

Who or Where Do the Memories Belong?: Representing US's Wars in the Middle East in *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost*

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Fernando Coimbra's *Sand Castle* (2017) and Rod Lurie's *The Outpost* (2019) resonated with the growing attention to the impacts of United States of America's foreign wars. This review combs through their critical responses and examines the films themselves to contextualize where they stand in the tradition of Hollywood war films and the debate of the concerns about the consequences of U.S.'s foreign wars. *Sand Castle* followed a newly recruited soldier as he navigated the battlefield of the U.S.'s Iraq War. The film captured the diversity within Iraqi communities by showing the characters' different levels of friendliness and hostility towards U.S. troops. Although the film maintains a protagonist-centered storyline, it highlighted the complexities of the foreign environments that had been simplified and exoticized into backdrops of heroic war figures. *The Outpost* demonstrated the alternatives to a protagonist-centered narrative for war films. The entire film unfolded around a specific military base, Combat Outpost Keating, and the dire conditions of the troops that were stationed there. Using the location of the story as a focal point, *The Outpost* passed the ownership of war memories from soldiers to battlefields. By reconsidering the ownership of war memories, both films added nuanced humanistic touches and included aspects of warfare that have not been sufficiently addressed in the genre of Hollywood war films.

Keywords: U.S. military, Hollywood war films, Iraq wars, Afghan wars, memories

War films are important in representing wars in popular culture. Generations of viewers have been moved by stories from the battlefields of the lesser-known battles, the unacknowledged sacrifices, the broken civilian lives, the home-coming soldiers, and so on. Hollywood war films conventionally follow the protagonists as they overcome physical and mental obstacles to embrace patriotism and comradeship. Recent war films have conveyed concerns about the peripheries of wars, such as the civilian communities impacted by warfare. Aside from infrastructural damages and casualties resulting from attacks, the presence of stationed troops complicates the power dynamics within local communities that in some cases lead to executions of collaborators by paramilitaries. Therefore, as the U.S.'s military operations in the Middle East continue, the attention to the impacts on both the

soldiers and the local communities increases. Fernando Coimbra's *Sand Castle* (2017) and Rod Lurie's *The Outpost* (2019) are two of the recent additions to a long lineage of war films, both address similar issues such as the bureaucracy in the military, the loss of young lives, and the relationship between U.S. troops and local communities. However, as any addition to a large collection of works would, their releases beg the question that Lee Rothery insightfully posed in his review of *Sand Castle*, "Why now?" What do these films add to the already rich genre? This review contextualizes where *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* stand among many Hollywood war films by combing through reception among film critics. And by analyzing the film titles, characters, and interactions between the U.S. troops and local communities in the films, this review seeks to explain the new perspectives that *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* bring to the genre of Hollywood war films and the representations of the US's war on terror.

Telling Old Tales Anew?

Covering the already well-discussed Iraq War, *Sand Castle* inevitably invites the question: what sets it apart from other films? Guy Lodge (2017) recognized *Sand Castle*'s connections to earlier war films and called it "a war movie with a more fluent understanding of war movies than of war itself." Being "well-versed" in the language is not necessarily a positive comment, since it poses the danger of being repetitive. As Brian Tallerico (2017) pointed out, the film resonated with "the futility of war, . . . [that] has been well documented." The sentiments about "the futility of war" may have been well documented, but in *Sand Castle*, its close connections to the screenwriter Chris Roessner's experience in the U.S. Army and the personal connections added complexity to the well-documented topic. He joined the military months before the September 11th attacks and became involved in warfare that he had not expected to take part in. Roessner's experience in Iraq lent the film its authenticity and humanistic touch. The story was sensitive about the precarious collaborative efforts between foreign forces and local communities and acknowledged the impossible situations the soldiers found themselves in. However, Roessner's closeness to the project might have also limited the film to a protagonist-centered storyline. The film adopted a protagonist-centered/bildungsroman-like narrative that follows a young private, Matt Ocre (Nicholas Hoult), as he adapts to military life in Iraq and develops strong bonds with his comrades and collaborators. The final product was not welcomed as warmly as expected, despite being named as one of the most popular unproduced screenplays in 2012. *Sand Castle* may not have been a pioneering attempt among various Hollywood war films, but it resonates with the ongoing discussion about the complexities of U.S. troop's presence on foreign lands.

