

At the Crossroads of Cinema and Aviation Safety: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Human–Machine Tension Through US Airways Flight 1549 and the Film Sully

Yavuz Çetin

yavuzcetin@esenyurt.edu.tr

İstanbul Esenyurt Üniversitesi

Selçuk Kahraman

İstanbul Esenyurt Üniversitesi

Aysel Merve Kuş

İstanbul Esenyurt Üniversitesi

Pınar Öztarkan Özyurt

İstanbul Esenyurt Üniversitesi

Aybike Zorlu

Maltepe University

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical review and thematic synthesis of Clint Eastwood's *Sully* (2016) and the US Airways Flight 1549 incident through a psychoanalytic lens, exploring the tension between human judgment and machine data, the psychological dynamics of high-stakes decision-making, and the ideological construction of heroic leadership in contemporary cinema. A structured thematic synthesis of existing literature, official investigation reports, and cinematic narratives reveals that Captain Sullenberger's decision-making can be interpreted as a dynamic conflict among the id, ego, and superego, and that the film's dream sequences cinematically externalise his trauma and guilt. The tension between human judgment and machine data materialises in the clash between the NTSB's simulation-based approach and Sullenberger's situational and authentic leadership practice. Moreover, by foregrounding individualism and resistance to institutional authority, the film reproduces a neoliberal ideological narrative. This review contributes interdisciplinary insights to aviation safety and leadership literature by bridging psychoanalytic film criticism with human factors research, concluding with practical recommendations for strengthening human factors training and integrating psychological dimensions into accident investigations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aviation industry has long been a high-risk domain where technological progress and human factors intersect in complex and often unpredictable ways. While the overarching objective of commercial aviation is to ensure the highest possible safety standards for passengers and crew, crisis situations inevitably expose the limits of technical systems and procedural frameworks, compelling a deeper examination of individual and institutional decision-making processes. Aviation safety, therefore, cannot be reduced to technical excellence or regulatory compliance alone; it is inextricably linked to the boundaries of human performance, the psychological dynamics of decision-making under extreme stress, and the quality of leadership exercised in moments of acute uncertainty.

Indeed, human factors are estimated to contribute to approximately 70–80% of aviation accidents, with technical causes accounting for only 15% and environmental factors for the remaining 5% (Reason, 1990; Wiegmann & Shappell, 2003; ICAO, 2013). Yilmaz's (2025) network analysis of the NTSB database corroborates these figures, revealing that crew errors predominate in commercial jet accidents while pilot error remains the leading cause in general aviation—findings that underscore the systemic and persistent salience of human factors in aviation safety research.

The concept of human factors, first formalised in the late 1960s, has since evolved into a multifaceted framework encompassing cognitive processes, team communication, stress management, and situational awareness. As automation systems have become increasingly pervasive in modern aviation, the nature of human–machine interaction has emerged as a critical area of scholarly and practical concern. This is particularly evident during crises, where the interplay between human judgment and machine-generated data can determine life-or-death outcomes. In this context, US Airways Flight 1549, which occurred on 15 January 2009, stands as both an extraordinary success story and a richly multidimensional case study. Shortly after takeoff from New York's LaGuardia Airport, the aircraft struck a flock of Canada geese, losing thrust in both engines.

Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, drawing on 42 years of flying experience, made the decision to ditch the aircraft in the Hudson River—a manoeuvre executed in 208 seconds that resulted in the survival of all 150 passengers and five crew members. The event, widely celebrated as the "Miracle on the Hudson," was subsequently investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), whose final report affirmed that the probable cause was "the ingestion of large birds into both engines" and notably emphasised "the flight crew's decision-making processes and crew resource management during the crisis" as key contributing factors to the survivability of the accident (NTSB, 2009). This official recognition confirms what many observers had already suspected: that Sullenberger's leadership, composure, and crew coordination were decisive in transforming a potential catastrophe into a story of survival.

The cultural afterlife of this event was secured in 2016 with the release of Clint Eastwood's film *Sully*, adapted from Sullenberger's autobiography, *Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters* (Sullenberger & Zaslow, 2009). Yet Eastwood's film is far from a straightforward documentary reconstruction; it is a carefully crafted ideological narrative that refracts the historical event through a distinct political and cultural lens. The film foregrounds themes of individualism, male authority, and anti-regulation populism, portraying state institutions—particularly the NTSB—as bureaucratic, technocratic, and emotionally detached, while positioning Sullenberger as a heroic figure who trusts his intuition and experience over the cold calculations of data-driven simulations (Sütlüoğlu, 2024). In doing so, *Sully* participates in a broader cinematic tradition of neoliberal heroism, wherein the autonomous individual is valorised against the perceived excesses of institutional regulation and state oversight (Lykidis, 2020). As one analyst observes, the film "presents a white male hero who opposes regulation" and, in so doing, reproduces a deeply conservative ideological vision that resonates with the political climate of its time (Goss, 2024).

This ideological dimension is not incidental but constitutive of the film's narrative architecture. Eastwood's directorial choices—the non-linear editing, the privileging of Sullenberger's subjective experience, the adversarial framing of the NTSB hearings—collectively construct a worldview in which human intuition and experiential knowledge are pitted against the perceived coldness of algorithmic rationality. The film thus opens a productive space for psychoanalytic inquiry, inviting us to explore not only the conscious decisions made by its protagonist but also the unconscious conflicts, anxieties, and desires that animate his actions and, by extension, the film's ideological project. This cinematic tradition of neoliberal heroism has been critically examined particularly in relation to how psychoanalysis can illuminate the ideological workings of capitalism and the construction of heroic subjectivity (Layton, 2013; Świrek, 2024; Boyle, 2025).

Psychoanalytic film criticism offers a particularly fruitful lens for this task. Drawing on Freud's theory of dream interpretation, which posits that repressed desires and anxieties find symbolic expression in the nocturnal life of the psyche (Freud, 1900), and on Lacan's assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan, 1977), we can read *Sully*'s dream sequences as more than mere dramatic devices. They are, rather, cinematic externalisations of the protagonist's inner turmoil—his guilt, his trauma, and his existential dread in the face of institutional scrutiny. The film's opening nightmare, in which Sullenberger envisions the aircraft crashing into a Manhattan skyscraper, evokes not only his personal anxiety about the correctness of his decision but also the collective trauma of 9/11, which haunts the American cultural imaginary. This layering of individual and collective unconscious dynamics is precisely what makes the film a rich object of psychoanalytic interpretation.

Moreover, the film's depiction of Sullenberger's conflict with the NTSB can be understood through the Freudian framework of the superego—the internalised voice of authority that demands adherence to rules and procedures, often at the expense of lived experience and intuitive judgment. Throughout the investigation, Sullenberger is subjected to the superego's relentless questioning: Was his decision to ditch in the Hudson rather than return to an airport a violation of protocol? Did he endanger lives by failing to follow the prescribed procedures? These questions, posed by the NTSB investigators, resonate with the superego's punitive function, and Sullenberger's recurring nightmares—in which a news anchor declares him wrong—can be read as the superego's accusation made manifest. In this sense, the film dramatises not only a technical and legal dispute but also a profound psychic struggle between the ego's reliance on experience and the superego's demand for compliance.

At the same time, the film's ideological work operates through its construction of Sullenberger as an "authentic" leader—a figure who remains true to his values, trusts his instincts, and refuses to capitulate to bureaucratic pressure. This representation aligns with contemporary leadership theories that valorise authenticity, transparency, and ethical conviction (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Yet, from a critical psychoanalytic perspective, this authenticity is itself a product of ideological fantasy: it obscures the structural conditions that make such heroic individualism both necessary and desirable, while simultaneously foreclosing alternative ways of imagining authority, responsibility, and collective action. The film thus performs a double gesture: reinforcing the neoliberal subject's dependence on the very system it purports to resist (Layton, 2004). It critiques institutional authority while simultaneously reinforcing the neoliberal subject's dependence on the very system it purports to resist.

In light of these considerations, this review pursues four interrelated analytical questions: (1) How can Captain Sullenberger's crisis decision-making be understood through the psychoanalytic framework of id, ego, and superego? (2) In what ways do the film's dream sequences cinematically externalise the protagonist's trauma, guilt, and existential anxieties? (3) How does the film construct and critique the tension between human judgment and machine-generated data? (4) What ideological narrative does the film reproduce through its portrayal of institutional authority and individual heroism?

