



# Réfléchir au pouvoir des images grâce à **Civil War**

**Un film de Alex Garland, 2024**

Avec *Civil War*, le réalisateur Alex Garland imagine jusqu'où pourrait mener la montée des tensions actuelles aux Etats-Unis (inflation, racisme, accusations croisées de déni de démocratie), en mettant en scène une nouvelle guerre civile.

Une guerre civile certes, mais au nom de quoi, et menée par qui ? Le film entretient le trouble en ne nommant que confusément les maux, laissant la place à une violence débridée dépourvue de tout sens apparent. Le film se mue alors en une réflexion sur le photojournalisme et ses limites : faut-il tout montrer ? À travers les personnages de Lee (superbe hommage à Lee Miller) et de Jessie, montrant les deux âges d'une même femme tiraillée par l'ambition, *Civil War* questionne notre rapport aux images, nous plongeant sans concession au cœur de l'action, entre dérive voyeuriste et esthétisation de la violence. Les images choquent, le propos intrigue : et si cette dystopie n'était au fond qu'un mauvais rêve ? Au spectateur de se faire sa propre opinion.

Niveau	Dans les programmes
Seconde	La création et le rapport aux arts
Première et Terminale	Art et pouvoir Fictions et réalités
AMC	Faire société Représenter le monde et se représenter
LLCER	Arts et débats d'idées

## A/ BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

### Brainstorming activity : *CIVIL WAR*

Definition? Possible causes? Has it ever occurred in the USA? Could it happen again? What do you expect from a film with such a title (genre, plot, characters...)?

You might show the movie poster to focus the debate on America and the film:



## B/ GROUP WORK

In groups, discuss one or several of the following topics and report your findings to the class:

**VIOLENCE:** Were you shocked by some images or scenes from the film? What makes them disturbing?



**WAR:** How is it portrayed in the film? Is it a classic war film? Is the film praising or denouncing war? What do we know about the conflict in the film?





**CHARACTERIZATION:** Who are the four main characters and what do we know about them? How much do we know about their past or family life?

**WOMEN:** How are women portrayed in the film? Is there a “male gaze” upon them?



**THE LEE / JESSIE RELATIONSHIP:** How does the relationship between the two women evolve? How are they similar/ different? Comment on Lee’s death.



**PHOTOJOURNALISM:** Does the film offer a positive or negative point of view on the job of photo reporter? What are the four main characters after, and how do their perspective on their job evolve?



**PHOTOGRAPHY:** What sort of photography is represented in the film? How are the pictures taken by Lee and Jessie inserted in the film? Do they show us exactly the same thing as what we saw in the movie scene?



**MUSIC AND SOUND:** How important are sound and music in the film? What do they convey? Give examples of scenes in which they play a key role. How do they impact the spectator?

**NATURE:** How important is nature in the film? Which role does it play?



**ROAD TRIP:** Is *Civil War* a road movie? Which role does the road play in the narrative and in the atmosphere of the film?



## C/ GOING FURTHER

Here are a few topics you can explore alone or in groups to analyze the film further.

### 1/ Withdrawal of information

**a/** Give examples of things/ information that the film leaves out. Can you see the irony of it in a film about journalism?

**b/** The director chooses to leave many questions unanswered. How do you explain his choice? How does it make you feel as a spectator?

**c/** How does the film make the spectator feel involved in the action? In the debate?



### 2/ A criticism of contemporary America

**a/** What makes the film seem realistic even though it does not relate true events? Which elements (characters, events, opinions expressed) echo today's America?

**b/** What do you think is the director's point of view on contemporary America? How does it relate to the American Dream? Comment on the film poster (if you haven't already before watching the film).





