

Alex Garland's recent films – *Civil War* (2024) and *Warfare* (2025) – have been critiqued on the left for their lack of political commitment and as propaganda for US military imperialism, respectively. One reviewer of *Civil War*, however, reads the movie as a biting satire of the dire state of US journalism and its overwhelming desire for vacuous and decontextualised spectacles. This article considers whether *Warfare* might also be a subtextual critique of US imperialism, one that reveals a profound moral degeneration at the heart of US politics and culture. If so, the article suggests that Garland's critique is too subtle in the face of rampant authoritarianism. But if the film is simply a straightforward representation of American murderous warmongering, then we might wonder whether there is any way back for the kind of society that produces this kind of 'entertainment'.

On Alex Garland's *Civil War* and *Warfare*

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Hollywood's role as the US's propaganda-in-chief is hardly news. For all the ostensibly liberal ideals of its personnel, this bastion of popular American entertainment has long celebrated the virtues of the US military, caricatured its perceived enemies as cartoonish villains, and flattened American aggression to, at worst, well-intended mistakes. Indeed, a 2022 documentary, *Theaters of War*, revealed how the Pentagon and CIA have systematically shaped Hollywood's depiction of military history, influencing thousands of productions to portray war, weaponry, and US military actions in a sanitised and favourable light. As Jonathan Cook avers in his review of the documentary, propaganda works most effectively when it can be passed off as entertainment.¹ Dictators would give their eyeteeth for a *Mission: Impossible* franchise, a series of films in which a small number of righteous patriots evade government oversight and accountability as a pre-condition for keeping the world safe. Of course, the extent to which filmmakers are aware of their propagandistic roles – and the degree to which they embrace them – is another question entirely.

With this in mind, Alex Garland's recent work makes for

1 Jonathan Cook, 'How the Pentagon Dictates Hollywood Storylines', *Middle East Eye*, 27 July, 2022.

an interesting set of case studies. His last two films *Civil War* (2024) and *Warfare* (2025) have come under flak from left-wing critics as politically braindead and uncomplicatedly pro-American military.² With respects to *Civil War*, the criticism centres on that film's lack of attention to the ideological divisions fracturing American society both now and in the midst of an imagined civil war in the not-too-distant future. Its attempts to remain neutral, so the argument goes, hamstringing the film to such an extent that it can, at best, say nothing of interest and, at worst, indulges in the specious claim that both a resurgent far right and the left are at fault for the US's contemporary predicaments. His more recent film, *Warfare*, is accused of offering contextless, propagandist action-fare on behalf of the US military. Rather than focusing on the destruction of a country, the destabilising of a region, and the countless civilian deaths that constitute the Iraq War (2003–2011), the film opts to focus on the heroism of a platoon of US Navy SEALs against the almost entire exclusion of the Iraqis. Indeed, there are three main groups of Iraqis in the film – the two translators and scouts for the platoon; the family whose home the SEALs take over and from which they conduct their mission; and the faceless aggressors from whose attacks the SEALs must escape when things go awry.

It is possible that these criticisms are correct. And, on my first viewing of *Civil War*, I was unimpressed with the film's underlying political commitments or lack thereof. The MacGuffin of journalists travelling across the country to interview the US President, the standard journalistic tropes of truth-seekers amidst the hell of war, and what I took to be the shallow and trite allusions to groups like 'Portland Maoists' and 'Western Forces' all struck me as jettisoning the more interesting details for the well-trodden path of the picaresque road-movie. The film, and by extension its journalist protagonists, makes no attempt to explain how the US could have reached that pitch of internecine violence, and the institutional collapses that precipitated a descent into war. However, after reading Hazem Fahmy's review of *Civil War*, which praised it as a 'brutal indictment of

2 Alex Garland, director, *Civil War*, DNA Films (2024); Alex Garland and Ray Mendoza, directors, *Warfare*, DNA Films (2025).

