POLITICAL AND IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN WARFARE (2025): VISUALIZING MIDDLE EASTERN MUSLIMS IN POST-9/11 AMERICAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Warfare (2025), a post-9/11 American war film, represents the political and identity positioning of Middle Eastern Muslims. Using Edward Said's Orientalism, Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory, and qualitative textual–cinematic analysis, the research explores how the film frames American military subjectivity while minimizing the visibility and agency of Middle Eastern Muslim characters. The study aims to understand how the film's narrative structure and visual choices shape ideological meaning and reinforce familiar patterns of representation in war cinema. The findings show that the film employs a subtle but persistent strategy of erasure, portraying Iraqi civilians only in brief, backgrounded moments without dialogue, cultural detail, or narrative importance. In contrast, the emotional and psychological experiences of U.S. soldiers are depicted with depth and consistency, encouraging viewers to align with American perspectives. These representational patterns ultimately reaffirm Orientalist hierarchies and support a broader legitimization of U.S. militarism within contemporary cinematic storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, American cinema has persistently depicted Middle Eastern Muslims through reductive and stereotypical frameworks that predominantly associate this group with terrorism, violence, and the construct of "Otherness." (Said, 1978; Shaheen, 2001). These portrayals extend beyond the scope of action and thriller genres, spreading into the war film genre, which frequently centers on conflicts in the Middle East. Such cinematic representations tend to reinforce negative perceptions of Muslims and Middle Eastern societies, contributing to a simplified and often misleading public understanding. In the context of ongoing geopolitical instability and social tensions worldwide, film functions as a potent cultural medium that shapes and influences popular attitudes and perceptions (Kellner, 1995). Consequently, these portrayals present significant challenges, as they continue to spread deeply rooted negative views and discriminatory attitudes but also have the potential to impact foreign policy decisions and political stances toward Middle Eastern nations. Within this

framework, war films among the most commercially successful and widely viewed genres in the United States play a pivotal role by frequently advancing patriotic narratives that construct the "enemy" in narrowly defined and ideologically charged terms (Dittmer, 2010; Alford, 2010). Such construction rely on the broader orientalist that not only defines the "Orient" as a threatening and aggressive but simultaneously positions the "Occident" embodied through American military and political identity as rational, moral, and civilizational. This dynamic underscores the importance of thoughtful analysis of cinematic representations and their broader sociopolitical implications in shaping discourse and public understanding regarding the Middle East.

The film Warfare (2025) stands out as a distinctive contribution within the body of Hollywood war cinema. Rather than offering a broad overview of the Iraq conflict, the narrative narrows its focus to the intimate and personal experiences of American soldiers, particularly those within the Navy SEAL units, highlighting the psychological burdens and traumas they endure. Notably, the film largely marginalizes the perspectives and lived realities of local inhabitants, especially Middle Eastern Muslims, who are typically the primary victims of such conflicts. This narrative choice is significant for critical analysis, as it illustrates how dominant war cinema discourses can evolve to sideline or silence the viewpoint of the "Other" (Hall, 1997; Said, 1978). Furthermore, Warfare reveals the processes through which American soldier identities are constructed within the wartime context, thereby reinforcing the hegemonic American narrative commonly found in mainstream media. In doing so, the film strengthens the dichotomy between the humanized Occidental self and the marginalized Oriental Other. A deeper understanding of how Warfare depicts these experiences and identities provides important insights into the symbolic and political power relations embedded within popular cultural productions.

Building upon gaps highlighted in previous research, this study analyzes how Warfare (2025) constructs American soldier identity and political subjectivity within the representational framework of post-9/11 war cinema. The film, set during a 2006 Navy SEAL mission in Ramadi, Iraq, offers an intimate portrayal of the emotional and physical burdens endured by U.S. military personnel. However, it deliberately omits the voices and perspectives of Middle Eastern Muslim civilians, those most affected by the violence, revealing a representational strategy that aligns with orientalist logics. Rather than presenting a neutral narrative, the film reinforces postcolonial hierarchies by silencing the "Other" and positioning American trauma as the central focus of moral and emotional engagement. This imbalance reproduces the core orientalist structure in which Occidental subjectivity becomes the default center of meaning, legitimacy, and humanity. Through this omission, Warfare contributes to a larger ideological agenda that upholds U.S. cultural and military dominance, all while appearing to promote realism and empathy.