**c/** Look up the definitions of dystopia and uchronia in a dictionary. How do they match the film?



### **3/ A reflection upon the role and impact of images in our society**

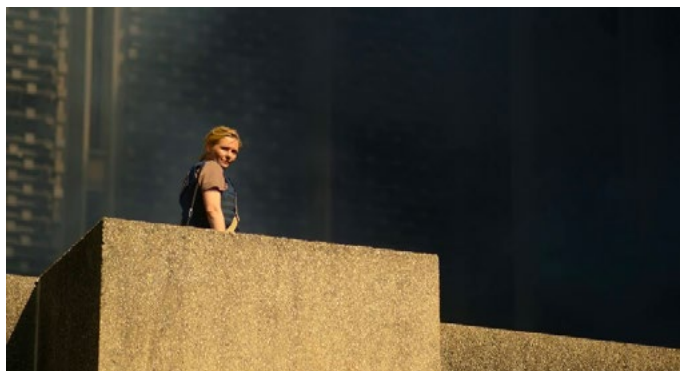
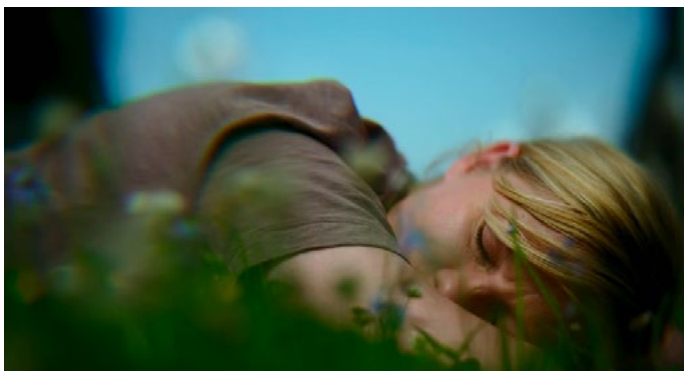
**a/** Lee Smith's character is based on a famous real-life photo reporter mentioned in the film. Did you catch her name? Have you ever heard about her and her pictures? If not, check out her work online or watch the movie *Lee* by British director Ellen Kuras.

**b/** All the main characters are reporters at various stages of their career. What are their different perspectives on their job? Who does the film focus on and why?





c/ How do the reporters in the film react to the violence they witness? How does the film echo their feelings? Look at the following screenshots and explain what could be seen as controversial about them.

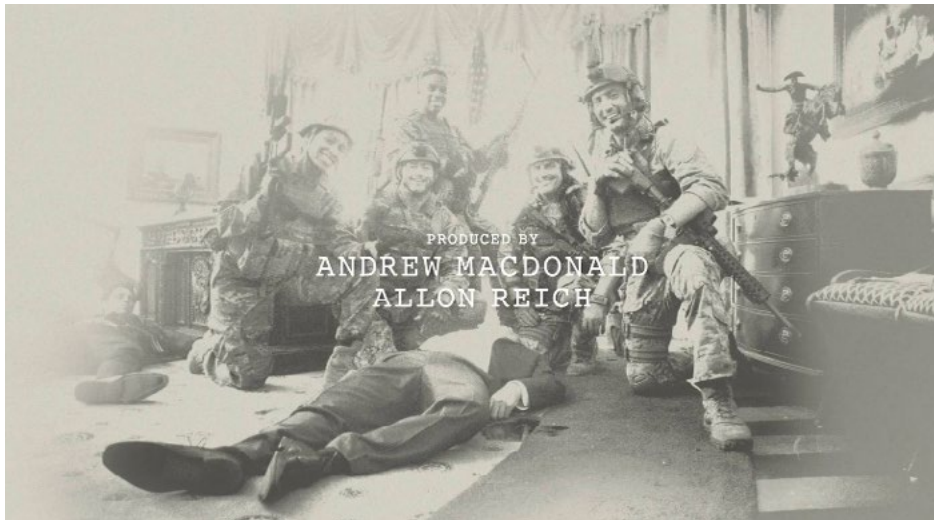


**d/** Draw a parallel between these two scenes from the beginning of the film:

1. The president rehearsing his speech before his intervention on TV, trying to find the right tone
2. Joel and Sammy preparing the questions they will ask him if they make it to the Oval office in time.

What do these two scenes tell us about the politics of war and communication?

**e/** Have you noticed the picture shown in the ending credits? Comment on the director's choice to leave us spectators on a final image like that.



## D/ INTERTEXTUALITY AND TRIBUTES

Even though *Civil War* does not depict real events, its plot and aesthetics were inspired by real-life photo reporters and their works.

Take a look at the following iconic photographs and try to remember which scenes from the film they echo. Then try to imagine why director Alex Garland chose to pay tribute to these photographers and images.



Dorotea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936 and *Oklahoma Sharecropper and Family Entering California*, 1937

David Scherman, *Lee Miller in Hitler's bathtub*, April 30, 1945



Lee Miller, *The liberation of Dachau concentration camp in Germany on April 30, 1945*

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *A wagon piled high with corpses outside the crematoria in the Buchenwald concentration camp*, 1945

Laurence Beitler, *The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, IN, on August 7, 1930*

## E/ DEBATE

The film raises the question of **photography and morals**.

Split the class into groups to prepare your arguments, find examples and try to find answers to the following questions:

- Can everything be photographed?
- Should everything that happens be shown in the name of information?
- Do pictures represent the truth?
- Is photojournalism art?