Americans' limitless capacity to aestheticise violence', I wondered if I had missed something.³

Crucially, Fahmy argues that the film's disinterest in its 'fictional factions' is not a flaw, but rather a deliberate choice. *Civil War* is ultimately not about the politics of the unfolding civil war, in this reading, but about how American media would distort and obscure whatever those factions represented. What Richard Brody (*The New Yorker's* resident film critic) laments as the movie's 'pornographic air', where summary executions are 'augmented by hip-hop music', is, for Fahmy, precisely the point.⁴ This is just what professional contemporary journalists would do with such a war. Indeed, there is a seeming contradiction in Brody's appraisal of the film. First, he suggests that Garland's film offers an admiring portrait of journalists engaged in 'a necessary endeavour' that is also 'a largely impotent one'. Later, however, he presents that film as a warning 'that the media is doing a terrible job of revealing and publicising the grave dangers looming, that news reporting is proving grossly inadequate to the current, dire moment'.⁵ Fahmy, who takes the logical next step in this argument, suggests that such inadequacy is better regarded as complicity.

Indeed, throughout the film, these not-so-intrepid reporters do very little that might be described as journalism. The fact that these reporters do not discuss politics, do not try to understand what is happening around them, or examine the various causes and implications of a civil war in the world's most powerful democracy cannot but be alarming. Even if these were ordinary citizens navigating a collapsed state, such a lack of discussion would be striking. But these are supposed to be professionals engaged in understanding and piecing together a story of what is happening to them, their fellow citizens, and the world. Instead of any 'endeavour' to comprehend, 'we see intense contextless gunfights, anonymous atrocities, and un-historicised developments in the war's trajectory'. In other words,

3 Hazem Fahmy, "'Civil War': A Brutal Indictment of Western Journalism's Disregard for Truth", *Middle East Eye*, 2 May, 2024.

4 Richard Brody, "'Civil War' is a Tale of Bad News", *The New Yorker*, 23 April, 2024.

5 Brody, 'Tale of Bad News'.

from Fahmy's perspective, we witness 'a perfect encapsulation of how the US covers global conflicts'. Finally, the interview with the US President, which is the ostensible purpose of the road trip, is nothing more than a money shot. There is no interview, and there is little disappointment that there is no interview because the journalists still have the chance to get something good: images of arterial spray on the walls of the White House and another of the President getting shot in the head. The final image of the movie is a gradually developing photograph of soldiers gloating over the President's corpse. Read in this way, the film becomes a 'scathing portrait of American journalism', in which the main journalist protagonist – played by Wagner Moura – is motivated by a 'psychotic attraction to violence'.⁶

Viewing *Warfare* through the lens of Fahmy's critique, a film that I had initially approached ready to dismiss, becomes, at least potentially, a far more critical piece of cinema. I want to be clear that my reading might be wrong. In which case, those reviews from the left are, broadly, correct. And, even if my reading is right, Garland might be doing something too subtle by half in an era of rampant authoritarianism, where the usual procedures for laundering unjust outcomes have been abandoned. Instead, full-throated condemnations of American imperialism – of the kind we would expect from filmmakers like Ken Loach (*Hidden Agenda* (1990) and *Route Irish* (2010), for example) and documentarians like the late John Pilger – should be, perhaps, the preferred artistic response. Ultimately, even if *Warfare* offers, like *Civil War*, another subtle and unspoken critique of a morally bankrupt audience – including, especially, that part of the audience consisting of a chattering class of reviewers – it still employs a morally dubious aestheticisation of imperial conquest as a vehicle for getting people into the cinema.

