**Friday, April 12, 2024 / America at war, now in theaters**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN <Bone Cracks - BMC>

NOEL KING (host, *Today, Explained*): One in five Americans, according to recent polling from NPR, the PBS Newshour, and Marist, think that to get the US back on track, we may need to resort to violence.

Now, math nerds will deduce that’s a MINORITY of people, but it’s enough to set us on edge in a tense election year.

Into the data leaps “Civil War,” Alex Garland’s beautifully shot and beautifully acted film about journalists who almost never file, navigating the wartorn eastern seaboard on their way to Washington DC.

Is this movie spinning the polling out to its logical conclusion? Is it tempting fate? Garland has been coy. Coming up on *Today, Explained*: America at war, in theaters now.

SCORING OUT

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAfM_1RirWY)*> The Best Years of Our Lives: …then everything will settle down nicely. Unless we have another war. Then none of us have to worry, because we'll all be blown to bits the first day.*

**[THEME]**

*<BUMPER> Efim: This is Today, Explained.*

NOEL: This week, I went to an advance screening of Civil War, a movie about America that my colleague Zach Beauchamp, who also saw it, describes as having “little to say about America.”

The movie opens on the 163rd anniversary of the O-G American Civil War. So what IS Garland trying to say here?

Mark Olsen writes about movies for the LA Times.

MARK OLSEN (staff writer, Los Angeles Times): The movie, it's set in a sort of undefined near-future where America has been torn apart by a civil war…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDyQxtg0V2w)*> Civil War trailer*

*19 states have seceded.*

*The United States Army ramps up activity.*

*The White House issued warnings to the Western Forces as well as the Florida Alliance.*

*The three-term president assures the uprising will be dealt with swiftly.*

MARK: …and a group of journalists who are in New York City are attempting to make their way to Washington, D.C., to get what they assume will be the last interview with the president, who's about to be deposed by rebel forces.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDyQxtg0V2w)*> Civil War trailer*

*"They're moving to DC today."*

*"We need to go down there."*

*"They shoot journalists on sight in the capital."*

MARK: The movie is doing a number of things. First of all, I think it's just about the sense of division that many people feel, not just in this country, but in countries all over the world. So I think a lot of the movie you know, has a sort of a larger perspective than just what's happening in the United States. Although the United States, in some ways, is the prime example of a “I would never imagine that this could happen here” country.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt9cKfiaAmQ)*> Alex Garland on the Daily Show: I chose America because everybody looks to America, but the things it's talking about are quite global.*

MARK: It's interesting. Garland says he wrote the script in 2020. So most notably ahead of the events of January 6th, 2021. But yet it feels like it's very much in those same cultural currents. And those are the kind of things that you're thinking about as you're watching it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDyQxtg0V2w)*> Civil War trailer*

*“There's some kind of misunderstanding here.”*

*“What?”*

*“We're American, okay?”*

*“Okay, but what kind of American are you?”*

*<gun clicks, dramatic music plays>*

NOEL: Is this supposed to be a war movie? Is that what it's doing?

MARK: Well, I think it's operating in a sense on two tracks, as far as that goes. It's interesting in that the trailer, and a lot of the marketing materials, I think are slightly misleading, and that they do have people think they're going in to see something that's much more of a war action movie, and also much more of a kind of a red state, blue state divide movie, like an us versus them type of movie. And in actuality, because the main characters are journalists, the movie actually becomes almost more of a meditation on the ethics of photojournalism than I think most general audiences are going to be expecting.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/DiscussingFilm/status/1776280460282282172)*> Civil War scene in the car:*

*Jesse: “Why didn’t I just tell him not to shoot them?”*

*Joel: “They were probably going to kill them anyway.”*

*Jesse: “How do you know?”*

*Lee: “He doesn’t know, but that’s besides the point. Once you start asking yourself those questions, you can’t stop. So we don’t ask. We record so other people ask. Want to be a journalist? That’s the job.”*

MARK: As well, Garland, in a lot of his interviews that he's done, has talked about how he wanted to be very careful that the film be an anti-war film and that, you know, movies tend to glamorize things, and that even the movies that have an intention of seeming anti-war often become…

NOEL: Yeah, yeah.

