



October 2024

## Civil War

Dennis Etzel Jr

Washburn University, dennis.etzeljr@washburn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Etzel, Dennis Jr (2024) "Civil War," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.02.10>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss2/10>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).



---

## Civil War

### Abstract

Alex Garland's 2024 film *Civil War* exemplifies how film can be considered a modern mythology, using a war movie to tell the story of the hero's journey with a mother archetype as the hero. Through an audience's shared morals and values, an impartial point-of-view, symbolism, the Jungian mother archetype, transformational imagery, ethical dilemmas and collective fears, the film functions in the way mythology does while leaving viewers questions for their own lives.

### Keywords

Alex Garland, Civil War, modern mythology, mother archetype, symbols, transformation, Jungian archetype

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

### Author Notes

Dennis Etzel Jr. is a poet and writer who lives with his spouse Carrie and their boys in Topeka, Kansas. He teaches English at Washburn University, which includes film studies, creative writing, and modern mythology. He is a TALK Scholar and part of the Speakers Bureau for Humanities Kansas and leads poetry workshops in various Kansas spaces.





**Civil War (2024), dir. Alex Garland**

If you haven't seen Alex Garland's 2024 film *Civil War* yet, you should know that all spoilers of spoilers are ahead. As the film takes place in a near-future dystopian America where the Western Forces (the WF, Texas and California) have seceded from and are at war with the United States, the trailer teases a movie-goer on what to expect, that this is a war movie. This includes a missile launch that hits the corner of the Lincoln Memorial, a spectacle of a possible reality as we know the current political stresses in America.

As such, it was one of the few movie-going experiences where I felt alert of people who came and might bring their own political views into a movie theater. Yes, I am sure the trailer's provocative imagery fed both Republicans' and Democrats' dystopian fears of what might happen if the other party wins the 2024 Presidential election. This is one reason I argue *Civil War* is an example of how a film can be considered a modern mythology.



One definition of mythology is that it is a culture's stories that represent that culture's morals and values, so if we are speaking of a modern American mythology, what better way to find those stories than at the movies? In addition, if we are talking American mythos, then I argue the audience as a whole should embrace and be moved by the film's story, characters, and any message of its values and beliefs. In *Civil War*, we see the President as an uncompromising leader not acting out of the people's best interests. We learn he is staying a third term in office, he disbanded the FBI, and he refuses to not give up the war until the WF surrender.

I applaud Alex Garland's subtlety and nuance in erasing anything that could be read as a politically-biased film from any political party's side. In other words, it is a Civil War, not a Democrat vs. Republican war. This exemplifies a modern mythology so that anyone, regardless of political belief and influence, might read into the film "the other side's" 2024 presidential candidate represented by Nick Offerman's character. Being a white, older man, while at the same time looking neither like Trump nor Biden (who was still the likely Democratic candidate at the time the film was made), is a successful move for creating this archetype of an authority figure who abuses their power and is oppressive. The film begins with the President rehearsing what he will say, interspersed with footage of riots, saying it is the "most successful military campaign in the history of the world." The villain is known from the start, through his propaganda and grandiose speech without a mention or hint of what political party he belongs to.

Added to the impartiality of not identifying political parties is the point of view of the protagonist. In this case, the story unfolds as we follow a photojournalist named Lee (Kirsten Dunst) and a reporter, Joel (Wagner Moura), who take on two other photojournalists, Sammy (Stephen McKinley Henderson) and Jessie (Cailee Spaeny), on a dangerous roadtrip from New York City to Washington DC in an attempt to get an interview and photo of the President as the



WF are closing in for a final battle. This is the second reason why *Civil War* is an American mythology: we witness the story through a nonpartisan group of reporters whose only aim is to document and report the war. This allows us as an audience to relate through these characters without “taking sides” through a soldier serving on either side. While an audience might come in expecting a war movie, they are also watching the story of people surviving the effects of war—a human story of how a group of journalists bond as a family through various symbols that create meaning in the film, as well as their personal transformations.

Mythologies often use imagery and symbols to represent meaning. One symbol of the film is in the reporting itself, symbolizing “seeing.” Throughout the film, the audience views the photos the characters are taking: Lee’s are in color, Jessie’s are in black and white. These stills bring in the audience to their point-of-view, as we also know who is taking which picture. We literally and figuratively view the story through their eyes.

We first meet Jessie taking close photos of the riot over the water tank. When she is hit by a police baton, Lee pulls her away. Jessie recognized Lee as a well-known war photographer, when Lee passes on her yellow press vest to Jessie. In other words, the vest’s protective function of reporting in the field is the first symbolic gesture Lee will make—alongside pulling Jessie down behind a car as she sees a sprinter with a bomb and US flag heading to the water tank.