Utilizing Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (1978) alongside Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory (1994) particularly his concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry. This study examines how Warfare (2025) reproduces orientalist assumptions and sustains postcolonial hierarchies through selective narrative framing. The purposeful exclusion of Middle Eastern Muslim perspectives functions as an ideological mechanism that centers American trauma, humanizes militarized identities, and reinforces hegemonic discourses of moral superiority and the legitimacy of U.S. military intervention. This process ultimately reinforces the moral authority of the Occident while rendering the Orient silent within the cinematic frame.

Through this theoretical lens, Warfare is understood not merely as a personal account drawn from the lived experience of co-director and former Navy SEAL Ray

Mendoza, but as a representational artifact that constructs and circulates ideological narratives. The film's reliance on real-time, testimony-driven storytelling positions it as a notable contribution to contemporary war cinema, one that both reflects and reinforces dominant representations of the Middle East and the legitimization of U.S. military presence. By foregrounding American soldier experiences while marginalizing or erasing the Middle Eastern Muslim "Other," the film reinforces an ideological project that legitimizes U.S. interventionism and silences counter-narratives. Thus, this study offers a critical intervention in the field of film and cultural studies by revealing how symbolic and political power is constructed, maintained, and visualized within cinematic representations of war.

Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism and Postcolonialism, and complemented by insights from Film Studies, this study investigates two key issues. First, it examines how the marginalization or omission of Middle Eastern Muslim representation in the film exemplifies orientalist practices and reflects underlying postcolonial power relations. Second, it explores how, through these theoretical frameworks and cinematic strategies such as narrative structure and genre conventions, the political representation in Warfare contributes to the construction and perpetuation of hegemonic American narratives within contemporary war cinema.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how post-9/11 Western cinema portrays Middle Eastern Muslims, emphasizing the persistence of Orientalist imagery and postcolonial power hierarchies. Studies consistently reveal that, despite occasional symbolic gestures of inclusion, Muslim characters remain confined within Western narrative control. Smith et al. (2021), in Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies, analyzed 200 globally popular films (2017–2019) and found that over 90% lacked a single Muslim character, while only 1.6% of speaking roles were Muslim. Those few appearances were mostly linked to negative stereotypes associating Muslims with terrorism or violence. These findings highlight the systematic erasure of Muslims, especially from the Middle East, reducing their presence to visual tropes of post-9/11 threat.

Kiran et al. (2021) deepened this discussion through a qualitative analysis of 30 post-9/11 Hollywood films featuring Muslim characters. Their study found that these characters were seldom given narrative depth or emotional complexity. Instead, they typically appeared as antagonists, extremists, or plot devices for Western protagonists who were often positioned as soldiers or moral heroes. This pattern closely reflects theories of Othering and Orientalism, as Muslim figures remain politically, emotionally, and morally distant from the central narrative logic, even when they are present.

Bajuwaiber (2024), in Political Narratives of the Arab World in Hollywood Cinema, employs semiotic and critical discourse analysis to examine Arab representation. He argues that post-9/11 Western films routinely depict the Arab world as chaotic, regressive, threatening, and morally backward. These portrayals erase the region's complex social, economic, and political realities while legitimizing Western military interventions and reinforcing hegemonic narratives, stripping communities of their historical and geopolitical contexts.