# Éléments de correction

## A/ BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

Seize this opportunity to remind the students of the American Civil War (1861-1865) which opposed the Northern and the Southern states and started over the question of slavery.

## B/ GROUP WORK

**VIOLENCE:** what makes the scenes disturbing is their crude realism ; violence does not seem as staged or sugarcoated as in traditional action movies. The horror feels real in its bare simplicity: it happens swiftly, without any big discourse justifying or announcing it. It is also filmed from up close, which makes us feel uneasy.

**WAR:** we actually know very little about the causes of the conflict, only that it has to do with the president who seems to have seized full power and is now entrenched in the White House. This civil war is portrayed as a form of guerilla involving civilians, not just the army. The warriors themselves seem to ignore why they are shooting (see the scene at the Winterland theme park : we shoot because they shoot), which gives an absurd dimension to the conflict, seemingly driven by blind violence only. This has nothing to do with an organized conflict, fights can occur anytime, anywhere, and affect anybody. All this makes *Civil War* a very original war movie (in the line of *Apocalypse Now* which denounced the Vietnam War, a film quoted with the helicopter scene at the end) in which neither the two sides nor the stakes of the conflict are clearly defined. War becomes a mere topic to cover, the opportunity for a good story, a good photo ; its is treated in a capitalist manner, as a means to become rich and famous through photojournalism.

**CHARACTERIZATION:** we also know very little about the main characters, defined only by what they do or say within the timeframe of the plot. They are all journalists at various stages of their careers (from rookie to seasoned professional). The two men write, the two women take the pictures. Whoever they were before does not matter, nor does their family status. They only exist through their job and embody different visions of it.

**WOMEN:** There is no male gaze in the film. Lee and Jessie wear no make-up, no heels, no skirts; they are not sexualized. The women are portrayed as the men's equals and their relationships are not sexualized. The two women are the main characters and they do not need the men to exist as protagonists. This is quite rare in action or war movies, in which ladies are often reduced to the hero's love interest or mother. Here we see women taking the same risks (if not more) than the men. Also note that women are also represented among the army attacking the Capitol.

**THE LEE / JESSIE RELATIONSHIP:** One woman echoes another as one starts her career and the other ends it. This is a classic mentor/ disciple relationship, with Lee being reluctant to teach Jessie at first, as if she felt that she was going to be replaced by her. They are driven by the same thirst for the perfect shot but after Sammy's death Lee is no longer blinded by adrenaline, she is in shock. She dies to save Jessie who, after just a minute of pause, leaves her corpse alone to go on running after the ultimate scoop (the president's death, which she will get). This is a story of transmission, with Lee passing on what she knows to an innocent, then not-so-innocent and finally not-innocent-at-all Jessie. They are two ages of a same person. They are complex characters that we can at turns admire, hate or despise as we agree or not with their behavior.

**PHOTOJOURNALISM:** their job seems exciting at first, but as the movie goes we realize (along with Jessie) all the sacrifices it implies. The four characters are all after the glory behind a good story, they only live to "get there first". We see four reporters dying doing their job (Tony, Bohai, Sammy and Lee) and the others go on as usual (Jessie and Joel), as if dying was just part of the risks. At first we side with Jessie, the rookie who is still shocked by the horrors she sees, but as she becomes more professional we distance ourselves from her and her growing indifference, especially when she abandons her friend's corpse to run after a scoop. We may also wonder at the part reporters play when they merely witness and not help or partake in the events they report on. The film lets us decide what to think about photojournalism; it gives us different variations so that we can make our own opinion on it.

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** artistic photography is never mentioned but there is undeniably an artistic dimension to the pictures taken by Jessie and Lee, which the film inserts as still shots within the action. They are shown in black and white and accompanied by a discreet click sound to detach them from the rest of the images. What they show is always a bit different from what we saw in the full scene, making the point that a picture is always a summary of a story, not its full plot. The action is encapsulated in a decisive moment, sometimes in great detail but still obliterating the more general context (what happened before). This shows how opinions can be manipulated through images, with one shot saying a lot but also concealing a lot of background information.

**MUSIC AND SOUND:** sound works as a (classic) means to create suspense and sometimes fake expectations (see when they reach the house in which we hear a man who seems to be tortured, but in the end he's just agonizing alone and they





# Éléments de correction

shoot him to end his suffering). As in most war and action films, sound is enhanced to increase the impact of violence (helicopters, bullets, rifles...) and give the spectator a feeling of immersion into the action. Music is repeatedly played against type as a means to contrast with the shocking images and tone down the horror. Ex: we hear *Jingle Bells* playing during the massacre in the Winterland theme park (intradiegetic music), the forest burning to ashes with a sweet melody saying « it's all a dream » as if indeed this was not happening ; the bloody street fights becoming funky with De La Soul's *Say No Go* cheerful tune (extradiegetic music). The music desensitizes the images, dehumanizing the spectator's reaction just as it numbs the journalists' feelings, for better or worse.