Mirrors can represent what is desired and self-discovery. In the scene in a clothing store where Jessie approaches Lee as she trying on a dress, we see them through the reflection of the three mirrors. Maybe the mirrors symbolize time—past, present, and future—as the town is where time has “frozen” and is idyllic to what life is without the war. Jessie takes Lee’s picture, making a joke, getting her to smile for the first time in the film. This is our glimpse of what Lee could have



been: a mother with a daughter trying on dresses. With Lee's protectiveness of Jessie and this tender moment, we can read Lee as a mother figure to Jessie.

Throughout their trip from New York City to DC, we see Lee and Jessie bonding. In a discussion with Sammy, Lee describes her beginnings as a war photojournalist, that she was taking photos as a means to tell people "back home" how horrific war is, to not "do this." Sammy replies, "Am I allowed to say I remember you at her age? . . . You think you're being hard on her and I think you're being hard on yourself." Jessie is the young Lee, just as a mother might see her younger self in a daughter. Lee represents the mother in this film, and the mother is broken. She is doing her best to mentor Jessie, her figurative daughter, but the catalyst that moves to the last act of the film is the conversation between Lee and Jessie. Jessie confides that their time together has been the most fearful she has felt, but also she has never felt so alive. Lee looks at her expressionless, holding any comment. The scene ends and we wonder how alien and removed Lee is from those two sensations.

In many stories, we hope the hero is transformed. In Jungian terms, this individuation changes the hero so they can move forward in their life. If we look at *Civil War* in this way, Jessie is the hero while Lee is the mentor figure. The "hero's journey" makes up most of the movie. The four journalists travel from New York City to Washington DC as a "road of trials" they face.

Fire is one symbol of the transformation of characters. As Sammy is dying in the back of the van from a gunshot wound, we see in slow motion the characters look out their perspective windows as the surrounding trees are on fire. Small, glowing ashes float through the air like fireflies. Sammy reaches out to grab some of the light as he is smiling at the beauty. Even as Sammy is dying, we see how this natural process of the trees on fire as how the world works. As



Lee says, “Sammy would never quit,” and these characters will not, even as it seems they might arrive too late from what they hear when they arrive at the WF base.

Hallways and corridors are also symbolic of transitions in this film, representing liminal states that develop characters and the story. The audience has been part of the journey to Washington DC, and we also follow Lee, Jessie, and Joel into the labyrinthine hallways of the White House. The soldiers will take no prisoners to get to the President, as security is doing what it can to protect the President. The reporters, too, know this is the all-or-nothing risk to get the story, culminating in all they have survived to get there.

It is mythic when Lee saves Jessie’s life by leaping in front of her in the final hallway where the president is hiding. Jessie makes a mistake in timing to take a photo from the center of the hallway, and Lee jumps to push her out of the way. This death and rebirth motif, similar to the trees on fire, serves as the film’s ultimate transformation. In this case, Lee’s sacrifice is also transitionary as Jessie inherits the trauma Lee has carried as a war photojournalist. We see Jessie in shock, in slow motion, as the sound is muffled. The audience experiences the sense of trauma and loss as Jessie stares ahead and doesn't look to the side of the fallen mentor. She stares ahead in shock, neither fearful nor alive. Joel moves into the Oval Office with the soldiers to get the last words of the President, “Please, help me.” Joel says, “Yeah, that will do,” and steps away so the soldiers can do what they came there to do.

Aside from how trauma affects us, and how it might remove empathy and compassion, the question remains on how we should read this film. As we go to the credits, one last black and white photo develops to ask the audience to stay. Five WF soldiers are posed, smiling over the president’s body. This is where the nuance of the photo allows the space for the audience to interpret what the film’s “message” is. Did we just see a film that justifies a *coup d'etat*? Or is this



an anti-war film? When the execution of a president is cause for celebration, the message is: Do we really wish for this, as a country, to happen?

To revisit who the villain might be, I lean toward the anti-war message one might carry with them after the film, as the discussion Lee had with Jessie resounds within me. As she told Jessie she became a war photojournalist to share horrific photos with the message, “do not do this,” the audience is left with one final message—the executed President on the ground, soldiers smiling. The figurative villain is war itself.

The best of science fiction or speculative fiction might serve as a modern mythology as it provides the audience with a way to examine their ethical dilemmas, to help confront their collective fears. That *Civil War* was the highest grossing film for A24, as well as #1 for weeks of streaming, shows its popularity.

Maybe the overall question should be: How transformative can this film be for others? At the end of the day, how can this film serve in discussions of politics in viewing what “could happen” without party lines or allegiances? This could be the best way to approach our shared dilemmas and work together, despite political lines, to see that a Second Civil War will have no winners—all shown through the shared language of film mythology.