Together, these studies expose the persistence of orientalist and imperial logics in American war cinema. Yet, recent films like Warfare (2025), which center exclusively on American soldiers while erasing the voice of the Other, remain underexplored. Smith et al. highlight this erasure, Kiran et al. reveal narrative flatness, and Bajuwaiber uncovers the ideological use of visual framing to sustain Western dominance. However, these works stop

short of treating erasure as a deliberate ideological strategy. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing Warfare (2025) through an integrated Orientalism and Postcolonial Theory lens, examining how the film not only misrepresents Muslims but renders them invisible.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on textual and cinematic analysis. The interdisciplinary design integrates Orientalism, Postcolonial theory, and Film Studies, allowing the study to examine both ideological and aesthetic dimensions of representation. Such an approach provides the critical tools necessary to understand how cinematic texts construct identity, reinforce cultural hierarchies, and perpetuate hegemonic narratives.

Edward Said's framework of Orientalism (1978) is applied as the primary lens to investigate the construction of the "Other," specifically Middle Eastern Muslims, within Warfare (2025). This framework highlights how omission, stereotyping, and erasure function as ideological strategies in war cinema. Complementing this, Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory (1994), particularly his concepts of ambivalence provides a critical framework for understanding how postcolonial power relations are negotiated in ways that portray American military subjectivity as layered and complex, while ultimately reaffirming its dominance.

At the same time, the study draws on analytical tools from Film Studies, including genre theory, narrative structure, and cinematic language such as mise-en-scène, framing (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013), to explore how technical and aesthetic features of Warfare (2025) contribute to the reinforcement or concealment of hegemonic discourse. In this way, the methodology situates ideological critique within the material and formal practices of cinema.

Data collection was conducted through repeated and systematic viewing of Warfare (2025). Each viewing focused on documenting visual details, dialogue, narrative structures, and representational strategies relevant to the construction of identity and power. This process emphasized both explicit discursive elements such as the centralization of the American soldier's perspective and implicit strategies, including the symbolic erasure of Middle Eastern Muslim figures.

This study adopts a visual-cinematic approach to investigate how elements such as lighting, framing, costume, and intentional gaps in the visual field contribute to the process of Othering. By examining how these formal and narrative techniques reinforce Orientalist power relations while presenting the American subject in a more humanized way, the analysis uncovers the film's underlying ideological position.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Politics of Representation: Constructing and Erasing Middle Eastern Muslim Identity through Orientalism
    A. **Erasure and Marginalization of Middle Eastern Muslim Identity**

One of the defining features of Warfare (2025) is its systematic erasure of Middle Eastern Muslim identity from the cinematic frame. Iraqi civilians, particularly those living in Ramadi, are stripped of narrative roles and reduced to fleeting presences on the margins of the American military storyline. Their absence is not merely a technical cinematic choice but an ideological one: it reflects a deeper ideological stance that renders local communities nameless and voiceless. Civilians appear nameless, voiceless, and devoid of sustained dialogue. For instance, in the scene where the Navy SEALs search for a house to

establish as a base. The camera follows only U.S. forces navigating deserted night streets, while Iraqi civilians remain entirely visible.

Figure 1. The camera follows only US troops moving down a deserted night street, while Iraqi civilians are either invisible or ignored

The film goes further than mere misrepresentation, it constructs what can be described as an "aesthetics of disappearance." Urban environments are depicted as void of civilian life. Schools, religious rituals, and family interactions are nowhere to be seen. Even the market, a space that typically embodies social interaction and cultural vitality, is recast as a zone of threat where Iraqi insurgents surveil the SEALs' compound under camouflage. These figures do not speak, nor are they individualized. They serve merely as atmospheric markers of danger or uncertainty, rather than people with lives of their own. Ramadi is represented as an empty battlefield-in-waiting, with drone shots emphasizing deserted settlements devoid of inhabitants. Through this visual strategy, the city is cut off from its cultural and historical roots, existing solely as a site for American intervention.

Figure 2. The city of Ramadi is depicted as an empty battleground, with drone footage emphasizing the abandoned settlements devoid of inhabitants

This erasure also extends to the auditory domain. The film rarely includes Arabic dialogue or translations that provide contextual meaning. For instance, when the SEALs raid a civilian home to establish their base, there is no substantive exchange between the family and the soldiers. The only sounds that break the silence are terrified screams as the family is threatened at gunpoint. Later, when insurgents discover the American base, the film further simplifies and distorts linguistic nuance by misappropriating the term jihad, reinforcing reductive narratives about Muslim identity.