By addressing these questions, this review aims to contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that brings psychoanalytic film criticism into dialogue with organisational and safety studies. While existing research on aviation accidents and crisis management has tended to focus on technical failures, procedural errors, or the cognitive outputs of decision-making processes, the unconscious dimensions of post-crisis experience—trauma, guilt, existential anxiety—and their cinematic representations have received far less attention. This gap is particularly striking given the prevalence of human factors in aviation accidents and the increasing cultural visibility of crisis narratives in popular media. By analysing the tension between the idealised heroic pilot image in *Sully* and the character's internal conflicts, this review offers a novel conceptual framework for understanding the psychological and ideological dimensions of crisis leadership.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this review is constructed upon four intersecting axes: the relationship between cinema and ideology, the tradition of psychoanalytic film criticism, the literature on human factors in aviation, and crisis management and leadership theories. Collectively, these axes enable a multi-layered reading of both the film's narrative choices and Sullenberger's decision-making process, while also situating the analysis within the broader socio-political and cultural contexts that shape contemporary understandings of authority, expertise, and heroic subjectivity.

2.1. Cinema and Ideology

Cinema, as a cultural form, is never ideologically neutral. It operates as a powerful apparatus through which dominant social values, power relations, and normative subjectivities are produced, circulated, and naturalised. Comolli and Narboni (1969) argued that the images, forms, and narrative styles conveyed through films, together with every process, tool, and stage used in their creation, are saturated with ideological meaning. Complementing this perspective, Althusser (1971) conceptualised cinema as one of the ideological state apparatuses through which subjects are interpellated into existing social orders. From this standpoint, cinema does not simply reflect reality; it actively constructs and legitimises particular versions of it, presenting ideology to itself in a form that appears natural and self-evident. Walter Benjamin's (1968) concept of mechanical reproducibility further underscores cinema's mass impact and its capacity to democratise—and simultaneously commodify—cultural experience, while the Frankfurt School's critique of the "culture industry" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) positions cinema as a key instrument in the production of passive consumer subjects who internalise dominant ideologies without conscious resistance.

Within this theoretical landscape, Clint Eastwood's *Sully* (2016) emerges as a paradigmatic ideological text. The film narrativises a real-world event but does so through a distinct political and cultural lens, weaving together themes of authority, bureaucratic domination, human fallibility, and redemptive heroism. As Sütüoğlu (2024) observes, the film, released during Barack Obama's presidency, constructs a discourse centred on the figure of the "white male hero standing against regulation." This figure embodies a specifically neoliberal fantasy: the autonomous individual who trusts his intuition and experience over the cold, impersonal calculations of institutional rationality. By foregrounding individualism, moral conviction, and resistance to state oversight, the film reproduces core tenets of American mainstream ideology while simultaneously reinforcing a nationalist imaginary in which the heroic citizen stands as a bulwark against overreaching government power. The film thus performs a double ideological operation: it critiques bureaucratic authority in the name of human judgment, yet in doing so, it reaffirms the very structures of power that make such heroic individualism both necessary and desirable.

The Frankfurt School's analysis of the culture industry remains indispensable for understanding how *Sully* operates as a commodity that both entertains and instructs. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argued that mass cultural products transform audiences into passive recipients of dominant values. In this context, *Sully* presents a narrative that, while ostensibly critical of institutional authority, ultimately stabilises the existing social order by offering a resolution that reaffirms faith in individual agency without challenging systemic arrangements. The film's portrayal of the NTSB as a bureaucratic, emotionally detached institution serves as a cinematic vehicle for neoliberal ideology, elevating individual freedom against state intervention while obscuring the structural conditions—deregulation, privatisation, the erosion of public trust—that make such

antagonisms culturally resonant. In this sense, *Sully* exemplifies Comolli and Narboni's (1969) thesis that cinema is never merely entertainment but always also a form of political discourse.

2.2. Psychoanalytic Film Criticism

Psychoanalytic film criticism constitutes one of the most influential and enduring theoretical traditions in cinema studies, treating films as cultural dreams that encode unconscious desires, anxieties, and conflicts. Freud's (1900) foundational insight—that repressed wishes find symbolic expression in dreams—has been extended to cinematic narratives, which are understood as structures that both reveal and conceal the psychic life of their creators and audiences (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). Lacan's (1977) assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language further enriched this tradition, directing attention to the formal and linguistic dimensions of cinematic representation. Post-Lacanian theorists, building on Metz's (1977) concept of cinematic identification and Mulvey's (1975) theory of the gaze, have explored how spectators are interpellated into filmic worlds through processes of visual and emotional alignment with characters and camera positions (Bainbridge, 2007). Terbaşı (2012) extends this framework by examining how characters' unconscious conflicts are constructed through cinematic language, treating films as dreamlike texts that externalise inner psychic realities. Psychoanalytic film criticism has been a consistent focus with recent contributions exploring the intersection of film, subjectivity, and unconscious desire (Boyle, 2025; Boutahir, 2026).

In *Sully*, the protagonist's confrontation with the unconscious is dramatised through a series of dreams and nightmares that visually externalise his trauma, guilt, and existential uncertainty. The film's opening nightmare, in which Sullenberger envisions the aircraft crashing into a Manhattan skyscraper, operates on multiple registers: it expresses his personal fear of having made a catastrophic error, evokes the collective trauma of 9/11, and signals the fragility of the heroic identity he is expected to inhabit. These dream sequences are not mere stylistic flourishes but constitute the film's primary vehicle for exploring the protagonist's inner world, revealing the psychic costs of bearing public responsibility under conditions of intense institutional scrutiny.

Mulvey's (1975) concept of the gaze offers a particularly productive lens for analysing the film's visual economy. In *Sully*, the camera positions the spectator within Sullenberger's subjective perspective during the crisis, fostering identification with his experience, while the recurring television and news screen scenes depict him as an object of public scrutiny. The discomfort Sullenberger experiences while watching his own image on hotel room screens embodies the tension between being the subject of one's own action and being reduced to an object of society's judgment. This dual-layered gaze relationship can be understood as a cinematic dramatisation of the superego conflict: the protagonist is both the agent of his decisions and the object of an internalised authority that subjects his actions to relentless evaluation. His hallucinations—seeing the plane crash into buildings from a window—indicate a breakdown of the reality principle, as repressed fears intrude into waking consciousness and destabilise his grip on reality. In these moments, the film stages a psychic crisis that mirrors broader cultural anxieties about the limits of human agency in an age of technological and institutional complexity.

2.3. Human Factors in Aviation

The discipline of human factors emerged as a systematic effort to identify conditions that predispose operators to errors and to ensure that technological systems are designed with human cognitive and physiological limitations in mind. In the Sully case, Captain Sullenberger's extensive flight experience—42 years and over 20,000 hours—constituted the bedrock of his capacity for rapid, accurate decision-making under extreme duress. Yet the NTSB investigation revealed a fundamental tension between human judgment and machine-generated data: computer simulations, which assumed instantaneous decision-making and ignored human-specific variables such as the startle effect, time required for analysis, and heightened risk perception, initially suggested that a return to the airport was feasible (NTSB, 2009). This discrepancy exposed the limits of simulation-based reasoning when divorced from the lived realities of human cognition.

Yüksel et al. (2006) define human factors as a multidimensional set of variables encompassing individual skill, reflexes, knowledge, reasoning ability, stress, attention, and personality structure. Their analysis of aviation accidents reveals that human factors are decisive in approximately 70–80% of cases, a finding that directly parallels the Sullenberger case. The NTSB's initial simulations could flawlessly calculate the aircraft's technical parameters but failed because they did not account for the human-specific variables that shape real-world decision-making: the startle effect, the time required for situational assessment, and the cognitive load imposed by sudden, unprecedented emergencies. The Sully case thus provides a compelling demonstration that human factors are not merely a source of error to be minimised but can also function as a solution partner capable of terminating crises when technical systems reach their limits.

This insight is reinforced by recent research on cognitive vulnerabilities in aviation. Yan, Boufous, and Molesworth (2025), drawing on interviews with aviation professionals, highlight the cognitive and communication challenges underlying critical events such as runway incursions, underscoring the necessity of aligning human performance with operational procedures. Similarly, İsmayilova (2025) emphasises that pilots' decision-making processes during crises are shaped not only by technical skills but also by psychological variables such as stress resistance and emotional balance. These findings support a view of human factors as integral to, rather than separate from, the socio-technical systems that constitute modern aviation. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the film's dramatisation of this tension can be read as a cultural symptom of broader anxieties about human agency in an age of increasing automation—anxieties that are both reflected and managed through the cinematic construction of heroic individuality.