MARK: …sort of pro-war, because just the glamorizing aspects of like, watching a cool movie and like a kind of a boss action sequence.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZbZflFfng0)*> Civil War action scene - guns, explosions, helicopters, shouting*

MARK: The movie, in some ways, continually undercuts itself. And like, is always trying to, like, not glamorize what it's depicting and trying to stay in the realm of being an anti-war film as opposed to a war film.

NOEL: The villain in the movie, such as one exists, is a third-term authoritarian president, played by Nick Offerman. And he has a kind of Trumpian bearing and delivery. The character’s not in the movie for very long, but he reminded me of Donald Trump. He has clearly reminded a lot of people of Donald Trump because people online are writing about this. If the bad guy is going to remind a lot of people of Donald Trump and we – other than that, we don't know the politics of the movie – how does this appeal to people who like Donald Trump?

MARK: Well, I think people who are Fox News viewers are going to watch it and probably feel it's for them in some ways. And people who are MSNBC viewers are going to watch it and feel it's for them, in some ways. That, I think the fact that the president in the film, it is debatable, the extent to which he does or does not seem like our former president Donald Trump. And I think also, so many of the signifiers in the movie, like who is what side, who are you kind of rooting for? What's the point of view of the journalists? Who are they embedded with? It's often sort of flipped around from what our sort of real world analogs would be, so that the rebels in the movie are not politically aligned in the same way that insurrectionists here have been in our actual United States. And so I think it's one of the things that makes the movie really complex and really fascinating, and also I think it's going to really carry it from the entertainment pages into like the editorial section and on to like news segments, is the fact that it's, like, hard to pin down, that people of different political stripes are going to be able to take what they want from this movie.

NOEL: And part of that is we don't actually know what the Civil War is about. Like, there would have been an easy way to do this, which is like, the right and the left in America go to war with each other. And I think people would have understood that – anyone who's lived through the last decade in America would have understood that. But we don't, in fact, know what happened. And I didn't like that. I'll be honest with you. I found it kind of destabilizing and, like, just just tell us what happened.

MARK: To me, I think the destabilization is the point, that the movie is not trying to make a specific political point on one side of the divide or the other. I think if anything, it's trying to get people to pay attention to, listen to, what that other side might be thinking or doing. And I think also the sort of like hallucinatory quality of the war itself and of, often the journalists encounter people and they're not it's not really clear which side of the fight they're on.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://twitter.com/TheFridaCinema/status/1777509407225414088/video/1)*> Civil War:*

*“You don’t know what side they are fighting for.”*

*“Someone’s trying to kill us. We are trying to kill them.”*

MARK: The idea of like a political side is in many ways set aside by the movie itself. And it's interesting that that is something that I think, especially for people who want the movie to have an answer, who want the movie to be making a very specific political point. It's something that is troubling and is difficult for audiences to swallow.

NOEL: Because we don't know who the good guys are.

MARK: Exactly.

NOEL: I said to you that I was frustrated by not knowing what caused the civil war, but in retrospect, I also, you know, I'm a journalist. I don't want to go to the movies and see on a movie screen, like, what I am covering day to day, but with, you know, with guns and explosions and, like, a dangerous road trip involved. So in that sense, that's kind of a freeing thing that Alex Garland did. You're watching this movie and it doesn't hew that closely to what we experience day to day or where we think this might all be headed.

MARK: That's right. I mean, I think it's interesting that there's a few references in the film to people in other states. One of the characters has family in Colorado…

NOEL: Yeah.

MARK: Another has family in Missouri. And they both say that their families are just sort of sitting this out. And on their travels, the journalists at one point go through a small town that is eerily normal, where, like there isn't fighting in the streets where shops are open and people are just sort of going about their lives.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVGP53534NA)*> Civil War:*

*“Are you guys aware there's like a pretty huge civil war going on all across America?”*

*“Oh sure. But we just try to stay out.”*

*“Stay out.”*

*“With what we see on the news, seems like it's for the best.”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“Well, let me know if you want to try anything on.”*

MARK: Even in a moment when, you know, it seems like things are so divided, even in a moment when it seems like there's a sort of constant threat of political violence, things can in some way be something like normal.