**NATURE:** nature is beautifully shot, in the line of American road trip movies portraying the glory of US open spaces. Nature seems indifferent to the woes of Men (a classic motif in literature, see Jack London's novels). The huge trees in the forests they cross seem timeless compared to the absurdity of human conflicts. In time of war, there is still room for beauty (see when they gaze at the bombs like fireworks in the night).

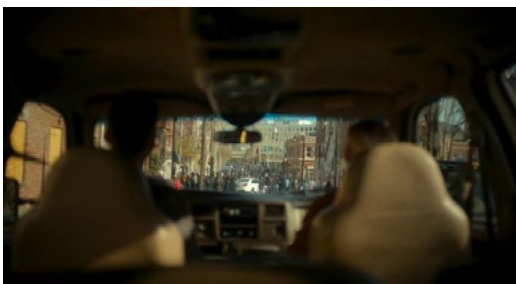
**ROAD TRIP:** the structure of the road trip allows to organize action into short episodes defined by the adventures they meet along the road. Every turn may reveal danger or introduce new characters, which creates suspense and tension. Note that the trip takes the form of a countdown (in miles, not time) from New York City to Washington DC, with inserts splitting the film in different parts. The tension increases as we approach the final stage / chapter, the attack of the Capitol. This is where the road trip stops to turn into a more classic action film.

## C/ GOING FURTHER

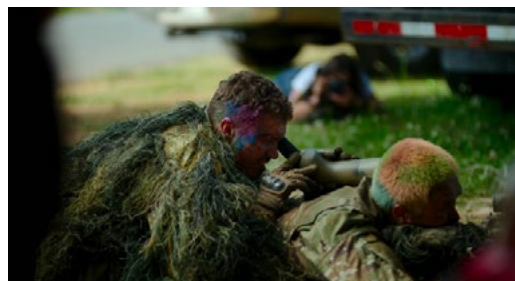
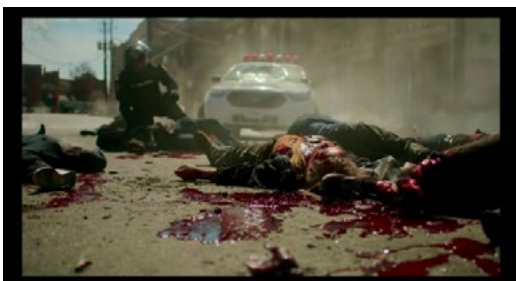
**1/a/** There are many things left unsaid and unexplained, such as why there is a civil war and what its stakes are. We don't know what year the action takes place either, we can only guess that it is set in the near future. The characters are only defined by their role in this story, we'll know nothing more about them. This is ironic because journalism is supposed to provide answers and transparency of information. Since the film begins in media res, with the war having started a while ago (the president has not given an interview for "14 months") the film avoids contextualization, which is a bold move as it forces the spectator to fill in the blanks, piecing up the narrative puzzle with the very few clues we are given (the president forcing its way through a third mandate, sending the army to counter rebellion, secessionists protesting immigration, inflation...).

**b/** This vagueness leaves the spectator frustrated as we are used to being guided into films. Here all we have is assumptions, but this is what the director wants: to make us think and exchange about the film instead of giving us lessons in democracy and freedom of speech. The film raises questions each of us can find his own answers to.

**c/** As we follow Jessie becoming a professional photo reporter we identify with her, discovering the job and the war with her. She is the "innocent" protagonist introducing us to the plot and setting. The camera is also sometimes subjective so as to create a feeling of immersion (see the following shot, in which we sit at the back of the car with Jessie).



It also stands sometimes very close to the action so we can experience what it's like to be an insider standing in a conflict. See for instance how in the next shots the camera lies at ground level with the corpses or the rebels, as if we were lying just nearby. The idea is to put us in the shoes of a photo reporter, as close to the action as allowed, so that we can ask ourselves whether this is right (to be photographing and not helping, for instance) or tolerable (could we do this job ? What would be our limit ?).





## Éléments de correction

**2/ a/** There are many elements echoing Trump's America : the president himself, claiming a third illegal mandate and sending troops to crush protests ; the attack of the Capitol at the end (see January 6, 2021) ; rebellion against inflation (see how \$400 can only get you a sandwich) ; fear and anger towards immigration (see the neonazis who kill whoever does not look or sound American enough) ; poverty and starvation creeping in (see the camp echoing the migrant camps during the Great Depression).