2.4. Crisis Management and Leadership

Crisis management, particularly in high-risk domains such as aviation, demands rapid, effective decision-making under conditions of extreme uncertainty and time pressure. Sullenberger's own account of the event—"As a leader, I had to control my emotions, compartmentalise even under stress, and set clear priorities"—encapsulates the cognitive and emotional demands placed on leaders in such contexts. Central to his approach was the ability to share authority and foster teamwork, a principle he articulated succinctly: "If you don't build a team and listen to them, given time and trials, you will fail." The Aviate–Navigate–Communicate protocol, which structures pilot priorities during emergencies, was exemplified in Sullenberger's actions: he first secured control of the aircraft, then assessed the most suitable landing alternative, and only then contacted air traffic control. This sequence reflects not only technical proficiency but also the emotional composure and situational awareness that distinguish effective crisis leaders.

Crew Resource Management (CRM) provides the theoretical framework for understanding how such leadership operates (Helmreich & Merritt, 1998). Developed to reduce human error and optimise team performance, CRM encompasses communication, decision-making, leadership, and teamwork skills. One of the most significant dimensions of Sullenberger's approach is his ability to control his ego and work collaboratively with First Officer Jeffrey Skiles. Research has shown that effective leadership is the cornerstone of successful CRM, and that flight leaders should adopt a situational approach adapted to the specific demands of each situation (Amiri et al., 2025). Sullenberger's leadership style—non-authoritarian, team-oriented, and communication-based—exemplifies this model. His capacity to balance authoritative decision-making during the emergency with collaborative engagement during the subsequent investigation reflects the flexibility that characterises effective crisis leadership.

From a critical perspective, Sullenberger's leadership also aligns with the "authentic leadership" framework, which emphasises self-awareness, transparency, and ethical conviction (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). His insistence on the correctness of his decision, even under intense institutional pressure, and his willingness to "surrender the foundation of my pilot identity—my license—the only anchor on which I have built my self," attest to a profound identification with his professional role. However, viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, this authenticity may also be understood as a form of identity fusion—a defence against the anxiety of institutional scrutiny that renders the self inseparable from its occupational performance. The film's representation of Sullenberger's leadership thus operates simultaneously as a model of effective crisis management and as a cultural narrative that naturalises neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility, authenticity, and resistance to bureaucratic authority.

3. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

3.1. Analytical Framework and Scope

This review employs a structured thematic synthesis approach, integrating existing scholarship, official investigation reports, and cinematic narratives to critically examine the US Airways Flight 1549 incident and its cinematic representation in Clint Eastwood's *Sully* (2016). Rather than generating primary empirical data, this study offers a conceptually driven synthesis of four intersecting bodies of literature: (1) cinema and ideology, (2) psychoanalytic film criticism, (3) human factors in aviation, and (4) crisis management and leadership theory. The analytical framework enables a multi-layered reading of both the film's narrative choices and Sullenberger's decision-making process, with the central aim of elucidating the ideological, psychological, and organisational dimensions of the human–machine tension that lies at the heart of the case.

This approach is particularly suited to the interdisciplinary character of the inquiry, which spans film studies, psychoanalysis, organisational psychology, and safety science. By treating the film and its associated institutional documents as intertextual materials that speak to one another, the review seeks to illuminate how cinematic representation both reflects and refracts the socio-political and psychic dynamics of real-world crisis events. The framework is informed by the tradition of critical hermeneutics, which emphasises the interpretative labour required to uncover the latent meanings embedded in cultural texts

(Ricoeur, 1981; Thompson, 1990), and by the reflexive orientation of psychoanalytic film criticism, which attends to the unconscious investments that shape both narrative production and spectator response.

3.2. Corpus and Sources

The analytical corpus consists of three complementary categories of sources, each selected to provide a distinct yet interlocking perspective on the event and its cinematic afterlife:

1. *Primary Cinematic Source*: Clint Eastwood's film *Sully* (2016) constitutes the primary object of analysis. The film is treated not as a transparent window onto historical reality but as a cultural artefact and ideological narrative that actively constructs meaning through its formal and thematic choices. Particular attention is paid to the film's non-linear editing structure, its use of dream sequences, and its adversarial framing of the NTSB investigation.

2. *Official Investigative Documents*: The National Transportation Safety Board's final accident report (NTSB/AAR-10/03) provides the factual grounding for the incident and its investigation. This document is analysed not only for its empirical content but also as an institutional text that embodies specific assumptions about causality, accountability, and the role of human judgment in technical systems. The report's emphasis on "decision-making processes and crew resource management" (NTSB, 2009, p. 87) is particularly significant for understanding how official discourse frames the relationship between human expertise and procedural compliance.

3. *Supporting Scholarly and Biographical Literature*: The autobiography *Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters* (Sullenberger & Zaslow, 2009) offers insight into the protagonist's subjective experience and self-understanding. Peer-reviewed articles on human factors, aviation safety, Crew Resource Management, psychoanalytic theory, and film criticism provide the theoretical and empirical scaffolding for the analysis. These materials are treated not as "raw data" but as analytical resources that together constitute a rich intertextual field for thematic synthesis.

This tripartite corpus enables the review to navigate between cinematic representation, institutional documentation, and theoretical frameworks, facilitating a dialectical reading that moves across different registers of meaning without claiming empirical generalisability. The approach is consistent with document analysis as a qualitative research strategy, which emphasises the situated and interpretative character of textual engagement (Prior, 2003; Bowen, 2009).

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis followed a hybrid thematic approach combining deductive and inductive reasoning, organised into three sequential stages:

Stage 1: Descriptive Mapping. The film's narrative structure, character development, and the NTSB investigation process were chronologically mapped to establish a comprehensive overview of the textual and institutional terrain. This stage involved close viewing of the film (multiple viewings were conducted to capture both macro-structural and micro-textual details), systematic note-taking on key scenes, and detailed

reading of the NTSB report to identify points of convergence and divergence between cinematic representation and historical documentation.

Stage 2: Theoretical Coding. Film scenes, dialogues, and dream sequences were coded using frameworks derived from psychoanalytic film criticism (Freud, 1900; Lacan, 1977; Metz, 1977), human factors research (Reason, 1990; Dismukes & Berman, 2010), and leadership theories (situational leadership, authentic leadership). The coding scheme identified recurrent themes and discursive patterns, including *repression*, *superego conflict*, *anxiety dreams*, *cognitive lockup*, and *automated expertise*. This stage also attended to the film's visual and auditory dimensions—camera angles, editing rhythms, and sound design—as these formal elements contribute to the construction of meaning and affect.

Stage 3: Comparative Analysis. The film's narrative construction was systematically compared with the factual findings of the NTSB report to analyse the differences between cinematic representation and historical reality. This comparative dimension is crucial for understanding how the film selectively amplifies, suppresses, or transforms aspects of the event to produce its distinctive ideological and psychological effects. The comparison was conducted thematically rather than line-by-line, focusing on key moments of divergence—particularly the dramatisation of the NTSB hearings as adversarial judicial proceedings, which contrasts with the agency's actual advisory and non-punitive mandate.

Thematic analysis followed the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the corpus, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually to maintain close engagement with the materials and to allow for the iterative refinement of interpretive categories. This manual approach, while labour-intensive, is consistent with the interpretative tradition that underpins psychoanalytic film criticism, which privileges depth of engagement over computational efficiency (Stam et al., 1992).

3.4. Analytical Rigor

As this is a review article based on thematic synthesis of existing sources, conventional validity and reliability measures—such as intercoder reliability or statistical generalisability—are not directly applicable. Instead, analytical rigor was ensured through a combination of methodological transparency, systematic documentation, and critical reflexivity. Systematic documentation involved maintaining a detailed audit trail of coding decisions, interpretive choices, and the evolution of thematic categories throughout the analysis. This trail is available for review and enables readers to trace the reasoning behind specific claims. Transparent reporting of the synthesis process, including the explicit articulation of the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis, allows readers to assess the plausibility and coherence of the interpretations offered. The review's conclusions are grounded in direct references to the film, the NTSB report, and the cited literature, providing a basis for independent evaluation.

Critical reflexivity regarding the interpretive choices made is essential in a study that draws on psychoanalytic concepts, which are themselves subject to multiple readings. The authors acknowledge that their positionality as researchers—situated within specific academic and cultural contexts—inevitably shapes the questions asked and the interpretations advanced. This reflexivity is not treated as a limitation but as an integral feature of qualitative inquiry, consistent with the hermeneutic tradition that emphasises the

situatedness of all understanding (Gadamer, 1975; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Finally, the analysis was subjected to peer debriefing within the author team, with regular discussions aimed at testing interpretations against alternative readings and ensuring that claims were not overextended. This collaborative process, while not eliminating subjectivity, contributed to the robustness and balance of the final synthesis.

