141, who are portrayed as professional, strategic military agents loyal to their country. Leadership within the team, particularly through Captain Price, is portrayed as strategic and composed, emphasizing tactical decision-making in high-risk situations (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020). In contrast, Russia is not directly

represented as a country as a whole, However, the group's identity is associated with Russian symbols, language, and characters' backgrounds. Makarov serves as the main figure directing operations to the Russian ultranationalist company that generates international tension (Segovia, 2023).

In this narrative structure can be analyzed through representation theory by Stuart Hall (1997) that said meaning is not only reflection but also constructed through symbols and narration. This structural distinction becomes important for understanding how identities and roles are established within the game world.

2.6. Previous Studies

To prove the originality of this research, the researcher lists several previous studies conducted on similar topics. Previous studies are used to determine whether or not this research has been researched. Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3 (2023) is a remake game created after its predecessor, which was made in 2013 with the same title. No research has yet been conducted using this game through the Russian representation as a villain. However, there are several previous studies related to the war games and Enemy representation in western game or media with a stereotyping approach, representation approach, othering, and hegemony as the main related to the theoretical framework.

One of the early studies that specifically discusses the Representation of Russian Ultranationalists in video games is Racism and Image of Adversary: The Representations of Russians as Villains in Video Games by Ispir (2015). This study highlights how Russian characters are consistently portrayed as brutal, irrational, and merciless enemies. Using Stuart Hall's theory of Representation (1997) and Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), this study shows that the image of Russia in Western video

games can produce Cold War-era propaganda, in which Russia is positioned as the natural enemy of the West. The results of this study confirm that Cold War nostalgia and geopolitical rivalry are still the main foundations for the construction of Russia's antagonistic image in modern games.

This argument is reinforced by Cronin (2019) explains that while the formal representation of Russia has shifted, from an ideological superpower during the Cold War to post-Soviet corruption, and ultimately to contemporary "New Cold War" tropes of ultranationalism and cyber-warfare the underlying positioning of Russia as an existential threat has remained remarkably consistent. Analyzed through Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, this evolution illustrates how the signifiers of Russian villainy adapt to contemporary geopolitical contexts while keeping the core meaning, Russia as an unstable, aggressive "Other", fixed.

Building on this, Binns (2024) argues that video games use symbolic visual codes and narrative framing to direct players' moral judgments. In ludic environments, this process does not merely represent a nation as an antagonist; it operationalizes that representation, requiring the player to actively combat the encoded threat to achieve victory, thereby reinforcing dominant Western geopolitical imaginaries.

The broader ideological dimensions of war games are examined by Harrison (2021) in *Military Video Games as Interactive Spectacles of War: Representation of Modern Conflict in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019). Drawing on Huizinga's theory of play and Bogost's procedural rhetoric, Harrison concludes that military games commodify war into spectacle rather than fostering critical reflection. Non-Western identities are frequently reduced to symbolic threats, reinforcing Western military dominance within the global imagination.

Beyond representational analysis, research in the field of popular geopolitics further expands the discussion. A thesis concluded by Daniel Bos (2016) that called *Answering the Call of Duty: The popular geopolitics of military-themed videogames* argues how Call of Duty Modern Warfare series construct and circulate geopolitical imaginaries through gameplay, audience interaction, and production practices. By proposing the framework of “popular geopolitics 3.0” the research emphasizes the relationship between text, audience, and production that military-videogames embedded within geopolitical discourse and everyday life. Bos (2016) argues that geopolitical discourse highlights how visual landscape, narrative scripting, marketing strategies, and player perception shape the meaning of geopolitical conflict within the imaginary world.

Earlier Call of Duty titles such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) and *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (2021) were largely situated within post-Cold War nostalgia and post-9/11 tragedy. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) focused on ultranationalist Russian aggression framed within War on Terror logic, reflecting anxieties shaped by 9/11 and global counterterrorism narratives. Meanwhile, *Black Ops Cold War* (2021) explicitly revisited historical Cold War tensions, drawing heavily on ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union as its narrative foundation.