Turning to another war of America, *The Outpost* centered around the history of a specific combat outpost (COP) in the valley of Kamdesh, Afghanistan – COP Keating. Within the two-hour screening time, *The Outpost* created two drastically different viewing experiences. It firstly provided a survey of the history of COP Keating before immersing the audience in the extremely stressful hour-long fighting sequence. The first half of the movie showcased soldiers valiantly defending their base as well as sharing human and vulnerable moments when shooting and shelling temporarily ceased. The second half of the film recreated the fateful siege on 3rd October 2009. Cameras followed Staff Sergeant Clint Romesha (Scott Eastwood), Specialist Ty Michael Carter (Caleb Landry Jones), and 1st Lieutenant Andrew Bundermann (Taylor John Smith) as the sequence unfolded: trapped in an armored Humvee with four other soldiers, Carter embodied the frustrating and traumatizing experience of witnessing comrades' death; representing the mobile forces in the battle, Romesha

organized counter attacks to reclaim the base; and Bundermann sat in the center of all strategic decisions and communication with backup forces. *The Outpost* was widely praised for the painfully realistic representation of warfare and its reflective tone on the U.S.'s operations in the Middle East. It successfully connected with the American audience and the current debates about U.S. military strategies. The significance of the film is that it "isn't glamorous, but it's respectful of the sacrifice" (Debruge 2020). Almost unanimously, reviews for *The Outpost* praise the director Lurie's, who is a West Point graduate, recreation of the Battle of Kamdesh. Recreating the blood-curdling 12-hour siege in under an hour, the film communicated to the audience the disorienting, high-stress experience, that would otherwise be unimaginable.

People and Places in *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost*

Sand Castle and *The Outpost* are fairly similar in many aspects. They were both new additions to a well-established genre and they were both addressing the nuances and frustrations of American overseas troops. They resonated with discussions that have been gradually gaining momentum, including the long-lasting impacts on overseas troops (e.g. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, cancers, etc.), the government's indifference to the troops' safety, and the damages to foreign lands, infrastructures, and communities. As more actors—individual, communal, and national—are included in the deliberation of the consequences of U.S. military operations, the ownership of war stories has begun to shift. Many stories no longer exclusively praise heroes and sacrifices and may instead take the form of odes to lost young souls or condemnation of reckless commands. By choosing different focal points to structure the story, the films approached the subject of U.S. military presence in the Middle East differently. The film titles, the characters, and attitudes of the local communities in *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* are indicators of their approaches in the sense that the former is more protagonist-focused and the latter centers around the base. This review suggests that, through a comparison of these factors, *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* have shed light on how Hollywood war films can better address the land and people affected by the war.

The titles of *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* both refer to locations, but their implications are very different. *The Outpost* unfolds within the confines of COP Keating, an outpost that is important to the history of the U.S.'s war in Afghanistan, and possibly to the entire U.S. military history. The significance of COP Keating anchors *The Outpost* in the context of Hollywood war films and accentuates the hostile surroundings, which the soldiers find themselves in. *Sand Castle*, on the other hand, can be interpreted in many ways: it may refer to the military bases that hold American troops in the middle of Iraqi deserts, the palace Ocre and his squad entered after the Baghdad Invasion, or any castle that is built on sand on a beach on a playful summer afternoon. To put it positively, the ambiguity spurs imagination, lightening up the deadly warfare with the exotic imagination of palaces in deserts. In a more pessimistic light, juxtaposing military operations and playful sand castles exposes the naivety behind military operations that have severe human costs.

Although the two films approach the U.S.'s presence in the Middle East differently, they share a deep concern over the struggles of young military members. *Sand Castle* especially did. As Roessner shared with *American Warrior Radio*, he insisted on addressing "the shared sacrifice of U.S. and Iraqi soldiers" and casting young actors to match the reality of the U.S. military (Buehler-Garcia 2021). The cast fulfilled such criteria indeed. Ocre's stereotypically young and hot-tempered companions were vulnerable as well. The conversation between Corporal Enzo (Neil Brown Jr.) and

Sergeant Burton (Beau Knapp) captured the vulnerability beneath their fiery shells. Before conducting the ambush, Enzo admits to Burton that he realizes they are participating in warfare and he is “scared.” Enzo’s realization that “this is war” accentuates that these are inexperienced soldiers who are ignorant or ill-informed about the scale and implications of their actions. Meanwhile, more experienced characters such as Harper and Syverson embody the exasperation of weathered souls. However empathetic Harper usually was to his troops, he shut down their reservations for the mission and instead said that they were “going back to work” the next morning, despite the hopeless state of their mission. Syverson was the first character to address the tensions between U.S. troops and the community, telling the incoming squad not to mistakenly think they are welcome and that “no one outside that gate wants you here.” In an almost trivial scene where he ordered Ocre to spray-paint a dog green, explaining that, a “[g]reen dog [is] a good dog. Anyone shoots a green dog, they answer to me.” Syverson demonstrated what troops on the ground became: people living by simplified codes of conduct to survive because the success of their mission is too far to be seen. In these instances, the glorified and naïve imaginations of comradeship and military experience were shattered.