**b/** The film is very pessimistic as to the future of America, showing democracy failing, people becoming more and more racist and intolerant as money gets scarce. The only « happy » place (and optimistic moment) in the film is the camp where children play and people share the food they have, as if togetherness was the answer to all foes. The film poster suggests that this war is one for freedom (see the statue of Liberty) as opposed to a government defying democracy. The people rebel against an illegitimate form of power but as we can see, the secessionists are not exactly freedom fighters as they seize the opportunity of general chaos to turn into looters and liquidate the supposed enemies of the state (foreigners). The American Dream has turned into an American nightmare, a « survival of the fittest » jungle where no one is safe.

**c/** *Civil War* imagines what could have happened if Trump had been re-elected (uchronia). It shows a worst-case scenario (dystopia) based on current immigration and inflation issues.

**3/ b/** Joel is excited by violence ; he loves his job because of the adrenaline rush it gives him (he says «what a fucking rush! » after the in-house massacre). At the end, Jessie becomes like him: « I've never been scared like that, and I've never felt more alive ». The adrenaline dehumanizes them (see how the only thing Joel tells the president is "I need a quote", as if only his story mattered). Sammy is the more seasoned, if not outdated journalist, who can no longer physically follow the action but is still ready to die not just for a scoop but for his colleagues (see how he drives into the neo-Nazis to save his friends from murder). Lee is at a key moment in her career, when she has already proved what a great photo reporter she is. At the peak of her career she suddenly realizes, as she loses Sammy and almost loses Jessie, the blunt reality of her job. We are not let into her thoughts or feelings but we can see that she snaps, she can no longer do her job properly (Joel needs to protect her during the Capitol attack). As a photo reporter her time is done, she has become useless ; like Sammy, her last role consists in dying for someone else, and this someone else immediately replaces her, catching the picture they were after from the start (the dying president). The film explores all the various takes on photo journalism, leaving us free to decide whether it's a wonderful or horrible job. The film focuses on Lee first, then on Jessie as her pictures are more and more present in the frame, gradually replacing Lee's. This evolution shows that no one is irreplaceable, even the best. The two men journalists are not as important as they are journalists of words, not pictures, and the film centers on a reflection upon the power of images, not speech.

**c/** The film could be accused of making violence and horror beautiful or at least aesthetically pleasing. We see the protagonists enjoy moments of peace and contemplation, which could be seen as immoral (but who are we to judge them when we have never been in their place?). The film often echoes the beauty of Sofia Coppola's movies (especially since the heroine is played by one of her favorite actresses, Kirsten Dunst) and we can't help but thinking of *Virgin Suicides* or *Marie Antoinette*, in which the treatment of lighting and nature were pretty similar. The moral question raised (and unanswered) by the film is: is it acceptable to depict violence beautifully?

**d/ 1.** These two echoing scenes show that nothing is improvised in war. It's all about communication: what happens and how people understand it depends on the words you put on them. The multiplication of points of view in the first scenes (with the president rehearsing his speech in various tones, then Lee watching him on TV, then she taking a picture of the screen) shows the variable nature of truth, a topic often associated with Donald Trump. The film's president's interpretation of the situation (« some are already calling it the greatest victory of mankind ») denies everything the images show us (there is no sign of victory, only utter mayhem). Words, like images, are nothing but manipulative tools in politics, especially in times of war. The journalists are also ready to distort the truth (or post-truth) as they shape and reshape their questions to direct the president's answers. In the end, this interview will never happen, dialogue will fail, obliterated by violence and death. The president will be merely canceled.

**e/** The final image is maybe the most shocking of all as it shows the dead president surrounded by his killers, the US army, all smiling triumphantly. The staging is a reminder of safari trophy shots, but also echoes the war in Afghanistan shots which created a scandal a few years back as they showed US soldiers posing with the enemies they had gladly tortured and killed in the name of war (or peace ?). The image is very bright at first then gradually reveals itself as its contours darken ; this process mimics that of Jessie developing her film (contrary to Lee, she does not use a digital camera). Most spectators leaving the movie theatre before the end of the credits will not see it, which echoes (in a rather gruesome way) the surprise end-of-credits extra scenes you sometimes have at the end of children's animated films. This final image is spine-chilling and leaves us on a very negative note : violence has won, dialogue has failed, the future is uncertain as we don't know what kind of regime is coming next.



## D/ INTERTEXTUALITY AND TRIBUTES

Here are a few screenshots echoing the famous real-life pictures :



### Crédits

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