Despite the previous studies having shown a historical context, there remains limited research examining how representations of Russian antagonists are constructed in war games released during an ongoing geopolitical crisis. Previous studies tend to focus either on Cold War nostalgia, post-9/11 militarism or generalized ideological critique (Ispir, 2015; Cronin, 2019; Bos, 2016). There is still a lack of in-depth textual analysis that specifically investigates how a contemporary title such as *Modern Warfare 3* (2023) constructs Russia as a

legitimate global threat through narrative structure, visual symbolism, and mission design within this new geopolitical environment. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the visual and narrative Representation of Russian Ultranationalists as villains in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2023). Using Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation (1997), Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony (1971), and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar, this study examines how visual and narrative resources construct geopolitical meanings within the game in the context of contemporary post-Cold War tensions.



2.7. Theoretical Framework

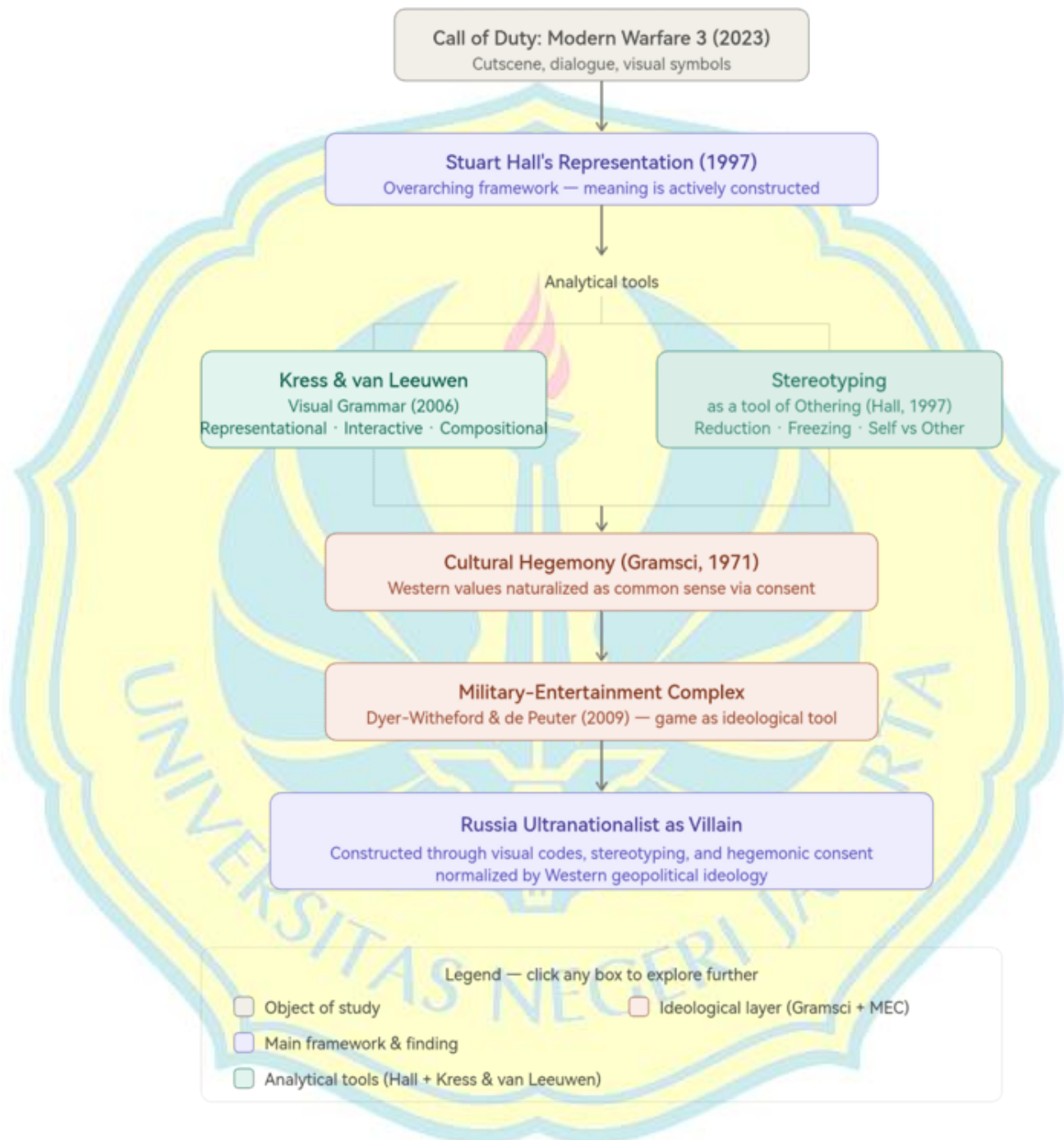


Figure 2.7 1 Theoretical Framework