SCORING IN <High Wire - APM>

MARK: I don't know that Garland or the distributor, A24, is trying to sway the United States presidential election one way or the other. But I think at a time when people have this stuff on their minds, having a movie that they can kind of like focus on, toss these ideas around, like to me, it makes sense. I know that there's, you know, some people say, “oh, I, I've been thinking about this all the time in my own life. I don't want to go to a movie and think about this more.” But I think the conversation that we're even having right now is a great example of how a movie can help us, you know, focus, localize our thoughts, our feelings on an issue like this and maybe help come to some kind of a, you know, a bigger picture answer at the end of it.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Mark Olsen, LA Times.

Coming up: a film professor argues these kind of movies are here to help us process our deepest fears.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-heIT3L9Qg)*> The Blob trailer: How can it be stopped? Mob hysteria sweeps one city. Before long the nation and then the world could fall before the blood-curdling threat of…*

NOEL: *Today, Explained*. We’re back and we’re talking movies with Nathan Blake.

NATHAN BLAKE (professor at Northeastern University): I'm a teaching professor at Northeastern University. I primarily teach film theory, film analysis, some genre classes.

NOEL: One of his genres is… the end of the world.

NATHAN: I mean I teach a lot of things on apocalyptic film in media, or war in media, or science fiction in horror films. Right. So I think film is a really rich way of kind of addressing some of these kind of big, amorphous fears and anxieties, because it almost by definition, kind of condenses things down. It puts things in a kind of a framework that can be, you know, it's spectacular, and particularly with a lot of kind of Hollywood genre films, it can be kind of introduced, kind of worked through and ideally in some ways kind of resolved within, you know, an hour and a half or two.

NOEL: When you teach and think about fears that people have that filmmakers can help us process by putting them into movies, what kinds of fears are you talking about?

NATHAN: What I find really interesting when I teach a film history or teach genre films through history, is we can see how these things kind of continually kind of evolve. Right. What are the monsters that frightened people in the 1930s as opposed to the 50s or the 70s or today? And what does that say about a given time? They're not just simply there because it's about the jump scares. Right. So I think there's a kind of a fantasy that we can make these things kind of visible. And that's in some way is the first step of confronting and then kind of defeating those anxieties or those threats.

NOEL: I want you to tell us when we first start seeing our collective anxieties, our American, let's say, in this case, our American anxieties on film, and then walk us through the chronology, if you can, up until today.

NATHAN: Sure.

SCORING IN <Tango Darling (vintage mix) - APM>

NATHAN: From an American context, I guess, if we take Thomas Edison as the American inventor, or the inventor of American cinema, one of the first actualities, these kind of early documentary films that they released was this execution of an elephant at Coney Island.

NOEL: Aw!

NATHAN: And so they used Tesla's alternating current as this way to electrocute this elephant. It's both this kind of spectacle of this grotesque moment of death of this giant elephant. But it also speaks to these anxieties of these new technologies. In this case, electricity or industrial technologies. You know, this is of this period at the turn of the 20th century where you have, you know, a lot of people coming to cities, working in factory jobs, dealing with the shocks and kind of alienation of this new modern world. And so they go to the theater, which is also a kind of industrial technology, to see their anxieties presented on screen.

SCORING OUT

NATHAN: We see some of the very early kind of apocalyptic narratives in response to the First World War. There's a great one called The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse with Valentino in 1921. Right. So it takes both the kind of the real world, you know, World War One and gives it that kind of biblical horsemen of the apocalypse, kind of framing. But it's funny, even in 1946 with The Best Years of Our Lives, there's this little bit of this offhand reference in 1946 to the next war that seems to be around the corner. And none of us are going to survive it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAfM_1RirWY)*> The Best Years of Our Lives: You know, your folks will get used to you and you’ll get used to them. Then everything will settle down nicely. Unless we have another war. Then none of us have to worry, because we'll all be blown to bits the first day.*

NATHAN: So even as early as 1946, there's this dread of this nuclear apocalypse or annihilation. And obviously, with the aftermath of the Second World War and the nuclear bomb, you see a whole kind of new emergence of science fiction films in the 1950s, in ways that seem to conflate the Communist and anxieties about the nuclear bomb onto the body of a martian or an alien or something like that. They leave a kind of radioactive trace.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-heIT3L9Qg)*> The Blob trailer: From then on there’s no stopping the blob as it spreads from town to town.*

NATHAN: They kind of sneak into our lives. They're involved in mind control. So they kind of stand in as this kind of communist threat as well as the fears of the invisibility of nuclear radiation.

