

Truth, lies, and video

***Civil War* and *Fly Me to the Moon* share an awareness of how malleable and fragile our sense of shared truth is in a world dominated by images.**

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Cailie Spaeny as aspiring photojournalist, Jessie, in *Civil War* (Murray Close / Courtesy of A24)

*Civil War* (directed by Alex Garland) mounted a massive ad campaign to sell the movie as a summer blockbuster fueled by the dark energies pulsing out of the wound of January 6. Knowing little beyond what I saw in the trailer, I went into the theater with my liberal blood boiling, expecting a dystopic war fantasy wrapped in tragic heroism, film-length clickbait for all the disaffected bros ready to prove their masculinity with a gun.

I am not sure I have ever been so misled by a movie trailer to such powerful effect. The film follows a crew of war journalists—Lee (Kirsten Dunst), her partner Joel (Wagner Moura), veteran journalist Sammy (Stephen McKinley Henderson), and young protégé Jessie (Cailee Spaeny)—traveling from New York to DC hoping to get photographs of the US president before a group called the Western Forces overthrows the federal government. As they travel south, mostly on backroads to avoid decimated highways, they stumble across violence both mundane and spectacular, from full-out battles between the warring armies to unexplained shoot-outs. “You don’t even know who you are shooting at,” Joel says to two men in full camouflage who are trading shots with a mystery shooter in a house on a hill above them. “Who’s giving you orders?”

“No one’s giving us orders, man. Someone’s trying to kill us. We’re trying to kill them,” the shooter responds, without taking his eyes off the scope of his gun.

The basic outlines of the war are established in a few voice-overs and news reports: Texas and California have formed the Western Forces and seceded from the Union, while a group called the Florida Alliance seems to be its own third force. The current president (Nick Offerman) is a kind of Trump proxy whose actions probably precipitated this chaos. But none of this is explained. We don’t know who is fighting for what or what each side stands for. No matter whose rhetoric might have gotten the war started, in the end war is just people trying to kill each other before they get killed. Rather than glorifying war, the film is artful and meditative, making us feel the pointlessness of this violence, how unglamorous and exhausting and unheroic it is.

I saw *Fly Me to the Moon* (directed by Greg Berlanti) because of how much I loved *Civil War*. They really couldn’t be more different, but I recognized a similar impulse to unravel fantasies and conspiracies by tapping into the forces that motivate them. *Fly Me to the Moon* is a romantic comedy doubling as an afterschool special intended to gently debunk the conspiracy theory that the US government faked the lunar landings.

It’s the late 1960s, and JFK’s promise to put a man on the moon is about to expire. Public support and congressional funding for the Apollo missions have dried up. Moe Berkus (Woody Harrelson)—one of those deep state agents, in conspiracy parlance, who pulls the levers of power and the wool over the American people’s eyes—hires Kelly Jones (Scarlett Johansson), a fast-talking New York advertising guru, to sell the

lunar program to the American people. Before long Kelly has astronauts on cereal boxes and endorsement deals with everything from toothpaste to Rolex watches. As the country rallies behind the space program, the stakes of a successful landing skyrocket—so Moe demands that they film a fake landing just in case. Soon enough, Moe decides it will be better to use the fake version even if the lunar mission is successful—the mission is about optics, after all, and a controlled, orchestrated version will always be superior to the chaos of real life, right?

Kelly usually has no qualms about the level of deception her job requires. Advertising is just a legal con game, she confesses to launch director Cole Davis (Channing Tatum). But Cole's straight-shooting, all-American righteousness starts to rattle her easygoing attitude toward the truth. As an enemies-to-lovers romance begins to blossom, Kelly discovers that the only thing better than selling anything is selling the truth. The problem, of course, is that once you start manipulating perceptions it can be hard to tell what is true anymore. The film crescendos into a madcap farce to settle the conspiracy debate once and for all.

*Fly Me to the Moon* is not a great movie. The pacing is halting, and I never believed the chemistry between the star-crossed lovers. It's half-baked both as a breezy romantic comedy and as a stirring patriotic ode to the glories of the space program. But I appreciate how much it understands the fundamental distrust toward manipulation that sits at the heart of conspiracy thinking. There is nothing conspiratorial, the movie suggests, in thinking the US government might manipulate the American public for its own self-perpetuating gains. By making this manipulation the punch line of the plot, it makes the audience the knowing insiders who can both see through the sales pitch and also, hopefully, still be stirred by the truth.

*Civil War* shares the same awareness of how malleable and fragile our sense of shared truth is in a world dominated by images. Even if we have the photographs from the front line or the video footage from the moon, will we—can we?—trust what we see? Both films can only explore this reliance on images in their own visual mediums, and both rely on a bait and switch in their own marketing spin: come for the conspiracy theory, stay for the truth! I can't tell whether fighting fire with fire will slow the conflagration of our democracy or just burn it down faster. "Every time I survived a war zone, I thought I was sending a warning home," Lee says to Jessie, "don't do this." Garland is sending the same message to his audience. It remains to be seen if we are paying attention.