Spotter: "Looks like they are getting a jihad."
Civilians from the market: "Allahu Akbar Allahu Akbar"
Soldier: "Captain Erik, it's not good. They said they call all of Muslims for jihad. Jihad to come now, to kill you, to kill Americans."

The result is a sonic landscape where Arabic loses its everyday communicative depth and is turned into something unfamiliar and threatening. Religious phrases that usually carry spiritual meaning are reshaped into sounds of tension, transforming sacred utterances into cinematic cues of danger. Through this reframing, Islamic symbols are not allowed to speak on their own terms but are re-coded as warnings that heighten tension and mark cu ltural differences. This auditory strategy reinforces a sense of Otherness while denying Muslim voices interpretive agency.

This logic of erasure aligns with Edward Said's theory of Orientalist representation, in which the "East" exists only in relation to the "West." In Warfare (2025), the Middle East is not presented as a lived or dynamic space but as an absence that makes American military heroism possible. The silencing of Muslim characters reflects a broader post-9/11 cinematic trend in which Muslims are either erased altogether or coded exclusively as terrorists (Smith et al., 2021). In Warfare, absence itself becomes a form of representation. Silence is weaponized as ideology, transforming nonexistence into political meaning. Within this framework, absence itself becomes a form of representation.

Within this Orientalist dynamic, the film sustain the binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident. The erasure of the Middle Eastern presences function to elevate the Occident, represented through American soldiers, as civilized, rational, and morally superior. By removing the visibility and humanity of Iraqi civilians, the film positions the Occident as the natural bearer of order and authority, while the Orient is constructed only as a threat or an absence to be controlled. Thus, even silence becomes a tool for establishing Western dominance.

From a postcolonial perspective, this erasure constitutes an ideological articulation that secures global power relations. The presence of the U.S. military is legitimized precisely because the Iraqi populace, its narrative interlocutor, is never granted space to exist. Through this contrast, the film implicitly asserts the superiority of the Occident, presenting Western intervention as necessary and justified against a supposedly unstable and voiceless Orient. In this sense, Warfare (2025) presents the Middle East as an "empty space" awaiting occupation, control, and management by the West.

From a postcolonial standpoint, this strategy of silencing operates as a means of maintaining global hierarchies. By excluding Iraqi civilians from meaningful participation, the film legitimizes U.S. military authority and intervention. This imagined emptiness of the Middle Eastern landscape operates simultaneously as a narrative strategy and an ideological device, framing the region as a space awaiting Western occupation, regulation, and control.

This pattern of cinematic silencing underscores what Bhabha (1994) terms the ambivalence of colonial discourse: the colonized are rendered simultaneously hyper-visible as a threat and invisible as subjects. The strategic absence of Iraqi civilians ensures that American soldiers remain the only agents of history, while Middle Eastern Muslims are confined to the margins of perception. Such representational tactics extend beyond Warfare and resonate with earlier depictions in films like American Sniper (2014) and The Hurt Locker (2008), both of which emphasize U.S. military subjectivity while effacing local voices (Kiran et al., 2021). In this way, Warfare does not merely reproduce Orientalist tropes but radicalizes them by transforming silence itself into a representational strategy. This transformation has profound ideological implications: it normalizes military occupation as a humanitarian necessity by disallowing alternative viewpoints from entering the narrative frame (Bajuwaiber, 2024). The Middle East thus becomes legible to Western audiences only through the prism of absence, a void that American heroism must fill.

Figure 3. War Zone Landscape

One of the clearest sites of marginalization in Warfare (2025) is dialogue. American soldiers are granted extensive conversations about strategy, tactics, and personal matters such as family, cultivating intimacy and empathy that align the audience with their emotional world. By contrast, Iraqi characters are rendered nearly mute. When they do speak, their utterances are reduced to brief warnings, and even the family whose home is seized as a military base barely speaks. No extended dialogue provides Iraqis the opportunity to articulate perspectives on the war, effectively denying them narrative agency.