NOEL: All right. Take us from there into the 60s and 70s are a profoundly polarized time in American life. Tell us what starts to happen in the movies, in the apocalyptic movies at that point.

NATHAN: One of my favorites is Romero's Night of the Living Dead in 1968.

NOEL: Mmm.

SCORING IN <Night Of The Living Dead (1968) Main Theme>

NATHAN: And what I love about The Night of Living Dead and part of, I think, it's progressive bent is that it sets up another kind of trope we see with so many of the contemporary zombie movies. There’s kind of this siege mentality. We have to build a wall, barricade ourselves in, protect ourselves from this outside other. The kind of the mass or the horde from the outside.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8L6CtsqDE4)*> Night of the Living Dead:*

*“We have to go out and get Johnny. He's out there. Please, don't you hear me? We've got to go out and get him!”*

NATHAN: But what happens with so many of Romero's movies from the 60s through the 70s and 80s and on, is that it's the humans on the inside are the ones that turn on each other.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8L6CtsqDE4)*> Night of the Living Dead:*

*“Helen, I have to get that gun.”*

*“Haven't you had enough?!”*

NATHAN: It's the family fighting against each other, or it's these petty squabbles over material in the shopping mall or whatever it is. Also what I love about those movies is that there's a kind of a fantasy sometimes with apocalyptic films, right, that it's about this return to a state of nature, it's a new kind of state of lawlessness, a state of kind of anarchy in a way that's almost like a contemporary version of the Western, that you're free of the kind of alienating drudgery of your everyday life. At least I don't have to go to my day job. Romero's films don't offer any kind of escape.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: What about the war movies of the time? So the country in the 70s is processing the Vietnam War. How do movies depict that anxiety on screen?

NATHAN: It's funny, one that I like to use as an example is, it's a kind of a maybe a little bit of a forgotten one, but Little Big Man with Dustin Hoffman. He's this Anglo white character, but he kind of makes his way into a couple of Native American tribes during the old Wild West period. You know, and what is the most kind of mythic American spirit genre, right, is of the Western.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vO_v1HtY2lw)*> Little Big Man: sound of gunshots, screaming*

NATHAN: But in this Vietnam War era, you have Dustin Hoffman living with these Indians, and Custer shows up and just massacres everybody. Sets fire to the teepees, shoots everybody in the back. You know, women and children and stuff like that. And it's this horrific kind of scene. And it was released, just a few months after the news reports of the My Lai massacre.

NOEL: Wow.

NATHAN: So you're taking this kind of mythic trope of, you know, cowboys and Indians. But using it as this allegorical framework for the war in Vietnam and the kind of demythologizing the American myth to kind of critique the kind of genocidal underpinnings of America's founding.

NOEL: We got through the 70s and then we get into the 80s. Again, America is changing. We have different kinds of anxieties. What are the movies reflecting at us at that point?

SCORING IN <Eighties Traxx - APM>

NATHAN: I think some of the signature elements of the 1980s, in some ways it's a kind of a beginning, you see, kind of a backlash against the second-wave feminism, women entering into the workplace or Roe v Wade. You get a lot of demonic children.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dClKllEv5MU)*> Children of the Corn, 1984:*

*“Kill! Kill! Kill!*

NATHAN: Or from a kind of reactionary male perspective. It's women entering the workplace. It's jobs going overseas, computers entering the workplace. So you see, in very two very different movies in some ways, but RoboCop, who becomes a kind of a product.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1_Pw563opc)*> RoboCop:*