Positive reviews of *Warfare* – by far the more numerous (93% on Rotten Tomatoes) – have lavished praise on the immersive experience it provides to viewers. Through the film one can, as Wendy Ide avers, 'taste the dust and the choking panic, smell the fear and the cordite and the tinny metallic

6 Fahmy, 'A Brutal Indictment'.

tang of spilled blood'.⁷ Having read such reviews, I was ready to dismiss it as tedious, technically proficient garbage. First, I do not think the sensations of war can ever really be translated onto screen or page. It takes someone at some distance from reality, let alone war, to make such an argument. Unless you are about to die or kill in order not to die, nothing art can do is going to really put you close enough to the experience to know what war is actually like. It should be obvious that when you spend money to see a film you do so in order to be entertained, not to risk PTSD.

Nonetheless, it is certainly true that *Warfare* commits to providing something like an immersive experience. After all, much of the film's runtime is devoted to following these SEALs in real time as they are shot at, scream, panic, and lose blood and limbs while attempting to escape a terrible situation. However, I found the action sequences unimpressive. As someone who grew up watching Jackie Chan, John Woo, Johnnie To, and Michael Mann, perhaps I expect too much, but for all the film's purported realism, the action scenes felt like a throwback to that 1980's style of action film, in which countless, faceless bad guys are there to shoot at the good guys, hide behind walls, be shot at, and die. There is, to be sure, a greater sense that the ostensible good guys are more vulnerable to being killed than in a movie like *Commando* (1985), and the bad guys in *Warfare* do not make the mistake of hiding behind oil cans and other explosives, but the basic underwhelming aesthetic is the same. The merits then, such that they are, can be found only in carefully considering the film's subtext.

First, it is not entirely accurate to say that the enemy is faceless. Our initial encounters with many of these faces are through the scope of a sniper rifle. Indeed, the least suspicion that one of these locals is up to no good is met, first, with a soldier's puzzlement that a suspected aggressor has not yet been shot and, second, with regret that a man who was seen holding a gun was not immediately and summarily executed. Moreover, as Eileen Jones notes in her critical review, the battle being waged is so obviously 'an unfair fight' as "[t]he enemy are all bareheaded, on foot, and wearing T-shirts and hoodies and jeans, going up against massively armed and equipped

7 Wendy Ide, 'Warfare Review', *The Guardian*, 20 April, 2025.

American soldiers bulked up by body armour and helmets and covered by military jets roaring overhead and huge tank-like military vehicles coming to their rescue'.⁸

Second, because of the film's real-time quality, it is hard to avoid mentally clocking up the dollar cost of all those 'shows of force' – the military designation for those moments when military jets are called into shave the top of homes and send masses of dust into the air to provide cover for the SEALs' escape. Whatever the costs of making the film, it pales into comparison to the actual expenditures – man hours, equipment, vehicles and weaponry, ammunition, tactical support, and surveillance systems – associated with this kind of military operation, and with nothing like a box office gross to justify it (the film has done solid yet unspectacular business off of its USD\$20 million budget).

Third, the total absence of any context to the events is itself a kind of statement. There is no context which could be given to justify the kind of operation.⁹ The platoon's mission – in which they take over the homes of two Iraqi families – is underexplained, but seems to be no more than reconnaissance-via-sniper-scope. In other words, as the film presents it, 18 soldiers invade and take over a home, with the residents effectively taken hostage for that period, in order to spy on the locals and, if the need should arise, overwhelm and murder them. Do we need any context to regard this as egregiously wrong? Indeed, can we begrudge those locals a right to resist, violently if necessary, an invading force that is not just brutal, but deigns to justify that brutality with appeals to democracy and freedom? This is an enemy that employs well-heeled hacks like Thomas Friedman, lest we forget, to advocate for 'American boys and girls going house to house, from Basra to Baghdad, and basically saying . . . well, suck on this!'.¹⁰ It is the very fact that America's political class is both so utterly incapable of restraint or

8 Eileen Jones, 'Warfare is Hell at the Movies', *Jacobin*, 18 April, 2025.

9 Contrast this with *Argo* (2012), directed by Ben Affleck – ostensibly a zombie film about the CIA chutzpah needed to escort American citizens beyond a marauding horde of bloodthirsty Iranians – which attempts to hide its blatantly pro-American messaging behind an opening sequence in which the filmmakers demonstrate that they accept America's egregious role in the Mossadegh coup and the Shah's subsequent 26-year reign.