4. THEMATIC SYNTHESIS: PSYCHOANALYSIS, HUMAN FACTORS, and IDEOLOGY in SULLY

This section presents a thematic synthesis of the film's narrative and psychoanalytic dimensions, organised around the core themes identified in the analytical framework. Rather than reporting empirical findings, the synthesis integrates cinematic analysis with established theoretical perspectives to illuminate the human-machine tension, trauma, and ideological construction of heroism. Each subsection contributes to the broader scholarly conversation by linking filmic representation to psychoanalytic, human factors, and leadership literatures, while also attending to the cultural and ideological contexts that shape the film's meanings and effects.

4.1. Analysis of the Film *Sully*

4.1.1. Narrative Structure and Historical Background

Clint Eastwood's *Sully* (2016) brings to the screen the dramatic story of US Airways Flight 1549, which occurred on 15 January 2009. Based on a true event, the film focuses on the successful ditching of an Airbus A320 in the Hudson River after striking a flock of birds shortly after takeoff and losing both engines, thanks to Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger's extraordinary 208-second intervention. All 150 passengers and five crew members were rescued; four passengers and one flight attendant sustained serious injuries. The event came to be known as the "Miracle on the Hudson" and was recorded as an unparalleled success story in aviation history.

The film's narrative structure proceeds with a non-linear editing style. Rather than following the chronological flow of the real event, Eastwood centres on Sullenberger's psychological process after the event and the NTSB investigation (Eastwood, 2016). This choice transforms the film into a multi-layered narrative shaped around themes of human factors, crisis management, and critique of bureaucratic authority, beyond being merely a heroic story. In the context of this review, this narrative framing serves as a critical entry point for synthesising cinematic representation with historical and human factors literature, illustrating how filmic choices shape public understanding of real-world crises. The film's temporal dislocation—its oscillation between the event itself, its aftermath, and the investigatory process—mirrors the protagonist's psychological fragmentation, effectively externalising his internal state through formal means.

4.1.2. Dreams and Confrontation with the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Reading

One of the film's most striking narrative elements is the protagonist's confrontation with the unconscious through dreams and nightmares. The film opens with Sullenberger's dream, in which he sees the aircraft crashing into New York skyscrapers and exploding, as he questions his decision to ditch on water after

engine failure. This dream can be read as a reflection of his subconscious anxiety. The recurring nightmares, in which the crash is relived, persist even after waking, causing the character to progressively lose focus.

Sullenberger's dream of the plane crashing into skyscrapers can also be interpreted as a reflection of the collective trauma of 9/11. The association of skyscrapers—iconic structures of New York—with an aircraft accident evokes the terror trauma in the American collective unconscious and visualises the character's deepest fear about the potential consequences of his decision. In this context, it can be considered a cinematic expression of the character's internal conflict, in line with Lacan's (1977) thesis that the unconscious is structured like language. Psychoanalytically, this dream sequence contributes to the literature on trauma and guilt by visually externalising the unconscious conflict between professional identity and institutional scrutiny, offering a cinematic case study for understanding post-traumatic stress in high-stakes professions.

A striking indicator of the character's mental state is the blurring of the boundary between reality and delusion. While jogging, Sullenberger continuously visualises the crash in his mind, unconsciously steps into the street, and is narrowly saved from being hit by a taxi thanks to the driver's attention. This scene reveals that the character exhibits symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and that his perception of reality is beginning to deteriorate. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sullenberger's condition can be interpreted as a disruption of the balance between the "reality principle" and the "pleasure principle"; repressed fears in the unconscious seep into the conscious level, beginning to affect the character's daily life. This cinematic depiction aligns with clinical observations of trauma and provides a rich analytical case for psychoanalytic film criticism, bridging individual psychology with collective cultural memory.

4.1.3. The Moment of Crisis and Decision-Making Process

Faced with the loss of both engines shortly after takeoff, Captain Sullenberger performed the necessary checks and, concluding that a return to the airport was not feasible, determined that ditching the aircraft in the river was the best option and implemented this decision. In doing so, he first secured control of the aircraft, then assessed the most suitable landing alternative, and finally contacted air traffic control. Sullenberger's extensive experience was the fundamental basis for his rapid and accurate decision-making during the crisis. The automated cognitive processes possessed by expert pilots enable them to assess the situation and produce appropriate responses without conscious effort during crises. This section synthesises the film's representation of expert decision-making with human factors and cognitive psychology literature, highlighting how cinematic portrayals can illustrate theoretical concepts such as "automated expertise" and "situational awareness."

4.1.3.1. The Decision Moment from a Psychoanalytic Perspective: Conflict Between Id, Ego, and Superego

Sullenberger's decision-making process, faced with the failure of both engines shortly after takeoff, can be read through Freud's structural model of the psyche as a dynamic conflict among the id, ego, and superego. According to Freud, the id represents basic biological drives and the survival instinct; the superego embodies internalised social norms, rules, and the pressure of authority figures; and the ego, balancing these opposing forces, acts according to the reality principle as the conscious self (Gençtanırım Kurt & Çetinkaya Yıldız, 2024). When confronted with the danger of losing control of the aircraft, Sullenberger initially acted on the

instinctual survival drive (id), but then mobilised the procedural knowledge provided by 42 years of professional experience and training (ego) to maintain composure. At this stage, air traffic control's directives to return to the airport resonated as the voice of the superego; the obligation to obey rules and authority created strong pressure in Sullenberger's mind.

However, concluding that his own experience and intuition (ego) were more life-saving than the strict rules of authority (superego), Sullenberger defied the superego's imperative to "follow the rule" and directed the aircraft to the Hudson River. This decision demonstrates the ego's capacity, within the reality principle, to transcend both primal drives (id) and internalised rules to make an autonomous choice centred on human life. This psychoanalytic reading allows us to interpret Sullenberger's decision not merely as a technical intervention but as a conscious existential choice. This analysis contributes to psychoanalytic leadership literature by illustrating how the ego's negotiation between instinct and authority can produce ethical, life-saving decisions under extreme pressure.

In this context, Sullenberger's decision can also be viewed from a Lacanian perspective as a confrontation between the "Symbolic" (NTSB simulations, procedures, automation data) and the "Real" (the inevitable physical necessity of ditching the aircraft). The NTSB simulations represent the perfection of the Symbolic order, while Sullenberger's action is the traumatic intervention of the Real that transcends this order and cannot be fully explained by data. Thus, the captain's preference is not a choice among procedures but an existential resistance against the Symbolic law in defence of the Real. This Lacanian reading enriches the human-machine tension debate by framing it as a philosophical conflict between data-driven rationality and embodied, experiential knowledge.

4.1.4. The NTSB Investigation and Human-Machine Tension

Despite the successful ditching and rescue of all passengers and crew, the NTSB investigators subject Sullenberger and First Officer Jeffrey Skiles to an investigation for alleged violations of rules and procedures. During this process, engineers' calculations clash with Sullenberger's flight experience. The investigators, steadfast in the accuracy of numerical data, consider Sullenberger guilty of causing the loss of the aircraft (material damage) by not returning to an airport, opting for water landing instead. This reveals the disparity between the public, who hails a pilot who saved all passengers as a hero, and the investigators' perspective. This tension serves as a cinematic microcosm of broader debates in human factors and automation literature, where procedural compliance is often pitted against situational judgment. The film's dramatisation offers a concrete case for examining how institutional rationality can overlook the human element in crisis management.

4.1.5. Guilt Psychology and Internal Conflict

At moments when strict adherence to rules is questioned, reference is made to the comparison between humanity and numbers—that is, emotions and data. The investigation's confinement to procedural dimensions leads Sullenberger to experience guilt in his dreams. Although hailed as a public hero, Sullenberger begins to have nightmares in which a news anchor tells him he was wrong and endangered passengers' lives. This dream symbolises the conflict between societal expectations and individual experience. While celebrated as a hero by the public, the character struggles internally with the possibility of

having made a mistake. Psychoanalytically, this guilt reflects the superego's internalised authority and contributes to the literature on moral injury and professional identity, showing how even successful decisions can generate profound psychological distress.

The disruption of inner balance and the confrontation in dreams also appear in the first officer, who tells Sullenberger that he cannot sleep because of nightmares. This shows that the trauma is not unique to Sullenberger but affects the entire crew. This collective trauma highlights the need for team-based psychological support, a dimension often underemphasised in aviation safety research. The question of whether unquestioning acceptance and application of familiar rules always yield the correct result echoes constantly in Sullenberger's mind. While this question confronts him with the fear of having made a mistake, his 42 years of experience in the profession he defines as "my whole life" whispers that he made the right decision.