Even when Muslims appear on screen, their language is erased through the absence of translation or stripped of narrative significance. In one scene, an Iraqi family inside the base tries to speak, but the camera quickly shifts back to the Americans' reactions. The soldiers tell them to stay quiet, without making any effort to understand what they are saying. As a result, their voices fade into the background, reinforcing the hierarchy of who is allowed to speak and be heard.

Figure 4. American soldiers telling an Iraqi family at the base to remain silent and not move

Religious symbols are subjected to a similar pattern of erasure. Mosques are conspicuously absent throughout the film, neither depicted as architectural landmarks nor represented as vibrant communal spaces. This omission eliminates any visual anchor for religious life, contributing to the flattening of local cultural presence. Rather than engaging with religion as part of everyday social reality, the film sidelines it entirely, denying audiences any sense of how faith structures community dynamics. Islamic attire such as hijabs and robes is filmed only from a distance, functioning as surface-level markers of otherness rather than being portrayed as layered cultural or spiritual expressions.

B. Ambivalence and the Controlled Other

The representational politics in Warfare (2025) are articulated through ambivalence rather than overt patriotic glorification. Instead of celebrating decisive military victories, the film foregrounds emotions such as fear, exhaustion, and uncertainty. Critics have pointed out that the depicted skirmishes often end without resolution, and the narrative closes not with triumph but with fatigue and disorientation. On the surface, this framing appears to offer a critical perspective on war, portraying it as chaotic and morally complex.

However, this apparent critique is constrained by the film's narrowly controlled point of view. The narrative focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of U.S. soldiers, allowing little space for Iraqi perspectives to emerge. Visually, this is reinforced through tight framing within military vehicles and enclosed spaces, where the outside world is visible only through narrow, dust-covered windows. This restricted visual field confines viewers to the perceptual frame of American soldiers, positioning their emotional and psychological states as the primary lens through which the war is experienced. As a result, the film adopts an ambivalent ideological position, appearing critical while ultimately reaffirming American centrality. This centralization underscores the cinematic construction of the Occident as the rational, humanized, and morally burdened project,

established against the marginalized Orient whose presence exist only as fragments in the American perceptual field.

The film's aesthetic choices further intensify this ambivalence. Unlike many contemporary war films that employ shaky handheld camerawork to evoke instability, Warfare (2025) relies on a measured and deliberate visual style. Camera movements are smooth, compositions are symmetrical, and interior scenes use a warm and muted color palette. Exterior shots emphasize bright natural light and dusty tones, creating a visual atmosphere that is simultaneously exposed and emotionally detached.

Figure 5. shows American soldiers on the roof of a building with a symmetrical composition and a static camera, observing the Iraqi urban space from above

The logic of the Controlled Other is most evident in how Iraqi figures are represented. Civilians and insurgents appear within the frame but are rarely afforded narrative agency or interiority. They are frequently depicted through the soldiers' optical devices, such as rifle scopes, distant windows, or silhouetted rooftops, which position them as either latent threats or passive features of the American military landscape. Instances of Iraqi suffering are mediated through the emotional responses of U.S. soldiers, exemplifying Spivak's (1988) notion of the "allowable subaltern appearance," in which the Other can surface only within carefully regulated boundaries that sustain Western narrative dominance. Through this representational system, the Orient is maintained as a controlled object of surveillance, while interpretive power remains monopolized by the Occident.

Figure 6. shows the shadow of an Iraqi citizen seen through the sights of an American soldier

Through its tightly managed visual and narrative strategies, Warfare (2025) constructs a controlled representational economy. Iraqi figures primarily function to intensify narrative tension and raise moral stakes, while interpretive authority remains firmly with American characters. This dynamic illustrates how ambivalence and control operate together. The film appears to question the realities of war, yet ultimately reinforces existing power structures by keeping interpretation confined to a U.S.-centered perspective. Although the film masks it ideological agenda behind emotional complexity, it ultimately reproduces the foundational Orientalist binary in which the Occident speaks, interprets, and feels, while the Orient is seen, managed, and controlled.