The lack of faith was more prevalent in characters in *The Outpost*. The characters did not have the same mobility as the characters in *Sand Castle*. Upon exiting the helicopter, they are stranded in an infamously indefensible outpost and, as the epigraph of the film suggests, every one of them “was going to die.” Even without supplying the backstories and personalities of the characters, *The Outpost* succeeds in culturing the audience’s empathy for the troops with the melancholic air that permeated the base. The juxtaposition of bickers and trust accentuates the precariousness of life on the base. Three verbal exchanges about “survival” underlined the grim prospects of the troops: in a discussion about ex-compatriots, Romesha expressed his belief that when it came to survival, it “[didn’t] matter what kind of soldier you [were]. Good, bad. . . . we all stay[ed] alive out here, we [won]”; Broward accepted the villagers’ dishonest accusation because his sole focus was to ensure the survival of the troops; and finally, when Bundermann announced that their mission was going to be “what it’s always been,” Romesha responded that their mission was “to survive.” These comments indicated that the circumstances in the Kamdesh valley were so dire that survival constantly overshadowed the military missions. Their shared, sole concern over survival provided coherence throughout the film. Each character demonstrated an approach, or at the very least an attempt, to live, in spite of the impossible situations he found himself in. In a way, *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* were both hyper-aware of the lostness of young souls, which appeared to have become a prevalent subject in recent years as the awareness of ex-militants mental wellness increased.

The wars’ long-lasting effects are not limited to the military but are equally relevant to the people and land where wars happen. The films’ attention to the troops’ interactions with the local communities, including interpreters, village elders, and paramilitaries, highlighted the nuances of interacting with an unfamiliar culture and navigating complex sectarian geography. The scenes of negotiation with Afghan elders in *The Outpost* effectively captured the tension and complications that arose from language and cultural barriers. Keating’s endeavors to cultivate collaboration fell apart after his death. It was clear that the community elders do not wholeheartedly cooperate and will try to defraud compensation from U.S. troops when opportunities occur. The desperate circumstance is made clear with Sergeant First Class Jonathan Hill’s (Jonathan Yunger) response to the interpreter Mohammed’s (Sharif Dorani) warning about a Taliban attack. According to Hill, they do not act upon Mohammed’s intelligence because “[the American troops] have the Taliban surrounding [them] all the

time. [They]’re in the middle of Afghanistan. [They] get hit every single day.” His words show that the frequent attacks have overwhelmed the base and made an effective alarm system impossible.

The characters from *Sand Castle*, on the other hand, had a more complex relationship with the local communities. Among the communities the protagonists encountered, some had strong opinions about the US’s presence in Iraq and others did not mind working for the US, on the condition that their safety would not be compromised. They were hesitant about helping U.S. forces not because of their hostility against Americans, but because of the local rebellious paramilitaries. As the Sheik bluntly points out: “Baqubah is two different cities: one during the day belongs to the U.S., and one at night belongs to other people.” The relationship between Americans and Iraqis is unpredictable. While the ambushes on the convoy and Kadeer’s death give valid reasons for the military to be suspicious, the light-hearted conversation between Iraqi workers and American troops on the construction site alludes to the hope of a more harmonious and collaborative relationship. The coexistence of friendly, indifferent, and hostile Iraqis accentuated the instability that prevents trust from forming. *Sand Castle* captured the complexity by showcasing both the good and bad case scenarios, but the unsavory truth is that as long as American troops are stationed on foreign lands as part of an invasion, their relationship with local communities will remain problematic.

Reconsidering the Ownership of War Memories

Wars are never a subject to be treated lightly. They are forever the anomaly in most people’s lives, but a constant reality in world politics. Their complexity leads to infinite approaches to war films: they commemorate the valor of the troops or their sacrifice, retell young men’s journeys on foreign grounds, give voices to the invaded communities, or capture the struggles of opening fire on once peaceful lands. As social media, journalism, and the film industry began to cover wars more extensively, the attention to the impacts of wars has grown, and more people have become more aware of the damage to infrastructure, the loss of human lives, the conflicts between invading troops and local people, and the long-lasting mental impacts to all people involved. *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* explore forms of damage, on the flesh, to the mind, to the land, within communities, and the everlasting effects that ripple across the world and leave impacts on people who are not directly involved in the wars. *Sand Castle* and *The Outpost* suggested that the complexity of war films can lie in the troops’ and the local communities’ struggles to navigate the new reality caused by the superpower’s military operations. The exotic backdrop of the traditionally hero-centric narrative slowly shifts to the center stage of the genre. In *Sand Castle*, Iraqis were introduced to the audience through collaborations between American troops and local workers, but Iraqi characters remained passive and reactive in their interactions with American soldiers. On the contrary, the Afghan mountains and Taliban fighters occupied a more proactive role in the plot of *The Outpost* and the soldiers in COP Keating were constantly in defense. Focalizing the location of the wars raises the awareness of the less addressed aspects of wars that are equally traumatized as the soldiers. Instead of “who,” considering “where” these war memories belong might benefit the genre of Hollywood war films with more complexities and humanities.

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