10 Thomas Friedman, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, 29 May, 2003.

even cursory reflection, and is enabled by such overwhelming technical superiority, that it can – and will – continue to throw young, brave, and presumably well-intentioned people into battle with other people who, whether for ideological positions we altogether embrace or not, have a right to defend themselves against rapacious invaders from the other side of the world.

Whereas Jones states, ‘it’s amazing that the film isn’t some kind of satire of contemporary American warfare’, I wonder whether that is, in fact, exactly what it is.¹¹ Because, if it is not, *Warfare* speaks to a moral degeneration so pervasive and so profound that I wonder if there is any way back for the kind of society that produces this kind of ‘entertainment’. Garland is an intelligent filmmaker and the hour is late. In 2025, with American empire in cataclysmic freefall, I find it hard to believe someone with his talent would be so obtuse as to waste his time remaking *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

The film has two endings: one, in which the family that has been taken hostage emerges from its captivity to return home, a home that is now awash with blood and body parts – although, significantly, no equipment: the SEALs have been diligent rounding up their expensive hardware. The roof has also been destroyed by tank fire in an effort to provide cover to the escaping SEALs. The father/husband assures his young family not to be afraid, because the SEALs have gone. Of course, as the frequent aerial surveillance shots throughout the film make clear, we and they know that the US military is still very much present, no matter where the surviving soldiers may be.

The second ending seems even more obviously provocative. During the credits, the audience sees the SEALs alongside the actors who portrayed them, which is interspersed with footage of the soldiers meeting each other and the actors outside the house where they had been trapped nearly 20 years ago. The final photo, however, is of the family that had been taken hostage, with their faces blurred and whose home was destroyed by this failed mission, unleavened by any footage or photographic testimony as to where they might have wound up. This final image is followed with a

11 Jones, ‘Warfare is Hell’

dedication ‘For Elliot’, the solider, played by Cosmo Jarvis, who was put in a wheelchair by the IED that, we should remember, killed the two Iraqi translators, neither of whom is mentioned let alone honoured with a dedication.

It is 2025, where questions of representation are, supposedly, at the forefront of our culture. We are more aware than ever of the need to tell the stories of marginalised people and to resist allowing the perspectives of the powerful – soldiers, in the context of American military interventions, surely count among them – to dominate our cultural diets. With that in mind, one of two things has happened in the making of *Warfare*. One, the filmmakers are either so utterly morally dead and politically bankrupt that they cannot see how repugnant these absences are. Or two, they are fully aware of them, and the film demonstrates, Rorschach-test style, the overall moral death and political stupidity of, at least, a whole class of western film critics. This is 90-minutes of blood and guts, typically consumed alongside intakes of popcorn and soft drinks, that has been fashioned from an expensive, pointless, illegal, and unjustifiable military intervention that murdered and traumatised millions. If a film like this were to be made about IDF fighters squaring off against Hamas fighters, would we think it appropriate entertainment? Does the 20 years between us and the (still unfolding) Iraq fiasco mean that we can now merrily chomp through buttery snacks, seasoned with the dust and ‘tinny metallic tang of spilled blood’ emanating from the screen?

Either way, the film is a condemnation. If my reading is wrong, then this is a film that testifies to an industry that is so corrupted that several thousand well-paid professional artists, studio heads, and craftspeople thought turning imperial carnage into an immersive action film was a worthwhile exercise. *1917* (2019), for example, is a film that is obviously and straightforwardly a despicable and soulless movie, transforming, as it does, imperial war games and mass bloodshed into a technically audacious video-game-cum-movie. If my proffered analysis is right, however, such that Garland’s intended and broader point refers to the dynamics sustaining expensive and unceasing American imperial aggression has been almost entirely missed in its reception, then that too is a profound indictment.