Constructing Power: Narrative, Genre, and the Formation of American Military Subjectivity

A. Construction of American Military Subjectivity

In marked opposition to the silence surrounding Iraqi civilians, Warfare (2025) devotes extensive narrative and aesthetic attention to shaping American soldiers as fully developed subjects. The Navy SEALs are portrayed not merely as military operatives carrying out strategic objectives but as individuals with complex emotional lives, personal histories, and internal struggles. Through this focus, the film humanizes the soldiers, granting them depth and individuality that are conspicuously withheld from their Iraqi counterparts. This contrast constructs a binary in which the American soldier embodies the civilized and emotionally articulate Occident, positioned against the voiceless undefined Orient.

The film's formal techniques further consolidate this focus on the soldiers' subjectivity. The camera often dwells on their exhausted faces, illuminated with warm or naturalistic lighting that encourages empathy and emotional identification from the viewer. During moments of crisis, the camera lingers on their faces with stable framing and naturalistic lighting, enhancing emotional immediacy and encouraging empathy from the audience. These stylistic choices frame the SEALs as both valorous figures and vulnerable

human beings burdened by the psychological and ethical weight of war. A particularly powerful scene captures a soldier writhing in pain after an explosive injury, his bloodied body filling the frame in a close-up shot that foregrounds suffering and evokes visceral emotional engagement.

Figure 7. Close-up of a soldier injured by an explosion, showing both the physical suffering and the emotional involvement of the audience

This narrative structure reflects what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) terms ambivalence, a simultaneous critique and reinforcement of dominant power. On one hand, the film seems to question militarism by foregrounding the psychological toll on American soldiers. showing them fractured and vulnerable rather than unblemished heroes. Yet beneath that critical veneer the story recenters American pain as the emotional anchor. Trauma, loss, and sacrifice are framed as distinctly American experiences, while Iraqi suffering goes largely unrepresented. In this way, the film condemns the brutality of war even as it reaffirms the primacy of American subjectivity. Thus, American emotional suffering becomes a vehicle through which the Occident reasserts moral authority and self-legitimization.

The effect is a hegemonic inversion: although American soldiers are shown as wounded and fragile, their suffering ultimately legitimizes military intervention. Brotherhood, wounds, trauma, and memories of the SEALs are highlighted as deeply humanizing.

Figure 8. The scene shows the camaraderie, injuries, and psychological scars of the SEALs, emphasizing the emotional depth and subjectivity of the individuals

Yet, the absence of space for Iraqi Muslims to narrate their pain and trauma produces a hierarchy of life: American lives are deemed grievable, while Iraqi lives are relegated to the background of conflict. The wounds of Navy SEALs become the moral center of the narrative, ensuring the war is remembered as an American tragedy rather than an Iraqi one. Thus, the humanization of U.S. soldiers paradoxically reinforces ideological hierarchy, channeling sympathy upward rather than across. This asymmetry reproduces the Orientalist binary in which the Occident possesses full humanity and emotional depth, while the Orient remains reduced to silence, abstraction, and functional presence.

Figure 9. Comparison of the absence of Iraqi civilian narratives with the suffering of American soldiers

The result is what can be described as a hegemonic reversal. American soldiers are portrayed as fragile and wounded, yet their suffering becomes the very mechanism that morally justifies military intervention. Through scenes of camaraderie, injury, and psychological scars, the film humanizes the SEALs, presenting their lives as uniquely valuable and deserving of empathy. Meanwhile, Iraqi perspectives are almost entirely absent, producing a moral imbalance in which American lives are framed as "grievable," while Iraqi lives are pushed to the margins, rendered invisible within the spectacle of conflict. The emotional weight of the narrative rests on the soldiers' pain, reframing the war as an American tragedy rather than one shared by both sides. Instead of challenging power, this form of humanization reinforces it, directing sympathy upward toward those who already hold narrative dominance.