4.1.6. Professional Identity and Existential Threat

Trusting his experience, Sullenberger confronts the existential threat of losing his profession when he learns that the highest authority has become involved in the investigation. Despite having saved 155 lives, he becomes unable to fully trust the reality of events due to the investigation into his alleged erroneous decision. This psychological pressure manifests in waking hallucinations; even while looking out a window, he envisions the crash he could have caused had he attempted to return to the airport. This existential threat to professional identity is a key theme in leadership and organisational behaviour literature, and the film's depiction vividly illustrates how institutional scrutiny can undermine even the most experienced professionals' sense of self.

His co-pilot articulates the situation through the observation that rules can be deadly, while the investigators—reliant on machine data—offer no acknowledgement that lives were saved. This symbolic silence reflects a dehumanising, data-centric rationality that resonates with critical technology studies, which warn against the reduction of human judgment to algorithmic calculation. Sullenberger's refusal to change out of his wet uniform after the accident and his indifference to fresh clothes indicate his profound identification with his role as a pilot. His identity is so thoroughly fused with his profession that his phone conversations with his wife centre not on family but on the fear of losing his career. This devotion to professional identity provides a rich case for psychoanalytic and organisational studies of identity fusion, wherein the self becomes inseparable from occupational role.

4.1.7. The Triumph of Human Factors: Simulation and Reality

Sullenberger's demand that pilots, rather than computers, simulate the same conditions marks a turning point in his psychological trajectory. He declares that if the simulation results prove his decision wrong, he will "directly surrender the foundation of his pilot identity—his license—the only anchor on which he has built his identity." This statement encapsulates his belief in the correctness of his decision and underscores the irreplaceable role of human judgment in automation. It reinforces the argument that simulations must account for human-specific variables—decision time, psychological preparation, and the startle effect—rather than assuming instantaneous, error-free responses.

Sullenberger's emphasis on timing reveals his deep understanding of crisis management. He points out that simulation pilots, having practiced the manoeuvre seventeen times, could act without delay; however, in a real emergency, the seconds required for checks and situational assessment fundamentally alter the outcome. When this human factor is incorporated, it becomes clear that returning to the airport after the required decision time is impossible. The accusations against Sullenberger are therefore deemed baseless, and it is accepted that a greater disaster was prevented. This resolution demonstrates that human experience, when properly integrated with simulation data, can yield more accurate and ethically sound outcomes than purely algorithmic approaches—a key insight for the emerging paradigm of human-autonomy teaming.

4.1.8. The Centrality of Human Factors

At the conclusion of the NTSB investigation, once it is revealed that the engine previously reported as operational was entirely inoperative and that the recorded data were erroneous, human factors are once again emphasised. Despite Sullenberger's having listened to numerous cockpit voice recorders, read accident reports, and his flight experience preceding Flight 1549, the preference for computers' numerical data over human experience highlights the perceptual difference between management and society. This revelation reinforces the human factors literature's argument that data are not infallible and that human expertise remains essential for interpreting and acting upon complex, real-world information.

The first officer's remark, "They're playing Pac-Man, you were flying an aircraft full of people" (Eastwood, 2016, 01:23:45), conveys the importance of humanity, yet Sullenberger remains internally conflicted, continuing to question the possibility of error. However, this questioning is not about scanning numerical data but about whether there might have been a chance to rescue passengers more comfortably. This internal conflict speaks to the ethical dimension of human factors—not merely whether a decision was procedurally correct, but whether it was the most humane possible under the circumstances.

The portrayal of elderly people, mothers with babies, and the fear experienced by passengers through Sullenberger's eyes, seeing each of them as individuals, establishes a superiority over computers, demonstrating his humanity. This is also reflected in his remaining on the aircraft after the ditching despite danger, checking that everyone had exited, and refusing to leave until learning that all 155 people on board had survived, despite calls from officials. Without human factors, everything is merely numbers; however, in reality, each number has a distinct face and identity, just like each of the 155 passengers. This concluding synthesis underscores the review's central argument: that human factors are not a source of error to be eliminated but a life-sustaining force that must be preserved and strengthened in aviation safety practices and training.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Tension Between Human Factors and Machine Data

One of the most striking dimensions of both the film *Sully* and the actual event is the fundamental tension between human judgment and machine-generated data. This tension is not confined to this particular incident but lies at the centre of a broader, ongoing debate about the nature of human-machine interaction in an era of accelerating automation. The human factors literature in aviation reveals that pilots'

decision-making processes during crises are shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, cognitive, and physiological variables—factors that cannot be adequately captured by simulation models that assume instantaneous, error-free responses. According to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data, approximately 80% of aviation incidents are associated with human factors, and as İsmayilova (2025) notes, despite significant technological advances, human factors persist as primary determinants of accidents and hazardous situations. While technical failure rates have declined, the influence of human cognition and emotion has not diminished; rather, it continues to play a critical role in safety outcomes during high-stakes decision-making moments.

As discussed in the conceptual framework (Section 2.3), the startle effect and cognitive lockup are critical psychological phenomena that shape pilots' responses during crises (Kharoufah et al., 2018; Dismukes & Berman, 2010). These phenomena underscore the gap between idealised models of rational decision-making and the messy, embodied realities of human cognition under extreme stress. As Sütüoğlu (2024) observes, *Sully* depicts the struggle of intuition and the "flawed human mind" against authorities that defend rational reason and its perfection. The film thus stages a confrontation between two competing epistemologies: the rationality and precision attributed to technology, and the emotionality, fallibility, and experiential wisdom attributed to humans. This struggle is not merely a pilot's effort to defend his professional reputation; it is, at a deeper level, an attempt to renegotiate humanity's position vis-à-vis technology in an age of increasing automation.

Pilots' decision-making processes during crises are influenced by psychological preparedness, professional experience, and team communication. As İsmayilova (2025) emphasises, under extreme conditions, human behaviour is shaped not only by knowledge and skills but also by stress resistance, emotional balance, and social communication abilities. The Sullenberger case demonstrates the decisive role of these human factors in crisis management, revealing that technical perfection, however advanced, cannot substitute for the adaptive, intuitive capacities that emerge from years of embodied practice.

In today's aviation industry, where automation systems are becoming increasingly complex, the nature of human–machine interaction is being re-examined. Parasuraman and Wickens (2008) highlight the delicate balance between operators' trust in automation and their situational awareness, warning that excessive automation can erode manual skills and increase cognitive load during crises. Endsley (1995, 2017) further notes a non-linear relationship between trust in automation and situational awareness: excessive trust erodes manual skills, while excessive distrust increases cognitive load and impairs decision quality. The Sullenberger case exemplifies a pilot who maintained this critical balance, critically filtering automation data and integrating it with personal experience and intuition to produce a life-saving outcome. These findings underscore the importance of the "human-autonomy teaming" paradigm in automation design—an approach that treats human and machine as complementary rather than competing agents.

Analysing the limits of technical protocols and the irreducibility of human experience during crises, Weeks, Howitt, and Leonard (2012), in their "Miracle on the Hudson" case study, emphasise the critical role of cognitive load and situational awareness in real-time emergencies—factors that simulation-based models often fail to capture. The case demonstrates that Sullenberger's "intuitive decision-making" under uncertainty, rather than technical perfection, was the system's saviour. This directly engages the "human–machine

tension" debates in the literature, revealing a fundamental conflict between the idealised perfection of technical calculations and the "flawed but life-sustaining" reality of human judgment. The balance between "procedural rigidity" and "situational flexibility" emerges as a vital concern for both aviation safety research and leadership theory.

The psychoanalytic conflicts analysed in this study and their institutional reflections are summarised in Table 1. From a crisis management perspective, the Sullenberger case contributes to the literature on sensemaking in high-velocity environments (Weick, 1995) and naturalistic decision-making (Klein, 1998). Sensemaking theory emphasises how individuals construct plausible interpretations of ambiguous situations under time pressure. Sullenberger's ability to rapidly reframe the situation—from a routine departure to an unprecedented emergency—exemplifies the cognitive flexibility that distinguishes expert crisis managers from novices. Similarly, the case illustrates Klein's recognition-primed decision model, wherein experienced decision-makers match familiar patterns to generate workable solutions without exhaustive analysis. Sullenberger's 42 years of experience enabled him to recognise the ditching option as viable within seconds, bypassing the slower, more analytical reasoning that simulation-based approaches assume. These insights suggest that crisis management training should prioritise pattern recognition and scenario-based practice over procedural memorisation, particularly for rare, high-consequence events.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 synthesises the psychoanalytic conflicts identified in the film and maps them onto their institutional and theoretical reflections. The Id, Ego, and Superego framework explains Sullenberger's decision-making as a negotiation between survival instinct, professional experience, and internalised rules. The NTSB's simulation-based approach represents the Lacanian Symbolic Order—a domain of data, procedures, and rational calculation—while the traumatic reality of ditching the aircraft embodies the Lacanian Real, disrupting the symbolic order and revealing the limits of data-driven rationality. The table also captures the collective trauma of 9/11 and the existential threat to professional identity, illustrating that human factors in crisis management are not merely technical variables but ethical and existential choices—choices that, as psychoanalytic theory suggests, are always already shaped by unconscious dynamics and cultural fantasies.