*“This guy's really good.”*

*“He's not a guy. He's a machine.”*

*“What are they gonna do, replace us?”*

NATHAN: It's the kind of corporate capitalism, taking over the police force, privatizing sort of everything, which really challenges our sense of autonomy, in that case, the kind of male cop autonomy. Or a movie like Die Hard, which the whole kind of initial premise is that he's estranged from his wife, who's gone across the country to work for a Japanese company. And then he has this kind of High Noon kind of standoff against these bank robbers.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnQEo4bazIo)*> Die Hard:*

*“Happy trails, Hans.”*

NATHAN: So I think a lot of this is this kind of backlash against automation, women entering the workplace, as well as obviously a kind of renewed anxieties about nuclear war.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: And then 22 years ago, we get the movie 28 Days Later, which is an apocalyptic film about zombies, not so much zombies, but like a virus makes everybody really aggressive. And that is written by Alex Garland. What do the movies of the more recent era, what fears are we working through in these movies?

NATHAN: Yeah, that's a really interesting one. And it's funny in terms of the timing, because it's my understanding that some of the stuff they shot for 28 Days Later kind of predates 9/11, and it sort of read kind of, I guess retroactively as something that kind of evokes this 9/11 with the wanted or missing posters and all of this kind of stuff. This kind of, lifeless, evacuated downtown London. And what I find interesting is the kind of a point of distinction from the very slow zombies of Romero. But with 28 Days later, it's this shock of the suddenness.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8FbMY-quW4)*> 28 Days Later:*

*Listen! The animals are contagious. The infection is in their blood and saliva. One bite… Stop! Stop! You’ve no idea! <monkeys screeching, humans screaming>*

NATHAN: It also has this hyper violent, hyperkinetic, out of nowhere kind of thing. So even if it was, you know, primarily shot before 9/11, I think it speaks to this moment of fear of terrorism. Something that seems to come out of the blue and take us unaware.

NOEL: And where have we been? What time period have we been in since then? What are we seeing?

NATHAN: Well, it's funny, I think throughout a lot of the early 2000s, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, you see these allegories of invasion, not unlike, I guess, Star Wars in the post-Vietnam era, where Americans or humans or whoever get to be the kind of underdog, that we fight off some kind of alien invasion in Battle: Los Angeles or whatever.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yt7ofokzn04)*> Battle: Los Angeles:*

*“When you invade a place for its resources, you wipe out the indigenous population. Right now we are being colonized.”*

NATHAN: So we can be these kind of underdogs that fight for our country in a way that doesn't have all of the kind of ugly moral ambiguity of our contemporary conflicts.

NOEL: And that brings us to the present day, where our contemporary conflict, in a lot of ways, is internal, right?

NATHAN: Mm hm.

NOEL: It's the United States and against the United States. And, you know, I don't want to overstate it, but people have been using the language of civil war for about five, six years now, right, since the Trump administration, are we going to descend into that? There's been a lot of discussion about whether a movie like Civil War coming out at a time like this either could prevent or inspire what it depicts, what is depicted on screen.

NATHAN: Mm.

NOEL: And there's some part of me that thinks, oh, come on, it's ridiculous that Americans see a movie about a civil war. And then we, like, turn on each other. And yet I sat there in the theater thinking exactly that. “Oh dear God, I hope no one is inspired by this movie.” What? What is the conversation around? Does it prevent a thing? Does it inspire a thing? Or in the end, is it just a movie?

NATHAN: In some ways, I think when we say things are “just a movie” is when they can work the most on us.

NOEL: Ooh.

NATHAN: That it lets our guard down. Yeah. And I have that similar kind of hesitation. This is not going to be the one thing that causes a civil war or something. But what do movies do is they continually think and rethink it and re-present it to us. Maybe the same ways that we think of another civil war as being something that's some kind of apocalyptic, impossible event, but we're continually reimagining it and restaging it.

SCORING IN <Global Motion - APM>

NATHAN: My kind of concern right now is the degree to which it's a movie that kind of helps us work through some of these divisions, or is it just going to be more fuel for the fire.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Northeastern University’s Nathan Blake.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Lissa Soep <<SOH-epp>. Laura Bullard is our fact-checker and Rob Byers engineered. I’m Noel King.

It’s *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**