This emphasis on American military subjectivity reflects what Butler (2009) calls the "differential distribution of grievability," in which some lives are constructed as mournable while others remain outside the scope of empathy. By centering the soldier's inner world, Warfare frames American trauma as a universal experience, while Iraqi suffering is rendered not only absent but structurally irrelevant. This selective humanization parallels trends in post-9/11 cinema, where Western soldiers are portrayed with psychological complexity, whereas local populations remain anonymous and marginalized. Furthermore, this framing aligns with Orientalist logics: the U.S. soldier becomes the privileged lens through which the Middle East is interpreted (Said, 1978). In this way, the politics of empathy is mobilized as a tool, ensuring that the film's apparent critique of war simultaneously reinforces American centrality. In this sense, Warfare culturally establishes the Occident as the central source of meaning, agency and emotional legitimacy, solidifying a representational hierarchy in which the Orient exist only as silent background to Occidental heroism.

B. Narrative Structure and Genre as Ideological Framework

While earlier sections have highlighted specific scenes and representational tactics, it is just as crucial to explore how Warfare (2025) uses its broader narrative structure and genre conventions to construct political meaning. The film's straightforward linear storyline and dependence on familiar war-film tropes operate not merely as stylistic choices but as ideological tools that shape how audiences interpret geopolitical realities. By embedding its message within recognizable cinematic frameworks, the film naturalizes U.S. military intervention and presents Middle Eastern settings through an American lens, making its political assumptions seem both familiar and unquestionable. This ideological positioning reflects what Said (1978) identifies as the structural opposition between the Orient and the Occident, in which Western identity is consolidated through the construction of the East as its constrasting Other.

The film adopts a mission-oriented linear narrative that mirrors the logic of military operations, emphasizing clear objectives, sequential actions, and resolution through tactical success rather than political negotiation. This structure frames U.S. intervention as rational and inevitable, subtly guiding audiences to perceive military action as both orderly and justified. At the same time, it strips away the historical and sociopolitical complexity of the Middle Eastern setting. Ramadi is depicted not as a lived urban environment but as a passive backdrop shaped by American goals. Through this linear framework, the film delivers narrative clarity while simultaneously imposing Western temporalities and priorities onto non-Western spaces, reinforcing ideological hierarchies embedded within its storytelling. In this context, the Middle East is rendered an Orient defined through

absence and silence, while the United States functions as the Occident endowed with agency, rationality, and narrative control.

Genre conventions play a crucial role in reinforcing this ideological framing. The film draws on well-established war-film tropes, including camaraderie, heroism, sacrifice, and the inner struggles of soldiers, to foster emotional identification with American characters. These familiar patterns shape audience expectations and place U.S. perspectives at the moral and emotional center of the narrative. At the same time, they turn violence into something visually organized and emotionally manageable, making war appear both familiar and controllable. Elsaesser (2017) explains that genre functions as a "cultural contract" between a film and its audience. By following recognizable war-film conventions, Warfare (2025) activates shared narrative codes that privilege Western viewpoints and silence Middle Eastern voices. Thus, the film reinforces Occidental centrality while relegating Oriental identities to the domain of distance and abstraction.

Viewed through an Orientalist and postcolonial lens, the interplay between narrative structure and genre produces what Said (1978) describes as a "field of knowledge," a framework through which the Middle East is made understandable to Western audiences. The film's formal choices guide viewers to see the conflict through an American perspective, reinforcing dominant ideas about war, intervention, and cultural hierarchy. Rather than challenging these narratives, its aesthetic and structural strategies work to strengthen them. In this sense, narrative structure and genre are not neutral tools of storytelling but active forces that shape and uphold ideological meaning.