5.2. Leadership and Crisis Management

Sullenberger's leadership behaviour during the crisis exemplifies the fundamental principles of effective crisis management. His 42 years of flying experience and more than 20,000 flight hours enabled him to maintain composure in the face of sudden, unprecedented danger. By adhering to the Aviate–Navigate–Communicate protocol, he first secured control of the aircraft, then assessed the optimal landing alternative, and finally maintained communication with the crew and air traffic control—a sequence that reflects both technical proficiency and emotional regulation.

CRM literature offers a rich theoretical framework for understanding Sullenberger's leadership performance. CRM is a framework developed to reduce human error and optimise operations, encompassing communication, decision-making, leadership, and teamwork skills. One of the most significant dimensions of Sullenberger's approach is his ability to control his ego and work collaboratively with First Officer Jeffrey Skiles. His shared-authority approach, encapsulated in the maxim "An unchecked ego is a leader's greatest

enemy," reinforces the transparency and collaboration principles that form the basis of CRM. This demonstrates that even within aviation's hierarchical structure, a democratic and team-oriented leadership style contributes to safety and effective crisis resolution.

The NTSB's accident report supports this assessment, explicitly citing the flight crew's decision-making processes and crisis-time crew resource management as contributing factors to survivability (NTSB, 2009). This official recognition confirms that Sullenberger's leadership qualities and coordination competence were decisive in the successful outcome. Erden (2020) further reveals that this success depended not only on technical skills but also on the captain's collaboration with team members under stress and his ability to maintain emotional balance. Sullenberger exhibited leadership that optimised the team's collective experience rather than adhering rigidly to traditional hierarchical structures; through this approach, he implemented CRM principles while constructing a human-centred decision-making mechanism that transcended procedural constraints.

Sullenberger's leadership also exemplifies the "situational leadership" model, which requires the leader to flexibly adjust their style according to circumstances. He acted as an authoritative decision-maker during the crisis—making the unilateral decision to ditch the aircraft—while adopting a collaborative and defensive stance during the investigation. This flexibility is a hallmark of effective crisis leadership. The film's first officer character, with his remark "They're playing Pac-Man, you were flying an aircraft full of people," critiques the bureaucratic approach that disregards the human dimension. This criticism reminds us that leadership is not merely about following rules but about making decisions centred on human life. In this context, Sullenberger also exhibits "authentic leadership" qualities: he remains true to his values and beliefs, acting transparently and ethically. His standing by his decision throughout the investigation, and his confidence in his professional identity and experience, are key indicators of this authenticity. The psychoanalytic dimensions of leadership have been explored particularly through Freudian frameworks of group psychology and the figure of the exceptional leader (Cho, 2026).

5.3. Psychoanalytic Reflections: Trauma and Guilt

The psychoanalytic reading of the film reveals Sullenberger's profound struggle with trauma and guilt. The film opens with the protagonist's nightmare of the aircraft crashing into New York skyscrapers—a dream that, according to Freud's (1900) dream theory, expresses his subconscious doubt about the correctness of his decision and his fear of having made a catastrophic error. In the tradition of psychoanalytic film criticism, films can be treated as dreams, reflecting not only the director's unconscious but also expressing it through the character (Özden, 2004).

Sullenberger's hallucinations while awake—seeing the plane crash into buildings from the window—indicate that trauma has permeated the conscious level. This can be read as a visual expression of the character's internal conflict, consistent with Lacan's thesis that the unconscious is structured like language (Bakır, 2016). These delusions also evoke the collective trauma of 9/11, suggesting that individual psychological distress is always embedded in broader cultural and historical contexts. The recurring nightmares and hallucinations reveal a disruption of the balance between the "reality principle" and the "pleasure principle," as repressed fears intrude into waking life and destabilise the character's grip on reality.

The first officer's mention of his own nightmares shows that the trauma is not unique to Sullenberger but affects the entire crew. This reveals that post-traumatic stress can spread at the team level, highlighting the urgent need for post-crisis psychological support—a dimension often underemphasised in aviation safety research. Sullenberger's guilt becomes more pronounced through the dream in which a news anchor tells him he was wrong, symbolising the conflict between societal expectations and individual experience. While celebrated as a public hero, he struggles internally with the possibility of having erred—a dual-layered pressure that can be interpreted psychoanalytically as "symbolic castration," the feeling of individual powerlessness against authority.

According to Freud, dreams are domains where repressed desires are symbolically expressed (Mitchell & Black, 2012). Sullenberger's recurring dreams of the aircraft crashing into skyscrapers reflect not only his personal anxiety but also the collective trauma of 9/11, which haunts the American cultural imaginary. The recurring nature of these dreams makes visible the depth of the guilt he experiences and the unconscious traces of his tension with authority. This cinematic externalisation of internal conflict offers a powerful example of how film can render visible the psychic costs of bearing public responsibility under conditions of institutional scrutiny. Recent psychoanalytic scholarship has extensively addressed the relationship between trauma and cultural narratives, particularly in how collective and individual trauma are processed through cinematic and literary forms (Ul Haq & Thakur, 2026).

5.4. Conflict Between Bureaucratic Authority and Human Values

The NTSB investigation vividly exhibits the conflict between bureaucratic authority and human values. The investigative board believes in the absolute accuracy of numerical data and advocates strict adherence to rules. The fact that Sullenberger saved 155 passengers is not considered a sufficient defence by the board; what matters is whether procedures were followed. In the film, the NTSB interrogation room is depicted as a courtroom, framing the investigation as a punitive, adversarial proceeding—a cinematic critique of how bureaucratic processes can disregard human dimensions. This dramatisation constructs a binary opposition between the heroic individual and the bureaucratic system, reinforcing a neoliberal narrative in which institutional authority is inherently suspect (Dekker, 2012).

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the divergence between the film's narrative choices and reality. NTSB investigators have publicly stated that the film portrayed them as "the bad guys." In reality, the NTSB has no punitive authority; its mandate is to issue safety recommendations, not to assign blame or impose penalties (NTSB, 2009). The film's construction of the investigation as an adversarial judicial conflict serves a dramatic and ideological purpose, confirming Comolli and Narboni's (1969) thesis on cinema's ideological function. The film is not a documentary but a political discourse that mobilises cinematic conventions to produce specific meanings and affects. This dramatisation constructs a binary opposition between the heroic individual and the bureaucratic system, reinforcing a neoliberal narrative in which institutional authority is inherently suspect.

This conflict is crystallised in the first officer's words: "Perhaps the part you don't like is that you are not used to having your predictions refuted!" This remark exposes the dangers of an approach that regards human life as merely a number and refuses to countenance alternatives to machine-like rationality. Sullenberger's

declaration that he would "directly surrender the foundation of his pilot identity—his license—the only anchor on which he has built his self" reveals the existential weight of this conflict. For the character, being a pilot is not merely a profession but the fundamental basis of his identity. The investigation thus becomes not simply a professional test but an existential threat—a trial of the self in the face of institutional power.

5.5. The Ideological Function of Cinematic Narrative

The narrative structure of *Sully* functions not merely as a reproduction of a real event but as a vehicle for specific ideological codes. As Comolli and Narboni (1969) argued in their foundational *Cahiers du Cinéma* essay, the images, forms, and narrative styles conveyed through films, together with every process and tool used in their creation, are saturated with ideology. Cinema functions as a medium that presents ideology to itself, speaks with it, and learns from it. The Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) remains indispensable for understanding how such cinematic narratives reproduce dominant ideology.