Figure 10. woman dressed in covered clothes with a robe which is Islamic culture only highlighted from a distance

Collectively, these choices reinforce an Orientalist aesthetic. Religion is marked visually and aurally but never explored as lived experience. Arabic is heard but not understood. Iraqis are present but never allowed to speak. In each case, presence is mediated by absence, and voice by silence. This deliberate linguistic and symbolic exclusion functions as a cinematic strategy of Othering, echoing Said's (1978) argument that the East is made legible only through Western frames of reference. By withholding meaningful

dialogue from Iraqi characters, Warfare turns language into a site of power: American speech carries narrative authority, while Arabic is reduced to either a warning signal or ambient texture. This selective mediation marginalizes Middle Eastern Muslims and simultaneously naturalizes Western interpretive dominance. As a result, the film reproduces a cinematic hierarchy in which subjectivity, meaning, and agency are unevenly distributed: the American gaze determines what is seen, heard, and grieved, while Iraqi voices remain structurally muted. These strategies reflect a broader post-9/11 cinematic pattern, where sound, silence, and framing work together to consolidate ideological authority (Bhabha, 1994; Smith et al., 2021; Bajuwaiber, 2024).

Across these different levels of analysis, a shared representational logic emerges, illustrating how the film mobilizes multiple cinematic strategies to sustain its ideological positioning. Taken together, these findings show that Warfare (2025) is more than just a war drama; it operates as a cultural and ideological text that reflects and reinforces post-9/11 power relations through carefully structured representational hierarchies. Across narrative, generic, and audiovisual dimensions, the film consistently marginalizes Middle Eastern Muslim identities while placing the inner lives and moral struggles of American soldiers at the center. The near-total absence of Iraqi voices, combined with the dominance of U.S. perspectives, enacts what Said (1978) describes as an Orientalist logic of selective visibility. Iraqis appear only in fragmented forms: as background figures, atmospheric sounds, or fleeting warnings. Meanwhile, American experiences and emotions occupy the narrative foreground.

By embedding these dynamics within familiar war-film conventions such as linear storytelling, testimonial framing, and realist aesthetics, the film invites viewers to read its images as "authentic," obscuring the ideological work taking place beneath the surface. This interaction between form and discourse creates a tightly managed interpretive space where empathy, agency, and moral significance are distributed unevenly. Arabic language and religious references are stripped of cultural complexity, reduced to exotic or threatening signs. At the same time, sound design and dialogue direct emotional investment almost exclusively toward American suffering.

These strategies echo Bhabha's (1994) notion of ambivalent inclusion and Butler's (2009) concept of differential grievability, ensuring that Iraqi lives remain peripheral, present yet voiceless, visible yet unheard. Ultimately, Warfare (2025) illustrates how post-9/11 war cinema functions as both cultural pedagogy and ideological apparatus. Through its cinematic form, the film naturalizes U.S. military intervention, reinforces Western interpretive authority, and shapes collective understandings of conflict and identity within an asymmetrical representational order.

CONCLUSION

Warfare (2025) illustrates how contemporary American war cinema continues to shape public understanding of conflict through selective representation and strategic silences. By centering the psychological burdens and personal experiences of U.S. soldiers while systematically erasing or marginalizing Iraqi voices, the film constructs a deeply asymmetrical narrative space. This imbalance is not incidental; it reflects broader Orientalist and postcolonial dynamics in which Western perspectives are privileged as the primary lens of interpretation. Through its controlled narrative framing, testimonial aesthetics, and genre conventions, the film reinforces the idea of the Middle East as a space defined by absence, emptiness, and danger, awaiting Western intervention. In this representational economy, the Orient is positioned as a silent and passive terrain, while the

Occident emerges as the authoritative subject endowed with agency, rationality, and interpretive control.

These representational strategies carry significant cultural and political weight. They shape how audiences perceive foreign conflicts, assign empathy, and understand whose lives are worthy of attention and mourning. By turning silence, language, and visual framing into instruments of power, Warfare (2025) contributes to the normalization of U.S. interventionism and the marginalization of Middle Eastern Muslim subjectivities. Recognizing these patterns is crucial not only for film analysis but also for understanding how popular media participates in the construction and maintenance of global hierarchies. This study highlights the need for more inclusive and critically engaged representations that challenge, rather than reproduce, dominant ideological narratives.

Acknowledgment

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