In this framework, *Sully* presents an ideological narrative shaped around authority, bureaucracy, human error, and heroism. Released during Barack Obama's presidency, the film foregrounds the figure of the "white male hero who opposes regulation" (Sütlüoğlu, 2024). By engaging themes of individualism, heroism, and resistance to institutional authority, it reproduces American mainstream ideology and reinforces a nationalist narrative. Eastwood's directorial style constructs a discourse that emphasises conservative values and individual liberalism. The film's positioning of the NTSB as the 'villain' is a cinematic reflection of neoliberal ideology, idealising distrust of institutional authority and celebrating the triumph of individual experience over the system (McGowan, 2016).

Beyond mere reproduction, the film's narrative can be understood through Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony: it presents the values of individualism and anti-institutionalism as common sense, naturalising them to the point where they appear uncontested. The film's depiction of Sullenberger as a self-reliant hero who triumphs over bureaucratic rigidity actively constructs and legitimises a neoliberal subject position for the viewer. In this sense, *Sully* participates in a broader cultural project of valorising individual agency while obscuring the structural conditions—deregulation, privatisation, the erosion of public trust—that make such heroic individualism both necessary and desirable. As psychoanalytic film criticism literature has consistently demonstrated, cinema serves as a privileged site for examining the intersection of psychoanalysis, ideology, and social critique (Layton, 2013; Boyle, 2025).

5.6. Practical Implications for Crisis Management

The Sully case offers actionable lessons for crisis management practitioners, policymakers, and training designers. First, the tension between procedural compliance and situational judgment underscores the need for adaptive decision-making frameworks that account for human cognitive constraints—time pressure, startle effect, and cognitive lockup—rather than relying solely on checklists or algorithmic predictions. Crisis protocols should permit deviation from standard procedures when human expertise indicates a safer alternative, provided such deviations are documented and debriefed post-crisis.

Second, Sullenberger's leadership illustrates the effectiveness of authentic and situational leadership in high-stakes environments. His capacity to balance authoritative decision-making during the emergency with collaborative communication during the investigation offers a model for crisis leadership training. Programmes should emphasise emotional regulation, ego control, and team-centred decision-making alongside technical skills.

Third, the film's dramatisation of the NTSB investigation highlights the importance of integrating human factors expertise into accident investigation processes. Investigative bodies should include psychologists and human factors specialists to evaluate whether decisions were reasonable given the cognitive and emotional conditions at the time of the crisis, rather than focusing exclusively on procedural compliance. This aligns with psychoanalytic and organisational psychology, which attend to the unconscious dimensions of decision-making and the psychic costs of institutional scrutiny.

Finally, the case demonstrates that post-crisis psychological support is a necessity, not a luxury. Even when a crisis is successfully resolved, team members may experience trauma, guilt, and anxiety that can impair future performance. Organisations should establish routine mental health screenings, confidential counselling services, and peer-support networks to mitigate the long-term effects of critical incidents—particularly in high-risk professions where psychological well-being is directly linked to safety outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

This review has evaluated the US Airways Flight 1549 incident and its cinematic representation in Clint Eastwood's *Sully* through a psychoanalytic lens, demonstrating that in the dialectical space between reality and fiction, the cinematic narrative functions as an autonomous cultural memory construction that cannot be reduced to the objective history of the event. The film does not merely reproduce historical facts; it actively constructs meaning, tracing collective trauma, institutional conflict, and the psychic costs of heroic subjectivity. Ultimately, the synthetic findings produced by this interdisciplinary approach contribute a new theoretical opening—from a critical and holistic perspective—to deterministic models in aviation safety literature, the charismatic authority emphasis in leadership theories, and narrative analyses in film studies.

First, human factors remain the decisive element of crisis management in aviation, contributing to more than 70% of aviation accidents. The Sullenberger case demonstrates that technical excellence and procedural compliance, while necessary, are insufficient without the adaptive, intuitive capacities that emerge from years of embodied experience. Second, effective crisis management requires a combination of the leader's composure, experience, and emphasis on teamwork. Sullenberger's adherence to the Aviate—Navigate—Communicate protocol, his ability to control his ego, and his collaboration with First Officer Jeffrey Skiles constitute the core elements of successful crisis management. CRM literature provides a rich theoretical framework for understanding his leadership performance, revealing that effective leadership is the cornerstone of successful CRM and that flight leaders should adopt a situational leadership approach that adapts to the specific demands of each situation.

One of the most important dimensions of Sullenberger's leadership approach is his demonstration of "authentic leadership" qualities. Authentic leaders remain true to their values and beliefs, acting transparently and ethically. Sullenberger's standing by his decision throughout the investigation and his confidence in his professional identity and experience are key indicators of this authenticity. His statement that he would "directly surrender the foundation of his pilot identity—his license—the only anchor on which he has built his self" is one of the most striking expressions of this stance. Furthermore, Sullenberger can be said to exhibit "transformational leadership" qualities; he inspired his team, believed in their potential, and united them around a shared vision. Yet, from a critical psychoanalytic perspective, this authenticity is itself a product of ideological fantasy: it obscures the structural conditions that make such heroic individualism both necessary and desirable, while simultaneously foreclosing alternative ways of imagining authority, responsibility, and collective action.

Third, psychoanalytic film criticism offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding the character's inner world and unconscious conflicts. Through dream sequences, nightmares, and visual narrative techniques, *Sully* successfully portrays the character's trauma, guilt, and existential anxieties. The opening dream of the aircraft exploding after crashing into New York skyscrapers symbolises his deep anxiety about his decision and his guilt psychology—an "anxiety dream" in Freudian terms, wherein repressed fears are externalised. This dream can also be read as a reflection of the collective trauma of 9/11, suggesting that individual psychological distress is always embedded in broader cultural and historical contexts.

The recurring dream sequences reveal symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and increasing subconscious doubt about the correctness of his decision. Sullenberger's hallucinations while awake—seeing the plane crash into buildings from the window—indicate that trauma has permeated the conscious level and that his perception of reality is deteriorating. This can be read as a visual expression of the character's internal conflict, consistent with Lacan's (1977) thesis that the unconscious is structured like language.

Fourth, the conflict between bureaucratic authority and human values constitutes one of the fundamental dilemmas facing modern institutions. The NTSB investigation represents an approach that believes in the absolute accuracy of numerical data and advocates strict adherence to rules, while Sullenberger's approach defends a decision-making process centred on human life. Despite the NTSB's lack of punitive authority and its advisory focus, the film's transformation of the investigation into a dramatic judicial conflict is a clear example of cinema's ideological construction. This dramatisation constructs a binary opposition between the heroic individual and the bureaucratic system, reinforcing a neoliberal narrative in which institutional authority is inherently suspect.

Fifth, the ideological function of cinematic narrative is clearly demonstrated in the *Sully* example. Comolli and Narboni's (1969) thesis on cinema's ideological function remains valid here, explaining how the film's narrative choices legitimise existing power relations. By engaging themes of individualism, heroism, and resistance to institutional authority, *Sully* reproduces American mainstream ideology and reinforces a nationalist narrative.

The film constructs a discourse that defends the legitimacy of human intuition and experience against the perfectionism imposed by institutional rationality. Through Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, we can

understand how the film presents the values of individualism and anti-institutionalism as common sense, naturalising them to the point where they appear uncontested. In doing so, *Sully* actively constructs and legitimises a neoliberal subject position for the viewer—one in which the autonomous individual stands as a bulwark against the perceived excesses of state power.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on a single film and a single incident, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, the study relies on qualitative document analysis; future research could employ experimental or quantitative methods to test the psychological and ideological effects of such cinematic narratives on audiences. Third, the psychoanalytic interpretation, while fruitful, represents one of many possible readings; other theoretical frameworks—such as post-structuralist or cognitive film theory—might yield different insights. Despite these limitations, the review contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that brings psychoanalytic film criticism into dialogue with organisational and safety studies, offering a novel conceptual framework for understanding the psychological and ideological dimensions of crisis leadership in an age of increasing automation and institutional distrust.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, the following recommendations have been developed to improve aviation safety, strengthen leadership training, and guide future research. These recommendations are informed by the interdisciplinary synthesis of psychoanalytic film criticism, human factors research, and leadership theory that has shaped this review, and are framed with an awareness of the broader cultural and institutional contexts in which crisis decision-making occurs.

6.2.1. Strengthening Human Factors in Pilot Training

In pilot training programmes, greater emphasis should be placed on crisis decision-making, stress management, and team communication skills alongside technical competencies. Given that the vast majority of aviation accidents are associated with human factors, updating curricula according to current scientific findings in this field is critical. Simulation training should be enriched with scenarios that account for human factors such as the startle effect, decision-making time, heightened risk perception, and cognitive lockup. Research highlights three fundamental factors that enable successful decision-making under extreme conditions: psychological preparedness, professional experience, and team coordination. These factors should be systematically integrated into training programmes. Special training modules should be developed specifically for psychological phenomena that negatively affect pilot performance during crises, such as the "startle effect" and "cognitive lockup." Simulating such crisis moments in training programmes will develop pilots' abilities to cope with these effects, thereby enhancing real-world performance under extreme stress.

6.2.2. Balancing Automation and Human Judgment

When developing automation systems in aviation, the principle that human judgment and experience should never be completely disabled must be adopted. Technological progress should support human decision-making processes, not replace them. Research shows that pilots have significant distrust of artificial intelligence making critical decisions and believe that human intervention is necessary to prevent critical errors. This finding indicates that the centrality of human factors must be maintained in automation system

design. Future automation systems should be developed with a hybrid approach where human and machine complement each other, within the framework of the "human-autonomy teaming" paradigm. This approach acknowledges that human intuition, ethical judgment, and experiential knowledge remain irreplaceable in high-stakes, uncertain environments.

6.2.3. Crisis Management and Leadership Training

Aviation personnel should undergo regular training in crisis management and leadership. Sullenberger's leadership approach can serve as a model for these trainings. Effective crisis management requires not only technical skills but also competencies such as emotional intelligence, stress management, team coordination, and ethical decision-making. Leadership trainings should focus on developing these competencies and include case studies based on real crisis scenarios. The core elements of Sullenberger's leadership behaviour—composure, trust in experience, openness to teamwork, ego control, and authentic stance—should be examined as case studies in training programmes. The principle that "an unchecked ego is a leader's greatest enemy" should be made a central theme of leadership training. Additionally, crisis management frameworks such as the Aviate–Navigate–Communicate protocol should be taught to help pilots and investigators set correct priorities during crises.

6.2.4. Incorporating Human Dimensions in Investigation Processes

Accident investigations should take into account the psychological, physiological, and cognitive dimensions of human factors alongside numerical data. Human factors and psychology experts should be included in investigation boards. As in the NTSB's Sully investigation, the opinions of human factors experts play a critical role in understanding the causes and survivability of accidents. Investigation processes should systematically evaluate the psychological factors affecting pilots' decision-making processes. Furthermore, realistic representation of human factors should be ensured in simulation studies. As Sullenberger emphasised, humans cannot respond instantly to an unprecedented emergency; the time required for decision-making processes and psychological preparation should be incorporated into simulation scenarios. Investigation reports should not focus solely on individual errors but should comprehensively address systemic vulnerabilities and organisational factors.

6.2.5. Psychological Support and Trauma Management in Aviation

Systematic support mechanisms should be developed to protect the psychological health of pilots and crew members after crises. As depicted in *Sully*, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and guilt can seriously affect pilots' mental health even after the crisis has been successfully overcome. Aviation organisations should offer services such as psychological counselling, post-trauma support programmes, and regular mental health screenings. Research shows that pilots and cabin crew are continuously exposed to stressors such as fatigue, shift work, emotional labour, and role ambiguity, which negatively affect both safety and service performance. Institutional policies should be developed and implemented for the management of these stressors. Additionally, considering that trauma experienced by team members after a crisis can spread at the team level, team-based psychological support programmes should also be designed.

6.2.6. Recommendations for Future Research

This review has been conducted on a single event and film. Future studies could comparatively examine different aviation crises and the films that portray them. For example, films such as *Flight* (2012), *American Made* (2017), or *The Aviator* (2004) could be analysed in the context of different crisis types and leadership approaches. Given the increasing role of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems in aviation, how the relationship between human judgment and machine intelligence will evolve remains a priority topic for aviation safety research. Future studies could experimentally examine the effectiveness of human-autonomy teaming, pilots' trust levels in artificial intelligence systems, and the impact of automation on decision-making during crises.

More specifically, future research could empirically test the following propositions derived from this review:

- *Hypothesis 1 (Leadership)*: Leaders who exhibit authentic leadership behaviours (transparency, value-consistency, and shared decision-making) will be perceived as more effective in crisis situations compared to those who rely solely on hierarchical authority.
- *Hypothesis 2 (Human–Machine Interaction)*: Pilots with higher levels of automation trust and greater experience will demonstrate better crisis decision-making performance, as measured by situation awareness and response time, compared to those with lower trust or less experience.
- *Hypothesis 3 (Training Effectiveness)*: Simulation-based training that incorporates human factors variables (e.g., startle effect, cognitive load, decision time) will produce superior transfer of learning to real-world crisis scenarios compared to training that focuses exclusively on technical procedures.

These hypotheses could be tested through experimental designs using flight simulators, quasi-experimental field studies in aviation training programmes, or survey-based research with pilot populations.

6.2.7. Encouraging Interdisciplinary Research Approaches

This review has demonstrated the productivity of an interdisciplinary approach combining seemingly distant fields such as cinema and aviation safety. Future research should develop hybrid models that integrate theoretical frameworks from different disciplines such as psychology, engineering, communication sciences, and business administration. In particular, quantitative studies measuring the impact of cinematic representations of crisis management scenarios on public perception and policymakers would contribute to a better understanding of aviation safety culture. Cinema is not only a narrative tool but also a domain where individual and collective unconscious are reflected (Buckland, 2013). Therefore, cinematic representations of crisis moments in high-risk fields such as aviation offer a rich data source for understanding the psychological and ideological dimensions of real-life decision-making processes. By bringing psychoanalytic film criticism into dialogue with organisational and safety studies, future research can continue to illuminate the hidden dynamics of power, authority, and resistance that shape both cinematic narratives and the institutional contexts in which they circulate.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Not applicable. This study is a document-based review and thematic synthesis of publicly available sources, including a film and official investigation reports. It did not

involve human participants, animal subjects, or any intervention requiring ethical approval.

Consent for Publication: Not applicable. This manuscript does not contain any individual person's data in any form.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence: No generative AI or large language models were used in the conceptualisation, writing, or revision of this manuscript. Grammarly was used solely for spell-checking and basic grammatical corrections.

Practitioner Points

- Crisis management protocols should explicitly account for human cognitive constraints—such as time pressure, startle effect, and cognitive lockup—rather than relying solely on checklists or algorithmic predictions.
- Leadership training in high-stakes environments should emphasise emotional regulation, ego control, and team-centred decision-making alongside technical skills.
- Accident investigation processes should integrate human factors expertise to evaluate whether decisions were reasonable given the cognitive and emotional conditions at the time of the crisis.

Author Contributions:

- **Yavuz ÇETİN:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Formal Analysis, Supervision, Project Administration, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing.
- **Pınar ÖZTARKAN ÖZYURT:** Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Review & Editing.
- **Selçuk KAHRAMAN:** Supervision, Resources, Writing – Review & Editing.
- **Aysel Merve KUŞ:** Validation, Writing – Review & Editing.
- **Aybike ZORLU:** Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Table

Table 1 *Psychoanalytic Conflicts and Their Institutional Reflections in Sully*

Psychoanalytic Concept	Cinematic Representation	Institutional Reflection	Theoretical Implication
Id (instinctual survival drive)	Sullenberger’s immediate response to control the aircraft after engine failure	N/A	Basic biological drives are overridden by experience and training
Ego (reality principle, experience)	Sullenberger’s decision to ditch in the Hudson rather than obeying ATC	Sullenberger’s situational leadership; “human-autonomy teaming”	The ego balances instinct and authority to produce life-saving decisions
Superego (internalised rules, authority)	ATC’s directives to return to airport; NTSB’s procedural scrutiny	NTSB’s simulation-based approach; bureaucratic rationality	Institutional authority represents the Symbolic Order, demanding procedural compliance
Lacanian Symbolic Order (data, procedures, simulations)	NTSB simulations; numerical data	Institutional pursuit of data-based perfection	The Symbolic seeks to eliminate human fallibility through technology
Lacanian Real (traumatic, inescapable reality)	The physical necessity of ditching; the crash itself	Sullenberger’s intuitive, embodied knowledge	The Real disrupts the Symbolic, revealing the limits of data-driven rationality
Collective Trauma (9/11)	Sullenberger’s dreams of plane crashing into skyscrapers	N/A	Individual trauma reflects and externalises collective cultural memory
Existential Threat to Professional Identity	Sullenberger’s fear of losing his license	Sullenberger’s authentic leadership stance	Professional identity becomes fused with selfhood under institutional scrutiny

Note. This table synthesises the psychoanalytic conflicts identified in the film and maps them onto their institutional and theoretical reflections, illustrating that human factors in crisis management are not merely technical variables but ethical and existential choices shaped by unconscious dynamics.